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*Courage to Recover: Married People's Experience of Post
Traumatic Growth After Infidelity*

Julie A. Blunkosky-Shaikh

*Courage to Recover: Married People's Experience of Post Traumatic Growth After
Infidelity*

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
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by

Julie A. Blunkosky-Shaikh, B.S., M.S.W., L.C.S.W.

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Area of Specialization: Marital, Couple, and Family Counseling/Therapy

COURAGE TO RECOVER: MARRIED PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCE OF POST
TRAUMATIC GROWTH AFTER INFIDELITY

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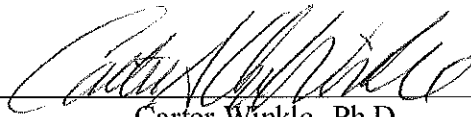
Julie A. Blunkosky-Shaikh, B.S., M.S.W., L.C.S.W.

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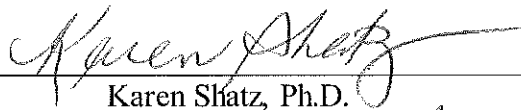
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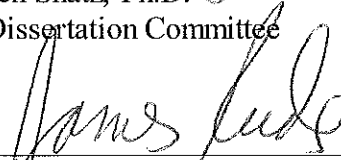
Fay Roseman, Ph.D.
Chairperson, Dissertation Committee



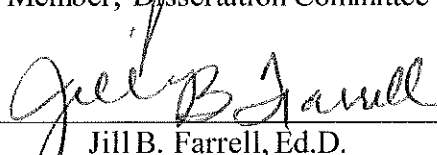
Carter Winkle, Ph.D.
Methodologist, Dissertation Committee



Karen Shatz, Ph.D.
Member, Dissertation Committee



James Rudes, Ph.D.
Member, Dissertation Committee



Jil B. Farrell, Ed.D.
Dean, Adrian Dominican School of Education

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Abstract

Infidelity is a traumatic event and a major cause of divorce and other adverse outcomes such as depression, anxiety, relational, and financial problems for both spouses and their family (Allen & Atkins, 2012). Much of the existing literature on infidelity has focused on the problems associated with infidelity, however, recent research has begun to explore positive outcomes associated with infidelity (Laaser et al., 2017). The outcomes of new research indicates that people may experience post traumatic growth as a result of experiencing the trauma of an infidelity within their marriage (Laaser et al., 2017). The aim of this research was to explore and gain understanding of married people's experience of post traumatic growth after infidelity. To accomplish this the researcher utilized an interpretative phenomenological analysis methodology to explore the specific thoughts, feelings, and behaviors associated with the experience of post traumatic growth amongst six demographically diverse, heterosexual married people who have stayed with their spouse after an infidelity. The findings suggest that growth was experienced in thoughts, behaviors and actions that reflected *Gains and Losses* in their life, in seemingly unexplainable *Paradoxes*, and in the *Courage* to recover from the infidelity. Findings of this study are intended to broaden the literature on infidelity and post traumatic growth and add to the knowledge base of marriage and family counselors who may be working with people who have experienced an infidelity.

Acknowledgements

I want to acknowledge Dr. Fay Roseman who believed in this dissertation from day one, Dr. Carter A. Winkle, whose emphasis on fidelity to my methodology stood constant through the research process, Dr. Karen Shatz, for the constant support and push to get to the finish line, and to Dr. Jim Rudes, who has been a catalyst for generative thinking throughout my Ph.D. journey. I want to also acknowledge the participants who made this study possible. Hope exists because of people like you, who are courageous enough to tell their stories.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents. I love you.

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CHAPTER I

"The day I had the epiphany I had been so angry and I can't remember what it was about, something I saw reminded me of his affair and everything just came rushing back. We got into a bit of an argument. It was very emotional. He ended up not sleeping and had to get up the next day for work at 3:00am. He had to work late and I knew he would be totally tired after his long shift. I also hadn't slept and ended up so sick with my nose and chest congested. Well, he walked in the door that day carrying a vaporizer. And this is the stupidest story, but the vaporizer of all things, of all the gifts he's ever given me, it was the best. I was like, my God, he really does love me! None of this matters, you know? After not getting any sleep, after being through this torture the night before talking about this affair again and again, he brings me home a vaporizer after he works all day and is miserable and disgustingly tired. He thought of me. And for some reason that just was like the moment when I realized, 'Okay, she doesn't matter anymore. It's done now.' If somebody asked me, 'What finally let you let it go?'... Well, it was a vaporizer. I mean its just a symbol, but it was at that moment I really felt how much he truly loved me."

—Rachel

THE PROBLEM

Marriage is a highly-valued institution that is entered into with often implicit expectations. One of these implicit expectations is that both spouses will remain loyal to one another and not have intimate relationships with others outside of their marriage. In many cases this is an expectation that goes unspoken and undiscussed prior to marriage and throughout its course. In this silence exists a tension, bookended by a distressing

reality and the human propensity towards denial. The reality being that infidelity is common and many people are vulnerable to the enticement that comes from attraction to others and the potential for straying from the ones we love. The unspoken expectation of sexual loyalty along with the belief that “my partner will never cheat” sets the stage for a traumatic experience if it should ever happen. If it should ever happen, there is another unspoken expectation at play that make’s the experience of infidelity even more treacherous—how it should be responded to.

Most people know of anecdotal accounts of friends, family members, strangers, and public figures who have cheated or been cheated on. The accounts of their affairs and how they are responded to are constructed and narrated by way of news, media, and social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and personal blogs. These public and highly personal accounts of infidelity generally tell one-sided stories of infidelity’s destructive power and the emotions and responses it elicits. The same is true for more private experiences of infidelity in the lives of friends and family. Generally, these accounts are reported by way of second-hand gossip or through confidential pulls for support by the betrayed, or guilty admissions by perpetrators. Regardless of the proximity to the infidelity, the way it is storied follows predictable patterns that include one spouse, the “perpetrator”, bearing the cross for cheating, and the “victim” being the recipient of empathy and compassion from concerned others. Those outside of the relationship who have knowledge of the infidelity become highly invested in its storyline, while simultaneously avoiding personalizing it and acknowledging the possibility that something similar could happen in their own relationship. Those who experience it directly are derailed by the traumatizing impact. Emotions of horror, guilt, shame, anger,

and sadness are expected to prevail throughout the course of the discovery and recovery by all parties experiencing and witnessing the infidelity. Pressure is cast on both spouses to act immediately and decisively—more so to ease the underlying discomfort of others who cannot reconcile why or how such a thing could happen to a couple so in love and committed to one another. The perpetrator is expected to abandon their affair, apologize profusely, and seek forgiveness from their betrayed partner. The betrayed spouse is under pressure to act to abandon their philandering partner, particularly in the absence of an apology or expressed remorse. Regardless of how public or private it's exhibition, the infidelity will live on as a stain in the couple's marriage prompting separation, divorce—or at best—resignation to lifelong resentment and lackluster commitment moving forward. This picture will ring true to many, particularly those who have been through it.

This construction of infidelity as a wholly devastating phenomenon is entrenched in the dominant discourse of infidelity in popular culture. As a result, the performance of the discovery of infidelity is predictably painful. Academia's singular focus on infidelity as a catastrophic phenomenon further supports the livelihood of this narrative (Ozgun, 2010). This view of infidelity is myopic and limits understanding about the potential positive outcomes that can occur after its discovery. Ultimately, married couples and counselors have limited alternative ways of understanding, experiencing, and responding to infidelity.

Background of the Problem

Infidelity is a common event in married life (Eaves & Robertson-Smith, 2007; Tafoya & Spitzberg, 2007). The reasons affairs happen are numerous (Emmers-Sommer, Warber & Halford, 2010; Jones & Weiser, 2014; Lambert, Mulder & Fincham, 2014).

While the causes of infidelity often stem from dissatisfaction in one's relationship, many infidelities occur in happy marriages (DeMaris, 2009; Dew & Tulane, 2015; Emmers-Sommer, Warber & Halford, 2010; Fisher et al., 2009; Lambert, Mulder & Fincham, 2014). The occurrence of infidelity is also related to personality characteristics such as selfishness and impulsiveness (Graham, Negash, Lambert & Fincham, 2016; Jones & Weiser, 2014; McNulty & Widman, 2014). Being affiliated with a cultural or religious group that is liberal in its philosophy about sex and relationships may also contribute to infidelity (Jackman, 2015; Martins et al., 2016; Morton & Gorzalka, 2015).

The trauma of infidelity might be best explained using Janoff-Bulman's (1992) shattered assumptions model of trauma. Specifically, married people often assume their spouse is benevolent, their marriage meaningful, and their self deserving of positive outcomes (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). The discovery of a spouse's infidelity shatters these assumptions. For the first time, a spouse may question the trustworthiness of their husband or wife, the value and meaning of their marriage, and who they are as a person. All of this can result in an experience consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder (Laaser et al., 2017). Ortman (2005, pg. 48) described the discovery of an infidelity of one's spouse as a "fatal psychic wound and a death blow to the relationship."

Circumstances surrounding an affair discovery may heighten its traumatic impact. Previous research indicates that the traumatic impact of an infidelity is greatest when spouses: take for granted their partner's satisfaction with the relationship, fail to acknowledge qualities and characteristics about their spouse that are red flags, assume an unrealistic utopian vision of fulfillment through marriage, and have unresolved childhood trauma related to a parent's infidelity (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Perel, 2015; Whisman &

Wagers, 2005). Further, sexual affairs and those exposed by a third party are also likely to be more traumatic than those that are emotional in nature and disclosed by the offending spouse (Afifi, Falato & Weiner, 2001; Leeker & Carlozzi, 2014; Steffens & Rennie, 2006; Tagler & Jeffers, 2013).

The negative outcomes of infidelity mirror those of other traumatic, life-threatening events (Ortman, 2005). Often, the focus of the impact of an affair rests on the uninvolved, betrayed spouse, but the emotional impact may be felt by both spouses (Allen & Atkins, 2012; Crouch & Dickes, 2016; Gorman & Blow, 2008; Haney & Hardie, 2014; Laaser et al., 2017; Lusterman, 2005a). The devastation of an affair may be widespread, affecting not only the spouses directly involved, but also their children and those close to them (Dean, 2011).

Less than half of married couples who experience infidelity will stay together (Allen & Atkins, 2012). Although there is an abundance of literature on counseling interventions for couples experiencing infidelity, recovery is a long and arduous road (Butler, Bird, & Fife, 2007; Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2008; Haney & Hardie, 2014; Olson, Russell, Higgins-Kessler, & Miller, 2002; Perel, 2015). Those who stay together have the potential for experiencing growth outcomes (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Heintzelman et al., 2014, Laaser et al., 2017).

Post traumatic growth (PTG) was first described in the positive psychology work of Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun in 1995. In their seminal work, Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) described PTG as the experience of positive and meaningful personal growth in domains of a person's life that results from a traumatic experience. PTG has been previously studied with culturally diverse populations of people who have

experienced trauma related to war, disease, sexual abuse and victimization, natural disaster, terrorism, motor vehicle accidents, displacement, genocide, and the death of a child (Hassija & Turchik, 2016; Hijazi et al., 2014; Maguen, Vogt, King, King, & Litz, 2006; Orcutt, Bonanno, Hannan, & Miron, 2014; Richardson, 2016; Siqveland, Hafstad, & Tedeschi, 2012; Vloet et al., 2014). Much is known about the PTG process and the emotional and cognitive functioning of people who have experienced a trauma and subsequent growth outcomes (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Many internal and external factors play a role in the promotion of growth, although the passage of time and severity of the trauma play a key role in growth outcomes (Boals, Steward, & Schuettler, 2010; Hijazi et al., 2014; Kleim & Ehlers, 2009; Val & Linley, 2006).

While similar concepts of resilience, benefit-finding, and cognitive adaptation have been applied to discussion about recovery from infidelity, only recently have scholars applied the PTG concept to infidelity recovery (Gonzales, Greer, Scheers, Oakes & Buckley, 2004; Heintzelman et al., 2014; Laaser et al., 2017; McCullough, Root, & Cohen, 2006; Schultz, Tallman & Altmaier, 2010). Three recent research studies shed light on factors that contribute to growth after an infidelity (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Heintzelman et al., 2014; Laaser et al., 2017). While these studies provide a foundation of evidence for growth after infidelity they did not explore in depth how growth manifests in the lives of spouses who overcome an infidelity.

Statement of the Problem

The literature on the experience of PTG after an infidelity is in its infancy. Extant research has shed light on the possibility of growth after infidelity, but there has yet to be a more detailed exploration of the lived experience of PTG after an infidelity.

Furthermore, previous research has focused on the experience of growth from the perspective of the betrayed spouse. Because infidelity has the potential to be a traumatic experience for both involved and uninvolved spouses it stands to reason that PTG may be possible for not only victims of affairs but also the perpetrators of affairs as well.

A qualitative exploration into the ways that growth manifests in and between spouses who have experienced infidelity might strengthen and add depth to survey reporting of growth. The inclusion of the involved spouses experience in a qualitative exploration of PTG after infidelity would add a new perspective to the emerging body of literature on this topic. Doing so might support the advancement of an alternative perspective for understanding infidelity and its recovery. This would be useful to counselors who work with couples who have experienced infidelity as well as to members of the public who may be seeking to understand infidelity and its possibilities for recovery.

Researcher Reflection

This researcher has an intimate relationship with the topic under study having been in the cross-hairs of an affair as the uninvolved partner in a previous committed relationship. The experience was traumatic—the discovery of the affair sudden and unexpected. In its wake, the experience of being betrayed, of being lied to, and the absence of details, left me feeling like a victim of my partner’s affair. The emotions I experienced were volatile, complicated, and at times, felt beyond my control. Amid the emotional turmoil, I mustered up the courage to ask my partner why he cheated on me. After many difficult conversations with him and swallowing my pride I came to realize that there were many things absent in my relationship with him that were being provided

by the other woman. His own despair and inner turmoil about the affair became clear and as time passed we both realized that the affair was a consequence of neglecting one another's needs, missed moments of communication about this, and lack of realistic expectations of one another. With this clarity, I no longer felt like a victim.

Despite the affair, my partner and I cared for one another and our commitment to one another became more obvious as we worked through the aftermath of the affair. Our relationship deepened because of the communication and honesty that was forced into being by the discovery of the affair. Although he and I are no longer together for reasons unrelated to the affair, we worked through our mutual pain and disappointments with one another that had resulted in the infidelity. I cannot speak for him, but my perspective on relationships and on infidelity and the possibility of recovery has changed because of my own experience. I no longer view infidelity as a death knell in a relationship.

Research Questions

The present study seeks to answer the principle research question: How do spouses experience growth within themselves and within their relationship after infidelity? This researcher sought to answer this question by focusing on the sub-questions:

- When did participants start noticing a positive change or growth within themselves or their marriage and how did participants know this change was a result of the experience of the infidelity?
- What thoughts, beliefs, or interactions represent positive change or growth?

- What is preferable about the relationship now as a result of the experience with the infidelity?

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The present study was guided by a social constructivist framework for understanding infidelity and post-traumatic growth (Gergen, 1999). This framework assumes that a person's cultural traditions and personal history have a powerful influence over the meaning made of their experience. Because of variation in people's cultural traditions and personal history, there are multiple possibilities for how people experience infidelity and growth.

The present study positions infidelity in the realm of being a "traumatic" experience, yet the researcher realizes that infidelity may be experienced differently, perhaps as "non-traumatic" by some. Throughout this study, this researcher's lens focused on the academic discourse that privileges the view that infidelity is traumatic. At the same time, this researcher understands that traumatic experiences of infidelity vary based on a person's cultural traditions and personal experience with both "trauma" and "infidelity". The choice to situate infidelity in the realm of a traumatic experience is for the purposes of exploring the construct of post-traumatic growth and the variation that exists in people's experience of post-traumatic growth.

This multiplicity of experience is best encapsulated through a qualitative inquiry which is suited for capturing the nuances and complexities of the human experience. The present study used an interpretative phenomenological analysis framework to explore the experience of post-traumatic growth after an infidelity between married people. This researcher conducted interviews with six married individuals who remained married to

their spouse after an infidelity and reported experiencing growth as a result. Responding to Laaser's (2017) call for more diverse sampling in future research on this topic, the present study included uninvolved spouses from various walks of life. Participants were recruited through Facebook group pages for people seeking marriage support.

Participants participated in 60-90 minute face-to-face, semi-structured, audio recorded interviews. Data analysis followed a procedure designed for IPA described by Storey (2007).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present study is to enrich the current emerging literature on post-traumatic growth after infidelity and offers an alternative lens for understanding the experience of recovery from infidelity. While there is evidence from previous research that people who have experienced relational betrayal can also experience growth related to that betrayal, no research has looked more deeply at the phenomenon of growth related to spousal infidelity to understand the way that growth manifests (Laaser et al., 2017). Understanding the phenomenon of post traumatic growth after infidelity would be useful to counselors working with people who have experienced infidelity. By adding to the body of knowledge on infidelity and its outcomes, counselors—particularly those who are strength-oriented in their treatment approach—might have a broader lens through which to understand their clients' experience. Additionally, by illuminating the positive growth potential of the experience of infidelity, spouses who may be experiencing this phenomenon in their own marriage may feel more hopeful about salvaging their marriage and avoiding divorce.

Definition of Terms

Term	Definition
Growth	a person's subjective experience of positive and meaningful personal change that resulted from a traumatic experience (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995)
Infidelity	any act of betrayal during a marriage that is emotional or physical in nature, involves a third party, and is experienced as traumatic to both partners (Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Lusterman, 2005a; Ortman, 2005)
Involved partner	the spouse engaging in the infidelity (Johnson, 2013)
Marriage	the state of being united as spouses in a consensual and contractual relationship recognized by law (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)
Trauma	an event that shatters a person's fundamental assumptions about their world, is out of the ordinary and directly experienced, and a threat to survival and self-preservation (Janoff-Bulman, 1992)
Uninvolved partner	the spouse not engaging in the infidelity (Johnson, 2013)

Summary

It is difficult to consider the positive outcomes of a traumatic event such as infidelity. Indeed, there is real pain and suffering associated with the trauma associated with betrayal by a committed partner. The extent to which it disrupts one's internal and external world is obvious to anyone who has experienced or witnessed the aftermath of an infidelity. This validates the concentrated attention in the counseling literature given to understanding the problems created by acts of infidelity, how to prevent them, and solve them. At the same time, there is also evidence in the literature that the experience of infidelity, and traumatic events in general, can lead to positive outcomes and growth for both individuals and couples (Heintzelman et al., 2014; Laaser et al., 2017; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). This literature seems to garner less attention despite its availability.

The present study sought to build on the existing literature on post-traumatic growth and infidelity and reconcile the paucity of information on this topic singularly.

The inclusion of this perspective in the counseling literature presents a step towards a clearer understanding of the ways spouses experience growth after the trauma of an infidelity. Specifically, the present study explored how subjective reports of growth manifest in the thoughts, feelings, fundamental beliefs, behavioral patterns, and relational interactions that occur within and between partners throughout the recovery process.

Overview

Chapter II provides an overview of the literature on the traumatic nature of infidelity, the factors that both lead to incidents of infidelity and its traumatic impact. The focus then turns to recovery from infidelity and the potential for growth. Recent research on growth after infidelity is presented to serve as a foundation for the present study's research question. Following this is a discussion on post-traumatic growth (PTG). Literature on infidelity is integrated into the discussion on PTG. Chapter II concludes by discussing recent research on infidelity and post traumatic growth as a launching point for the design of the present study.

In Chapter III, the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology used for the present study is explained. The sample population is described along with a rationale for the sample size and explanation of the screening procedure. Instrumentation utilized for screening purposes is presented as well as a description of the schedule of questions used as a guide for the semi-structured interviews. The procedures of the study are explained including informed consent, recruitment, and data collection procedures. Risks to participants and steps to reducing risk are proposed. Following this is the data analysis procedures and an explanation of how the findings are presented.

Chapter IV presents the study findings. Three superordinate themes and subthemes are presented with supporting excerpts from the interview transcripts. An analysis of the findings as it relates to the research question is provided. Following this is a discussion of the findings with study limitations and recommendations for future research in Chapter V.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much has been written about infidelity and post traumatic growth exclusively. Infidelity has been studied extensively by academics of various disciplines, and as a result, much is known about the causes of infidelity and its consequences. Overwhelmingly the literature privileges a troubling view of infidelity and its negative effects on individuals, couples, and families. This one-sided depiction has a powerful influence on how couples and counselors interpret and experience infidelity (Parker, Berger, & Campbell, 2010). Only recently has infidelity been studied for its potential to elicit growth (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Heintzelman et al., 2014; Laaser et al., 2017). This addition to the infidelity literature provides new insight into the positive experiences that can occur after infidelity. Within the post-traumatic growth literature, there is an abundance of literature on growth outcomes occurring after the experience of traumatic events such as cancer, natural disasters, and war (Maguen et al., 2006; Siqueland, Hafstad, & Tedeschi, 2012; Stanton, Bower, & Low, 2006). Much is understood about the process of growth and related factors.

The following literature review provides a foundation for the emergence of the present study's research question. It begins with a discussion on the traumatic nature of infidelity for both involved and uninvolved spouses, its impact, and the process of recovery. This leads into a discussion on growth after infidelity and recent research that has looked at post traumatic growth. The concept of post traumatic growth, its related concepts, domains of growth, and factors related to growth are presented, along with current instrumentation used to measure growth.

