

AN EXAMINATION OF GENDER DIFFERENCES IN ATTITUDES TOWARD PARTNER
INFIDELITY

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Abstract

When men and women are asked to choose whether sexual or emotional partner infidelity is more distressing, women are relatively more likely to select emotional infidelity and men are relatively more likely to select sexual infidelity. Evolutionary theorists interpret this difference as evidence of distinct selection pressures faced by men and women. In contrast, social-cognitive theorists suggest that gender differences are due to socialized decision-making strategies and flawed approaches to the measurement of jealousy. These diverging perspectives and research issues remain largely unresolved and contentious. The present study is designed to take a new approach to studying gender differences in reactions to partner infidelity by measuring attitudes toward partner infidelity. No previous studies have directly examined attitudes toward partner sexual versus emotional infidelity, nor have studies assessed the strength of these attitudes. Thus, this study was designed as an initial investigation of overall evaluative differences between men and women. It was found that women held significantly more negative attitudes towards emotional infidelity than did men, with no gender differences in attitude held towards sexual infidelity. For sexual infidelity, more positive attitudes toward partner sexual infidelity were associated with lower reported distress for both men and women, with the relationship being significantly more pronounced for men. For emotional infidelity, attitude strength moderated the relationship between attitude towards emotional infidelity and distress about emotional infidelity. There was a significant

relationship between attitudes toward partner emotional infidelity and distress when attitude strength was high but not when attitude strength was low.

An Examination of Gender Differences in Attitudes Toward Partner Infidelity

In one of the most cited evolutionary psychology studies, Buss, Larson, Westen, and Semmelroth (1992) investigated gender differences in jealousy by asking college students which scenario would distress or upset them more: Imagining their romantic partner forming a deep emotional attachment to another person or enjoying passionate sexual intercourse with that person. In line with evolutionary theory predictions, women were more likely to select emotional infidelity and men were more likely to select sexual infidelity. These forced choice results have been replicated many times, most often with U.S. college student samples (e.g., Buss et al., 1999; Buunk, Algeleitner, Oubaid, & Buss, 1996; Harris & Christenfield, 1996; Tagler, 2010; Tagler & Gentry, 2011; Treger & Sprecher, 2010), but also cross-culturally (e.g., Buss et al., 1999; Buunk, Angleitner, Oubaid, & Buss, 1996; Fernandez, Sierra, Zubeidat, & Vera-Villarroel, 2006).

Despite these consistent results, several theoretical and methodological debates remain unresolved. As reviewed below, there are two competing theories that try to explain gender differences in infidelity distress: evolutionary theory, and the social-cognitive theory. Unfortunately, progress toward reconciling these perspectives has been slowed by seemingly entrenched disagreements concerning the appropriate methods of measuring jealousy and the critical comparisons needed to test evolutionary predictions. After reviewing the existing literature concerning these issues, a new approach is proposed that examines gender differences in attitudes toward partner infidelity.

Evolutionary and Social-Cognitive Perspectives

According to evolutionary theorists (Buss et al., 1992), men and women have evolved different sensitivities to partner sexual versus emotional infidelity. As a result of human internal fertilization and gestation, women are always fully certain that the children they bear are biologically theirs. Because of this, they are predicted to be relatively less concerned with sexual infidelity and relatively more concerned with partner emotional infidelity. Partner infidelity is more directly threatening to women because it signals a loss of paternal investment of time and resources. Men, on the other hand, are not fully certain of their paternity for any given child and are thus relatively more concerned with partner sexual infidelity as a protection against investing time and resources into a child that is not genetically theirs. According to Buss and Haselton (2005), as a result of these high costs of infidelity, evolution should have left mechanisms in humans that differ according to gender with men concerned more with sexual infidelity and women more concerned about emotional infidelity. Although both sexes would be concerned about both types of infidelity, they are weighted differently for men than women as hypothesized by Buss. He argues that because there are mechanisms in place to deal with a man being cuckolded in other species, the mechanisms also have probably evolved in human males as well. For women, because it is a bigger concern that they may lose the investment of a man, they have evolved to be concerned when men develop emotional attachment to another woman because it is a strong indicator that they will lose some of that man's investment.

Support for the evolutionary predictions, however, may depend on the type of measures used. Most notably, the Buss et al. (1992) forced-choice measure has been criticized by social-cognitive theorists on both theoretical and empirical grounds. DeSteno and colleagues (DeSteno, Bartlett, Braverman, & Salovey, 2002; DeSteno, Bartlett, & Salovey, 2006; Desteno & Salovey, 1996) have argued that forced-choice measures require unique and deliberate decision-making processes that might reasonably be influenced by gender socialization. As acknowledged by evolutionary theorists, both emotional and sexual partner infidelities are likely to create emotional distress. But, when forced to choose only one option that is most distressing, participants may be more likely to choose the option that they believe also implies the other type of infidelity. Because men tend to think that women will only have sex when they are in love (Harris & Christenfield, 1996), the “double-shot hypothesis” (DeSteno & Salovey, 1996) suggests that men select sexual infidelity as most distressing because it also implies the co-occurrence of emotional infidelity. Thus, if their partner is committing sexual infidelity, a man is likely to assume that his female partner must already love the other man. For women, emotional infidelity is more likely to be chosen as the more distressing type of infidelity as a result of the expectation that men readily and eagerly have sex with or without love. Thus, whenever a man is emotionally attached to a woman it strongly implies that they are already having sex. However, a man “only” having sex does not definitively imply the co-occurrence of emotional infidelity. If this social-cognitive interpretation is correct, men and women do not necessarily differ innately about

which type of infidelity is worse but rather differ on what they have learned each type implies (Harris & Christenfield, 1996).

