

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

Thomas S. Cooke for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Counseling presented on March 11 2021.

Title: A Qualitative Metasynthesis of Male Client Experiences of Counseling and A Netnography of Men Seeking Support Through an Online Discussion Forum for Victims of Infidelity

Abstract approved:

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The purpose of this dissertation was to contribute to deeper understanding of how men experience support seeking. The first manuscript is located in chapter 2 and titled *A Qualitative Metasynthesis of Male Client Experiences of Counseling*. This metasynthesis integrates sixteen pieces of qualitative research which contain first-person accounts of male clients' experiences with counseling. This study combined queer theory and constructivist theory, utilizing constant targeted comparison to produce three key themes: (a) recognizing, (b) risking, and (c) recalibrating. The second manuscript is located in chapter 3 and titled *A Netnography of Men Seeking Support Through an Online Forum for Victims of Infidelity*. This study explores the way in which men seek support using initial posts, with particular attention to heteronormative structures. This study utilized thematic analysis to produce five key themes: (a) connecting with social supports (b) expressing emotions (c) requesting direction (d) seeking evaluation and (e) disclosing vulnerability. Implications for practice, training, research as well as limitations and areas for future research are explored for each manuscript. The two manuscripts are unified by their common focus on illuminating male client worldview to promote multicultural competency.

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A Qualitative Metasynthesis of Male Client Experiences of Counseling  
and  
A Netnography of Men Seeking Support Through an Online Discussion Forum for  
Victims of Infidelity

by  
Thomas S. Cooke

A DISSERTATION

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Doctor of Philosophy dissertation of Thomas S. Cooke presented on March 11, 2021

APPROVED:

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I understand that my dissertation will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my dissertation to any reader upon request.

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Thomas S. Cooke, Author

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## **Chapter 1: General Introduction**

The American Counseling Association (ACA) defines counseling as “a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, career, and education goals” (Kaplan, Tarvydas, & Gladding, 2014, p. 368). Within the field, specialty providers may focus on addiction, trauma, LGBTQIA, military, relationship, and/or vocational experiences, to name a few examples. On average, those who participate in counseling as clients report positive outcomes (Seligman, 1995; Smith, Glass, & Miller, 1980; Wampold & Imel, 2015).

The practice of counseling has changed dramatically over the past half century. This evolution has included transitions from psychodynamic, to behavioral, to humanistic paradigms. More recently, multiculturalism has been identified as the fourth force in counseling (Pederson, 2000). Emerging as a response to scientific racism and institutional oppression, multiculturalism validates the existence of diverse human identities and acknowledges that harm is done when one identity is privileged over another.

As the above-quoted definition of counseling suggests, focusing on counseling clients’ diversity, or the unique intersections of their various identities, is now an ethical imperative (ACA, 2014). While the benefit of adopting a multicultural lens is widely accepted within helping professions, it has not always been. Historical examples of oppression include mislabeling black students based upon IQ testing (Comas-Diaz, 2009), stigmatization of same sex attraction (Byne, 2014), and the application of western counseling interventions to clients from collectivistic cultures (Sue & Sue, 2015).

In response to these injustices, advocates have encouraged the development of multicultural competency for counselors. This paradigm shift has involved the recruitment of minority individuals into the profession (Comas-Diaz, 2009), an examination of existing biased practice (APA, 1975), and developing a robust theory of multicultural competency (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). Multicultural competency is now defined as obtaining self-awareness, understanding client worldview, attending to the dynamics of privilege, and offering culturally appropriate interventions and advocacy (Ratts et al., 2015).

A significant piece of advancing counselors' cultural competency involves becoming aware of privilege. This includes exploring the experience of victims of social injustice and confronting oppression. For counselors who typically possess certain forms of agency, learning about this in contrast to their own privilege (McIntosh, 1988; Rothenberg, 2016) can be painful and powerful (Adams, Blumenfeld, Hackman, Peters, & Zuniga, 2013).

In addition to increasing self-awareness, counselors increase multicultural competency by gaining knowledge about the experience of specific target populations. For example, the American Psychological Association (APA) has published guidelines for effective practice with female, transgender, disabled, older adult, and male clients. Similarly, the ACA has also formalized competencies unique to clients with LGBTQIA, transgender, multiracial, and religious/spiritual identities.

Among many identities impacted by oppressive systems, gender stands prominently. The evolution of a multicultural perspective in counseling is closely connected to the feminist movement of the 1960's. Emerging alongside civil rights

activism in the United States, feminist advocacy began to critique the normative expectations of the female gender role (de Beauvoir, 1949; Freidan, 1963). While feminist activists championed equity in relation to birth control, divorce, and employment opportunities, advocates for female counseling clients challenged sex-bias in diagnosis and treatment (APA, 1975; Miller, 1976). As a result of this important work, clinicians were educated to validate the impact of female socialization (e.g. being taught to value relationships over independence), rather than viewing such a presentation as an essentialized and negative trait.

The shift to consider the developmental impacts of gender is crucial to the story of counseling. Interestingly, however, the notion of studying gender is usually shorthand for engaging in women's studies (Addis, 2008; Bowman & King, 2003). While most university settings have departments exploring the female gender experience, a much lower number have any type of courses devoted specifically to understanding the gendered experiences of boys and men (O'Neil & Renzulli, 2013).