Search terms for this literature review included infidelity, relational betrayal, trauma, benefit-finding, resilience, cognitive adaptation and post-traumatic growth. Search parameters included peer reviewed articles and books seminal in nature or published within the past 10-15 years. Literature was reviewed from a variety of disciplines to ensure multiple perspectives and ways of understanding infidelity and growth were included in the review of the literature.

Infidelity and Post Traumatic Growth

Most people think cheating on one's spouse is wrong but both men and women do it and they do it often (Brand, Markey, Mills & Hodges, 2007; Costello, 2006; DeMaris, 2013; Eaves & Robertson-Smith, 2007; Sagebin-Bordini & Sperb, 2013; Tafoya & Spitzberg, 2007; Treas, Lui, & Gubernskaya, 2014). Infidelity permeates cultures throughout the world (Mir, Wajid, Pearson, Khan, & Masood, 2013; Moore, 2010; Traeen & Thuen, 2013; Trent & South, 2011; Zhang, 2010). In the US between 20-40% of marriages will experience infidelity by a spouse (Eaves & Robertson-Smith, 2007; Tafoya & Spitzberg, 2007). These estimates may be conservative. The stigma, shame, and cultural and social sanctions associated with engaging in infidelity or being cheated on may prevent people from reporting honestly and accurately in self-report studies (Brand, Markey, Mills & Hodges, 2007; DeMaris, 2013; Eaves & Robertson-Smith, 2007; Krumpal, 2013; Martins et al., 2016; Traeen & Thuen, 2013; Zhang, 2010). The taboo nature of infidelity makes it an experience that can be isolating and therefore more troubling when experienced (Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

Infidelity factors. People cheat for different reasons. Understanding the reasons is important for making sense of why some couples or spouses are traumatized by an

infidelity while others are not. The qualities of a marriage and each spouse's overall satisfaction plays an important role in the occurrence of infidelity. Poor communication, high frequency of negative interactions, low sexual satisfaction, emotional and financial dependency, as well as lack of trust, commitment and vitality in the relationship are associated with infidelity (Allen et al., 2008; Corona et al., 2010; DeMaris, 2009; Dew & Tulane, 2015; Emmers-Sommer, Warber & Halford, 2010; Fisher et al., 2009; Fisher et al., 2012a; Jackman, 2015; Lambert, Mulder & Fincham, 2014; Martins et al., 2016; McNulty & Brineman, 2007; Munsch, 2015; Whisman, Gordon & Chatav, 2007). Even when relationship quality is high and spouses are satisfied with the marriage, the presence of high quality potential partners outside of the home and the ease and convenience to engage in an affair may be too tempting for some spouses to resist (Ciarocco, Echevarria, & Lewandowski, 2012; Emmers-Sommer, Warber & Halford, 2010; Martins et al., 2016; Trent & South, 2011; Warner, Manning, Giordano & Longmore, 2011; Zhang, 2010).

Some people are simply more likely to have affairs because of their character or personality. Spouses who are demanding, selfish, impulsive, conflict avoidant, perceive themselves to be powerful, have addictive personalities, and lack empathy or self-esteem may be more likely to have affairs as are those who have insecure attachment styles (Graham, Negash, Lambert & Fincham, 2016; Jones & Weiser, 2014; McNulty & Widman, 2014; Russell, Baker & McNulty, 2013; Tidwell & Eastwick, 2013). Family influence plays a role as well and infidelity may occur in intergenerational patterns (Fife, Weeks & Gambescia, 2008; Fish, Pavkov, Wetchler & Bercik, 2012; Havlicek et al., 2011; Hunyady, Lawrence & Jost, 2008). Finally, a person's cultural and religious position also plays a role in the experience of infidelity. Infidelity is more likely to

happen in cultures where people are more liberal in their beliefs, sexually permissive, lack religious affiliation and participation, and in cultures that prioritize the pursuit of personal pleasure and individual need fulfillment in intimate relationships (Jackman, 2015; Martins et al., 2016; Morton & Gorzalka, 2015; Sagebin-Bordini & Sperb, 2013; Schmitt & Jonason, 2015). In more conservative cultures people may be driven to having affairs as a result of the incongruence and associated tension between their innate desires and the more conservative values of the society where they live (Anderson, 2010).

Infidelity as trauma. The association between infidelity and trauma is replete in the literature on the effects of affairs on betrayed spouses (Haney & Hardie, 2014; Leone 2013; Ortman, 2005; Schneider, Weiss & Samenow, 2012). Affairs are by nature deceitful and involve acts of betrayal more traumatic than the experience of death of a family member or friend (Perel, 2015). In her seminal work on trauma, Janoff-Bulman (1992) described a traumatic event as one that shatters fundamental assumptions, is out of the ordinary and directly experienced, and a threat to survival and self-preservation. When a marriage is already unstable spouses may be hardly surprised to discover their husband's or wife's infidelity. While it may hurt no less, the surprise of it is mitigated by the acknowledgement that things haven't been going well and both partners may already have one foot out the door. In these cases, an infidelity may serve as merely the tipping point for a divorce already on the brink. However, many infidelities surface as surprises in marriages otherwise considered happy and threaten the survival of the marriage (Perel, 2015). In these cases, the discovery of an infidelity is unexpected and the uninvolved partner is left shocked and unprepared for the emotional and psychological turmoil that follows. This is no better evident than when an affair surfaces and the uninvolved partner

responds in shock with exclamations such as, “I never saw it coming” or “I thought things were so good”. Affairs like this are experienced as traumatic because they are unexpected and violate the beliefs and assumptions the uninvolved spouse holds about their partner and their marriage (Whisman & Wagers, 2005).

Infidelity is also traumatic in cases where spouses hold one-sided views of their partner and overlook qualities that are red flags. Maintaining a one-sided view may support smooth interactions with one’s partner along the journey of marriage; however, ignoring red flags increases one’s vulnerability and susceptibility to experiencing greater distress in the event of an affair. Additionally, it is often falsely assumed that spouses will unconditionally fulfill one another’s needs, hopes, and desires over the course of a marriage (Perel, 2015). When an infidelity happens in these illusory types of relationships they shatter the fantasy and expectations of the marriage. Further, people who may have been traumatized by their own parent’s infidelity may be vulnerable to re-traumatization if experienced in their own marriage. Taken together, it can be concluded that the discovery of an infidelity is most traumatic when it is unexpected and when spouses take for granted their partner’s satisfaction, fail to acknowledge qualities and characteristics about their spouse that are red flags, assume an unrealistic utopian vision of fulfillment through marriage, and/or have unresolved childhood trauma related to a parent’s infidelity.

Certain characteristics of the affair such as the nature of the affair itself, how it was discovered, and who it was with, may heighten the traumatic impact of its discovery and threaten a spouse’s physical health and social life. Sexual affairs are particularly threatening due to the risks associated with STDs or HIV and the possibility of pregnancy

along with the fears of abandonment associated with the emotional attachment of the involved partner to the affair partner (Anderson, 2006; Denes, Lannutti & Bevan, 2015; Frederick and Fales, 2016; Hertlein, Wetchler & Piercy, 2005; Leeker & Carlozzi, 2014; Tagler, 2010; Tagler & Jeffers, 2013). There may be physical risk associated with the affair partner becoming obsessional, threatening, or violent towards the involved or uninvolved partner. Affairs that are exposed by a third-party source are highly damaging because of the shame and humiliation involved with other people knowing (Afifi, Falato & Weiner, 2001). Because women are not typically thought of as the perpetrators of infidelity men may experience added distress over their spouse's affair (Martins et al., 2016; Traeen & Thuen, 2013; Zhang, 2010). From a gender perspective, women have more difficulty with their partner's emotional infidelity while men may be more distressed by their partner's sexual infidelity (Donovan & Emmers-Sommer, 2012; Schutzwahl, 2006; Whitty & Quigley, 2008).

Impact of infidelity on spouses and family. Ortman (2005) coined the term "Post Infidelity Stress Disorder" or "PISD" to describe the similarities in response to infidelity to other life-threatening, traumatic events. Ortman's concise description appropriately summarizes a body of more recent research that has sought to understand the impact of infidelity relative to other traumatic events (Allen & Atkins, 2012; Crouch & Dickes, 2016; Gorman & Blow, 2008; Laaser et al., 2017; Lusterman, 2005a). This impact includes temporary or long-term psychological and emotional distress, interpersonal conflict, existential crises, physical illness, and impairment in overall functioning in life for both involved and uninvolved spouses and even close family members.

For spouses, the effects of an infidelity on the marriage can linger long after its discovery stifling happiness in the marriage, reducing sexual satisfaction over the long run, and inflicting permanent damage on the couple's perception of their relationship (Kluwer & Karremans, 2009; Previti & Amato, 2004; Yucel & Gassanov, 2010).

Uninvolved spouses may feel they can no longer trust their spouse again or that they may never recover from the emotional pain and devastation of the betrayal (Laaser et al., 2017; Previti & Amato, 2004). Fear of future betrayal may result in ambivalence about having children together (Hill & DelPriore, 2013).

For the uninvolved spouse, the experience of being cheated on has been described as feeling like a "bad dream" that can trigger a state of emotional dysregulation characterized by alternating feelings of shock, denial, anxiety, sadness, numbness, anger, or even homicidal rage (Allen et al., 2005; Broussard, 2012; Denes, Lannutti & Bevan, 2015; Haney & Hardie, 2014). The uninvolved spouse may become overtaken by and obsessed with thoughts about the circumstances leading up to the infidelity, the details of the affair, jealousy towards the affair partner, and revenge fantasies (Miller & Maner, 2009; Morrissette, 2012). Some betrayed spouses may be moved to violence against their offending spouse and/or their affair partner (Goetz & Shackelford, 2009; Nemeth, Bonomi, Lee, & Ludwin, 2012; Waltermaurer, 2012; Witte & Mulla, 2012). Unsettling questions may arise about their spouse's trustworthiness leading to diminished feelings of safety in the relationship. The uninvolved partner may become hypersensitive to their spouse's behaviors. Incoming text messages and phone calls, once benign, may now arouse fear and suspicion. Other questions arise over previously held assumptions about

the strength of the marriage and their own ability to meet their partner's needs (Ortman, 2005).

The uninvolved spouse may vacillate between blaming themselves and their partner for the affair. As they attempt to make sense of why it happened and how they didn't see it coming, they may feel "stupid" or "crazy" for being deceived by their partner or for not following their instincts when they felt something was wrong in the relationship (Haney & Hardie, 2014). This may bring to the surface feelings of inadequacy or insecurity that had previously been hidden under the anger directed at their spouse. To reconcile their emotional dissonance, they may attempt to rationalize what happened or seek the support of others to make sense of the event.

Their distress may be compounded by scrutinizing or accusatory comments made by social supports who have knowledge of the affair or who lack empathy for the uninvolved spouse's experience of the affair (Haney & Hardie, 2014; Pittman & Wagers, 2005). To make matters worse, the involved spouse may become intolerant of their ongoing distress about the affair and attempt to force them to "move on" or "get over it" (Allen et al., 2005). As the uninvolved spouse attempts to reconcile moving forward, they may experience a loss of identity, self-worth, and have difficulty re-engaging in the marriage confidently (Gorman & Blow, 2008; Ortman, 2005; Rachman, 2010; Wang, King, & Debernardi, 2012). The ongoing stress of the affair and its impact can impair physical health leading to anxiety, depression, and negative cardiovascular outcomes (Cano & O'Leary, 2000; Fisher et al., 2012a; Gorman & Blow, 2008; Hertlein, Wetchler & Piercy, 2005; Kachadourian, Smith, Taft & Vogt, 2015). The troubling nature of an infidelity can be so deep for some uninvolved spouses that they may need to end their

marriage (Allen & Rhoades, 2007; Atkins et al., 2005; Confer and Cloud, 2011; Donovan & Emmers-Sommer, 2012). In cases where the marriage ends, uninvolved partners may experience problems with jealousy in new relationships and may be more likely to get divorced in subsequent marriages (Burchell & Ward, 2011; Previti & Amato, 2004). Moving forward, the fear of being cheated on may foster self-destructive or sabotaging behaviors in future relationships or may lead some to become so disillusioned as to never partner again for the remainder of their life.

The impact on involved partners may be two-fold as they must face the fallout associated with two relationships, their spouse and their affair partner. During the affair, the intoxication of engaging in the forbidden and the reawakening of an emotional connection may be worth the potential consequences of being discovered, even if that means the disruption of their marriage (Allen & Rhodes, 2007; DeMaris, 2013). For those involved partners who experience their affair as a breath of fresh air from a stale or stagnant marriage or an opportunity to fulfill a long-lived fantasy, the loss of the affair may be just as distressing as the fallout in their marriage (Allen & Baucom, 2006; Gorman & Blow, 2008). In the wake of the discovery of the affair, involved partners may begin to go through a roller-coaster of emotions including anger, sadness, rage, guilt, shame, fear, regret, and remorse about their involvement in the affair (Hertlein, Wetchler & Piercy, 2005; Olson et al., 2002; Walters & Burger, 2013). As the involved spouse is forced to face the consequences of their actions they may become appalled with themselves and distraught with the conflict between their values and actions and begin to question their inherent trustworthiness (Allen et al., 2005; Foster & Misra, 2013; Seedall, Houghtaling & Wilkins, 2013; Walters & Burger, 2013). They may experience self-

betrayal leading to a loss of self-esteem and the development of depression (Gorman & Blow, 2008; Hertlein, Wetchler & Piercy, 2005). While they attempt to deal with their own internal turmoil and the fallout with their spouse, involved partners may experience increased scrutiny by friends or family and develop a tarnished reputation from those outside of the relationship who have knowledge of the affair (Hackathorn & Harvey, 2011).

The devastation of an affair may be widespread, affecting not only the spouses directly involved, but also their children and those close to them (Dean, 2011). While the affair is ongoing, resources may be diverted away from the family to the affair partner (Crouch & Dickes, 2016). The discovery of the affair may lead to divorce and fragmentation of the family system (Allen & Atkins, 2012; Crouch & Dickes, 2016). Children who are affected by infidelity in their parent's relationship may experience negative mental health outcomes and enduring conflict in their own intimate relationships later in life (Lusterman, 2005b; Platt, Nalbone, Casanova & Wetchler, 2008).

Recovery from infidelity. The discovery of an affair will force the couple to make important decisions about their life together. Less than half of married couples who experience infidelity will stay together (Allen & Atkins, 2012). Separation may be relieving to a highly-distressed partnership, however, breaking up prevents resolution of the traumatic experience of the affair and often leaves both partner's feeling emotionally unresolved (Lusterman, 2005a; Sweeney & Horowitz, 2001). Without resolving the internal conflict presented by the infidelity the uninvolved partner may carry the infidelity as baggage into future relationships. Similarly, breaking up may prevent involved partners from having the opportunity to explore the reason for the infidelity.

This might help prevent such occurrences from happening in future relationships. Further, there are plenty of reasons for couples to stay together after an infidelity. Aside from the more tangible investments both partners may have made in building a life together, owning a home, having children, or sharing financials, which may be difficult to walk away from or dissolve, couples may choose to stay together because of the meaning associated with being married, because they treasure acts of kindness between one another, or to maintain the social support associated with the relationship (Abrahamson, Hussain, Khan, & Schofield, 2012). Those couples who do stay together will face a long and arduous road to recovery fraught with difficulties as well as opportunities to confront and resolve long-standing issues (Haney & Hardie, 2014; Perel, 2015; Thunnissen, 2009).

The recovery process is not linear nor mutually experienced as both partners will be faced with different feelings and obstacles at different points along the way (Haney & Hardie, 2014). In the wake of a discovery of an affair unfettered emotions and destructive communication may compound emotional wounds and hinder the recovery process (Donovan & Emmers-Sommer, 2012). Both partners may be forced to acknowledge problematic attributes within themselves (Hall & Fincham, 2006). While involved partners may feel a sense of relief that the affair is out in the open, uninvolved partners may struggle to forgive and trust their spouse and may be ambivalent about moving forward in making major life decisions such as having children (Allen et al., 2005; Haney & Hardie, 2014; Hill & Del Priore, 2013). Uninvolved partners may become more possessive and obsessive about their partner's whereabouts contributing to resentment by the involved spouse (Denes, Lannutti & Bevan, 2015; Robey & McIntosh, 2012). Involved partners may inadvertently prolong the process of recovery by attempting to

protect their partners from the ongoing distress of the infidelity by not talking about it or discussing details (Hertlein, Wetchler & Piercy, 2005). For both partners, the process may be marked by intense grief over the loss of what the relationship once was or could be (Dean, 2011). Confusion will arise in deciding whether to move the relationship forward as the partners struggle to bridge understanding over why the infidelity happened and work towards rebuilding a life together (Butler, Bird, & Fife, 2007; Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2008). Recovery may be further complicated by input from those around the couple who inadvertently obstruct the couple's resilience by attempting to prescribe how they should or ought to respond to the infidelity (Ungar, 2016).

Growth after infidelity. Despite the challenges associated with the discovery of an affair, an infidelity can serve as a positive “turning point” in a couple's marriage and lead to growth (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Brown, 2007; Heintzelman et al., 2014, Laaser et al., 2017; Perel, 2015; Warren, Morgan, Williams, & Mansfield, 2008). Few studies have sought to understand how couples can grow from an infidelity but those that have shed light on the ways that spouses are transformed by their experience (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Heintzelman et al., 2014, Laaser et al., 2017). These studies reveal that recovering from infidelity has the potential to bring married couples closer together, enhance the value of the marital bond, and increase a sense of comfort and relaxation with the relationship (Heintzelman et al., 2014). Couples may develop more constructive patterns of relating with one another by practicing more honesty and communicating emotions and needs (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Heintzelman et al., 2014). The dynamic of the relationship may shift such that uninvolved spouses may become more assertive in

the marriage while involved spouses may become more accountable (Heintzelman et al., 2014).

A recent study by Laaser et al. (2017) sought to more clearly understand the traumatic nature of infidelity as well as the experience of growth in a sample population of 202 heterosexual women who had experienced a relational betrayal in their relationship. They found that 96% of participants experienced relational betrayal as very traumatic, meeting diagnostic criteria for PTSD, and experienced growth because of an infidelity committed by their partner. They measured growth by way of the Post Traumatic Growth Inventory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) which looked at specific areas of growth in the women's lives. Specifically, growth outcomes included developing increased compassion for others, possessing the ability to handle difficulties, having stronger religious faith and a better understanding of spirituality, and increased sense of personal strength. This study provided further evidence for the traumatic nature of infidelity and supported the idea that growth can occur in its wake.

Post traumatic growth (PTG) and related concepts. In their seminal work, Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995), described post traumatic growth (PTG) as the experience of positive and meaningful personal growth that results from a traumatic experience. At the foundation of PTG theory is the assumption that people can live a richer and more fulfilling life because of the knowledge and experience acquired from a traumatic event (Lev-Wiesel & Amir, 2006). The ability to persevere after a life changing event brings to mind the concepts of resilience, benefit-finding, and cognitive adaptation. These concepts bare similarities requiring some distinction since they play a role in the PTG process.

Resilience may be described as the ability to withstand and rebound from disruptive life challenges (Walsh, 2003; 2007). People who are resilient are able to “bounce back” to a pre-trauma state whereas the experience of PTG can be more likened to “bouncing forward”. The experience of struggle, of challenging one’s beliefs and cognitions, of experiencing a seemingly lack of resilience, is necessary for growth to occur to transport someone from a previous way of being to a new way of being (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). A person who experiences PTG does not bounce back to a pre-trauma state, but rather is transformed by the trauma to another state of being. Resilience is inherent in people who survive trauma and experience growth; however, possessing a high capacity for resilience may actually inhibit growth after a trauma (Levine, Laufer, Stein, Hamama-Raz & Solomon, 2009; Znoj, 2006). Benefit-finding is the process of deriving positive growth from adversity (Cassidy, McLaughlin & Giles, 2014). It is a cognitive strategy that may play a role in helping a person along in the PTG process; however, it is not considered an outcome of experiencing an adverse event. Similarly, Taylor (1983) described cognitive adaptation as a strategy of forming positive illusions in order to cope or adapt to a trauma. This strategy is effective at protecting one’s self-esteem, sense of personal control, and optimism when threatened by a traumatic event. While this may act as a mechanism in the PTG process it does not describe the more fundamental changes that occur to a person’s sense of self and the world around them after experiencing a traumatic incident.

These mechanisms assist in the process of growth but are not indicators of growth (Prati & Pietrantonio, 2009). Previous studies on the outcomes of infidelity have explored the concepts of resilience, benefit-finding, and cognitive adaptation after a spouse’s

experience of infidelity (Gonzales, Greer, Scheers, Oakes & Buckley, 2004; McCullough, Root, & Cohen, 2006; Schultz, Tallman & Altmaier, 2010). These concepts have been described as protective factors in helping couple's in the recovery process.