In support of the double-shot hypothesis are studies showing that the gender differences are specific to the forced-choice format. On continuous measures of infidelity distress, where participants separately rate their levels of distress to sexual and emotional infidelity, men and women both tend to select sexual infidelity as more distressing than emotional infidelity (DeSteno et al., 2002; DeSteno et al., 2006; DeSteno & Salovey, 1996). In further support of the double-shot hypothesis and social-cognitive perspective, DeSteno et al. (2002) found that with a cognitive load condition (distraction) the differences on forced choice measures disappear. It should be noted, however, that Schutzwahl (2008) found forced choice sex differences remain under both deliberative and cognitive load conditions. Moreover, evolutionary theorists have argued that continuous scales do not detect gender differences because they are subject to ceiling effects (Buss et al., 1999) and scale labeling effects (Edlund & Sagarin, 2009). This debate concerning the use of forced choice versus continuous measures of infidelity distress remains unresolved (DeSteno, 2010; Edlund, 2011).

There are also unsettled disagreements regarding the critical comparisons needed to test evolutionary predictions. Specifically, social-cognitive theorists have tended to interpret the evolutionary perspective as predicting *within-gender differences*, with a statistically significant and clear majority of men (>50%) selecting sexual infidelity as most distressing, and a clear majority of women

selecting emotional infidelity (DeSteno & Salovey, 1996; Harris, 2005, Harris & Christenfeld, 1996). However, evolutionary theorists have emphasized the importance of *between-gender differences*, stating that men more so than women are likely to choose sexual infidelity as more distressing and vice versa (Buss & Haselton, 2005; Sagarin, 2005). Moreover, Edlund and Sagarin (2009) argue that researchers should only look at the participant Gender \times Infidelity Type interaction because men would have a heightened response to sexual infidelity (but women would not) and vice versa for women. The main effects would only be relevant if the researchers were making the assumptions that only evolved differences in jealousy modules (and nothing else) influenced responses to measures of jealousy. Which comparisons are used is important: Whereas a majority of women choose emotional infidelity as more distressing than sexual infidelity, men's forced choice responses are much more variable. Although some studies report a clear majority of men choose sexual infidelity as more distressing, many other studies find that men are either evenly split about which type of infidelity is distressing or are also more likely to select emotional infidelity as more distressing than sexual infidelity (Harris, 2003; Sabini & Green, 2004; Tagler, 2010).

Another unsettled issue is the predominate use of college student samples, rather than more relationship-experienced, older adult samples. Importantly, when adult samples are used, results are less consistent and gender differences tend to be less pronounced. Some studies show that the gender difference disappears in older samples (DeSteno & Salovey, 1996) whereas others show that older adults are more

likely to choose emotional infidelity as more distressing than sexual infidelity (Harris, 2002; Sabini & Green, 2004). Previous infidelity experience may also play a role (Tagler, 2010). Older adults of both genders who have experienced infidelity choose emotional infidelity as more distressing whereas college students who had and had not experienced infidelity and adults who had not experienced infidelity responded similar to the pattern predicted by evolutionary theorists (men choose sexual infidelity as more distressing, women choose emotional as more distressing).

In summary, research examining gender differences in reactions to partner infidelity has primarily used hypothetical scenarios in which participants report their anticipated jealousy, distress, or emotional upset to sexual versus emotional infidelity. Whereas much of the continuing debate in this research area concerns evolutionary versus social-cognitive interpretations of the results, unresolved measurement issues also continue to slow progress. Specifically, researchers remain divided over the use of forced-choice versus continuous scales to measure jealousy, distress, or emotional upset. Moreover, there is a growing dissatisfaction with the use of hypothetical partner infidelity scenarios to measure jealousy and related emotional reactions (DeSteno, 2010). Given these unresolved and seemingly entrenched positions, the present study takes a novel approach to the study of gender differences in reactions to partner infidelity. Specifically, this study is designed to investigate potential gender differences in overall attitudes toward partner infidelity.

Attitudes and Attitude Strength

The widely accepted definition of attitudes in contemporary social psychology is given by Eagly and Chaiken (1993): “a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor” (p. 1). Eagly and Chaiken (2007) further describe an attitude as a “mental residue” which results from prior experiences and gives people a tendency to react in specific ways towards an entity. This overall evaluative tendency reflects prior cognitive (beliefs), affective (feelings, emotions) and behavioral reactions to attitude objects. Although earlier theoretical approaches tended to equate attitude with affect, modern attitude theory distinguishes attitudes as an overall latent evaluative tendency from specific affective, cognitive, and behavioral indicators.

Attitude research has a very long history in social psychology primarily because of the relationship that is presumed to exist between attitudes and behavior. In practice, however, attitudes are often rather weak predictors of behavior (Wicker, 1969). As a result, a great deal of research has focused on identifying and then measuring features of attitudes that, when present, improve behavioral prediction. Collectively, these features are viewed as indicators of attitude strength. By definition, strong attitudes are those that are durable and impactful (Krosnick & Petty, 1995). Durability is specifically indicated by persistence and resistance. Persistence refers to the ability for an attitude to remain stable and unchanging through the course of everyday life, and resistance refers to an attitude’s ability to endure competing arguments from another attitudinal

standpoint (persuasion). Impact is manifested by influencing information processing and by guiding behavior (Krosnick & Petty, 1995).

More specifically, a large number of attitude strength measures exist (Visser, Bizer, & Krosnick, 2006; Wegener, Downing, Krosnick, & Petty, 1995). Because bipolar attitude scales simultaneously measure the attitude dimensions of valence and extremity, one approach is to use extremity as an indicator of attitude strength. Whereas valence simply refers to attitude direction (the positivity versus negativity of an attitude), extremity is measured by computing the absolute distance that a respondent's attitude is from the attitude scale midpoint (Abelson, 1995). Doing so, however, unnecessarily confounds the assessment of attitude (a combination of valence and extremity) and attitude strength. Moreover, using extremity as a measure of attitude strength does not allow for the prospect that attitudes can be strongly held anywhere on the continuum of positive or negative (e.g., strongly held neutral attitudes). As a result, measuring attitude strength typically involves evaluating attitude and attitude strength separately.

