

Factors that Rebuild Relationships after Infidelity

Name: Iona Abrahamson

B.A. (Psychology), Griffith University, Gold Coast, QLD

Master of Counselling, University of New England,
Armidale, N.S.W.

Degree: Master of Counselling (Hons), University of New England

A thesis submitted for the Master of Counselling Honours degree of the
University of New England, School of Health

Date: April, 2007

Abstract:

While the frequency and causes of extramarital affairs have been explored in the past, there are few qualitative studies that have explored the factors that keep couples together after an extramarital affair and how these relationships have been rebuilt. There is no published qualitative study from Australia in this regard. The primary purpose of the present study was to explore the experience of Australian couples affected by infidelity, including factors that helped participants in rebuilding their relationship and their perceptions of social support. The research employed narrative inquiry with qualitative in-depth interviews using a purposive sample of seven informants. The participants were defined as those aged 18 or over, who had experienced extramarital infidelity (either party) and had remained as a couple for at least two years after the discovery of infidelity. The key findings from this study revealed motivational factors such as the investment of children, property and time as well as a desire to solve problems were instrumental in couples resolving their problems. Helpful strategies in rebuilding the relationships were making meaning of the affair and breaking the cultural barriers. It was found that reconciliation occurred through forgiveness, counselling and the rebuilding of trust. Added to these strategies were acts of kindness and vicarious learning. Modification occurred through personal growth and a change in the power dynamic in the relationship. The results of this study provide insights both for couples as well as professionals such as counsellors and psychologists in understanding what factors may assist in rebuilding a relationship after infidelity and what is involved in facilitating recovery. Implications of the current study for further research are also highlighted.

Candidate's Certification

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and the sources used, have been acknowledged in the thesis.

Signed:

A solid black rectangular box redacting the signature of the candidate.

Iona Lorne Abrahamson

April 2007

Acknowledgements

There are a number of people whose contribution needs to be acknowledged. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the contribution of the study informants, without whom this thesis would not have been possible. I would like to thank each of them for sharing their unique experiences.

Secondly I would like to thank my supervisors for their invaluable advice, and on-going support and encouragement that enabled me to successfully complete this thesis. Initially my primary supervisor was Professor Margot Schofield, who was supportive and encouraging of my ideas. My secondary supervisor, Associate Professor Rafat Hussain, who eventually became my primary supervisor, has helped me to question and develop thoughts and ideas throughout this journey. Thanks are also due to another supervisor, Dr. Adeel Khan, who assisted me in refining my thesis. I should also mention here some of my work colleagues who were interested in and challenged by my research topic. We had some rigorous discussions about the topic and associated issues, which were insightful and helpful in developing my ideas for this thesis. My appreciation goes to you all.

My heartfelt thanks to my husband, Walter, who encouraged me to keep going when it was difficult to proceed. During the writing of this thesis, he was diagnosed with Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma, which necessitated him undergoing chemotherapy and eventually a bone-marrow transplant. He is now in

remission. I thank you for your love, courage and endurance, which also inspired me to keep on writing this thesis.

To the rest of my family and friends, I thank you for your words of encouragement and support. At times I was not able to share time as much as I would have liked to but I am grateful for your patience and kindness. I also would like to acknowledge the influence of my grandparents, especially my grandfather, and my parents who encouraged me to not only learn, but to also love learning. I am grateful that my thirst for knowledge was supported.

Finally, to my children, Deborah, David, Andrew and Adele you have been an inspiration to me. Our journey together has been richly rewarding and I thank you for your support and graciousness to me. As for all my grandchildren, Jessica, Sarah, Joshua, Jesse, Holly, Toby, Jacob, Hannah, Rebekah, Abbey, Laura and the new one soon to be born, it is time for you to have more moments with me. Thank you for your love, patience and kindness as I struggled and juggled all my other commitments.

Table of Contents

Title page	1
Abstract	2
Candidate's certification	3
Acknowledgements	4
Table of contents	6
Chapter 1: Introduction	11
1.1 Background and Significance	12
1.2 Organisation of thesis	13
Chapter 2: Literature Review	16
2.1 Introduction	16
2.2 Literature search	18
2.3 A brief history of infidelity	19
2.4 A contemporary view of infidelity	23
2.5 How common is infidelity?	25
2.6 Who is most likely to experience infidelity?	27
2.7 Discovery of infidelity	34
2.8 Impact of infidelity	35

2.9	Recovery from infidelity	41
2.9.1	Motivation	41
2.9.2	Healing the hurt	42
2.9.3	Forgiveness	43
2.9.4	Counselling	45
2.10	Conclusion	51
Chapter 3: Research Methodology		52
3.1	Purpose of the study	52
3.2	Rationale for qualitative approach	53
3.3	Sampling	55
3.4	Recruiting informants	56
3.5	Data collection	57
3.6	Data Analysis	60
3.7	Ethics approval	64
3.8	The researcher's role	64
3.9	Limitations and strengths	65
3.10	Conclusion	69
Chapter 4: Narratives		70
4.1	Anton	71
4.1.1	Family portrait	71
4.1.2	Events preceding affair	72
4.1.3	Discovery of affair	72
4.1.4	Effects of affair	73

4.1.5	Factors that restored relationship	74
4.2	Bella	75
4.2.1	Family portrait	75
4.2.2	Events preceding affair	76
4.2.3	Discovery of affair	76
4.2.4	Effects of affair	77
4.2.5	Factors that restored relationship	78
4.3	Cheryl	80
4.3.1	Family portrait	81
4.3.2	Events preceding affair	82
4.3.3	Discovery of affair	82
4.3.4	Effects of affair	84
4.3.5	Factors that restored relationship	85
4.4	Darren	87
4.4.1	Family portrait	87
4.4.2	Events preceding affair	88
4.4.3	Discovery of affair	89
4.4.4	Effects of affair	90
4.4.5	Factors that restored relationship	90
4.5	Errol	92
4.5.1	Family portrait	92
4.5.2	Events preceding affair	93
4.5.3	Discovery of affair	94
4.5.4	Effects of affair	94
4.5.5	Factors that restored relationship	95

4.6	Felicity	96
4.6.1	Family portrait	97
4.6.2	Events preceding affair	97
4.6.3	Discovery of affair	97
4.6.4	Effects of affair	98
4.6.5	Factors that restored relationship	98
4.7	Gary	100
4.7.1	Family portrait	100
4.7.2	Events preceding affair	101
4.7.3	Discovery of affair	101
4.7.4	Effects of affair	102
4.7.5	Factors that restored relationship	102
4.8	Conclusion	104
Chapter 5: Results of Analysis		105
5.1	Motivation	106
5.2	Meaning	109
5.2.1	Understanding the reason for infidelity	110
5.2.2	Willingness to break cultural barriers	112
5.3	Reconciliation	114
5.4	Modification	121
5.5	Conclusion	126
Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusion		128
6.1	Key findings in relation to research on infidelity	130

6.1.1	Understanding reasons for infidelity	130
6.1.2	Disclosure and reaction to infidelity	132
6.1.3	Rebuilding relationships	135
6.2	Strengths and limitations of this study	138
6.2.1	Strengths	138
6.2.2	Limitations	139
6.3	Key issues to professional practice and future research	142
6.3.1	Implications for professional knowledge	143
6.3.2	Implications for professional practice	144
6.3.3	Implications for future research	146
6.4	Conclusion	149
	References	151
	Appendices	173