In PTG, growth is both an active process as well as an outcome that can be identified and reported on over the course of time (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). At any point during the recovery from an affair a spouse may notice ways they are growing. For example, they may be actively practicing being more assertive with their partner or engaging in more open communication. The awareness of this difference in being may be identified as a process of growing whereby changes are happening but there may be no clear, identifiable outcome from the process. At a later point in time however, the spouse may be able to identify an outcome from that process of practicing assertiveness and open communication. They may identify, for example, that they have increased intimacy with their spouse. Given that an infidelity effects spouse's individually and their relationship with one another, growth can occur on an individual level, within the spouse and may also occur within the relationship or between the spouses. The distinctions between who one once was and who one is now or how a marriage was and how a marriage is now, may be defined as outcomes of growth.

PTG is a dynamic process (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). This dynamic process starts with the experience of a highly distressing event, in this case, the discovery of an infidelity in one's marriage, that marks a divide between the pre-and post-trauma world, disrupting a person's internal world and challenging their core beliefs and assumptions about the external world (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Cann et al., 2010; Da Silva, Isabel, Moreira & Canavarro, 2011; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Similar to that described in

Ortman's (2005) PISD model, the event triggers a period of emotional and cognitive distress, marked by intrusive thoughts, images, and persistent and conscious rumination over the event in an attempt to make sense of what happened and why (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999; Morris, Shakespeare-Finch, Rieck & Newbery, 2005).

Rumination over interpersonal transgressions can increase feeling of vengefulness; however, in the PTG process ruminative thinking is considered productive as it specifically serves to deconstruct, repair, restructure, and rebuild the individual's general way of understanding the world (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; McCullough, Root & Cohen, 2006). For growth to occur this cognitive activity must be deliberate, persistent and take place over time (Cann et al., 2010; Stockton, Hunt & Joseph, 2011; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). While there is no specific time frame required for growth to occur, the passing of time allows for processing of the traumatic experience and integration into the person's meaning making system and production of new internal models for understanding the self and the world (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). In the case of infidelity, getting to this stage will require assurance that the affair has ended (Allen et al., 2005; Atkins et al., 2005; De Stefano & Oala, 2008). As the person begins to make meaning of the event, a narrative may begin to form about the trauma and new beliefs and assumptions will emerge followed by new life wisdom and ways of functioning (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). As time passes from the initial discovery of an infidelity and both spouses are able to identify ways of coping with the event in order to get through life, the reality of it will become more real and emotionally tolerable for both spouses and they may begin the process of recovery (De Stefano & Oala, 2008). Concurrent to this, in surviving the infidelity both spouses may realize that they have the

resources to deal with what happened and that new possibilities and growth have resulted from the infidelity (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Warren et al., 2008).

Concurrent to this internal process unfolding, if the spouses are open about their experience to those close to them their PTG process may be influenced by the “co-ruminations” of those concerned others (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). Specifically, how concerned others perceive the infidelity and the possibility of growth may influence the content and direction of the rumination of the spouses and how they make meaning of the affair (Davis, Harasymchuk & Wohl, 2012; Ungar, 2016). The social influence of others has a powerful influence on promoting resilience and recovery after an infidelity (Botey & Kulig, 2013; Poulin, Silver, Gil-Rivas, Holman & McIntosh, 2009; Laaser et al., 2017; Ungar, 2016). Concerned others who possess a growth mindset are likely to provide support and feedback that promote ruminations that contribute to growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). On the other hand, when a spouse seeks to disclose the infidelity to someone who they expect to be supportive and find that they are met with resistance or a lack of compassion this response can compound the spouse’s negative response to the affair (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Hackathorn & Harvey, 2011).

Domains of growth. PTG theory asserts that growth can occur in three specific domains of a person’s life (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1995). These domains include: perception of self, relationships with others, and philosophy of life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Within these domains are 5 common themes which include changes in personal strength, sense of new possibilities, appreciation of life, relating to others, and spirituality (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Themes are likely to emerge that are specific to the nature

of the traumatic event (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). Growth in each domain may co-occur together as growth in one area leads to growth in another area and vice versa.

The domains of growth in a person's life will vary by their experience of the trauma and their unique characteristics prior to the trauma. For example, a trauma involving an act of betrayal, such as infidelity, may alter a person's way of relating to others. An infidelity may also alter a spouse's perception of their self. As previously discussed, after the discovery of an affair, an involved partner may begin to question their values about marriage and monogamy (Foster & Misra, 2013).

Culture also plays an influential role in promoting growth in specific areas. For example, in cultures that value collectivism over individuality, spouses who are recovering from an affair may place greater importance on growth in their relationship with one another (Park & Lechner, 2006). This is important to consider when understanding spouses' experiences of growth after infidelity.

Previous studies on positive outcomes associated with recovery from infidelity suggest growth in all three domains. Laaser et al's (2017) findings that uninvolved women who have experienced relational betrayal report developing increased compassion for others, possessing the ability to handle difficulties, having stronger religious faith and a better understanding of spirituality, and an increased sense of personal strength suggest growth in the domain of perception of self. Findings from Heintzleman et al. (2014) indicating that couples recovering from an affair experience a greater valuation of the marital bond, an increased sense of intimacy and closeness, and increased comfort and relaxation with the relationship suggest growth in philosophy of life and relationship with others. (Heintzleman et al., 2014). Finally, previous findings that couples may develop

more constructive patterns of relating with one another including preferred shifts in power differentials suggest growth in both perception of self and relationship with other (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Heintzelman et al., 2014).

Post traumatic growth factors. Not everyone experiences growth after a traumatic event (Janoff-Bulman, 2006; Lepore & Raveson, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006; Znoj, 2006). For those who do, growth may be supported by factors specific to the circumstances of the traumatic event and the characteristics and actions of the person experiencing the trauma. Understanding these factors assists in understanding why some spouses experience growth after an infidelity while others may be hindered.

An important factor in the occurrence of growth is the passing of time (Hijazi et al, 2014; Laaser et al., 2017). The amount of time needed for growth to occur is unique to each individual, however, a good benchmark is the time it takes for resolution of the traumatic event to occur. This is marked by a reduction in distressing emotional and psychological symptoms and the ability to draw a contrast between the pre-and post-trauma world (Janoff-Bulman, 2006). It is the point at which a person's distress has diminished such that they are able to return to normal daily functioning. The time it takes to recover from an infidelity varies based on the circumstances surrounding the infidelity, how it was discovered, and steps both spouses take to repair the damage it causes. Haney and Hardie (2014) suggest it can take couples 18-24 months to recover from an infidelity. With that recovery comes a gradual process of rebuilding trust and intimacy (Abrahamson et al., 2012).

Additionally, growth is impacted by the severity of the trauma. Traumas experienced as deeply disturbing and provoking immediate intense fear and horror are

most likely to elicit growth as are those that challenge one's core beliefs and identity (Boals, Steward, & Schuettler, 2010; Kleim & Ehlers, 2009; Morris et al., 2005; Schuettler & Adriel, 2011). As previously discussed, an infidelity can be more traumatic than the experience of death of a family member or friend and result in symptoms consistent with PTSD (Haney & Hardie, 2014; Laaser et al., 2017; Leone 2013). As described by Ortman (2005), an infidelity is "often experienced as a fatal psychic wound and a death blow to the relationship" (pg. 48).

The characteristics of a person involved in a traumatic event play a role in growth outcomes. For example, women are more likely to report PTG than men (Vishnevsky, Cann, Calhoun, Tedeschi and Demakis, 2010). Demographically, married, educated, middle aged, minority people are the most likely to experience growth after a trauma (Kleim & Ehlers, 2009; Koutrouli et al. 2012; Maguen et al., 2006; Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996; Tang, 2007; Val & Linley, 2006; Webster & Deng, 2015). People who have high emotional intelligence, extroverted personalities, psychological flexibility, and the willingness to experience difficult emotions, thoughts, memories, or body sensations are more likely to seek support from trustworthy support systems and express their thoughts and feelings after a trauma leading to greater chances of experiencing growth (Engelkemeyer & Marwit, 2008; Hassija & Turchik, 2016; Kashdan & Kane, 2011; Kroo & Nagy, 2011; Lepore & Ravenson, 2006; Linley, Felus, Gillett, & Joseph, 2011; Val & Linley, 2006). Growth is also more likely for people who are able to cope with their emotions in a way that the emotions do not interfere with daily activities (Heintzeman et al., 2014; Orcutt et al., 2014). Religiosity and having a high sense of self-worth supports a person in their recovery from a traumatic event and in making meaning of what

happened (Cann et al., 2010; Chan & Rhodes, 2013; Engelkemeyer & Marwit, 2008; Lepore & Ravenson, 2006; Linley & Joseph, 2011; Steger, Frazier & Zaccanini, 2008).

Other individual factors related to growth include growing up in a positive supportive environment, experiencing secure attachment to parents, and having supportive, non-judgmental friends who listen and are sensitive to the person's needs and allowing them to process the trauma in their own way (Hecker, 2007; Ungar, 2016).

People who lack chronic stressors and are in good mental health with no PTSD symptoms stemming from prior stressful events are more strongly positioned to manage the emotional distress of a trauma than those who are chronically stressed or have a history of mental illness (Lepore & Ravenson, 2006; Ruini, Offidani, & Vescovelli, 2015; Studley & Chung, 2015; Val & Linley, 2006). On the other hand, the presence of frequent intrusive or ruminative thinking about the recent trauma and feelings of hyper-arousal are associated with positive growth outcomes (Bitton, 2014; Helgeson, Reynolds & Tomich, 2006; Hall et al., 2008; Holgersen, Boe & Holen, 2010; Kleim & Ehlers, 2009; Kunst, 2010; Levine, Laufer, Hamama-Raz, Stein & Solomon, 2008; McCaslin et al., 2009;). Growth is also more likely for people who experience satisfaction with their life even after the experience of the traumatic event and for those who are able to be forgiving and open-minded (Cann et al., 2010; Gunty et al., 2011; Znoj, 2006).

Growth is more likely to occur when one's perception of the world is generally trusting and hopeful despite the experience of a traumatic event (Kroo & Nagy, 2011; Trzebinski & Zieba, 2013). People who have a sense of self-efficacy over the circumstances in life and who hold realistic expectations of the world and those in it may also be supported in the process of growth (Hassija & Cloitre, 2014). Believing that there

is meaning in life is associated with growth outcomes (Cann et al., 2010; Linley & Joseph, 2011; Steger, Frazier & Zacchanini, 2008). Maintaining optimism about the future is also a factor related to growth.

A person can also take conscious specific action in their life after a trauma that contributes to growth outcomes. Having a trusted support system that one can reach out to for support after a trauma is associated with positive growth outcomes (Kraemer, Stanton, Meyerowitz, Rowland & Ganz, 2011). Talking openly to a support group of people who have been through a similar experience helps a person to process the trauma and feel supported in their emotional distress (Bhushan & Kumar, 2012; Cobb et al., 2006; Hassija & Turchik, 2016; Prati & Pietrantonio, 2009; Richardson, 2016; Sears et al., 2003; Weiss, 2004). Engaging in intense and purposeful self-reflection and maintaining positivity about life helps a person to not only move through the distress of the trauma but leads to developing new core beliefs (Boyras & Efstathiou, 2011; Kraemer et al., 2011).

Three recent research studies shed light on factors that contribute to growth after an infidelity. Heintzelman (2014) found a positive correlation between PTG after an infidelity and differentiation of self scores, relationship satisfaction, and forgiveness. Abrahamson et al. (2012) found positive outcomes amongst people who possess high motivation to salvage their relationship and who take several actions towards reconciliation such as: going to counseling, practicing forgiveness and gestures of kindness and mercy, trying to understand the reasons for the infidelity, and vicariously learning from others' experience with infidelity. Finally, the findings from Laaser et al. (2017) suggest that seeking help immediately following the infidelity, pursuing

individual and couples therapy, having full disclosure of the infidelity under the supervision of a counselor, and reading psychoeducational material contributed to reports of growth after relational betrayal.

Measuring growth. Measuring growth is not easy. First, the process of growth is not linear nor universal. Some people never experience growth while others experience patterns of stable growth, elevated growth, or regression in several areas of life (Baker, Kelly, Calhoun, Cann & Tedeschi, 2008; Janoff-Bulman, 2006; Milam, 2006). In research, focusing on growth outcomes in trauma studies can inadvertently subjugate negative outcomes (Park & Lechner, 2006). While this may be useful for the goals of research in the area of PTG, lack of acknowledgment within the study of the potential to also experience negative outcomes as a result of trauma would be negligent to the full experience of participants.

Growth can occur in many ways that are not easily measurable quantitatively or captured by current measurement tools thus rendering qualitative methods of data collection important (Park & Lechner, 2006). Current empirically validated tools to measure growth and its related concepts include the Post Traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), the Stress-Related Growth Scale (SRGS) (Park, Cohen & Murch, 1996), and the Benefit Finding Scale (BFS) (Tomich & Helgeson, 2004). Although the development of these tools were influenced by Western values of individualism, their application to other more collectivistic cultural groups has been studied and appears to be cross-culturally valid (Splevins, Cohen, Bowley & Joseph, 2010). Each tool uses a Likert scale to assess the amount of change in specific areas of a participant's life.

There are many shortcomings to exclusively using these tools in research. One important shortcoming is that these tools are dependent on retrospective reports of differences between the ways a participant was at a past time in comparison to the ways they are now. Growth is subjective which makes self-reporting tricky since many people are motivated to believe they are growing and report accordingly (McFarland & Alvaro, 2000). Further, all tools have only been validated utilizing a single population (college students, cancer patients) which limits the tools' adequacy for use with other populations (Park & Lechner, 2006). Additionally, these tools lack comprehensiveness in measuring for all possible areas of growth in a person's life (Park & Lechner, 2006). Because the tools only measure for growth in various areas they leave out the option for a participant to report negative change in those same areas (Park & Lechner, 2006). Similarly, the scales do not allow for distinguishing if a person was already high in a specific area prior to the trauma which could lead to misleading data (Park & Lechner, 2006). Last, growth is a dynamic process which may be reported on at various points within a person's recovery. Reports of growth at specific points in time may not reflect actual continued growth in the future leading to questions about the validity of PTG outcome studies over time (Park & Lechner, 2006). Qualitative studies in conjunction with the use of one or more of these tools would be useful in obtaining richer data on the actual experience of growth. Previous studies on growth after infidelity have utilized the PTGI to investigate the phenomenon (Heintzelman et al., 2014; Laaser et al., 2017).

Summary

The discovery of an infidelity is a traumatic experience that many spouses will face in their marriage. The reasons why people have affairs are complex but worthy of

understanding in order to make sense of why some spouses experience infidelity as traumatizing while others do not. In the wake of the discovery of an infidelity both spouses may experience emotions and behaviors similar to other life-threatening traumatic events. The effects of infidelity on both spouses and the family system is significant and can be long term and destructive. Many couples will not recover from an infidelity and will divorce. Many will stay together and those who do have the potential for improving their relationship with one another and growing. This has been previously studied and reported by Abrahamson et al. (2012), Heintzelman et al. (2014), and Laaser et al. (2017).

The idea that people can experience positive change as a result of a trauma is not a new concept, however, the study of post traumatic growth theory is relatively new in the field of counseling and has not been adequately applied in relationship to recovery after infidelity. The extant research on this topic suggests that people who experience an infidelity can experience growth in 3 domains: self -perception, relationships with others, and philosophy on life after a traumatic event. The process of PTG has become more understood as researchers have identified the different cognitive strategies and mechanisms that play a role in its manifestation; such as conscious rumination, meaning making, benefit-finding, and help seeking. Further, much is also known about the factors that contribute to the growth process and its subsequent outcomes; such as the nature of the trauma and characteristics of the person experiencing the trauma. Recent studies have shed light on the characteristics associated with growth after infidelity.

Growth is hard to measure. Self-reports of growth are subject to exaggeration by participants who may wish to show that their life is better than it actually is (Wortman,

2004). In the absence of deeper qualitative inquiry superficial self-reports of growth may not be indicative of true positive change (Park & Lechner, 2006; Wortman, 2004). Current growth measurement tools are inadequate on their own to capture the breadth and depth of the growth experience. More qualitative studies are needed to explore the multitude of ways that a person experiences growth after a traumatic event.

The present study seeks to build from extant research that supports the existence of growth after the trauma of infidelity. Specifically, the present study seeks to engage a more diverse sociodemographic population who have experienced this phenomenon. Through the use of a qualitative methodology the present study aims to broaden understanding of the thoughts, feelings, and actions that are reflective of post traumatic growth after the experience of infidelity.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This chapter explains the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology used to answer the principle research question: How do spouses experience growth within themselves and within their relationship after an infidelity? The chapter is organized to include an explanation of IPA including its theoretical underpinnings, purpose, and a rationale for its use in the present study. Following this is a description of the sample population and rationale for the sample size chosen. Instrumentation used in the sample selection process and data collection is described, followed by an explanation of the research procedures related to recruitment, data collection, and analysis. Risks associated with participation are explained, as well as procedures for minimizing risk. This chapter concludes with a description of how findings will be presented and issues related to reliability and validity of the results.

Research Paradigm

The research paradigm chosen for the present study is interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA; Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Smith, 1996; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The explanation of IPA has been drawn from the work of Smith and his colleagues (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith, 1996; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Smith & Eatough, 2007) as well as those who have interpreted the theoretical underpinnings and methodological procedures of the IPA approach for the sake of broadening its understanding and use for researchers (Abayomi, 2017; Shinebourne, 2011). As a qualitative form of inquiry, IPA is appropriate for participant-oriented research that explore questions related to how a person makes meaning of an

event as it relates to their personal and social identity (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). These questions tap into issues that require participants to reflect on events that transpired at an earlier point in time or over a period of time (Smith & Eatough, 2007). Themes that generally arise out of IPA relate to participants' meaning making and interpretation, identity and sense of self, and bodily feeling within the lived experience (Smith & Eatough, 2007).

IPA was first described in the seminal work by Smith (1996) and has since developed into a legitimate qualitative approach commonly used in health sciences research (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Shinebourne, 2011). Smith (1996) described IPA as a humanistic model of qualitative research that is phenomenological, hermeneutic, and idiographic in nature. What follows is an explanation of these theories and their related concepts as drawn from Shinebourne (2011). This explanation substantiates the choice of the IPA paradigm for the present study exploring the experience of PTG after infidelity.

Drawing from phenomenological theory first articulated by Husserl (1927), the goal of IPA is to uncover the nature of a phenomena through the systematic and attentive exploration of the lived experience of that phenomenon and the thoughts and feelings people attribute to it from the perspective of those who have experienced it (Smith et al., 2009). Uncovering the nature of the phenomena in this way is not as simple as lifting a veil to disclose the truth. Rather, as described by Moran (2000, p. 229), "How things appear or are covered up must be explicitly studied. The things themselves always present themselves in a manner which is at the same time self-concealing."

The method for revealing "the thing" follows the hermeneutic process described by Heidegger (1962) which involves interpretation and articulation of the meaning of an

experience through language. An assumption of the interpretative process is that interpretation is always grounded in a rich historical and cultural context that is influenced by knowledge acquired through previous life experiences (Heidegger, 1962). In short, no one experiences something *tabula rasa*. Since all events are experienced in this way and because people vary in their historical and cultural contexts of experience, the way a phenomenon is interpreted will be different from person to person. It would also follow that people who share a similar cultural or experiential history may share similarities in the experience of a phenomenon with variances being explained by the differences inherent in people's lived experience. This is important because the inclusion of the researcher in phenomenological explorations adds another interpretative lens for making meaning of the phenomenon.

Smith (2004) called this scenario a double hermeneutic, whereby, the participant is attempting to make sense of their experience with the phenomenon and the researcher is attempting to make sense of how the participant is making sense of the phenomenon. This casts the researcher into a dual role of participant/observer. As a participant, the researcher acts as an empath who seeks to table their preconceptions about the phenomenon and to "stand in the shoes" of the participant to understand and make meaning of their individual experience throughout the process of data collection and analysis. In doing so the researcher has access to the "innermost deliberation" that goes on inside research participants as they attempt to make meaning of their experience (Abayomi, 2017). At the same time, as an observer the researcher maintains an objective position by "stepping out of their shoes" and remaining curious about the participant's way of making meaning of their experience (Eatough & Smith, 2007).

The researcher's preconception about the phenomenon often does not become fully evident until the researcher is engaged with the participant in their own meaning-making of their experience with the phenomenon. Throughout the course of an IPA study the researcher's own perspective of the phenomenon is dynamic and broadening with the inclusion of the participant's perspective (Smith, 2009). The researcher's dynamic relationship with the phenomenon is made transparent throughout the data analysis process in an attempt to bracket biases that may contaminate the meaning made by the participant of the phenomenon.

As an idiographic approach to doing research, the aim of an IPA study is to capture a highly-detailed perspective of an individual participant's experience with a phenomenon (Smith & Eatough, 2007). The idiographic approach was first translated by Gordon Allport (1937) from the writings of Wilhelm Windelband (1894-1998) who sought to distinguish traditions in ways of knowing the nature of things. Allport (1937) described knowledge that makes general claims to be nomothetic while idiographic knowledge is knowledge that can only make specific claims. Idiographic studies break from traditional scientific research that is primarily interested in the broader, more general conclusions that research findings make about an event or phenomenon.