Although many strength-related attitude features have been identified (see Visser et al., 2006; Wegener et al., 1995 for reviews), among the most efficient and common are respondent self-reports of attitude ambivalence, importance, certainty, personal relevance, and stability. Ambivalence refers to how evaluatively mixed (both positive and negative) one's reactions to an attitude object are and is typically measured by simply asking how conflicted people's attitude towards an object is. Conversely, certainty is measured by asking how confidently a person holds an

attitude. Attitude importance refers to a subjective perception of how personally important an attitude is to a person. Similarly, personal relevance refers to the extent to which people reports that the attitude object or topic holds significant consequences in their life in the form of outcomes, values, possessions, or groups (Wegener et al., 1995). Attitude stability refers to the degree to which an attitude persists over time, as opposed to fluctuating, and can be assessed by simply asking people if their attitude is likely or unlikely to change.

Attitude accessibility is another commonly employed attitude strength indicator. Accessibility refers to the degree of ease of attitude retrieval. In other words, accessibility measures assess how easy it is for a person to think about and report their evaluation when encountering that particular object. Accessibility has often been operationalized as the response latency (electronically recorded in milliseconds) between attitudinal inquiry and participants' reported evaluation (e.g., Fazio & Williams, 1986). However, assuming that people are more likely to think about and reference highly accessible attitudes, accessibility can also be measured by directly asking participants how often they either think about or talk about the attitude object (Wegener et al., 1995).

Purpose and Overview of the Present Research

The present study is designed to investigate gender differences in attitudes and attitude strength toward partner sexual and emotional infidelity. Thus, this study is designed as an initial investigation of potential overall evaluative differences between men and women on these dimensions. This differs substantially

from previous research that has only examined affective differences (jealousy, infidelity distress, emotional upset). Because attitudes exist as tendencies to evaluate that reflect previous affective, cognitive, and behavioral experiences with attitude objects, the present study takes a more thorough approach. Moreover, the use of hypothetical scenarios in which participants are asked to imagine their emotional reactions upon discovering partner infidelity has been criticized because of the problem of “affective forecasting:” Participants’ predictions of their emotional reactions tend to be a poor predictor of actual reactions (DeSteno, 2010). An attitude approach, however, may hold more promise for accurately predicting real-world responses to partner infidelity. Specifically, attitudes that are held strongly are more likely to influence mental processes and behavior. Although both men and women are likely to have negative attitudes toward both types of infidelity, they may have differing attitude strength towards the types of infidelity. Unfortunately, previous research has not directly examined this possibility. Rather, research has examined attitudes towards sex in general (Hendrick, Hendrick, Slapion-Foote, & Foote, 1985), the role of general sexual attitudes and romantic beliefs in predicting distress to infidelity (Cann, Mangum, & Wells, 2001), and attitudes towards online versus offline infidelity (Whitty, 2003). The results of such studies tend to support the argument that men are more distressed by sexual infidelity and women are more distressed by emotional infidelity. However, the reasons for the differences are explained differently by each study. No previous studies have examined

attitudes toward partner sexual versus emotional infidelity, nor assessed the strength of these attitudes.

The present study is designed to directly test for gender differences in attitudes toward partner infidelity and attitude strength by administering self-report measures to a sample of college students. Importantly, this study is not designed to directly test evolutionary versus social-cognitive theoretical positions. In fact, given the entrenched opposing theoretical positions, it is unrealistic to expect such a study to be conducted to satisfy both viewpoints. Rather, the aim of this study is to test for existence of gender differences. Although this investigation is largely exploratory in nature, in line with gender stereotypes and previous research on jealousy it is predicted that men's attitudes toward partner sexual infidelity will be significantly more negative but also significantly stronger than women's attitudes toward partner sexual infidelity. In contrast, women's attitudes toward partner emotional infidelity are predicted to be significantly more negative and significantly stronger than men's attitudes toward partner emotional infidelity.

The present study is also designed to examine whether attitudes toward partner infidelity predict responses to hypothetical infidelity scenarios (i.e., the jealousy-provoking scenarios used by previous researchers). Specifically, it is hypothesized that people with strong, negative attitudes toward a specific type of infidelity would most likely have more distress toward that specific type of infidelity because attitudes that are held strongly influence reactions to those specific attitude objects. On the other hand, it is expected that individuals who do not have strong

attitudes towards specific forms of infidelity are less likely to be distressed about those types of infidelity because it is not as important to them and they therefore will not react consistent with someone who does hold the attitude strongly. Thus, it is predicted that attitude strength will moderate the size of the attitude toward infidelity – infidelity distress relationship.

Method

Participants

Participants were 334 university students aged 18 years or older who were recruited from the Ball State University Introductory Psychology participant pool. Due to incomplete questionnaires, the final dataset used was comprised of 328 total participants (212 females, 112 males). Most participants were White (87.3%), heterosexual (93.2%), and of traditional college student age ($M = 19.78$ years, $SD = 1.11$). Approximately half of the participants (49.8%) reported that they were currently in a serious, committed romantic relationship, with a mean length of 22.87 months ($SD = 16.14$).

Measuring instruments

Attitude position scales. Participants rated “emotional infidelity” (Appendix A) and “sexual infidelity” (Appendix B) separately on six 7-point semantic differential scales: good–bad, positive–negative, natural–unnatural, unpleasant–pleasant, harmful–beneficial, and acceptable–unacceptable. Internal reliability was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha, and was found to be acceptable for both the sexual ($\alpha = .75$) and emotional ($\alpha = .90$) infidelity attitude scales.

Attitude strength scales. Separately for each type of partner infidelity (Appendices A and B), participants indicated on 7-point scales modeled after those used by Brannon, Tagler, and Eagly (2007) how personally important-unimportant the issue of infidelity is, how sure-unsure they are of their position, how central-peripheral their attitude towards infidelity is to their self-concept, how likely-unlikely they are to change their attitudes, and how often they think and/or talk about their partner engaging in infidelity. Internal reliability was poor: Cronbach's $\alpha = .20$ for the sexual infidelity attitude strength scale and $\alpha = .26$ for the emotional infidelity attitude strength scale. Unfortunately, item analysis of these scales failed to identify items for removal that would improve the reliability.