To legitimize the contribution of IPA research to the overall body of scientific research, the IPA researcher directly acknowledges that a participant's interpretation of their experience with a phenomenon is only one explanation of some of the facts, thus the researcher's analysis and findings are only a partial analysis of the phenomenon within a specific context and not the final say on the topic under inquiry (Smith & Eatough, 2007). Conclusions are only drawn about the nature of the participant's experience and the

convergence and divergence of experience between participants, and no statements are made in IPA research with regard to broader conclusions about the nature of the event or phenomenon itself (Smith & Eatough, 2007). With that said, the deep analysis that is made in an IPA case study can offer insights into what may be a more general shared experience. As described by Smith & Eatough (2007; pg. 40), "...the detail of the individual also brings us closer to significant aspects of the general; connecting with his/her individual unique life also connects with a shared humanity."

While IPA findings may be weak in their transferability across diverse populations, they provide support for theoretical understandings of an event or phenomenon gathered from extant literature and personal and professional field experience (Smith & Eatough, 2007). Indeed, the contribution of research findings drawn from the detailed analysis of individual case studies, as well as the convergence and divergence of findings between case studies, supports the theoretical basis and inclination many researchers have to undertake research initiatives meant to make broader conclusions about a phenomenon (Robinson, 2011).

The choice of the IPA paradigm for the present study can be justified by returning back to the theoretical assumptions about the experience of infidelity and PTG, and research questions first articulated in Chapter 1. Specifically, the present study utilizes a social constructivist framework for understanding the trauma of infidelity and its growth potential as a socially constructed phenomenon that is uniquely experienced based on a person's cultural, social, and life history. Thus, it would be expected that participants will vary in their experience of infidelity and growth. An IPA paradigm allows for an exploration of the uniqueness of this experience, while also attending to those aspects of

experience that are similar. Further, the data required to answer the present study's principle research question cannot be adequately captured through the use of a quantitative tool alone. To answer the research questions, the present study required participants to reflect deeply on the experience of growth after an infidelity and to describe the specific thoughts, beliefs, or interactions that represent growth. Thus, the nature of the present study's fundamental theoretical assumptions and proposed research questions makes a qualitative paradigm, and specifically IPA, an appropriate choice.

Sample Universe and Sample Size

Sample populations in IPA studies are generally contextualized within a defined population of interest (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The population of interest in the present study is legally married heterosexual individuals who have remained with their spouse after the disclosure of an infidelity in their marriage, who experienced the infidelity as traumatic, and who have experienced PTG as a result of their experience.

As sample homogeneity is imperative for the integrity of the IPA study, this researcher was guided by practical and theoretical considerations when making a decision about the sample universe of this study. First, given that this is a new area of research, little is known about the influence of demographic difference or spousal involvement in the affair on the experience of growth related to the experience of infidelity. Second, as this study is guided by a social constructivist lens, variety in each participant's experience is expected despite homogeneity in demographics or spousal involvement. Third, Robinson (2014) explained that homogeneity may be sought along parameters of life history or the sharing of a past common experience, broadening the parameters for defining homogeneity within a demographically diverse sample. As a result,

homogeneity in this study may be defined more broadly as having had the life experience of remaining married after an infidelity and experiencing growth as a result.

While stratification of the sample along gender lines and status of involvement were considered intently during the course of the proposal of the research, the decision was ultimately made that there is no clear theoretical grounds for stratification of the sample. The rationale is as follows.

1. While it can be expected that women will self report more growth than men (Vishnevsky et al., 2010) there is no evidence to suggest that gender will be a reliable variable in the reported lived experience of growth after infidelity.
2. There is no current literature to suggest that status of involvement in the affair is a reliable variable in the reported lived experience of growth after infidelity.

To ensure a sufficient pool of perspective participants, the decision to include a diverse demographic in the recruitment phase of the study was a practical one based on the need to identify a robust pool of perspective participants who would satisfy the inclusion criteria of the study. Using an online survey and PTGI as a tool to select for homogeneity of the sample, the researcher selected for participation in the data collection phase, those participants who indicated:

1. having experienced the infidelity as traumatic
2. that the infidelity took place more than 6 months prior to completion of the survey
3. a score of 3 or higher on any dimension on the PTGI

As previous research has shown the passage of time to be an important factor in the presence of growth outcomes, the present study required that the infidelity had taken

place and ended at least 6 months prior to participation in the study to allow for time to have passed for the participants to process their experience (Heintzelman et al., Laaser et al., 2017; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

The sample size chosen for the present study was based on both theoretical and practical considerations suggested by Robinson (2014). Sample sizes in IPA studies are generally small due to the focus on capturing highly detailed accounts of participants' experience with a specific event, (Smith & Eatough, 2007). Having a sample size range provides scope for developing cross-case generalities (Robinson & Smith, 2010). Previous peer reviewed and published IPA studies have included sample sizes ranging from 1-42 participants, although on average sample sizes are under 10 (Smith & Eatough, 2007). For example, recent published IPA studies have included sample sizes of 3 (McCandless & Eatough, 2012), 5 (Aresti, Eatough, & Brooks-Gordon, 2010; Eatough, Smith, & Shaw, 2008) and 10 (Darker, Larkin & French, 2007; Shonin, Van Gordon, & Griffiths, 2014). A search for sample sizes utilized in IPA PhD dissertation studies resulted in studies including sample sizes of 12 (Ecklund, 2013), 10 (Del Quest, 2014), 7 (Serning, 2011), 6 (Briggs, 2010), and 4 (Lannan, 2015; Nunn, 2009). An argument for a case study of 1 is supported by the idiographic approach to IPA research as well as published peer reviewed studies that have utilized $n=1$ sample sizes (Bramley & Eatough, 2005; Eatough & Smith, 2006; Glasscoe & Smith, 2008; Shinebourne & Smith, 2009; Storey, 2007). Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) recommended 3-16 participants for a single study with the lower end suggested for undergraduate projects and the higher end for larger scale funded projects. Taking into consideration the recommendations from the literature, previous sample sizes utilized in peer reviewed IPA studies, and completed

PhD dissertations, as well as the nature of the present study being exploratory in nature, this researcher intended a maximum sample size of 10.

Sampling Procedure

The present study utilized a purposive sampling strategy to ensure participants met the inclusion criteria for the sample universe. Participants chosen for inclusion in the research study were selected from a pool of participants who completed an initial online survey. The following section explains the details of how participants were recruited, the procedures for completion of the online survey, and the instrumentation utilized to derive the sample.

Participant recruitment. Upon gaining approval by the Barry University Institutional Review Board, the study began through the recruitment of legally married heterosexual male and female individuals, over the age of 18 who had cheated or been cheated on in their current marriage more than 6 months ago. Respondents from all areas of the United States were considered for participation in the study. Respondents were solicited by way of a recruitment flyer (Appendix A) posted on community Facebook pages including “Recovery From Infidelity Support Group” and “Marriage Recovery.”

Interested participants were directed to Survey Monkey Inc. (www.surveymonkey.com) to complete an informed consent (Appendix B) and the online survey (Appendix C and D). Upon entering the Survey Monkey site participants reached an introduction page where they were asked to review the informed consent to participate in the online survey. Participants were then asked to mark a check box indicating they acknowledged receipt and understood the informed consent. Upon marking this check box the participants were directed to a survey page where they were asked to complete a

brief demographic survey of eight questions that included demographic characteristics, a question identifying if the participant was the involved or uninvolved partner, check box questions for establishing the infidelity as a traumatic event in the participant's life, and a question to assess for the amount of time since the infidelity ended. Participants were then asked to complete the Post Traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) as it related to their experience of the infidelity. Upon completion of the PTGI, participants were asked if they were interested in completing a follow-up face-to-face interview either in-person or via teleconference at a mutually agreeable future time and public place convenient to them. They were provided with a field to enter their name, location, email, and phone number should they be selected to participate. The online survey took approximately five minutes to complete.

Completion of the demographic survey and PTGI assisted this researcher in identifying if participants met the inclusion criteria for participation in the data collection portion of the study. To be included participants checked one or more items on question #7 of the online survey indicating that the infidelity was experienced as traumatic. They also indicated that the infidelity took place more than 6 months prior to completion of the survey. Additionally, participants reported a minimum of moderate level of growth or higher on any dimension on the PTGI. These instruments will be further described in the following section on Instrumentation and Materials.

A total of 64 participants responded to the initial call for completion of the online survey. From that pool of participants, 24 met inclusion criteria for participation in the follow-up interview. Excluded from the sample was couples. The main reason for this was the potential for responder bias by participants through known involvement of other

participants in the study and the risk to protecting the anonymity of participants and their data. A total of 6 participants completed the follow-up interview and were included in the data analysis. Information collected from those participants who completed the survey was not used as data for the study.

The sample in the present study included both male and female participants who varied demographically. As intended, all participants in the present study were legally married heterosexual individuals who remained with their spouse after the disclosure of an infidelity in their marriage, who experienced the infidelity as traumatic, and who experienced PTG as a result of their experience. As expected, more women responded to the call to participate as did uninvolved spouses versus involved spouses. This is supported by research that indicates that more women than men participate in research and the operation of the social desirability bias which indicates that taboo subjects and fear of judgement may prevent or influence participation and responding in research (Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2004; Krumpal, 2013; Robinson, 2014).

Instrumentation and materials. The initial recruitment screening tools in the present study include an online survey (Appendix C) and the PTGI (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) (Appendix D). The demographic survey was created by this researcher. Participants indicated their age, gender, race, religious affiliation, years of marriage, amount of time that has passed since the infidelity concluded, as well as whether the participant was the involved or uninvolved partner in the affair. The survey also asked participants to indicate if: the discovery of the affair/infidelity made them question assumptions they held about themselves and their marriage, the discovery of the affair/infidelity was unexpected and surprising, and/or if the discovery of the

affair/infidelity threatened the survival of their marriage. The purpose of this question was to identify if the participants' experience of the infidelity was traumatic as described in the operational definition presented earlier in Chapter I. Participant responses to the PTGI will be reported as averages in the findings section of this report.

The PTGI (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) is a 21-item inventory for assessing the degree of change occurring as a result of trauma across 5 identified PTG dimensions; relating to others, new possibilities, personal strength, spiritual change, and appreciation of life. Each item uses a 6-point Likert-type scale. The PTGI produces a total score as well as individual scores for each dimension and is indicated to have good reliability and validity. In a sample of college students, the Cronbach's alpha for the PTGI subscales ranged from .67 to .85 indicating acceptable to good reliability (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). The internal consistency has been found to be strong ($\alpha=.90$) and the test-retest reliability (alpha) is .71 (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Validity of the PTGI has been tested using both quantitative and qualitative methods (Shakespeare-Finch & Barrington, 2012; Shakespeare-Finch, Martinek, Tedeschi, & Calhoun, 2013). Shakespeare-Finch et al. (2013) completed a qualitative study to assess the content validity of the PTGI and found that research participants answered the PTGI statements consistent with the purpose of the instrument. Responses to the inventory have been found to be without positive bias (Smith & Cook, 2004). The PTGI is publicly available for use and was used in the present study for sampling purposes only.

Informed consent. All participants received an informed consent to participate in the online survey. All participants were informed of the aims of this research, that their participation was voluntary and could be terminated at any time, the procedures for

participation, risks and benefits associated with participating, confidentiality of information provided, storage of records, and that they might be selected for a follow-up maximum 90-minute face to face audio-recorded interview.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

This section explains how data was collected and analyzed for the present study. Data collection procedures followed the suggestion of Creswell (2003) and Smith and colleagues (2007, 2009). The data analysis procedure chosen for the present study followed steps described by Storey (2007) in her IPA research conducted with an ex-soldier on the experience of being in the army and his post-army life. Presentation of the research findings follows a procedure described by Pietkiewicz & Smith (2014). The process for ensuring the dependability and credibility of the findings follows the suggestions of Yardley (2000) and Smith (2010).

Data collection procedure. Participants who completed the online survey and who met criteria for inclusion in the study received a follow up email from the researcher to solicit their participation in a semi-structured, audio-recorded interview. A total of six participants responded to the email request and completed the interview. All interviews were conducted and recorded via teleconference on GoToMeeting.

At the time of the interview, a second informed consent (Appendix E) was provided to the participant via email reiterating the aims of the research, that their participation was voluntary and could be terminated at any time, the procedures for participation, risks and benefits associated with participating, confidentiality of information provided, and storage of records. Included in this informed consent was an explanation of the use of GoToMeeting for facilitating a teleconference interview.

The primary method of data collection was through in-depth semi-structured interviewing of each participant. During the course of the interviews a schedule of questions (Appendix F) served as a guide during the interviews to assist in obtaining the breadth and depth of information required to answer the research questions, to serve as a starting point for exploring reported areas of growth reported on the PTGI, and to prepare for any sensitivities that could have arose due to the nature of the topic under study (Smith & Eatough, 2007). The schedule of questions was also utilized to jot down notes or thoughts that arose throughout the course of the interviews as well as to bracket biases that arose throughout the interview as a result of the researchers own experience. These notes served as reflections or observations that were later integrated in the data analysis and findings section. This is consistent with a qualitative strategy of inquiry and with the interviewing procedure of IPA which privileges the participant as an active agent in the evolution of the interview and allows for flexibility in exploring areas that arise throughout the course of participant interviews (Creswell, 2003; Smith & Eatough, 2007).

Upon verbal acknowledgement of receipt of the informed consent and verbal agreement to participate, the researcher began each interview by building rapport with the participant. This took the form of the researcher introducing herself, engaging in small talk, and using humor to set the mood as appropriate. Because of the personal nature of IPA research and the deep level of inquiry required to gather the data needed to answer the research question, the researcher must take steps to establish rapport with the participant that will be conducive to this end (Smith et al., 2009).

All interviews were between 45-90 minutes in duration. This length of time provided flexibility in ensuring adequate data collection and was also the timeframe

supported by literature recommendations informing IPA data collection and analysis procedures (Alase, 2017). Each interview was audio recorded in its entirety with the permission of the participant. Participants were provided the option to receive the typed transcript for their own purposes. Three participants requested a copy of their transcript and were emailed a copy upon completion of transcription.

Participants' data were deidentified through the use of pseudonyms and other anonymizing strategies. All online survey results were maintained on a password protected file on the researcher's secure home computer. Informed consent forms related to participation in the interview were filed in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's home office separate from the hard copies of schedule of questions and transcribed interviews. All audio records and transcribed interviews were kept on a password protected digital file on the researcher's password secure home computer. All digital and hard copy forms of data will be retained indefinitely.

Risks and benefits to participants. There were no risks associated with participation in the online survey and minimal risk associated with participation in the interview. Participation in the interview involved participant's actively recollecting and talking about the experience of the infidelity. While the focus of the research is on the positive aspects of their experience, it was possible that talking about the experience could have elicited negative thoughts or feelings that were unpleasant to the participant. Participation in research related to interpersonal trauma has been shown to elicit emotional reactions in both men and women (Edwards et al., 2017). These reactions may include negative thoughts, avoidance in thinking about the traumatic experience, and flashbacks (Edwards et al., 2017).

To decrease risk to participants, the researcher was explicit about the purpose of the study during the recruitment phase and included language in the informed consent to participate in the interview stating that questions related to the distressing aspects of the infidelity may be asked in the interview. Prior to beginning each interview, the researcher asked the participant to confirm acknowledgement of the informed consent and agreement to participate in the study by way of issuing a verbal audio-recorded consent.

The researcher did not experience any adverse reaction, however, in the event a participant had experienced an adverse reaction during the course of their participation, they were permitted to end their participation in the research study and data collected from their participation would not have been utilized in the data analysis. The researcher prepared a list of counseling referrals that included local and national resources for finding a mental health counselor in the event participants reported being in distress (Appendix G). Within the informed consent participants were informed that any and all financial responsibility for counseling services they might choose to receive as a result of participation in this study would be their responsibility. No participants reported to the researcher experiencing an adverse reaction during the course of their participation in the study.

Data analysis procedure. The process for data analysis in IPA is dynamic and iterative requiring a high degree of reflexivity on the part of the researcher (Smith, 2010). While there is no prescription for the data analysis procedure in an IPA study, the aims of IPA presuppose certain steps are taken to protect the integrity of the data collected and prevent contamination of the data throughout analysis (Smith, 2010). Following Creswell (2013), this researcher provided a journal reflection of her own experience with growth

after infidelity in Chapter 1. Acknowledgment and awareness of this experience allowed for this researcher to think about how her own context influenced both the data collection and the interpretative process throughout each stage of the data analysis. Additionally, as advised by Smith and Eatough (2007), to prevent contamination of the data each individual case was analyzed separately to ensure the data was contextualized within the boundaries of the participant's own words and experience.

The procedure for data analysis used in the present study followed a four-stage process (Appendix H) described by Storey (2007) in her IPA research conducted with an ex-soldier on the experience of being in the army and his post-army life. Each interview was analyzed in full prior to moving to the next interview. Stage 1 of the data analysis began with an iterative process of initially reading one transcript to get a "feel" for the overall case. The transcript was then reread and notes were taken in the left-hand margin of the transcript to identify excerpts of significance. Excerpts of significance included identification of cognitive constructions and rhetorical patterns, such as words or phrases that were common across the transcript and representative of emerging themes in the participant's description of his or her experience of growth. These constructions and patterns reflected coherence or contradictions in the participant's responses which were critical to illuminate in the analysis of any identified themes.

Stage 2 involved returning back to the transcript and notes made in the left-hand margin to begin identifying emerging themes (first level) that may be informed by theoretical concepts. These emerging themes (first level) were recorded in the right-hand margin of the transcript. In the present study, theoretical concepts were drawn from this researcher's understanding of post traumatic growth theory, family systems theory, and

social constructivist theory. Transparency around the theoretical perspective driving the identification and analysis of an emerging theme was coded next to the theme written down in the right-hand margin. Following completion of this the themes were reviewed for the emergence of preliminary themes (second level) related to the research questions.

Stage 3 involved making connections between the preliminary themes (second level) and potentially consolidating some preliminary themes (second level) into sub-themes (third level) under a broader more concise superordinate theme (fourth level). Stage 4 involved organizing the superordinate themes (fourth level) into a table with their associated sub-themes and illustrative quotations. This 4-stage process was repeated for each case. Following the completion of analysis for each individual case, a cross case comparison was completed for analysis of convergence and divergence of themes. This led to the development of superordinate themes which are presented in Table 1 in Chapter IV.

Findings in Chapter 4 are reported by way of a narrative summary as described by Pietkiewicz & Smith (2014). Superordinate themes arising from the cross-case comparison presented in the group-level table are presented and discussed one by one. Each superordinate theme is described and exemplified by way of verbatim excerpts from participant interviews and supported by interpretative commentary from the researcher. Following the narrative summary is a discussion about how the findings relate to preexisting literature on the topic of infidelity and PTG, implications of and limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research. Also, included in the discussion is the researcher's reflections on the research journey.

Process to ensure dependable and credible results. Throughout the data analysis process the researcher sought to ensure credibility of the findings by following criteria described by Yardley (2000). These criteria are supported by recent literature on enhancing validity in IPA studies (Robinson, 2014; Smith et al., 2009; Smith, 2010). These criteria include sensitivity to the context, rigor, transparency, coherence, and impact and importance of the research (Yardley, 2000). Attention to these criteria at each stage of the research process is necessary for fostering trust amongst readers. Robinson (2014) described the various ways a study's sampling strategy can meet these criteria. Sensitivity to context was accomplished by the selection and articulation of a clearly defined sample population, legally married heterosexual individuals who have remained with their spouse after the disclosure of an infidelity in their marriage, who experienced the infidelity as traumatic, and who have experienced PTG as a result of their experience. The researcher was clear in their presentation of the research method that the findings could not be overgeneralized. Rigor was demonstrated through the detailed description of the sampling strategy and procedures to ensure that the participants selected for inclusion in the data analysis met the inclusion criteria of the study and could provide sufficient data to answer the study's research questions. Transparency was sought through a clearly articulated and auditable sample selection process and the researcher's acknowledgements of her own context, biases, or conflicts of interest related to the sample strategy. Coherence was also sought through a clear description of the research aims, research questions, sample selection, data collection and analysis, and reported findings. Finally, the impact and importance of a study can be defined by the relevance of the sample to the target audience of the research.

Smith (2010) suggested enhancing the validity of IPA through multiple levels of checking such as supervision of the researcher's analytic process by a colleague or an independent audit of the researcher's transcripts, codes, themes, and final write up for coherency. The researcher sought to enhance validity of the study findings by providing transparency in the write up of the methodological process and ensuring that the convergence and divergence of themes presented in the findings are supported with excerpts from multiple participant interviews. Validity was also sought by providing transparency in the researcher's own personal experience of the phenomenon under study. Identification with participants in this study had the potential to influence the researcher's collection of data, analysis and interpretation of the participant's experience. To ensure the dependability and credibility of the present study's findings, throughout the process of data collection and analysis this researcher attempted to bracket her own experience, feelings, reactions, and assumptions with the subject under study in order to allow the participants to tell of their experience in their own words. This helped to prevent contamination of the collected data with the researcher's bias. Bracketed content was acknowledged within the write-up of the data analysis to maintain transparency as to the context through which the researcher interpreted the participant's meaning making process. Inclusion of rival explanations that could account for reported growth has been provided to boost credibility of results.

IPA studies require the researcher to participate as a witness and interpreter of other people's experience of a phenomenon. The self of the researcher plays a critical role at all stages of the research process, from the researcher's initial curiosity with the phenomenon and development of the research question to the choice of research

methodology, strategy for data collection, and analysis and reporting of findings. At each stage the researcher brings forward his or her own unique context which has the potential to interact with the data. In acknowledgment of the central role the participant plays in the research the researcher should also contribute a written reflection of their experience along the journey of the research study (Alase, 2017). In the present study, this researcher's personal experience with the topic under study was disclosed in Chapter I. A self-reflection statement of this researcher's experience with completing the research is presented in the discussion section of the research.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings that arose from the data analysis process. After a brief description of the sample population, average PTGI scores from the online sampling survey will be presented for the purpose of demonstrating participant perception of growth after infidelity. Following that is more detailed interpretation of the participants' reported growth from the perspective of themes that emerged in the data analysis process.

Participants in this study represented a demographically diverse sample (Table 1). All participants were members of infidelity support groups on Facebook. Most participants were white female. Given the highly detailed and personal nature of the participants' responses to the research questions, and to aid in protecting participant anonymity, participants were asked to report their age, length of time they have been married to their current spouse, and length of time since the infidelity ended as a range. The age of participants ranged between 35-64 with most participants being in the 35-44 age range. Length of marriage ranged from 1-20 years. Most participants reported that it had been between 2-5 years since their spouse's affair ended.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Religion	Length of Marriage (yrs.)	How long has it been since the infidelity/affair ended?
Lindy	35 to 44	Female	White / Caucasian	No religion	5-10	+6 months
Janet	45 to 54	Female	Black or African American	Inter/Non-denominational	20+	+ 2 yrs. - 5 yrs.

Rachel	35 to 44	Female	White / Caucasian	Catholicism	15-20	+ 1 yr. - 2 yrs.
Karen	45 to 54	Female	White / Caucasian	No religion	5-10	+ 2 yrs. - 5 yrs.
Mark	55 to 64	Male	White / Caucasian	Christianity	20	+ 2 yrs. - 5 yrs.
Steph	35 to 44	Female	White / Caucasian	Christianity	1-5	+ 2 yrs. - 5 yrs.

All participants in this study indicated experiencing growth in all 5 domains of the PTGI with the greatest degree of change experienced in the domain of relating to others followed by appreciation of life, personal strength, new possibilities, and spiritual growth (Table 2).

Table 2. Participant Average Scores Across PTGI Domains

Domain	Average score
Relating to Others	4
Appreciation of Life	3.8
Personal Strength	3.75
New Possibilities	3.5
Spiritual Change	3

Without further description, these scores failed to capture the complex and dynamic experience of growth that was articulated throughout the participant interviews. Rather, the experience of growth described in the interviews painted a picture of considerable overlap across PTGI domains. For example, growth in the domain of personal strength

overlapped with growth in the domain of new possibilities. A participant's sense of being able to overcome other traumatic events correlated with an increasing courage to use their voice and explore new adventures in life.

Convergence across participant descriptions of growth was initially easy to identify in the data and could easily be situated within the domains of growth described by PTGI theory. Simple statements such as "We get along much better" related to the participants' beliefs that they had grown in the domain of relating to others. Similarly, participants sense of "not knowing how strong I was" indicated growth in the personal strength domain. On their own these descriptions have merit and provide a glimpse of how participants perceive growth and how it manifests in their everyday life. What was more captivating were the more subtle but persistent themes that reflected contradictions and paradoxes embedded in the participant descriptions of growth. Rather than growth being described as a neatly defined experience of a preferable outcome from the trauma of infidelity, growth appeared to be more dynamic, more volatile, and in some cases confusing in its presentation in the lives of the participants, their spouses, and their marriage. More adequately growth was embedded in themes of *Gains and Losses*, *Paradoxes*, and *Courage*.

Table 3 describes these superordinate themes with subthemes related to detailed descriptions of growth provided by participants.

Table 3. Superordinate Themes

<i>Gains and Losses</i>	<i>Paradoxes</i>	<i>Courage</i>
Need for Help Personal Power Relationship with Spouse	Self and Togetherness A Journey and a Destination Worse but Better	Commitment Hard work Accountability

Growth as *Gains and Losses*

“For a seed to achieve its greatest expression, it must come completely undone. The shell cracks, its insides come out and everything changes. To someone who doesn't understand growth, it would look like complete destruction.” — Cynthia Occelli

The people in this study were torn apart by the discovery of their spouse's infidelity. Throughout the interviews, participants used words like “catastrophic” and “devastating” to describe the initial impact of the discovery on their life and marriage. The losses were great. The initial impact was followed by loss of trust not only in their spouse but others as well. Janet described losing her ability to “get out of the bed each morning.” Rachel shed pounds because of the emotional turmoil it caused. Mark lost respect for himself. The discovery of the affair shattered participants' view of the world and muddied the image of their spouse. At first glance these descriptions of the participants' experience reflect only destruction. But with this destruction came space; space for a brand-new way of functioning and for gaining new understanding and possibilities for the participants and their spouses.

The experience of growth for participants in this study was characterized by both the loss of previous ways of functioning in the marriage and the gain of new ways of functioning. The discovery of the infidelity, a sentinel moment in the history of the participants' marriages served as a much-needed catalyst for change. These changes were unexpected and took time to settle into. Notably, participant descriptions of the *Gains and Losses* associated with growth reflected three themes: need for help from others, changes in sense of personal power, and changes in relationship with their spouse.

Need for help. For all participant's in this study the discovery of the infidelity and its subsequent aftermath promoted the realization of the value in reaching out for support and seeking help for themselves and their marriage. Whether from counselors, family members, clergy, and friends, the act of seeking help promoted recovery which led to perceived individual and relationship growth. At the same time realizing the importance of seeking help was also perceived by participants as growth itself. This realization and subsequent help seeking behavior was explained by participants from the perspective of how they used to be. What was lost for participants was a previously felt comfort in self-dependence. Lindy explained this way:

I learned that I had to talk to somebody. I never really liked being social. I never really liked having friends. I never really talked to my family. When this started happening with him, I got a closer bond with my sister because out of everyone in my family she seemed to have the most sense. And so, I started talking to her about everything that was going on....Then there were other people who I could text message or message on Facebook or call if I just felt like I needed to talk to someone about it even though it should've been my husband that I was talking to. It gave me an outlet and I'd never done that before.

The value in seeking help from others was interpreted as growth for Lindy, a person who previously felt more comfortable with holding things in.

Mark said he never was a person who talked much about things until the affair prompted him to reach out for help. He found support from confiding in a colleague at work about his wife's affair. Seeing that this was helpful to him, he turned to other people in his own family:

Talking about this really helps me out, you know. At work, I was on an assignment with another guy from our company for about three months. He had been through the same thing with his wife years prior. It was good because he helped me through it. Every day we talked and he helped me through it. Then, I spent a lot of time talking with my wife's sister. She was helpful. And then my brother-in-law's wife. They really helped me through this a lot. I talked to them nearly every day for about a month after it happened. I really needed them and you know, I don't talk to them as much anymore because I probably drove them crazy because I talked to them so much, but they really helped me through it.

As a result, Mark says he now sees the value in talking about problems and is more open with everyone in his life.

For Janet, seeking help from a counselor after discovery of her husband's affair replaced a long-standing pattern of stifling her voice. She described believing that it was her responsibility to "make everything right" which led to fear in ever speaking up.

When talking about her husband's first infidelity Janet recounted:

When the first incident happened, he said to me, "It's over, it's done with." He didn't want to come home to be discussing that (the infidelity) over and over again and he didn't want to live like that. And at that time, I was so young, and I was so afraid of losing him. I felt the responsibility to make everything right...So what I basically did was I just pushed it down, and I went on almost like it never happened. So, there was no counseling. There was definitely no discussions about it. There was no making amends on his part and I just went on as though it never happened. I have responsibility to keep everybody together....to keep the family

together.

Later in our conversation when discussing how she responded to her husband's second infidelity she shared her realization that she needed to rely on others:

When all of this happened I honestly felt as though everyone left me. There were maybe three persons from church that knew about this and they treated me as though I bopped my toe and they were holding their breath until I got over it. It made me realize that I had to take care of me. No one was going to. My husband didn't look out for me. My friends didn't look out for me and it was on me... There was a time I actually felt like I was losing my mind. And it was at that time that I started counseling again. I just knew that I needed to talk to someone and that's how I've been doing things. I can't wait for anyone to do anything for me.

Ultimately this led Janet to strengthen her relationship with family and friends.

It is worth noting that many people do not seek help because of the perceived stigma surrounding the need for help. This is particularly true for men whose help-seeking behavior may be viewed as emasculating (Hines & Douglas, 2009). Although help-seeking amongst women is seen as more socially acceptable and common, the participants in this study expressed a different reality prior to their experience of their spouses' infidelity. For participants in this study disclosure of their partner's infidelity to others was not immediately intuitive; however, the pain associated with the infidelity discovery forced them to break through the stigma and discomfort to seek help which ultimately brought awareness to the benefit of seeking help and talking about their problems. This was perceived as a sign of growth related to the experience of the infidelity.

Personal power. Participants described gaining power in their marriage because of their spouse's affair. Power, in this case, was interpreted in participant descriptions of becoming on a more "equal playing field" with their spouse. Personal power was also interpreted in descriptions of expansion of new opportunities, in feeling as though the participant had more of a voice in decisions in the marriage, and in taking more liberty with pursuing self interests. At the same time, participant's perceived power gains for them as a loss for their spouse. For Karen, discovery of her husband's affair had the effect of "equalizing power" in their marriage and gave her more power to make demands of him in the relationship. She described the effect of the discovery:

I think it made my priorities more self involved than before the affair. My whole life when I first was married to him was living to please him and make him see me as a worthy person. I did everything for him. I practically wiped his bum for him...not to be a jerk, but I really catered to him. My priority afterwards was that I deserved things too and I'm going to take care of me as well and not in a selfish way, but in a self preservation kind of way. I wasn't taking care of myself before all of this and I was allowing him to abuse me and our relationship to deteriorate and I was burning the candle at both ends and not caring for myself. So, discovering this gave me the power to discover that it was okay to take care of myself and take care of my wants and needs too and have expectations of my husband and let him know he wasn't satisfying me either. Before the balance of power was very unequal and my only priority was keeping him thinking he was the king. And now our power is equal.

The effect of Karen's husband's affair was ultimately empowering to her, but for her

husband, his guilt over his behavior lowered his status in the relationship. She explained his loss of power this way:

He's got all this tremendous guilt, which he never felt before. He was very much narcissistic in the way that he didn't care if what he did hurt me. He's not like that anymore, which is good, but it's kind of had a slingshot effect. So maybe that's the kind of a downside for him. He still feels pretty bad about what he's done even though I don't beat him up about it.

Karen's husband's loss of power in the relationship was a result of the guilt he felt about hurting her. Her description of her husband's loss of power is an example of how involved spouses may suffer from the aftermath of the discovery of their affair - a notable outcome that is not often discussed in the literature on infidelity.

Growth in personal power was also described in gaining the ability to openly express one's identity and be true to oneself. Such was the experience of Janet, whose lack of personal power in her marriage before the infidelity was apparent in her condescending description of having been "the perfect little minister's wife." She tells the story of how she came to find herself through the narrative of the discovery of her husband's affair:

"I think he saw a side of me that he didn't know existed, and to tell you the truth, I didn't know she was in there either."

She described this side of herself through prideful laughter:

I don't swear. And I went like a drunken sailor. I didn't even know I knew those words. And I think when I realized that he was so offended (laughing) by my words, I used them even more often. I remember the first night when I discovered

the affair. I called my best friend, and she and her husband came over and we're all sitting in the living room. The first thing that came out of his mouth was like, "Janet is like this....", and you know what? I don't know where it came from but I just shut him down with that so quickly. I said, "Don't you ever, ever make this my fault. This is on you, okay? This is your lack of character. Your lack of integrity." And I think that right there set the stage for how we have moved along with this.

The discovery of her husband's infidelity brought forward a voice within Janet that had been stifled by her obedience to him over the course of their marriage. His infidelity reduced her perception of him and he was no longer on the pedestal she had once placed him on. As a result, she felt empowered to express her thoughts and feelings. There was nothing left to lose in letting go of being wrapped up in his identity and discovering herself. She explained:

Before all this happened I was living his life. I was doing things that I didn't want to do...raising my children the way I didn't want to raise them...wearing clothes that I probably didn't want to wear.... just going to all the right places that he probably thought I should go...being involved in all the things that he thought I should be involved in. I was living my life as though it was a dress rehearsal, as though I was going to get another chance to do it over. I couldn't continue to be who I wasn't and I needed him to love me for who I am and that's what I'm doing now...His infidelity has freed me to be who I am.... I'm at the point where you either take me as I am or don't take me at all. I'm nearly 50 years old. This is my life. I'm going to have the best life that I can have. I really don't have time to be

tiptoeing around his feelings.

Janet's prioritization of living her best life led her to go back to school. She stopped asking her husband's opinion on what to wear and she started taking the initiative to do things she liked to do as opposed to what he liked to do. She describes more candidly with the excitement of someone eager to tell much anticipated news:

I cut off all my hair. I no longer dye my hair. I started the gym, so now I have muscles and definition. And now I wear the clothes that show that I have muscle. (laughing) So that's on the outside, that's on the outside.... But I think my close friends and my family can see the inside also. I'm more family oriented. I realized that for a lot of my life I made my husband my life. I hadn't made enough connections with my family and I've really made an effort to spend a lot of time with them. And also with my friends. I guess when all of this first happened I realized that I needed a life outside of my husband because at that time I really didn't know what would happen...if I was a betting person I would say that we won't be together now...in the beginning. So, I don't know if that was my preparation for leaving, but it's turned out pretty good.

Janet's description about finding personal power after the devastating discovery of her husband's affair bares resemblance to the empowering process of reclaiming self, written about in the feminist theory literature on women leaving abusive partners (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2001). Interestingly in saying, "I don't know if that was my preparation for leaving, but it's turned out pretty good" Janet suggests that this process was not a conscious one, but perhaps rather one based on survival instincts.

Rachel, a self-professed woman with bipolar disorder, remarked frequently on her

surprise at how logical she had managed to be in the aftermath of her husband's affair. For Rachel, her ability to be logical brought her a sense of personal power. When I asked her why she thought she was so surprisingly logical she recounted how she responded to the discovery of the affair:

Usually he's the logical one in our relationship. He's the calm one. He's the one that has all the answers. I'm the more emotional one... I think it really comes down to a weird role reversal that we had at the time because I thought clearly about what had happened almost immediately. I didn't have the details and I didn't know exactly what happened, but I saw pretty clearly that out of the adults that are involved in this situation, I seem to be the only one that is having any kind of sense. It was like a survival instinct and I saw my usual very logical husband, completely idiotic. I saw him that he had lost his mind. I guess my instinct said, "Well, you better step up. One of you has to make sense of it because there's only the two of you and if he's not going to do it, you have to do." And that's what I think happened.

Rachel's sense of power is interpreted as a response to a realized exception to the long-standing narrative she holds about herself being an "emotional" and "mentally ill" person. This is something she appears proud of. She describes herself now:

I think I'm more confident when I talk about my opinions. I also don't put up with being railroaded anymore. I used to always defer to him. Sometimes it would really be rough because my kids would be so pissed off and I wouldn't speak up. I think he looks at me more like an equal rather than him always being in charge. My opinions are more logical, more confident, less whiny. Now I state what I

think and the reasons why I think the way I do. It makes it so the conversations are a little bit easier. I'm more equal.

Rachel's sense of increased power in her relationship comes at a loss of a sense that she can rely on her husband like she used to. While Rachel says that she feels like she has a more fulfilling marriage after the infidelity she remarks at the conundrum of no longer viewing her husband as a protector. She explained the conundrum this way:

I know it's very difficult to recover from something like this, but it can be done. I feel like it gave us a new relationship. I feel like it gave us a new lease on life. It's not the same. Never going to be the same. There are some negatives. I will never trust again like I did with anyone. It's not just him. But I also feel like I have a more fulfilling marriage, so it's really kind of a conundrum because to be thankful for such an awful thing, but I don't know how else to say it. He's done a huge amount to repair our marriage but there's never going to be a time where I fully trust him. It really has changed the way that I think about him. I always kind of perceived him as my protector, the strong one. I didn't ever think that he would do anything like that to hurt me. I always thought of him as more of like a protector, and so while I still do rely on him, it definitely has altered my view. I see him as a lot weaker.

Rachel did not speak to her husband's personal experience of her altered perception of him but it can be interpreted that her perception of him as weaker could be felt as a slight to his masculinity.

For these participants, gaining personal power had an unintended consequence of diminishing power from their spouses. The net gain was a sense of being equal which

was important to the participants and viewed as growth within the marriage.

Relationship with spouse. At the end of her Ted Talk on infidelity Esther Perel (2015) says she asks couples, “Your first marriage is over. Would you like to create a second one together?” This adequately captures the totalizing loss that occurs after an infidelity and the potential gain of new relationship if the couple chooses to stay together. In this study, all participants described many ways that their relationship with their spouse changed after the discovery of the affair. This included descriptions of new ways of thinking about the marriage, communication patterns, more proactivity in addressing problems, increased intimacy, and increased prioritization of nurturing the relationship through gestures of gratitude, compliments and planned date nights. Woven through these descriptions were threads of grief about how the relationship once was and gratitude and relief over what the relationship has become.

The metamorphosis of Karen’s marriage with her husband was felt in her description of how her trust in her husband has changed since the discovery of his affair with a woman he met at a bar. She shared the following:

The trust that you have with your spouse before an affair is implicit. That's the person you're supposed to be able to trust more than anyone in the world. And people get naive because of it. So, you know, I viewed him with rosy colored glasses, kind of trust. After the affair I looked at him more realistically. In some ways, the perfect veneer was rubbed off of him, and for a long time it just disillusioned me about him. I was disgusted when I looked at him for like a good 8 months after the affair. Now that he's put in so much work, I look at him as just an overall better person and I think I trust him in a healthier way now than I did

before the cheating. He's changed so much. It took away my respect for him in a lot of ways, but it also rebuilt a different kind of respect.

For Karen, having a more "realistic" perception of her husband as opposed to a "rosy-colored" one is preferable to her in her marriage now.

Descriptions of the change in the relationship after the discovery of the infidelity were more bittersweet for other participants. For Mark, appreciation he gained for his wife was felt against a backdrop of self loathing and despair. He explained his thoughts about his wife since the discovery of her affair with a high school sweetheart:

What I see is a beautiful woman. And she is. She's an attractive woman but before I just didn't see it that way like I do now. She's always been a great wife. Even while she was having an affair, she actually still did all her wifely duties. You would've really never known, looking on the outside in that she was doing anything because, you know, she's always been a great wife and mom and a housewife.

Gaining appreciation for his wife required a dive into a darker truth about the affair and how he contributed. At another point in our interview he explained how hard it is to deal with the realization that he drove his wife to having an affair:

I was the fault. I didn't treat my wife very well for about 15 years or better, so I never did blame her because I didn't treat her good. I fell out of love with her. I let the kids disrespect her. She didn't feel like she was loved at home. I just was horrible to her so I didn't never blame her for doing this and actually we've never fought about it.... never argued about it because I realized that I was the one that pushed her down that road to do that.....I think it's easier. I think it's easier on

me in one way but it's hard in another way. If we had had a great relationship and a great marriage and all that and she did this - then it would be horrible. But since I know that I was the cause of it because she didn't just do it because I was great to her. It's easier for me to deal with it that way, but then again, it's hard for me to deal with it for the fact that I was so rotten to her that she had to do that, to find somebody that would actually hold her and hug her.

The loss associated with a preferable relationship with his wife now is the bitter realization of years of being a “bad husband” and driving his wife into another man’s arms. When I asked him to tell me about what others noticed to be different about him since the discovery of the infidelity he revealed the depth of his loss. He said:

“I'm depressed a lot, I suppose. They see me down a lot I guess. But you can understand how that would be, right? It's very depressing.”

Despite his own self-despair, throughout our interview Mark described his wife adoringly. He described the positive changes he sees such as snuggling together every night and “raising their child as one” in a more unified way. Yet, as he described his relationship as better his despair was palpable. I asked him how he reconciles the relationship as being better if he feels depressed. Our conversation went like this:

Mark: Yeah, that's a good question.... Huh...Um, just by the way we don't fight. We don't fight. We talk. I mean, she's good to me and I'm good to her. We don't sleep in the same bedroom or the same bed anymore. We haven't for years because I got a horrible snoring problem, but she does come and lay with me and snuggle up with me every night. She has ever since this has happened.

Julie: And that makes a difference?

Mark: Yeah.....Yeah.

Mark's description of the change in his relationship with his wife highlights the shadow side of growth and the despair associated with a loss of self-esteem related to his self-blame. While self-blame after a trauma is associated with decreased relational well-being (Kaufman, Allbaugh, & Wright, 2018), in this case, Mark's self-blame has driven him to better appreciate his wife and to take actions to show her.

Steph struggled to move forward in her marriage after the discovery of her husband's affair which occurred shortly after they got married. She described her realization of how much she appreciated her husband and the marriage after he nearly left due to her ongoing anger about his infidelity. She shared:

For the past two years, we've fought through it with a lot of disdain for each other. We've discussed divorce and things like that. There came a point where my husband was done. He couldn't deal with my reactions to it anymore and he left. And at that point I think I realized that maybe my marriage was more important to me than the anger that I was harboring.