Forced-choice infidelity distress. The forced-choice format and wording used by Buss et al. (1992) was employed to assess distress to hypothetical partner infidelity. Participants were asked to think of a serious committed relationship they have had in the past, are currently having, or would like to have and then to imagine that they discovered that the person with whom they have been seriously involved with becomes involved with someone else. They were then asked to select which scenario they would find more distressing: imagining their partner (a) has formed a deep emotional attachment with someone else or (b) engaging in sexual intercourse with someone else (Appendix C).

Continuous infidelity distress. Similarly to the forced-choice measure, participants were asked to think about a serious committed relationship they have had in the past, are currently having, or would like to have and then to imagine that

they discover that the person with whom they have been seriously involved with becomes involved with someone else. They rated on a 5-point scale (1 = not distressing, 5 = very distressing) both how distressed they would be if “You discover that your partner is engaging in sexual intercourse with someone else,” and if “You discover that your partner has formed a deep emotional attachment with someone else” (Appendix D).

Procedure

Participants took part in the study either in person ($n = 73$) or online via the InQsit system ($n = 251$). In person, participants took part in small, mixed-gender group sessions consisting of anywhere between one and 10 participants, during which they completed a demographic questionnaire, attitude toward infidelity scales, attitude strength scales, and responded to hypothetical infidelity distress scenarios. In order to control for possible order effects, the measures were counterbalanced with eight total orders. These eight orders were the result of grouping the scales together as follows: Distress to infidelity scales were always presented together (with forced-choice and continuous formats being counterbalanced) and attitude position scales were always presented immediately before the corresponding attitude strength scale (with sexual and emotional being counterbalanced). The demographic questionnaire was always presented last. A detailed list with the orders used is presented in Table 1. Online, participants were sent a link that automatically randomized the respondent to one of the eight counterbalanced versions of the questionnaire.

Results

Replication of gender differences in infidelity distress

Replicating previous research employing forced-choice infidelity distress scenarios with college students, a 2 (Participant Gender) X 2 (Sexual or Emotional Infidelity selected as most distressing) chi-square test of independence was significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 324) = 36.36, p < .001, \Phi = .34$, with 80.7% of women choosing emotional infidelity as more distressing and 51.8% of men choosing sexual infidelity as more distressing.

To test for gender differences on the continuous measures of infidelity distress, a 2 (Participant Gender) X 2 (Infidelity Type: Sexual vs. Emotional) ANOVA with repeated measures on the second factor was performed. A main effect was found for gender such that women ($M = 4.78, SD = 0.52$) were overall more distressed about either type of infidelity than men ($M = 4.50, SD = 0.83$), $F(1,324) = 21.60, p < .001$. A main effect was also found for infidelity type, with sexual infidelity ($M = 4.76, SD = 0.58$), being more distressing than emotional infidelity ($M = 4.61, SD = .74$), $F(1,324) = 19.08, p < .001$. A significant interaction between gender and infidelity type, $F(1, 324) = 12.61, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$, was also found. Consistent with looking at between-gender differences, simple effects were conducted for male and females separately and revealed that females reported significantly more distress to emotional infidelity ($M = 4.76, SD = .57$) than did males ($M = 4.32, SD = .92$), $F(1, 324) = 28.44, p < .001, d = .57$. However, there was not a significant difference in

distress to sexual infidelity, with females rating this distress ($M = 4.80, SD = .48$) similar to men ($M = 4.69, SD = .74$), $F(1, 324) = 2.87, p = .06, d = .17$.

Gender differences in attitudes

To test the hypothesis that there would be gender differences in attitude held towards partner sexual versus emotional infidelity, a 2 (Gender) x 2 (Infidelity Type: Sexual vs. Emotional) ANOVA with repeated measures on the second factor was conducted. A main effect was found for Gender such that women ($M = 1.76, SD = 0.89$) held significantly more negative attitudes toward partner infidelity than men ($M = 2.03, SD = 1.01$), $F(1, 324) = 10.74, p < .05, d = .54$. A main effect was also found for Attitude, with Sexual Infidelity ($M = 1.41, SD = 0.67$) being rated significantly more negative than Emotional Infidelity ($M = 2.29, SD = 1.23$), $F(1, 324) = 193.41, p < .001, d = .40$. However, these main effects were qualified by a significant Gender x Infidelity Type interaction, $F(1, 324) = 13.05, p < .001$. Simple effects analysis (conducted to look at between-gender differences) revealed that, consistent with the hypothesis, females ($M = 2.11, SD = 1.12$) reported significantly more negative Attitudes Toward Emotional Infidelity than males ($M = 2.63, SD = 1.36$), $F(1, 324) = 13.63, p < .001, d = .42$. However, inconsistent with the hypothesis, there was not a difference in Attitudes Toward Sexual Infidelity, with females reporting similarly negative attitudes ($M = 1.41, SD = .64$) as men ($M = 1.43, SD = .71$), $F(1, 324) = .08, p = .78, d = .03$.

Gender differences in attitude strength

To test for differences by gender in attitude strength, a 2 (Gender) x 2 (Attitude Strength: Sexual vs. Emotional) ANOVA with repeated measures on the second factor was conducted. A main effect was found for Attitude Strength such that attitudes toward sexual infidelity ($M = 3.07, SD = 0.96$) were significantly stronger than attitudes toward emotional infidelity ($M = 3.47, SD = 0.93$), $F(1, 324) = 65.51, p < .05, d = .42$ (with lower values meaning stronger attitude strength). Neither the main effect of Gender nor the Gender x Attitude Strength interaction was significant.

Attitude strength as a moderator of distress to sexual infidelity

To test the hypothesis that Attitude Strength moderates the strength of the Attitude – Distress relationship, a hierarchical multiple regression to predict Distress to Sexual Infidelity was conducted with Gender, Attitude Toward Sexual Infidelity, and Attitude Strength entered into Model 1, all two-way interactions entered into Model 2, and the three-way interactions entered into Model 3. The results of this analysis are displayed in Table 3. Attitude Towards Sexual Infidelity was a significant predictor in all three models with the Attitude Towards Sexual Infidelity by Gender interaction also being significant in the second model. For the third model, the Attitude by Gender interaction was significant. When the interaction was entered into Model 2, there was a significant change in variance accounted for ($R^2 = .17, \Delta R^2 = .02, \Delta F(1, 324) = 2.88, p = .04$). Figure 1 displays this interaction by plotting Distress to Sexual Infidelity regression lines for high (plus

one standard deviation from the mean of attitude) and low (minus one standard deviation from the mean of attitude) Attitude Towards Sexual Infidelity, separately for men and women (Aiken & West, 1991). Although more positive attitudes toward partner sexual infidelity were associated with lower reported distress for both men and women, as Figure 1 shows, the relationship was significantly more pronounced for men, $b = -0.45$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = -6.27$, $p < .001$, than for women, $b = -0.24$, $SE = 0.06$, $t = -4.17$, $p < .001$.

Attitude strength as a moderator of distress to emotional infidelity

Another hierarchical regression to predict distress to emotional infidelity was conducted with Gender, Attitude, and Attitude Strength entered into Model 1, two-way interactions entered into Model 2, and three-way interactions entered into Model 3. The results of this analysis are displayed in Table 4. For Model 1, all predictors were significant. With the addition of the two-way interactions into Model 2, Gender and Attitude were the only significant predictors. However, the three-way interaction in Model 3 was significant. When adding the three-way interaction between Gender, Attitude Towards Emotional Infidelity, and Attitude Strength, there was a significant increase in variance explained $R^2 = .24$, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $\Delta F(1, 364) = 7.05$, $p = .008$. Figure 2 displays the interaction by plotting, separately by Gender, regression lines for those with attitude strength above and below the mean of Attitude Strength at 1 standard deviation above and below the mean of Attitude Towards Emotional Infidelity. To interpret this interaction, the Attitude x Attitude Strength interaction was examined separately for women and men. As

shown in Figure 2, the Attitude x Attitude Strength interaction was not significant for men, $b = 0.04$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 0.63$, $p = .53$. However, the Attitude x Attitude Strength interaction was significant for women, $b = -0.08$, $SE = 0.03$, $t = -2.37$, $p < .05$. Specifically, for women there was a significant relationship between Attitudes Toward Partner Emotional Infidelity and Distress when Attitude Strength was high, $b = -0.26$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = -6.21$, $p < .001$, but not when Attitude Strength was low, $b = -0.08$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = -1.21$, $p = .23$.

Discussion

Current Study

Consistent with previous research showing gender differences in infidelity distress (e.g., Buss et al., 1992; Buss et al., 1999; Buunk, Algeitner, Oubaid, & Buss, 1996; Harris & Christenfield, 1996; Tagler, 2010; Tagler & Gentry, 2011; Treger & Sprecher, 2010), results of this study revealed that men and women do react to sexual infidelity and emotional infidelity differently. The differences were driven by women in the forced-choice measure and by men for the continuous scale. When presented with a hypothetical emotional infidelity scenario, women find it significantly more distressing than men do. On the other hand, when participants rated on a scale how distressed a hypothetical sexual infidelity situation made them, there were no gender differences, with both genders finding it distressing.

The present study served as an initial investigation of overall evaluative differences between men and women in attitudes toward partner infidelity. This is an important construct to look at because it is a new way to try to understand the

gender differences that are present in distress to partner sexual infidelity versus partner emotional infidelity. In order to show that attitude and attitude strength and distress to infidelity were different constructs, bivariate correlations were conducted with the results being presented in Table 2. Although similar in what they are trying to accomplish measuring these constructs are measuring two different things. Measuring distress to a hypothetical infidelity scenario is asking for an anticipated reaction to a specific scenario. On the other hand, rather than asking for anticipated emotional reactions (distress or jealousy) in response to a hypothetical scenario, an attitude approach asks people more directly how they evaluate particular attitude objects (in this case partner sexual and emotional infidelity).

High attitude strength towards emotional infidelity mattered for women such that those with a more negative attitude towards infidelity were more distressed by emotional infidelity than those with a positive attitude whereas for those with low attitude strength, there was no difference. This study showed that when looking at distress to sexual infidelity, attitude held towards sexual infidelity mattered for men. Specifically, men with more negatively held attitudes towards sexual infidelity were more distressed than were men who held more positive attitudes towards sexual infidelity. Attitude did not play as important of a role in distress for women as it did for men, as women overall held more negative attitudes towards partner infidelity.

Attitude Strength as a moderator of distress to infidelity

Attitude strength was thought to be a moderator of distress to infidelity for both types of infidelity because of the role it plays on behavior. As previously discussed, stronger held attitudes influence behaviors and are a better predictor of actual behaviors than weak attitudes. If an attitude held is personally relevant, important, thought about often, unchanging, and the person who holds it is certain it is correct it is more likely to be used as guidance in a person's behaviors.

For emotional infidelity, the findings were consistent with the hypothesis that attitude strength moderated the relationship between attitude towards infidelity and infidelity distress. For women, those people with strongly held negative attitudes were significantly more distressed than those who held strong, positive attitudes. This makes sense because if someone feels very strongly about emotional infidelity and it is important, relevant, accessible, stable, and they are certain about it, it is likely that if that emotional infidelity happening to them would be very distressing. It would most likely negatively affect their self-concept. However, for men, those with a low attitude strength were more distressed if their attitude held was negative than if the attitude held was positive. Inconsistent with the hypothesis, high levels of attitude strength was not significant for men. Those with a high attitude and low attitude were equally distressed if the attitude was held strongly.