She described a single interaction in her recovery from the affair that cemented the value of her husband in her life:

“The biggest thing that made me probably decide to be with him was when someone asked me the question, “Is he a good man that did a very bad thing or is he a bad person and doesn't care?” And my husband is a very, very good man.”

Although her initial response to the discovery of her husband's affair was self-protection she realized that if they were going to work things out she needed to appreciate his needs. She explained:

“I feel like we took those first two years and concentrated on me and my recovery and we didn't concentrate on him and the things he needed. So, once we started to do that, things, definitely changed. And, you know, today we're both happy.”

At other points in the interview this brighter side to her realization of the value of her marriage was diminished by another stark reality. When I asked Steph to tell me any differences that she noticed in the way that she thinks about her husband because of the affair she admitted the following:

I have less respect for him. I kind of view him as less of a man, if that makes sense. He used to be the person that I would go to with everything. The way I feel about him now.... I would still go to him with everything, but it's, I don't even know what word to put on it. Maybe I just kind of watch what he says. Maybe everything is taken with a grain of salt now. There's always that question that in the back of my head about, you know, “Could he do this to me again?” I'm always thinking about that.

Steph's description of taking “everything with a grain of salt now” and always thinking about if her husband would cheat on her again is interpreted as a loss associated with the “new” relationship forming between her and husband post-infidelity.

Lindy's discovery of her husband's week-long fling with a younger woman opened space for her to value him more. She described coming to the realization that his lack of self-esteem contributed to his affair. As a result, she realized the importance of showing appreciation for his efforts in the relationship. She explained how she has come to value him more through a description of her husband doing the laundry:

Before when he would help do the laundry I would get ticked off because he wouldn't sort it. He's kind of colorblind. Some colors he can't see right so he would just throw it in the washing machine and turn it on. I hated that. He started bleaching stuff that wasn't supposed to be bleached. I got mad. I wouldn't yell at him, but I would reprimand him, you know, like, "Hey, my blouse is pink and you just bleached it and now it's ruined." And he didn't know because he can't see. It looked white to him and I knew that, but I was still upset about it because I'm thinking he shouldn't be allowed to touch the darn laundry because he doesn't know what he's doing. Now I just don't even care. I mean he still throws the towels in with his work uniforms. But now I look at it as, he's helping, he's doing what he can. I don't care anymore. I've learned to value him more as a person. I recognize that he's doing the best he can. He's trying to help me. He's making an effort. I really shouldn't complain. I shouldn't be so anal about how he's doing it.

For Lindy, this newfound appreciation of her husband's contribution to doing the best he can in helping with the laundry was a departure from her previous way of being so "anal" about the outcome. She perceived this as a positive change that contributed to growth in her relationship with her husband as well as a preferable way of being. While showing more appreciation for her husband might be preferable to him as well, other changes in the relationship were interpreted as potential losses for him. For example, Lindy spoke about "putting her foot down" in the relationship by establishing rules for him such as no longer being able to have his phone in the bathroom with him. This is interpreted as a loss of freedom.

The description of change in the relationship as experienced as *Gains and Losses*

sets the tone for another overarching theme that weaved throughout the interviews.

Throughout the interviews there was a paradoxical undercurrent in participant descriptions of growth in self and togetherness, of the experience of growth as both a journey and a destination, and in the description of the relationship as worse but better.

We move now to the findings related to growth after infidelity as it is experienced by the participants as a paradox.

Growth as a Paradox

“The world is full of paradoxes and life is full of opposites. The art is to embrace the opposites, accommodate the paradoxes and live with a smile.” – Sri Sri Ravi Shankar

The second major theme that arose in the data analysis was that growth was experienced as a paradox for the participants. Participants stories of growth after infidelity highlighted experiences of grief in the loss of the marriage as it once was and simultaneous wonder over what it has become. Stories of shattered trust contrasted with stories of renewed appreciation of one’s spouse. Disillusionment in the relationship identity was eclipsed by the awakening of a new sense of self. Growth was located somewhere along a middle path between competing realities. It manifested in the graceful ways the participants navigated these opposites.

When asked broadly about what they noticed to be different about themselves and their relationships since the discovery of the affair, all participants described thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that reflected increasing prioritization in both self and being together with their spouse. Despite the incongruence there was a sense that these contradicting priorities counterbalanced one another, peacefully contributing to more

equality within the participants' relationships and preferential interactions with their spouses. The discovery of the affair seemed to realign the spouses relational space in a way that made things "better" for the participant both individually and relationally. This theme emerged from the researcher's understandings of family systems theory and the concepts of individuality and togetherness specifically understood as "counterbalancing life forces" which serve as a foundation for the integrity of the family's functioning (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 58). Specifically, the researcher observed that growth manifested in the participant's experience of their self as an individual and in their sense of togetherness ultimately reflecting that the discovery of the infidelity had the effect of recalibrating the homeostasis of the couple system.

Self and togetherness. All participants appeared to experience an increased pull towards togetherness with their spouses in the aftermath of the affair. Specifically, recovery from the affair elicited new appreciation, intentionality, and prioritization of the relationship and marriage. Simultaneously participants spoke about the increased priority on taking care of their self secondary to the relationship. Rachel observed this paradoxical aspect of growth in her descriptions about initiatives she has taken to feel better about herself.

I had to do a lot of work on myself because basically I was faced with possibly only being with myself and I needed to be okay with that. So, I started doing things, like buying clothing for myself, doing more things with my hair and my makeup. A part of it was because we were starting to go out and do things together, but also because I just wanted to feel better. I just wanted to feel better about myself. I started to lose weight because of the trauma and then I just kept it

up. But I had to be okay with myself. I had to make some changes to try to get a little bit more confidence in myself. I'm thinking, okay, I'm, you know, I'm early forties now so I need to just realize that I'm never going to be a size freaking two again. I need to just embrace what I am.

She continued:

I want to do more things with him to. We do, but I'm doing more things that I enjoy rather than just for everybody else. I've started to value my alone time, which is weird because we're a couple and we're trying to bond and whatever, but you can't really be happy unless you make yourself happy to.

Rachel's description of how she has prioritized herself contrasts with her descriptions of her increasing prioritizing of her husband she described early in our interview:

We pay a lot of attention to each other and spend time with each other. When we're not together we're talking on the phone. There's nothing that can compare to just spending time together. If you're not a priority it will feel like you aren't a priority.

Ultimately becoming okay with herself reflected on what she could give to repairing her relationship with her husband:

I think that translated into good things for my relationship. You know, my confidence and my trying to make myself happy just came through in other areas. So, it helped repair our marriage because I felt better about myself. I wasn't so depressed about myself.

Similarly, Lindy's husband's affair was the impetus for her to help herself. She sought out help for her long-standing mental health issues. She started therapy and taking

medication which not only helped her but allowed for recovery with her husband. She explained:

When we started reconciling and trying to figure out how we could fix this, I told him I was going to go get a job instead of going back to school. I told him I'm going to go help myself because really most of my anxiety comes from my OCD disorder. If something didn't go as planned in my head, it would freak me out.

That doesn't happen anymore. So, I got medication. We started going to therapy.

She also described other self-oriented initiatives:

I've decided I need to get out of the house. I need to meet people, I need to be in a different environment. I need to give my husband space and he needs to give me space because we're getting on each other's nerves, being around each other all the time.

In contrast her descriptions of her relationship with her husband paint a picture of a reduction in space and a prioritization of togetherness:

When he's not at work we're always together. We do more together. We communicate more. We go and do stuff together as a couple and we never really did that before. We never went out on date nights and we promised each other that at least once a month we would go out and have dinner together without the kids. So far, it's been like twice a month that we've been doing it. We talk more about what we want from each other. Our intimate life is much better because I think that has more to do with the communication. Now I tell him that I appreciate him and I'm glad he's helping me and I'm glad that we're working things out. We didn't do that before. He tells me this stuff too. Sometimes it's overboard.

Sometimes I think during the day I tell him that I love him 100 million times and you know, he, he doesn't get sick of it, but, you know, I mean it has to get repetitive. I told him, 'every time I think of how much I love, I'm going to tell you. And so far, I have done that.

Participant descriptions of self-improvement efforts reflected one level of growth. These efforts indirectly helped to improve the relationship overall which provided for perceived growth within the marriage.

A journey and a destination. Participant descriptions of growth were situated in various moments in time during their recovery from their spouse's affair. Some experiences of growth could be located in descriptions of singular moments in time such as through an "epiphany" or punctuations along the timeline of recovery. In these cases, growth was interpreted as a destination or something that was witnessed by participants at singular points in time. In other cases, growth was located in descriptions of actions and insights that became clear over time. In these cases, growth was interpreted as a journey, never really culminating into a seminal moment, but rather a moving object that was dynamic and changing.

For Janet, growth in her acknowledgment of her strength came over time through reflection on all she had been through after her husband's infidelity and her initiatives to "fashion a life" for herself. Her description paints a picture of this journey:

After going through all of this, the unimaginable pain, just the beating that it does to your self-confidence and who you think you are. And just being able to pick yourself up and fashion a life that you want. I just know that there's nothing in this life that I can't handle. I know I'm still here. Not only am I still here, but I believe

that I'm a better version of myself. I don't think there's anything in this life that I can't handle, you know. Even if my husband has another affair, it just won't affect me the way that this last one did. Will I hurt? Sure. Sure, but I'll pick myself up. I'll move along.

For Janet, the journey that manifested this revelation was punctuated with moments of great weakness, of feeling “kicked in the gut”, and having days when she couldn't get out bed.

Rachel described many reflections of her own growth throughout our interview but one description stood out among the rest of a singular moment of insight during her and her husband's recovery from his affair. It was on this day that she realized her husband's love for her was greater than his affair:

The day I had the epiphany.... I had been so angry. I can't remember what it was about...something I saw reminded me of his affair and everything just came rushing back. We got into a bit of an argument. It was very emotional. He ended up not sleeping and had to get up the next day for work at 3:00am. He had to work late, and I knew he would be totally tired after his long shift. I also hadn't slept and ended up so sick with my nose and chest congested. Well, he walked in the door that day carrying a vaporizer. And this is the stupidest story, but the vaporizer of all things, of all the gifts he's ever given me, it was the best. I was like, my God, he really does love me! None of this matters, you know. After not getting any sleep, after being through this torture the night before talking about this affair again and again.... he brings me home a vaporizer after he works all day and is miserable and disgustingly tired....and he thought of me. And for some

reason that just was like the moment when I realized, ‘Okay, she doesn't matter anymore. It's done now.’ Like if somebody asked me, "What finally let you let it go?" Well...it was a vaporizer. I mean its just a symbol, but it was at that moment I really felt how much he truly loved me.

Similarly, Mark described a moment of growth in his relationship with his wife when he realized how bad he had treated her:

We were on vacation and she was talking privately to my son. I knew there was something wrong because I could see out the window. I went out and talked to him and he was just telling me that they were talking about all the things I've done to treat her badly... and at that point it just hit me on the head like a hammer and I went from tunnel vision to seeing everything I'd done and it just made me sick. I didn't realize...this sounds stupid you know...but I didn't realize what I'd done to her. So that point four years ago now, that was before I knew she had started the affair. She was done.

For Mark, growth has been a journey of realizing his role in his wife’s affair and making a conscious effort to treat his wife “like a queen”:

Julie: So, you said that you treat her like a queen now. What are some of the things that you do to treat her like a queen?

Mark: Well, respect for one. We have a child together and we're as one raising this child. I'd do anything for her. We go on little dates and stuff and I treat her like she should be treated just very nice like what you'd want from a husband.

Julie: And how did you know to do that stuff since you didn't really have an idea before?

Mark: It all came to me that night. I fell in love with her all of a sudden and I was sickened by what I'd done and it was just all came at once. I know it sounds kind of weird. But uh, it just happened that quick.

Julie: Does that often happen for you like that, that things come to you all at once? Has that happened to you before in your life about anything?

Mark: No, not like that. No, I don't know if she'd been praying that I would change for probably 20 years or whatever and then all of a sudden it just did. It just happened.

Mark's description of his experience of growth in his marriage highlights that growth can be located in both punctuated moments in time, such as having an epiphany, and can be a product of gaining clarity about one's self and behaviors over time.

Worse but better. Participants in this study demonstrated a remarkable ability to sit with the despairing aspects of life after the affair and move forward. In all cases participants described aspects of their marriage that seemed worse, yet overall, they characterized their marriages as better.

Steph's description of the growth she has experienced within her relationship is highlighted by the efforts her husband has made to make things better. Now they enjoy improved communication, more lightheartedness, and humor between one another—but Steph reflected that the weight of the infidelity will always be there. She explained:

There was a point where I thought that the infidelity would define me for the rest of my life, but it certainly hasn't defined me. I don't think you'll ever forget about it and I don't think you'll ever forget the pain, but I think you'll move on. I don't think this is ever going to go away, but I will recover and move on.

A similar sentiment was echoed by Janet who shortly into our interview said she and her husband are “doing the best we’ve ever done.” Later, however, I asked her to tell me more about what has changed in the way she thinks about him. The conversation that unfolded highlighted how she comes to terms with the darker realities about her husband to move forward in the marriage:

Janet: When I think about him, there's definitely been a loss of respect. I just completely respected his word and I thought he was a person of complete integrity and to realize that he' not.... well let me say this.... and I keep going back to the first time because I think I dismissed that because of what we were going through. But this last time, you know there really wasn't anything going on in the relationship that was a bad. Not in my view. And this last time, this was planned out...okay, this was a relationship that progressed from a business relationship to friends to flirting to meeting up. So, this wasn't a one off. I think that is what really just hurt me so much because you had so many opportunities to say, no, this is not where I need to go. So, there is a loss of respect. I really try not to roll my eyes at certain things. I recognize now that he's capable of anything and that's really sad because you know, you want to believe that the person that you are committed to and want to spend the rest of your life with will always have your back. But I'm in a situation where I know that's not true. So, I'm working through all of that.

Julie: How do you come to terms with that and stay in the marriage—knowing he doesn't always have your back or that you can't always trust him?

Janet: You know, the sad thing is—I have put him in the category of everyone

else almost and I've just come to the point where I say to myself, you cannot get everything from everyone and I have broadened my spare of friends and my family and that's how I deal with that. You know, sometimes I find myself thinking that the relationship is going so well, and find myself waiting for the next whatever—so it's difficult. But even living through all of that we were very happy. It's just that our story won't be one of those, um, storybook romances. It has its ugly parts and certain things that have happened we cannot take back and they will affect us going forward but I do believe we can still be happy.

Julie: And what tells you that? What do you experience in your day-to-day life that tells you that—that you can still move forward and that you can still be happy?

Janet: I don't put too much stock in words any longer. I look at his actions. I look at how he is so remorseful. If he's going out anywhere he's always telling me where he's at. If he's staying longer than he thought he would, he would call and say. He spends more time with me. We're spending time as a family. He's no longer on social media. He's just very considerate whenever I'm feeling emotionally low, like the anniversary of this is this month and I've been feeling very low and he would hold me and tell me how sorry he is. And if he could change it, he, would. Those sorts of things.

From Janet's description growth is interpreted as the ability to come to terms with aspects of the marriage that are worse; not having a "storybook romance," of embracing the "ugly parts," but finding happiness amongst the pain.

Mark characterizes his marriage as "better," even though he says the discovery of his wife's infidelity has been the worst thing that has ever happened to him. In

describing the depression he still feels because of the affair, he says:

“It's been over two years. It's just an everyday deal. It's a battle every day.”

He explained the ongoing battle with feeling triggered:

Depends on how many triggers I've had during the day, you know, that triggers the emotions from the affair and then I get home. And then I get, not really that angry, but just really sad that she would actually do something like that.

Adding to the challenge of recovery is his wife's feelings towards her affair partner. He explained:

She's still in love with him. She says she doesn't know how to get over it. I understand. You know, she was in love with him for a couple of years. It was her high school boyfriend as well. So, I understand that you can't just snap your fingers and be out of love with somebody. It takes a lot of time, you know, and I understand that. I've got a lot of understanding that came with it. It sucks. It's hard, but, you know, I understand. It's just reality. So, I just kind of patiently wait.

Mark has discovered strength in himself for “sticking around” considering his wife's ongoing connection to her affair partner. He says, “In the end if it all works out—it'll be worth it.” It was within this theme of participants acknowledging that aspects of the marriage were in some ways worse but overall better that the final theme of courage became apparent.

Courage

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.

-Serenity Prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr

The third and final superordinate theme—*Courage*—speaks to the undercurrent in all participant stories of growth. *Courage* is defined as showing strength in the face of pain or grief. The act of growth is courageous. Participant descriptions of growth were permeated with themes of *Courage*. *Courage* resonated in their acts of pressing forward in the marriage despite the pain and uncertainty if things would ever get better. *Courage* had the qualities of commitment, hard work, and accountability.

Commitment. All participants in this study demonstrated a remarkable commitment to recover from their partners' infidelity. Recovering required participants to commit to a new unexpected narrative about their marriage and push past the many internal and external barriers confronting them. This was interpreted in the way that each of them pushed outside of their comfort zone and community influence to make sense of their spouse's infidelity on their own and to choose the path of staying together.

Commitment to recover was evident in Lindy's description of breaking a "barrier" to be intimate with her husband. She described:

I remember that I hadn't touched my husband in months. We hadn't been sexual with one another. We hadn't hugged each other. We hadn't held hands for at least 10 months. After all this stuff with the affair happened it almost seemed like I had to be brave and I had to force myself and I walked up to him and I just looked at him and asked him if I could have a hug. And that was one of the hardest things that I had done because it had been so long since I touched him or had been intimate with him that it felt like I was hugging a stranger, you know. That is one instance that I can remember for sure that like it was a barrier that I broke. From there on, we started with hugging and holding hands in public and all that stuff

again.... but that was the icebreaker after I found out about the affair.

For Rachel *Courage* and commitment were evident in her description of the “constant” and sometimes “difficult” efforts made between her and her husband to push past feelings of frustration, sadness, and anger to understand and recover from the infidelity. She described:

I'm just seeing constant effort. I needed to know that he would talk to me if I wanted to, that I could do that, you know, anytime that I needed. We did have lots of occasions where he got really impatient, like "Why are we talking about this again? We already went over this." Part of the thing that is helpful is just going over and over it and it might be the same question 50 different times in different ways. Until my mind made sense of that answer I was going to ask it again. I had to get it in every way I possibly could just like repetitiveness and it wasn't just words though I needed to see action from him, affection and caring and effort, letting me know that he was thinking about me. Now in turn, I did it for him to. Even though it was quite difficult at times because I was so angry and sad, that it was kind of hard to leave him little love notes and stuff and I didn't do it in a fake way, I would only do it if I was really okay doing it. There were many times I thought, "Why am I doing this? I didn't do anything wrong." No, but really the point is to have a more successful marriage, not go back to what it was before, and so it had to stay in the forefront all the time that I had to participate no matter how much I hurt.

Courage in Mark's commitment to recover was interpreted in his decision to stay with his wife in the face of personal, institutional, and community barriers. Although his

belief that marriage is a “lifetime thing with your partner”, most couples he knows who have faced infidelity have divorced. He explained:

The one guy that I worked with—he's the only one that I know of personally that went through an affair and is still together with his wife that did the affair. All the other people I know that had wives that had affairs have left them. One of them actually has been married twice and both of his wives cheated on him. He divorced both of them.

Committing to staying married despite external pressure has resulted in Mark feeling a sense of strength. He described this way:

When you talk with people about what they'd do if their wife cheated on them—you always come up with these conclusions what you might do. Leave them? It takes a lot of strength to stick around—especially when she's still in love with him and stays in contact. It takes a strong person to do that, I believe. You know, I think in the end if it all works out, it'll be worth it. You know. So that's what I meant about the strength.

Hard work. Commitment to recover meant the participants had to do hard work. Hard work was interpreted in the participant descriptions of actions taken to recover. These actions required on-going development of awareness, intentional thoughtfulness, and sometimes doing things that felt awkward or uncomfortable. In some cases, it meant reaching out to counselors and clergy for help. *Courage* was required to persist in putting in the work in the face of pain. The passage of time and holding onto the positive moments appeared to help participants maintain the momentum required to put in the hard work to recover.

For Steph, *Courage* was committing to putting in hard work everyday. She shared:

“You have to work from day one—you know—put your work in every day.

Everyone tells you that and you know, you get that—you think you do.”

She went on to describe the hard work that she and her husband have committed to:

Things in our relationship that are different or maybe just a little off kilter, I'm more likely to bring that up and talk about it now rather than before when I just hoped it was different tomorrow. My husband is more open to talking. He's never been a big communicator but now he will. He has some anger issues and he's working on those. That's probably the biggest thing is his anger...We do a lot of talking about how to strengthen our relationship further...We have more physical contact now. He makes an effort now to be more, more aware and do more of the physical contact...I have changed my demeanor with him. You know, before if he would make a mistake or what I felt was snapping or anything, I would just snap back and fight with him. Now I have taken more of the approach of stepping back and asking, you know, "Is this what you meant? Did you mean to snap there? And nine times out of 10 it's not. He did not mean it."