For sexual infidelity, the results were not consistent with the hypothesis that attitude strength moderated the attitude towards infidelity – infidelity distress relationship. Although attitude did play a role for men, those men who held negative

attitudes towards sexual infidelity were more distressed by sexual infidelity than those who held positive attitudes towards sexual infidelity did not differ based on attitude strength toward sexual infidelity.

One possible explanation for why attitude strength might not have played a role in the attitude towards sexual infidelity – sexual infidelity distress relationship was because of possible ceiling effects. Because the mean is so low ($M = 1.41$, $SD = .67$) it is possible that attitude strength did not matter. The negative attitudes that the participants held were so negative that attitude strength did not play a role. If the attitude strength was weak or if they did not care about cheating, there would be more variability in distress to sexual infidelity. However, because the overall rating was so negative towards sexual infidelity, it is obvious that participants saw it as very negative and did care about it.

Limitations

One large concern in this study is the low reliability of the attitude strength scales. Attitude strength was not shown to moderate the relationship between attitude towards infidelity and distress to hypothetical infidelity scenarios, and the low reliability of the scales might be a reason for this. There was some participant confusion about the wording of the third attitude strength question asking about personal relevance, specifically with the words ‘central’ and ‘peripheral’, so this might have played a role in the reliability being so low. Another explanation comes from Visser, Bizer, and Krosnick (2006), who suggest that attitude strength may actually be made up of unrelated facets and that, because of this, each one should be

measured separately rather than combining them into one score. As a result of this way of conceptualizing those variables, an exploratory attempt was made to use each of the individual attitude strength items as a predictor rather than the scale as a whole. When looking at each individual attitude strength item as a moderator of the attitude toward infidelity – infidelity distress relationship, for emotional infidelity no one factor was a significant moderator. However, for sexual infidelity only, certainty was important. Importance, accessibility, personal relevance, and stability were not significant moderators of the attitude towards infidelity – infidelity distress relationship. Even for certainty, when entered into a regression model with Gender, Attitude Towards Sexual Infidelity, Attitude Strength, the two-way interactions, and the three-way interaction, Certainty was only significant in the first step. With the addition of other variables, it became non-significant and did not affect the outcome of the regression.

Another possible explanation for the low reliability for the attitude strength scales is the possibility that the question wording decreased reliability from previous studies that used different attitude objects. For example, when using a one word concept that likely has more variability in answers than infidelity (for example, universal healthcare), allows for the scales to measure the construct of attitude strength as a whole. In contrast, few people would rate their partner cheating on them as good, useful, or any other positive word. It may be that telling participants that they are to imagine a committed relationship, that is in some way also telling them what their answers should be for the attitude and attitude strength

items. A scale that attempts to measure one specific attitude strength facet might be more helpful in a situation where there is less variability in answers.

Because participants varied on many different things for this study the question of how specific variables affected the outcome must be addressed. There were two different modes of giving the questionnaire and eight different orders along with personal variables that might easily influence the results of the study (current relationship status). **T**o test for effects of any of these variables, analyses were conducted and were shown to have no influence on the previously reported infidelity distress, attitude, or the hierarchical regression results examining attitude strength as a moderator of distress to sexual infidelity. For the results of the emotional infidelity regression, however, order was significant when put in as the first step of the regression analysis. However, after the second step it became non-significant and did not affect the results of the three-way interaction between gender, attitude, and attitude strength.

Future Research

Future research should be done with attitude strength scales with a higher Cronbach's alpha if using self-report measurement. Rather than relying on self-report, it is worth noting that there are other ways to assess attitude strength such as reaction time measures of attitude accessibility, manipulation, and known groups (Wegener, Downing, Krosnick, & Petty, 1995). Manipulation is meant to only alter one construct of attitude strength and may be able to be used with younger samples because it is a better option for when people have little or no experience with the

attitude object before. Known groups can be used when the groups used in a study are expected to vary on the attitude object of interest. There are other viable options that could be used to measure attitude strength than the one used in this study that might be beneficial to explore.

The sample used was homogeneous, so it is unknown how well the results would generalize to other populations. For example, previous research has shown that older adults show a different pattern of results than college samples. Sometimes studies show that the differences in distress to infidelity are non-existent (DeSteno & Salovey, 1996) while other times older adults tend to choose emotional infidelity as more distressing than sexual (Harris, 2002; Sabini & Green, 2004). Older adults responses might also be dependent on their experience with infidelity, with those older adults who have experienced it choosing emotional infidelity as more distressing while their counterparts who had not experienced infidelity follow the pattern of men choosing sexual and women choosing emotional as more distressing (Tagler, 2010).

There is a great deal of research concerning gender differences in infidelity distress, but there is still no agreed upon explanation as to why those gender differences exist. This study was not meant as a test of those explanations, but rather as a test of gender differences in overall attitudes. Because gender differences were shown in this study to emotional infidelity on the continuous measures, attitude strength effects might show some support for the social cognitive perspective. Those who held negative attitudes towards infidelity and also thought

of their held attitudes to be strongly held were more likely to be distressed by a hypothetical scenario of it, suggesting that previously held and consciously thought about evaluations rather than an automatic reaction is what guides a decision. Rather than continuing the debate of whether evolution or socialization plays a larger role in decision making to hypothetical infidelity distress, an overall evaluation of participants' attitudes might predict just as well as other theoretical frameworks how distressed participants will be to infidelity. Because attitude can also predict behaviors, by presenting an attitude object (infidelity in this case) it might be a more realistic or accurate prediction of how a person might react to actual infidelity rather than just a hypothetical scenario.

This study was a much-needed first step to a more thorough approach of an understanding of gender differences that have been shown consistently for over a decade. However, it is clear that more research is needed to determine to what extent attitude is as an explanation of these differences and to explore the role it might play with other samples of varying ages and relationship backgrounds.

By definition, attitudes are something that are formed over time and as a result of our experiences with a particular entity. Although this study does show some support for a social-cognitive theory because attitudes are learned and not innate, much more research is needed to do anything substantial. In order to really assess the role that experience with infidelity and life experiences in general play on attitude formation, a longitudinal study would be ideal. In conducting this, a person would be able to measure attitudes at a relatively young age where participants

have fewer relationship experiences and also a less chance of experience with infidelity. Over time questions could be asked that would assess experiences that happen and how attitudes are changing to draw more definitive conclusions. A cross-sectional study would also work to draw similar conclusions, although there would be limitations with that type of research design as well. However, by being able to ask different generations about their experiences, it is more information than gathered in this study alone. The results would be more likely to generalize to older populations and people who have experience with infidelity as well.

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Appendix A

Attitude Measures: Emotional Infidelity

Please think of a serious committed romantic relationship that you have had in the past, that you are currently having, or that you would like to have. **Imagine that you discover that the person with whom you've been seriously involved has formed a deep emotional attachment to another person.**

On each scale below, please place an "X" or check mark in the place that best describes your attitude toward **your romantic partner forming a deep emotional attachment to another person.**

- Place your marks in the middle of the spaces, not on the boundaries.
- Don't put more than one X or check mark on a single scale.

Your romantic partner forming a deep emotional attachment to another person		
BAD	_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _	GOOD
NEGATIVE	_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _	POSITIVE
ACCEPTABLE	_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _	UNACCEPTABLE
UNPLEASANT	_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _	PLEASANT
NATURAL	_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _	UNNATURAL
HARMFUL	_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _	BENEFICIAL

To me personally, my partner forming a deep emotional attachment to another person is:		
extremely IMPORTANT	_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _	extremely UNIMPORTANT

On the issue of my partner forming a deep emotional attachment to another person , I am:		
extremely SURE	_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _	extremely UNSURE
that my opinions are right.		

My attitude toward my partner forming a deep emotional attachment to another person is:		
extremely	_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _	extremely

CENTRAL	_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _	PERIPHERAL
to my self-concept.		

On the issue of my partner forming a deep emotional attachment to another person , I am:		
extremely LIKELY	_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _	extremely UNLIKELY
to change my attitude.		

I think about my partner forming a deep emotional attachment to another person :		
extremely OFTEN	_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _	extremely RARELY

Appendix B

Attitudes Scale: Sexual Infidelity

Please think of a serious committed romantic relationship that you have had in the past, that you are currently having, or that you would like to have. **Imagine that you discover that the person with whom you've been seriously involved has had sexual intercourse with another person.**

On each scale below, please place an "X" or check mark in the place that best describes your attitude toward **your romantic partner having sexual intercourse with another person.**

- Place your marks in the middle of the spaces, not on the boundaries.
- Don't put more than one X or check mark on a single scale.

Your romantic partner having sexual intercourse with another person.		
BAD	_ _ _ _ _ _ _	GOOD
NEGATIVE	_ _ _ _ _ _ _	POSITIVE
ACCEPTABLE	_ _ _ _ _ _ _	UNACCEPTABLE
UNPLEASANT	_ _ _ _ _ _ _	PLEASANT
NATURAL	_ _ _ _ _ _ _	UNNATURAL
HARMFUL	_ _ _ _ _ _ _	BENEFICIAL

To me personally, my partner having sexual intercourse with another person		
is:		
extremely IMPORTANT	_ _ _ _ _ _ _	extremely UNIMPORTANT

On the issue of my partner having sexual intercourse with another person , I am:		
extremely SURE	_ _ _ _ _ _ _	extremely UNSURE
that my opinions are right.		

My attitude toward my partner having sexual intercourse with another person		
is:		
extremely	_ _ _ _ _ _ _	extremely

CENTRAL	_ _ _ _ _ _ _	PERIPHERAL
to my self-concept.		

On the issue of my partner having sexual intercourse with another person , I am:		
extremely LIKELY	_ _ _ _ _ _ _	extremely UNLIKELY
to change my attitude.		

I think about my partner having sexual intercourse with another person :		
extremely OFTEN	_ _ _ _ _ _ _	extremely RARELY

Appendix C

Forced-choice Infidelity Distress

Please think of a serious or committed romantic relationship that you have had in the past, that you currently have, or that you would like to have. Imagine that you discover that the person with whom you've been seriously involved became interested in someone else. What would distress or upset you more (*please circle only one*):

- (A) Imagining your partner falling in love and forming a deep emotional attachment to that person
- (B) Imagining your partner having sexual intercourse with that person

Appendix D

Continuous Measure Infidelity Distress

Please think of a serious or committed romantic relationship that you have had in the past, that you currently have, or that you would like to have. Imagine that you discover that the person with whom you've been seriously involved became interested in someone else.

How distressed would you be if you discovered that your partner is engaging in sexual intercourse with someone else?

Not	1	2	3	4	5
Very					
distressed					
distressed					

How distressed would you be if you discovered that your partner has formed a deep emotional attachment with someone else?

Not	1	2	3	4	5
Very					
distressed					
distressed					

Table 2.

Correlations between Gender, Attitudes (A), Attitude Strength (AS), and Infidelity Distress Measures

	Gender	Sexual A	Emotional A	Sexual AS	Emotional AS	Forced- choice	Continuous sexual	Continuous Emotional
Gender	1.00	.02	.20**	.02	.07	.34**	-.09	-.29**
Sexual A		1.00	.31**	.24**	.13*	-.06	-.37**	-.18**
Emotional A			1.00	.15**	.47**	.10	-.11*	-.41**
Sexual AS				1.00	.57**	.07	-.11*	-.16**
Emotional AS					1.00	.08	-.04	-.27**
Forced-choice distress						1.00	.10	-.20**
Continuous sexual distress							1.00	.27**
Continuous emotional distress								1.00

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Gender was coded 0 = women, 1 = men

Forced-choice was coded 1 = sexual infidelity, 2 = emotional infidelity

Table 3.