Discovery of Karen's husband's affair was the impetus for both to finally get the help they had long needed to address marriage issues:

The affair was the catalyst for finally going to therapy. I had been asking and he had even suggested in the past, maybe we should go to therapy, but like every busy married couple we just put it off and put it off and then we would just deal with the fights and the misery and the aftermath as it happened. The affair was

definitely a catalyst to say, all right, we need to do something or we have to go our separate ways now because you know, I was not only not going to put up with the cheating but I wasn't going to go back to being miserable and having him treat me badly on top of it all.

In therapy, they learned coping skills and how to communicate with one another. Her description of the “exhausting” work they did in their recovery was amplified in a description of how they have managed to curb their “legendary” fights and improve their communication:

Our fights were legendary. Now if I'm upset about something we communicate much better. I talk to him. He responds properly. If he offends me or I offend him or something, we can tell each other, “Hey, that was uncool.” or “I'm sorry honey.” We're much calmer now and we can communicate much better. We're friends as a result instead of just husband or wife, which we never really were before. So, it did improve the marriage in that way, but it was such a huge price to pay. It was exhausting.

Hard work was interpreted in Janet's courage to push through the fear she had about speaking up in her marriage. Janet's newfound fearlessness about broaching difficult subjects was clarified in her description of the fear she used to have about asking her husband questions. She described this by referring to the first time she discovered he was having an affair:

The difference between this time and last time—I was so afraid to ask questions. I was so afraid to upset anyone and this time I was like, “No, I'm the one who's been put in the situation that I didn't even ask for. I have to carry this burden and

this pain and nobody gave me a choice in this..." I often think back to that. I say to myself, "What if you had really pushed about that? What if you had asked about it? What if you had just said, "Who's that?" I realized that I was just so afraid, I guess, of what the answers would be.

Janet described her growth in this way:

I'm very open with what I'm feeling now. Sometimes I don't have an unspoken thought. If I think it, if something that he did makes me feel uncomfortable, I say it right away. Overall, we just communicate better. Everything isn't pleasant, but I don't keep anything inside anymore.

She further explained how they communicate better by providing a more intimate description of their behaviors:

I think the biggest change is our level of communication—the fact that we actually listen to what the other person is saying. I think a lot of the times prior, we probably just listened to respond—not really listening. We just had to defend ourselves. Now we do a lot more listening and asking, "Do you mean this or do you mean that?" I think we're both more inclined to apologize quicker than before. We do things together now. Before it was, he did his thing and I did my thing with the kids and basically it was just living in the same house. Now we spend a lot of time together. We actually exercise together. I think he's been coming with me now for about a year. We enjoy that. I think I'm more confident in who I am. I'm not afraid to lose him. I guess he can tell that. I'm not afraid to have faults or deficiencies and I just let it be known.

Janet also acknowledged her husband's sustained efforts over the course of their recovery

that have made a difference to her perception of growth in their relationship:

He is so remorseful and if he's going out anywhere he's always telling me where he's at. If he's staying longer than he thought he would, he would call and say. He spends more time with me. We're spending time as a family. He's no longer on social media. This all began there. He's just very considerate whenever I'm feeling emotionally low, like the anniversary of this is this month and I've been feeling very low and you know, he would hold me and tell me how sorry he is. And if he could change it—he would.

Accountability. *Courage* was interpreted in the participants' descriptions of taking personal responsibility for their spouse's affair and for their role in repairing the relationship. This was directly acknowledged by Rachel whose willingness to look at her own faults reflected growth in her thinking about conflict resolution in her marriage. She shared:

If you as a couple decide you really want to heal your marriage, the betrayed has to give. You can't just keep throwing it in his face. You can't because it's basically a sabotage. You have to be willing to look at your own faults in the marriage.

Steph believes her husband is responsible for his decision to cheat but she also acknowledges that her marriage wasn't strong. She described her insight about her part in the weakness of the marriage this way:

I went through depression from my dad passing away. I withdrew from him. I was sleeping on the couch at the time his affair started. I liked to sleep with my dog. You know, there were a plethora of reasons...like I had every excuse in the book, to sleep on the couch. I wasn't mad at my husband but he saw that as me not

wanting to be married to him. He didn't know how to talk to me but he could talk to her and he says that's because she didn't really mean anything and he wouldn't be judged about what he's saying.

This awareness grew in her recovery efforts with her husband:

We talked to our pastor and that gave me some clarity about what my husband needed. He needed to know that I wanted him here and not just that he's here so now he has to stay. I think up until then that's kind of how I approached it. You know, I'm a very headstrong person and I viewed it like this is something that happened to me, not to us. So, I think once I got that mind frame switched is when things started to change...I feel like we took those first two years and concentrated on me and my recovery and we didn't concentrate on him and what needed. So, once we started to do that things definitely changed. My anger is definitely subdued, definitely. And I think that has made him not so fearful of talking to me.

Discovery of his wife's affair led Mark into a deep soul search about how he had been conducting himself as a husband. His level of accountability for his wife's affair was stronger than all other participants. He was depressed and ashamed of his behavior.

He showed *Courage* in taking accountability for his role this way:

I was the fault. I mistreated her to the point where I knew this is not typical of her to do something like this. I really just didn't treat her well to the point where she was almost suicidal from the way I treated her. I texted the guy after I found out and thanked him for saving her life. So, I think she was that bad off...I really think he probably did save her life. Saved her in many ways.

He described how he has sought to make amends:

My wife is really important to me now. Like I said, I'm not a mean person but I really focus more on being nice to everybody and just try to be the best person I can be. Like with my wife's family. She has several brothers and sisters and none of them really liked me well through all the years I've treated their sister so badly. After all this I went around to each one of them and I did express my emotions and apologized to every one of them about how I treated their sister. I apologized to everybody for the way I treated her in the past and I truly meant it because I was horrified by what I'd done it. And I'm not afraid to tell anybody the truth about anything now.

Summary

All participants in this study reported experiencing growth within all domains of the PTGI. Descriptions of everyday moments and interactions in the marriage as well as noticeable changes within themselves highlighted the way growth manifested during the participants' recovery with their spouse. These descriptions were organized into three superordinate themes; *Gains and Losses*, *Paradoxes*, and *Courage* (Table 4).

Table 4. Superordinate Themes Revisited

<i>Gains and Losses</i>	<i>Paradoxes</i>	<i>Courage</i>
Need for Help Personal Power Relationship with Spouse	Self and Togetherness A Journey and a Destination Worse but Better	Commitment Hard work Accountability

Within the theme of *Gains and Losses* were participant descriptions of growth that reflected a realization of needing help, changes in sense of personal power, and changes in relationship with their spouse. These descriptions demonstrated that growth

was experienced with the acknowledgment of certain losses, such as a loss of self-dependence, being placed on a pedestal, or being viewed with rosy colors juxtaposed with gains, such as greater connection with others, the ability to have more of a voice in the relationship, and a more realistic perspective of one another.

Within the theme of *Paradoxes* were participant descriptions of growth that reflected competing priorities of self and togetherness, that realization of growth manifested along the journey of recovery and at certain destinations along the way, and that somehow growth meant the relationship was better but not without some aspects of the relationship being worse. These descriptions demonstrated that growth after infidelity was not necessarily mutual for both spouses, that it existed in the simultaneous presence of preferred and unpreferred experience and that it was often a conundrum to make sense of.

Finally, within the theme of *Courage* were participant descriptions that reflected growth as an active process of commitment, hard work, and accountability. These descriptions highlighted the challenges that had to be overcome to push past the infidelity. They reflected intimate details of actions taken to repair the marriage and continuous awareness of one another's needs and follow through on meeting them. Accountability was displayed in the participants' descriptions of how they made sense of their spouse's infidelity and how they viewed their responsibility in repairing the relationship. Taken together they reflected that while growing required courage, having courage was also perceived to be an indication of growth.

CHAPTER V.

Discussion

Summary

Infidelity is a common event in married life (Eaves & Robertson-Smith, 2007; Tafoya & Spitzberg, 2007). The negative outcomes of infidelity resemble those of other traumatic, life-threatening events (Ortman, 2005). Less than half of married couples who experience infidelity will stay together (Allen & Atkins, 2012). Previous research has suggested that those who stay together have the potential for experiencing growth outcomes (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Heintzelman et al., 2014, Laaser et al., 2017). No research until now has looked more deeply at the phenomenon of growth related to spousal infidelity to understand the way that growth manifests in their lives.

The present study sought to understand how spouses experience growth within themselves and within their relationship after infidelity. Growth was defined as “a person’s subjective experience of positive and meaningful personal change that resulted from a traumatic experience” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). The methodology used to explore the experience of growth was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Smith, 1996; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA is appropriate for participant-oriented research that explore questions related to how a person makes meaning of an event as it relates to their personal and social identity (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The researcher used a social constructivist framework for understanding growth after infidelity, thus an IPA methodology was a logical choice for answering the research question.

Participants in this study were recruited from infidelity support groups on

Facebook to participate in in-depth interviews. Due to the intimate and sensitive nature of the topic under the present study it was assumed that the number of people responding to the call for participation might be low. It was also expected that more women than men would participate in the research (Smith, 2008). A total of 6 demographically diverse participants were selected for inclusion in the data analysis. All participants in this study were uninvolved spouses of a person who had an affair while they were married.

Participants indicated experiencing growth in all 5 domains of the PTGI with the greatest degree of change experienced in the domain of relating to others followed by appreciation of life, personal strength, new possibilities, and spiritual growth.

Convergence across participant descriptions of growth was initially easy to identify in the data and could be situated within the domains of growth described by PTGI theory; however, a deeper analysis revealed that growth was dynamic, volatile, and presented a conundrum in the lives of the participants, their spouses, and their marriage. The findings suggest that for these participants growth was experienced in thoughts, behaviors and actions that reflected *Gains and Losses* in their life, in seemingly unexplainable *Paradoxes*, and in the *Courage* to recover from the infidelity.

Conclusions

The experience of growth after infidelity was common across participant narratives in this study. Commonalities in experience cut through geographic differences, and transcended age, gender, religion, and lifespans of togetherness. Notably, participants shared similarity in the thoughts, beliefs and interactions with their spouses that reflected growth. Participant reports of growth along dimensions of the PTGI were consistent with themes found in other studies (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Heintzelman et al., 2014; Laaser

et al., 2017). Adding to the body of literature on this topic, findings from this study deepen understanding of the lived experience of growth as a process punctuated by realizations of what has been lost and gained in the relationship. These realizations were embedded with a graceful acceptance that in order for the relationship to improve, something had to be sacrificed. Growth also looked like a messy conundrum, that could not be explained without justification, such as how focusing on one's self more, or distancing from the relationship, also seemed to bring the spouses closer together. Finally, the process of growth was steeped in courage.

All of this culminated in the generation of 3 superordinate themes: *Gains and Losses*, *Paradoxes*, and *Courage* and their corresponding subthemes. These themes permeated participant descriptions of growth within themselves and their relationships. There was also considerable overlap amongst superordinate themes. For example, participants demonstrated *Courage* in the way they described living with the conundrum that aspects of their marriage were worse after the discovery of the affair, yet in some ways better. This could be seen in the way they fought back against pressure to leave their spouse from members of their family. Similarly the gains described by participants may not have been possible without the hard work and accountability they brought to their recovery from the infidelity.

Participants described growth by reflecting on what was both gained and lost in their lives. Descriptions of this theme conjured up the visualization of a seed cracking open, losing its original form, gaining a new one. Although during the beginning phase of recovery participants experienced a sense of loss over the shattered perception they held of their spouse, the passing of time and mutual effort to heal the relationship allowed

for a renewed perspective of gratitude for the relationship. The trauma of the infidelity disturbed participant comfort with who they were, how they had been prior to the discovery of their spouses' affair, and the nature of their relationship with their spouse. A loss for one spouse meant a gain by the other and this had the effect of equalizing power in the relationship and ultimately making the relationship better in the eyes of the uninvolved spouse. For participants, the loss of old ways of being brought about an expansion of new opportunities, of having more of a voice in decisions in the marriage, and in taking greater liberty with pursuing self interests.

Growth was also a conundrum. For participants in this study growth was experienced as a continual dance between acknowledging and accepting what once was and what now is in the relationship. It was a process defined by *Paradoxes* such as how renewed interest in one's self coincided with increased interest in relationship-sustaining activities, or how loss of trust in the involved partner coexisted with feelings of greater closeness. Beyond descriptions of experience, these *Paradoxes* were also felt when participants conveyed disgust over their spouse's affair but followed with expressions of gratitude for the way their spouse has changed. Growth was both a journey and a destination which participants located in specific moments in time and as an unfolding event throughout the course of their recovery from the affair. Moments, like the one described by Rachel when her husband brought her home a vaporizer to treat her cold and the lingering resentments surrounding the affair faded away with the awareness that her husband really loved her, illuminated that growth was experienced as a sudden epiphany. Separately, reflecting on one's journey in practicing better communication with their spouse over time, revealed growth was an evolving phenomenon that required both the

passing of time, practice of new behaviors, and a frank look at the outcome of those behaviors. In short, growth was both something to achieve and something to actively do.

To grow took *Courage*. *Courage* was evident in the commitment, hard work, and accountability that underscored participant descriptions of the recovery process. It was required to overcome the judgement by friends and family members when they chose to remain married and work things out. To stay together spouses had to push past shame and anger, accept responsibility for their role in the affair, and open themselves up to a new way of being with their partner. This required conscious and intentional action to learn and practice behaviors to heal the relationship and continue to grow together. In some cases these efforts were foreign to participants and blind hope kept them moving forward. Participants showed gratitude and compassion towards their cheating partners in what appeared to be a herculean effort to transcend the deep sadness and pain they continued to feel years after the affair. Whether *Courage* was something already possessed by these participants or something gained through the arduous journey of recovery was not easily distinguishable, yet it was a constant thread through their narratives of growth.

The findings also illuminate that growth after infidelity is not a unidirectional phenomenon, like the expected upwards rise in height as a child ages or the climbing of a sapling towards the sun. Instead, growth in this study was situated on a variable plane with obvious moments of regression, stillness, and movement forward. When we think about growth we think of a mostly positive phenomenon, one that conjures images of living and thriving, that might be characterized as being “good”. Growth after infidelity is perhaps more complicated, less obvious, requiring a more microscopic look to see its existence. It looks neither good nor bad but somewhere in between, evoking both horror

and wonder.

For counselor education and training programs the findings of the present study should present new information that should be included in curriculum related to working with individuals and couples around betrayal trauma and extra-marital affairs. This new information can also equip both novice and experienced counselors with an alternative way of conceptualizing the outcomes of extra-marital affairs. For spouses who may be recovering from an affair in their marriage, the findings from the present study might provide hope that they can both overcome the infidelity and that it might have a positive impact on their life together and as individuals in the future.

Limitations and Future Research

This study provided an intimate portrait of the experience of growth after infidelity for 6 individuals and is not intended to suggest that everyone who experiences an infidelity in their marriage will experience growth. The theoretical underpinnings and choice of methodology of the present study presuppose that the findings will be limited to the participants interviewed; however, the findings may offer a glimpse at what might be possible for couples who stay together after the trauma of infidelity.

Descriptions of growth by participants were one-sided, reflecting only the perspective of the uninvolved spouse. Participant descriptions of growth strongly suggested growth was experienced by the involved spouse. Inclusion of both spouses in a study about growth after infidelity could better substantiate if growth is mutually felt, or determine variances in the experience of growth between involved and uninvolved spouses. Further, all participants were married, heterosexual, cisgender people, limiting the findings from being applicable to homosexual or transgender married people, or to

people who may be unmarried or in shorter term relationships. Broader inclusion of participants in future studies might help to understand similarities and variances in experience of growth after infidelity across diverse couple groups.

The findings from this study are limited by the researcher's interpretation of the participants' interpretation of growth. It is likely another researcher would interpret the data in this study differently. While the study's social constructivist framework allowed for a range of interpretation of the data, the researcher noted that the data could also be interpreted from a family systems or cognitive behavioral perspective. For example, the data supporting the theme of growth in self and togetherness could be interpreted using the concepts of the forces of differentiation and togetherness with further discussion related to how these forces interact to stabilize the relationship. Similarly, a cognitive behavioral perspective might lend to understanding how participants use of cognitive mechanisms, such as intellectualization, rationalizing, and reframing their spouse's affair influenced their ability to cope and mediate their overall perception of growth. Other theoretical perspectives might enrich understanding of growth after infidelity for counselors with different theoretical orientations.

As supported by previous research (Laaser et al., 2017) it was expected that the experience of growth after infidelity would be influenced by a number of demographic, relationship, and individual variables as well as the amount of time that had passed since the infidelity occurred. Throughout the data analysis process it was evident that mechanisms were at play that enhanced the likelihood of and experience of growth after infidelity. Participants were noted to have characteristics and past experiences, such as a growth mindset and previous experience with trauma, which would be expected to

contribute to growth outcomes. Other important factors in the participant growth process were their willingness to seek help after the discovery of the affair and their partner's willingness to take responsibility for their actions and engage in reparative behaviors. A discussion of this is important but beyond the scope of the present study. Future research might investigate the mechanisms of growth that influence recovery and growth after the discovery of infidelity.

The findings in this study are also limited to time and circumstance. While participants were able to speak to how things are now there is no promise for what tomorrow will bring. For now, it is unknown if the experience of growth today will continue into the future and if it will manifest differently. A longitudinal study would be useful to determine if there is longevity associated with the experience of growth after infidelity.

Finally, these findings are not meant to condone or validate affairs or to suggest that all spouses who encounter infidelity ought to preserve their marriage. Rather, the findings are meant to more clearly understand the phenomenon of growth after infidelity. While the participants in this study believe that their individual lives and marriages are better today as a result of their spouse's affair, negative effects of the trauma of the infidelity linger. With that in mind this study suggests that some couples persevere after a traumatic infidelity. Understanding why and how they persevere and what positive outcomes can come from the discovery of an affair are valuable for promoting hope and optimism amongst married couples and to provide couples with a reference point for other understandings of recovery after infidelity.

Reflection

It was an ongoing challenge to maintain the integrity of the participants stories, to share brief excerpts of our interviews and still capture the nuances of their telling of their experience and maintain the heart of it. This was made more difficult by how unexpectedly touched I was by the many moments in each interview where I felt like a witness to the participant's personal lives and could feel their emotions, when their vivid descriptions of what growth looked and felt like brought me into the intimate moments of their life as a witness. I felt this in Mark's bittersweet description of how cuddling every night with his wife in spite of her ongoing love for her affair partner makes staying in the marriage worth it. I felt Rachel's joy and relief and the love of her husband in her retelling of the time he brought her home a vaporizer after an exhausting day of work which made her realize that his love for her was greater than the affair. Lindy's vivid description of overcoming her frustration and finding appreciation for her husband's efforts to help with the laundry punctuated her recovered life with her husband as one that was woven with patience, grace, gratitude, and lightheartedness. Steph's description of the efforts both her and husband have put in to strengthen their relationship in spite of the pain she experienced from his emotionally laden affair offered hope. I felt empowered by Karen's confidence in her narrative of overcoming abuse and becoming whole as a result of finally prioritizing herself after the discovery her husband's affair. I was so struck by Janet's description of how her and her husband "used to listen to respond and now listen to understand" that I have incorporated this philosophy into my own relationship.

The stories here have impacted my own life, added substance and value to my

experience of small moments in my life, and now, my marriage. I have found strength and courage to change for the betterment of my own relationship through their examples of strength and courage to change. They were experienced by this researcher as an oasis in the desert of bleakness that so often underscores the destructive narrative of infidelity and its aftermath.

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Appendix B
Informed Consent to Participate in an Online Survey

Barry University
Informed Consent to Participate in an Online Survey

Your participation in a research project is requested. The title of the study is *Married People's Experience of Post Traumatic Growth After Infidelity*. The research is being conducted by Julie Blunkosky MSW, a doctoral candidate in the Adrian Dominican School of Education at Barry University, and is seeking information that will be useful in the field of counseling and to help those who may be recovering from an infidelity in their marriage. The aim of this research is to understand heterosexual married people's experience of post traumatic growth after an infidelity and specifically, the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors associated with growth. I am seeking 100 participants.

If you decide to participate in this research, you will be asked to do the following: complete an online survey that includes demographic information and a survey called the Post Traumatic Growth Inventory which asks you questions about how you may have positively changed because of your experience of infidelity. You will also be asked to provide your name and contact information if you would like to participate in a follow-up interview. This survey should take no longer than 5 minutes to complete. Upon completion of the survey you may be contacted by the researcher to participate in a maximum 90-minute face-to-face audio recorded interview at a mutually agreed upon time and private public place convenient to you. In the event, you are not chosen for participation in the interview your online survey results will not be used in the data analysis and final report of the study.

Your consent to complete the online survey is strictly voluntary and you may decline to participate or drop out at any time during completion of the survey. In the event you terminate your involvement in the online survey, all data collected from your participation will be excluded from the final data analysis and there will be no adverse effects to you.

There are no known risks from participation in the online survey. There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study; however, your participation will contribute to the understanding of the experience of post-traumatic growth after an infidelity. As a research participant, information you provide will be held in confidence to the extent permitted by law. Any published or presented findings of the research will be deidentified with pseudonyms. Your responses to this online survey will be kept on a password protected digital file on the researcher's password secure personal computer and/or kept in hard copy form in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's home office. Data will be retained for at least 5 years and then indefinitely.