Hierarchical Regression Predicting Distress to Sexual Infidelity from Gender, Attitude Towards Sexual Infidelity, and Attitude Strength

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β
Gender (G)	-0.11	.06	-0.09	-0.07	.07	-0.06	-0.07	.07	-0.06
Attitude (A)	-.32*	.05	-.36	-.20*	.06	-.23	-.20*	.06	-.23
Attitude Strength (AS)	-.01	.03	-.02	-.05	.04	-.08	-.05	.04	-.08
G x A				-.26*	.10	-.19	-.26*	.10	-.18
G x AS				.09	.07	.09	.09	.07	.09
A x AS				-.07	.05	-.07	-.06	.06	-.06
3 – way interaction							-.02	.11	-.01
<i>R</i> ²		.15			.17			.17	
<i>F</i> for change in <i>R</i> ²		18.04			2.88*			.02	

**Gender coded as 0 = female 1 = male*

**p < .05*

Table 4.

Hierarchical Regression Predicting Distress to Emotional Infidelity from Gender, Attitude Towards Emotional Infidelity, and Attitude Strength

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β
Gender (G)	-.33*	.08	-.21	-.34*	.08	-.22	-.44*	.09	-.29
Attitude (A)	-.19*	.30	-.31	-.19*	.05	-.32	-.16*	.05	-.26
Attitude Strength (AS)	-.09*	.04	-.11	-.06	.06	-.08	-.12*	.06	-.15
G x A				-.07	.07	.07	-.03	.08	-.04
G x AS				-.16	.10	-.11	-.07	.11	-.05
A x AS				-.04	.04	-.05	-.13*	.06	-.19
3 – way interaction							.22*	.08	.23
<i>R</i> ²		.22			.23			.24	
<i>F</i> for change in <i>R</i> ²		29.82			1.22			7.05*	

**Gender coded as 0 = female 1 = male*

**p < .05*

Figure 1. Interaction between attitude and gender in response to sexual infidelity

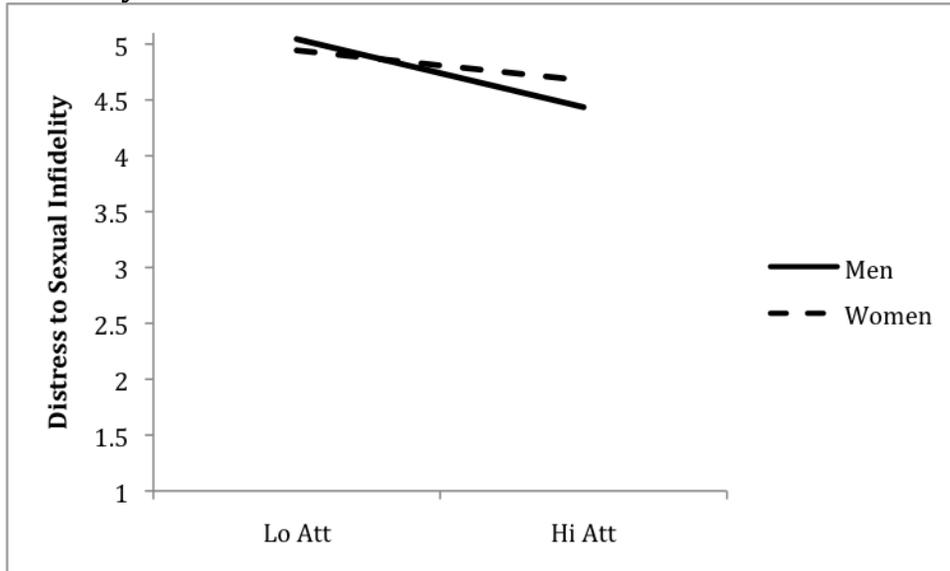
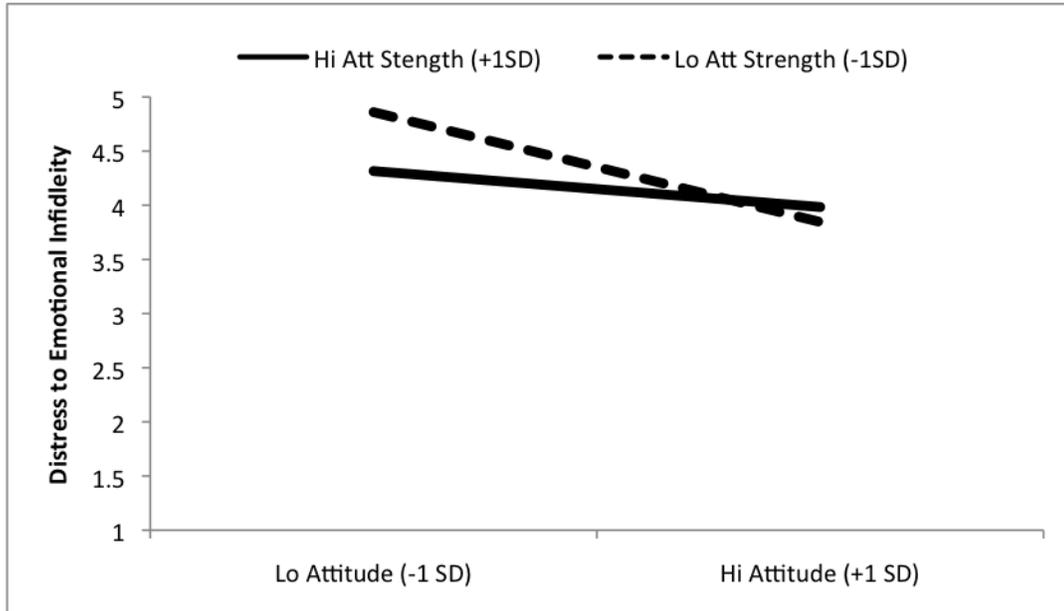


Figure 2. Emotional attitude strength as a moderator of attitude held towards emotional infidelity and distress to emotional infidelity

Men



Women