It is possible that SurveyMonkey.com will collect IP addresses for its own purposes. You may wish to review the privacy policy of SurveyMonkey.com before you begin.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding the study or your participation in the study, you may contact me, Julie Blunkosky at julie.blunkosky@mymail.barry.edu or (412) 930-5157, my dissertation chairperson, Dr. Fay Roseman at froseman@barry.edu or (305) 899-3707, or the Barry University Institutional Review Board point of contact, Jasmine Trana at jtrana@barry.edu or (305)899-3020.

Voluntary Consent

I acknowledge that I have been informed of the nature and purposes of this experiment by Julie Blunkosky and that I have read and understand the information presented above, and that I have received a copy of this form for my records. I understand the risks and benefits associated with participation in this study. I give my voluntary consent to participate in this experiment.

Appendix C
Online Survey

Demographic Survey

Thank you for participating in this online survey. The following questions will help me to understand if you may be a suitable candidate for participation in the research stud

1. What is your age?

- 18 to 24
- 25 to 34
- 35 to 44
- 45 to 54
- 55 to 64
- 65 to 74
- 75 or older

2. What is your gender?

- Female
- Male

3. Please describe your race/ethnicity.

- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian/Pacific Islander
- Black or African American
- Hispanic
- White/Caucasian
- Multiple Ethnicity/Other (Please Specify) _____

4. Do you identify with any of the following religions? (Please select all that apply.)

- Protestantism
- Catholicism
- Christianity
- Judaism
- Islam
- Buddhism
- Hinduism
- Native American
- Inter/Non-denominational
- No religion
- Other (please specify)

5. How long have you been legally married to your current spouse?

- Less than 6 months
- 6 mo. - 1 yr.
- 1 yr. - 5 yrs.
- 5 yrs - 10 yrs
- 10 yrs - 20 yrs
- More than 20 yrs

6. What was your involvement in the infidelity/affair?

- I was the spouse who cheated
- I was the spouse who was cheated on

7. Please check the items that correspond with what you experienced after the discovery of the infidelity/affair?

- The affair/infidelity made me question assumptions I held about myself and my marriage
- The affair/infidelity was unexpected and surprising
- The affair/infidelity threatened the survival of my marriage

8. How long has it been since the infidelity/affair ended?

- Less than 6 mo.
- 6 mo. - 1 yr
- 1 yr - 2 yrs
- 2 yrs - 5 yrs
- 5 yrs - 8 yrs
- 8 yrs - 10yrs
- Over 10 yrs

Appendix D
Post Traumatic Growth Inventory
(Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996)

Indicate for each of the statements below the degree to which this change occurred in your life as a result of the crisis/disaster, using the following scale.

- 0 = No change
 1 = Very small degree of change
 2 = Small degree of change
 3 = Moderate degree of change
 4 = Great degree of change
 5 = Very great degree of change

	0	1	2	3	4	5
1. I changed my priorities about what is important in life						
2. I have a greater appreciation for the value of my own life.						
3. I developed new interests.						
4. I have a greater feeling of self-reliance.						
5. I have a better understanding of spiritual matters.						
6. I more clearly see that I can count on people in times of trouble.						
7. I established a new path for my life.						
8. I have a greater sense of closeness with others.						
9. I am more willing to express my emotions.						
10. I know better that I can handle difficulties.						
11. I am able to do better things with my life.						
12. I am better able to accept the way things work out						
13. I can better appreciate each day						
14. New opportunities are available which wouldn't						

have been otherwise						
15. I have more compassion for others.						
16. I put more effort into my relationships						
17. I am more likely to try to change things which need changing						
18. I have a stronger religious faith						
19. I discovered that I'm stronger than I thought I was						
20. I learned a great deal about how wonderful people are						
21. I better accept needing others						

Post Traumatic Growth Inventory Scoring

The Post Traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) is scored by adding all the responses. Individual factors are scored by adding responses to items on each factor. Factors are indicated by the Roman numerals after each item below. Items to which factors belong are not listed on the form administered to clients.

PTGI Factors

- Factor I: Relating to Others
- Factor II: New Possibilities
- Factor III: Personal Strength
- Factor IV: Spiritual Change
- Factor V: Appreciation of Life

1. I changed my priorities about what is important in life. (V)
2. I have a greater appreciation for the value of my own life. (V)
3. I developed new interests. (II)
4. I have a greater feeling of self-reliance. (III)
5. I have a better understanding of spiritual matters. (IV)
6. I more clearly see that I can count on people in times of trouble. (I)
7. I established a new path for my life. (II)
8. I have a greater sense of closeness with others. (I)
9. I am more willing to express my emotions. (I)
10. I know better that I can handle difficulties. (III)
11. I am able to do better things with my life. (II)
12. I am better able to accept the way things work out. (III)
13. I can better appreciate each day. (V)

14. New opportunities are available which wouldn't have been otherwise. (II)
15. I have more compassion for others. (I)
16. I put more effort into my relationships. (I)
17. I am more likely to try to change things which need changing. (II)
18. I have a stronger religious faith. (IV)
19. I discovered that I'm stronger than I thought I was. (III)
20. I learned a great deal about how wonderful people are. (I)
21. I better accept needing others. (I)

Appendix E
Informed Consent to Participate

Barry University
Informed Consent Form to Participate in Interview

Your participation in a research project is requested. The title of the study is *Married People's Experience of Post Traumatic Growth After Infidelity*. The research is being conducted by myself, Julie Blunkosky MSW, a doctoral candidate in the Adrian Dominican School of Education at Barry University, and is seeking information that will be useful in the field of counseling and to help those who may be recovering from an infidelity in their marriage. The aim of this research is to understand heterosexual married people's experience of post traumatic growth after an infidelity and specifically, the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors associated with growth. I am seeking 10 participants to complete the interview.

If you decide to participate in this interview, I will ask you to complete a face-to-face, audio recorded interview that will take no longer than 90 minutes. Upon transcription of the interview I will email you a copy of the typed transcript and my analysis so that you may have an opportunity to review the transcript and provide feedback. Your feedback is optional and not required for participation in the study. It will take approximately 1 hour to review the transcript and provide feedback.

Your consent to be a research participant is strictly voluntary and you may decline to participate or drop out at any time during the study. In the event, you terminate your involvement in the study, all data collected from your participation will be excluded from the study and there will be no adverse effects to you.

The risk to participating in this research is minimal, and may include negative or unpleasant thoughts or memories of the infidelity. The risk is no greater than it would be in talking about the infidelity in another context. If you feel uncomfortable and choose to end the interview, you may do so at any time, and you will be provided a list of counseling resources. There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this study; however, your participation will contribute to the understanding of the experience of post-traumatic growth after an infidelity.

As a research participant, information you provide will be held in confidence to the extent permitted by law. Any published or presented findings of the research will be deidentified with pseudonyms. Informed consent forms related to participation in the interview will be filed in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's home office separate from the hard copies of the transcribed interviews. All digital video, audio records, and transcribed interviews will be kept on a password protected digital file on the researcher's password secure home computer. All digital and hard copy forms of data will be retained for at least 5 years and then indefinitely.

For participants completing interviews by way of teleconference, this study involves the use of the online teleconference service, GoToMeeting. Interviews conducted over GoToMeeting will be video recorded. Per the GoToMeeting website, all meetings are secure and private, protected by end-to-end Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) and 128-bit Advanced Encryption Standard (AES) encryption. No unencrypted information is ever

stored on the GoToMeeting system. If you have concerns regarding GoToMeeting privacy, please consult the GoToMeeting privacy policy statement at: <https://www.logmeininc.com/legal/privacy>. To ensure confidentiality, the researcher will establish a separate GoToMeeting account for this research project only. After each communication, the researcher will secure a copy of the digital visual recording and then delete the original from her GoToMeeting account.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding the study or your participation in the study, you may contact me, Julie Blunkosky at julie.blunkosky@mymail.barry.edu or (412) 930-5157, my dissertation chairperson, Dr. Fay Roseman at froseman@barry.edu or (305) 899-3707, or the Barry University Institutional Review Board point of contact, Jasmine Trana at jtrana@barry.edu or (305)899-3020.

Voluntary Consent

I acknowledge that I have been informed of the nature and purposes of this research by Julie Blunkosky and that I have read and understand the information presented above, and that I have received a copy of this form for my records. I understand the risks and benefits associated with participation in this study and agree to assume all financial responsibility for counseling services I may choose to receive because of participation in this study. I agree to the use of GoToMeeting to facilitate participation in the study. I give my voluntary consent to participate in this research.

Signature of Participant

Date

Researcher

Date

Appendix F
Schedule of Questions

Tell me about your experience of the infidelity?

How did you make sense of why the infidelity happened?

What helped you to recover form the infidelity?

Can you tell me what you notice to be different about your relationship with your spouse since the infidelity happened?

Can you tell me any differences you notice in the way you think about your spouse? The way you feel? The way you interact?

You indicated on the survey I provided you that you have noticed changes in (domain of growth). Can you tell me what specifically you notice is different?

What is different and preferable about your marriage now because of what you went through?

How might your closest friends or family members have noticed these changes you describe? Is there anything they might see or hear when they are around you and your spouse that would tell them something is different about your marriage, perhaps that something has changed for the better in your marriage?

Appendix G
Counseling Referral List

Mental Health Counseling Referrals	
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Treatment Referral Helpline	1-800-662-HELP (4357) 1-800-487-4889 (TTY)
SAMHSA Behavioral health treatment locator	https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/
American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy	http://www.aamft.org/imis15/aamft/
Mental Health America	http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/im-looking-mental-health-help-myself
Psychology Today	https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists
Infidelity Support	
Infidelity Support Group	https://www.cheatingsupport.com/usa_therapists/
Surviving Infidelity Online Support	http://www.survivinginfidelity.com/forums.asp

Appendix H 4 Stage Data Analysis Procedure (Storey, 2007)

This process is completed for each individual transcript. Following the completion of analysis for each individual transcript, a cross case comparison is completed for analysis of convergence and divergence of themes. This leads to the development of overarching superordinate themes which are presented in a group-level table.

Data Analysis: Stage 1

Excerpts of significance

- cognitive constructions and rhetorical patterns, such as words or phrases common across the transcript
- representative of emerging themes in the participant's description of his or her experience of growth
- reflect coherence or contradictions in the participant's responses

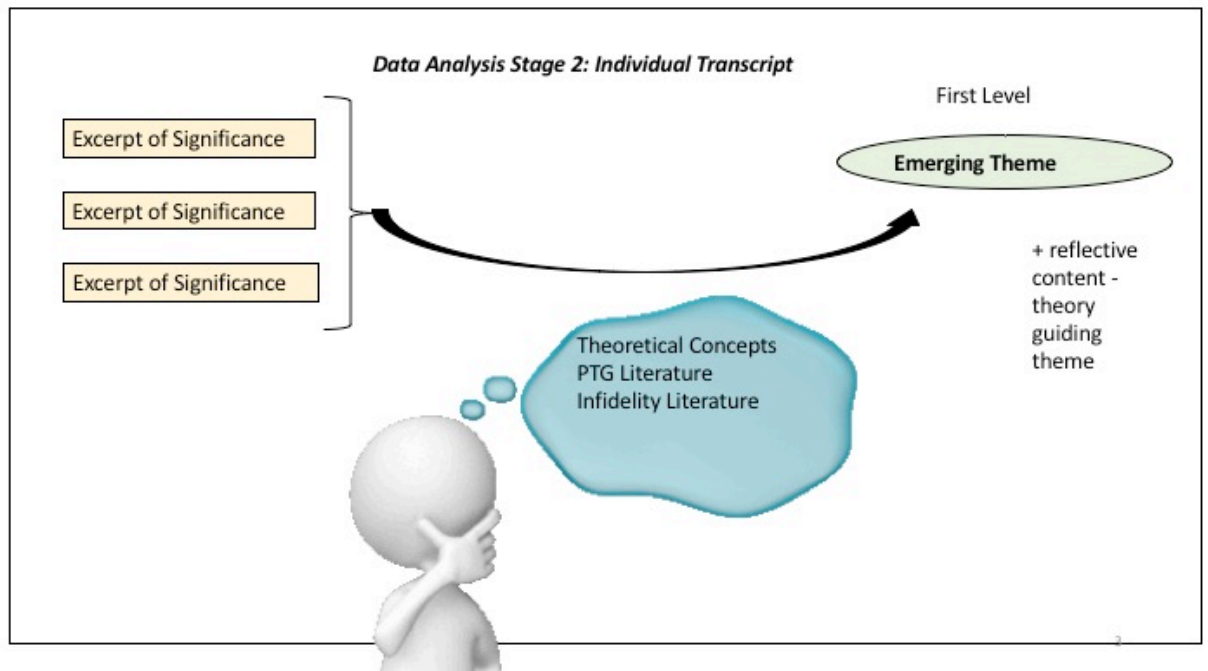


Data Analysis: Stage 2

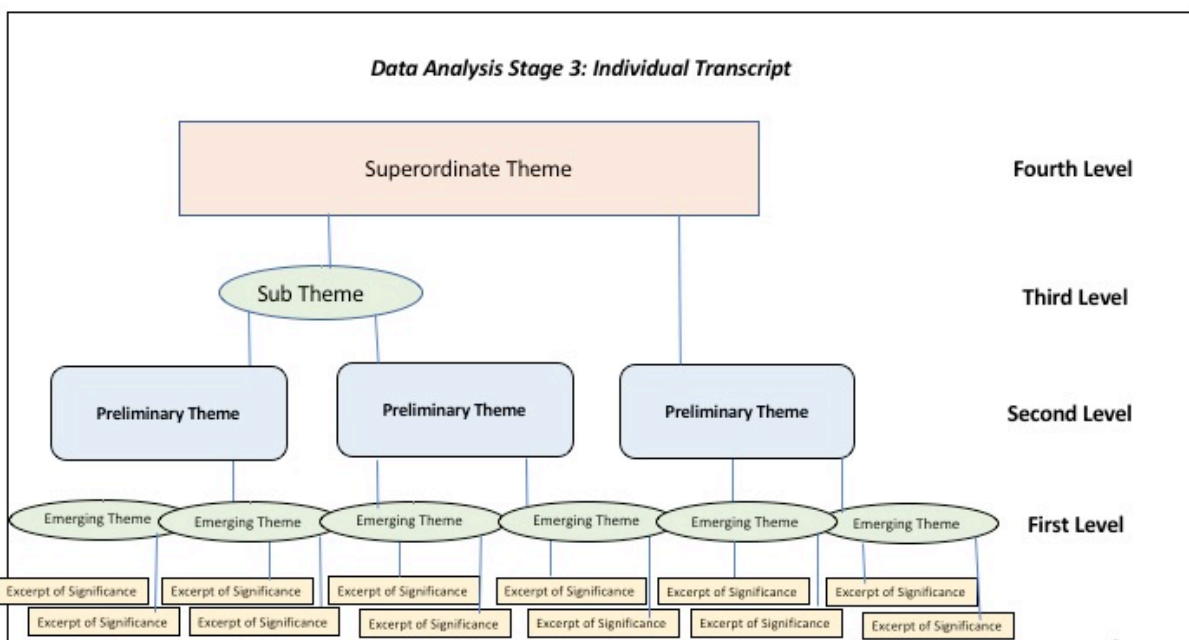
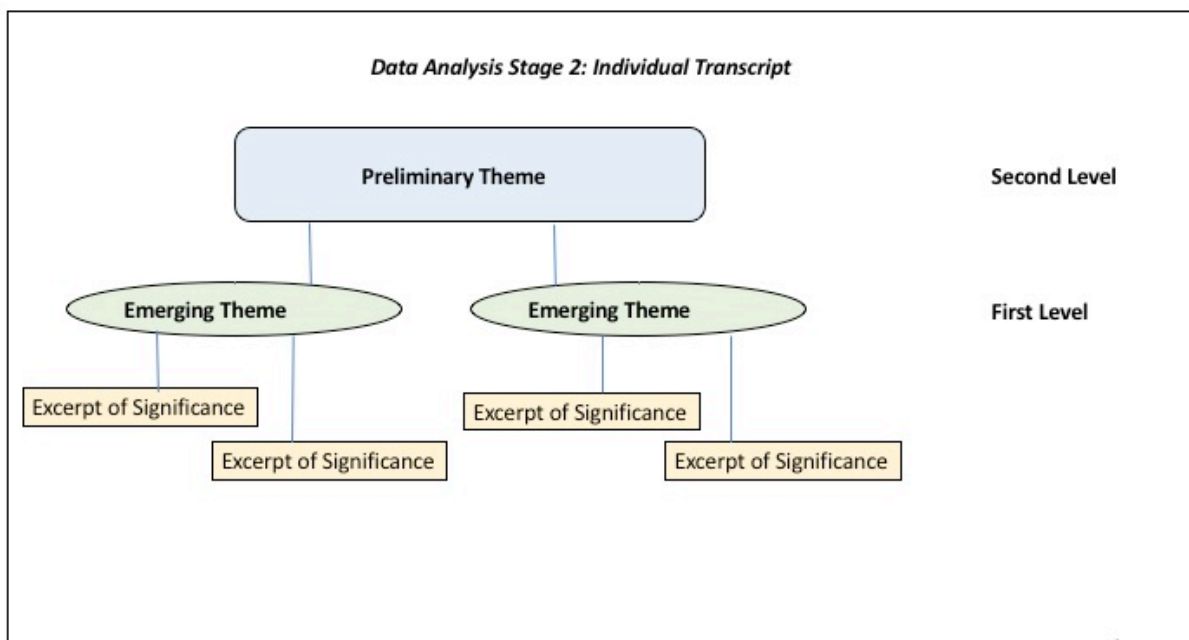


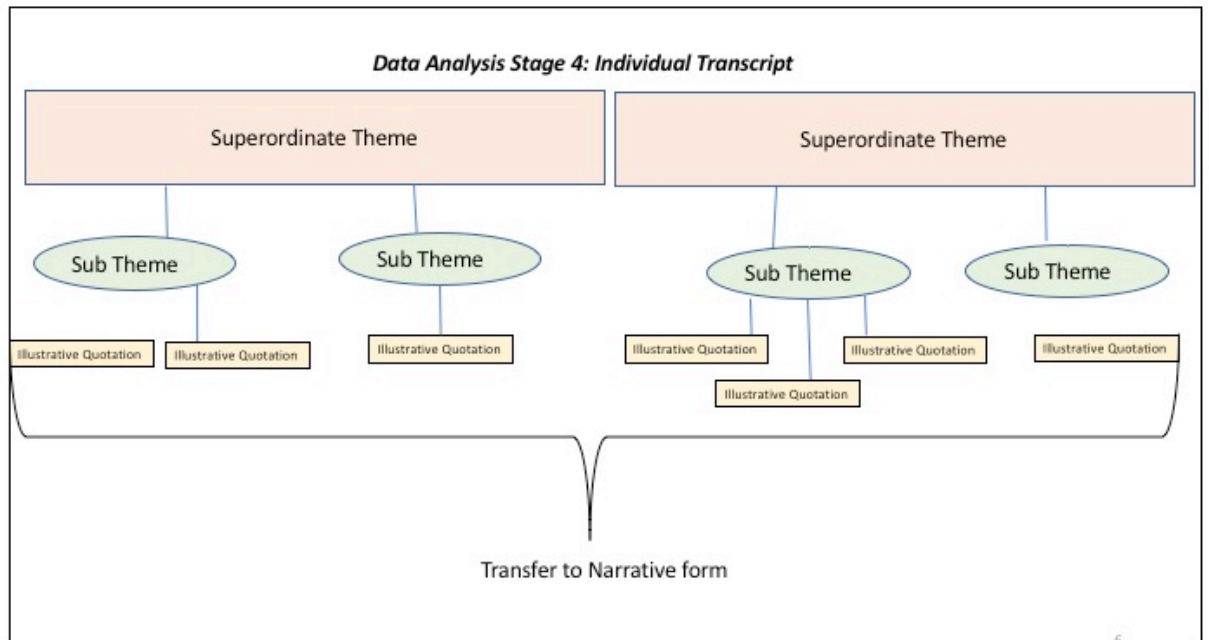
- Return to transcript
- Re-read notes and reflect on theory and literature to inform emergence of themes
- Identify emerging themes
- Write emerging themes (1st level) on right hand margin with ref to theory/literature driving theme
- Review emerging themes for patterns and begin to identify preliminary themes (2nd level)

2



3





Appendix I
Permission to Conduct Research Using
SurveyMonkey



SurveyMonkey Inc.
www.surveymonkey.com

For questions, visit our Help Center
help.surveymonkey.com

Re: Permission to Conduct Research Using SurveyMonkey

To whom it may concern:

This letter is being produced in response to a request by a student at your institution who wishes to conduct a survey using SurveyMonkey in order to support their research. The student has indicated that they require a letter from SurveyMonkey granting them permission to do this. Please accept this letter as evidence of such permission. Students are permitted to conduct research via the SurveyMonkey platform provided that they abide by our Terms of Use, a copy of which is available on our website.

SurveyMonkey is a self-serve survey platform on which our users can, by themselves, create, deploy and analyze surveys through an online interface. We have users in many different industries who use surveys for many different purposes. One of our most common use cases is students and other types of researchers using our online tools to conduct academic research.

If you have any questions about this letter, please contact us through our Help Center at help.surveymonkey.com.

Sincerely,

SurveyMonkey Inc.