Despite their group status as privileged, many men describe, experience, or behave in ways that demonstrate they do not feel empowered. For example, men complete suicide four times more frequently than women (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). Epidemiological studies also consistently display that men meet criteria for substance use disorders, a common coping behavior to deal with painful emotions (Woodford, 2012), at a rate of two to three times that of women (Kessler et al., 1995, 2005; SAMHSA, 2012). Looking through a medical lens, when men more rigidly adopt traditional masculine ideals, their physical health worsens (Courtenay, 2010).

Although men have a clear need for supportive mental health services, in general, they underutilize counseling services (Good & Wood, 1995; Vogel & Heath, 2016). Englar-Carlson (2014) suggests male socialization restricts participation in activities that may highlight vulnerability, such as counseling. Others cite evidence that some counselors may be lacking competency to effectively support male clients (Owen, Wong, & Rodolfa, 2009). Counselor bias has been detected in establishing therapeutic alliances with male clients (Vogel, Epting, & Wester, 2003), believing that men are hypoemotional (i.e. have reduced emotional experiences) (Heesacker et al., 1999), and stigmatizing men who deviate from gender role expectations (Levant & Silverstein, 2005).

The idea of considering men as a unique multicultural population of counseling clients is not new. Since Scher's (1979) call for attention to the uniqueness of the male client, researchers and clinicians have begun a slow, yet steady, discussion to promote the development of male client competency in counseling. Several handbooks have acted as a foundational direction for clinicians. Additionally, the founding of Division 51 of the American Psychological Association and its accompanying journal, *The Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, have produced an increase in research and practice-oriented publications, with a recent focus on the diverse experiences of boys and men.

Although the conversation about competency has begun, in many ways it is in its infancy and suffers from growing pains. For example, leading researchers in the field have voiced concern that much of the research and theory concerning men overemphasizes pathology (Englar-Carlson & Kiselica, 2013; Heesacker & Snowden, 2013), and that little is known about positive experiences of counseling for men (O'Neil, 2014). Additionally, the methods utilized to research boys and men, which have tended

to be quantitative, frame masculinity or male experiences as essential and static (Whorley & Addis, 2006). The notion that masculinity exists as a trait, conflicts with most of the contemporary and accepted theoretical discussion about gender as a socially constructed concept.

In addition to research which characterizes men as reluctant to seek support (Addis & Mahalik, 2003), it is also the case that only a few studies explore the experience of men who do seek help (Bedi & Richards, 2011). Until recently, researchers have limited studies of men who seek help to considerations of formal mental health structures (e.g. counseling). This approach ignores findings that suggests men do seek help and prefer receiving support from informal sources, such as accessing online support (Gough, 2016). Although rare, the study of online support groups has illuminated some of the ways in which men benefit from support when dealing with issues such as depression (Gough) and anxiety (Drioli-Phillips, Oxlad, LeCouteur, Feo, & Scholz, 2021).

A final concern in the research of men is that many experiences are under reported. Since men are mostly rewarded for displaying toughness and and hiding weakness (Brannon & David, 1976), it is not surprising that men would conceal instances of injury. Additionally, when normative research suggests that men are a certain way, exceptions to these experiences can be overlooked. For example, as research explores the experience of infidelity in heterosexual couples, quantitative surveys suggest that men are predominantly the unfaithful partner (Blow, 2005; Fincham, 2017). As a result, when men are injured by a female partner's infidelity, their experience goes against the norm. In an attempt to avoid the stigma of being viewed as odd or deficient in some way, this experience may be hidden.

Deconstructing the damaging impact of male socialization and illuminating the hidden experiences of men who seek support is important. Such under-represented narratives have the potential to help not just men who suffer, but those who are harmed, victimized, and/or oppressed by male acting out. Said differently, offering an antidote to ‘toxic masculinity’ is possible on a micro-level through competent counseling of male clients.

The following research studies are relevant to clinicians, supervisors, and educators as counseling continues to work to increase the profession’s ability to serve male clients.

### **Organizational Structure of this Dissertation**

The organization of this dissertation follows the Manuscript Document Dissertation format. Chapter 1 serves as introduction to the central topics that form the foundation of this dissertation, including the profession of counseling’s priority of multicultural competence, the unique mental health needs of men, the need for counselors to possess competency to work with male clients, and the influence of gender on the counseling process. Additionally, Chapter 1 outlines the theoretical orientation of this dissertation, as well as plans for venues of publication. Chapter 2 (Manuscript 1) is a metasynthesis of current qualitative research on male clients’ experiences of counseling. Chapter 3 (Manuscript 2) reports results from a netnography that explored how male clients seek support online as they experience the infidelity of their female partner. Chapter 4, a conclusion to the dissertation, follows the two manuscripts.

## **Queer Theory**

As noted above, it is necessary for research on men to evolve beyond the deficit-model which perpetuates static and deficit model-based notions of the male gender. In pursuit of such a process, this research will employ queer theory (Jagose, 1996; Plummer 2011), which is a critical approach that attempts to debunk normative, fixed, and binary conceptions of gender, sexuality, and identity.

Queer theory allows for this research to actively expose and productively trouble cultural meanings that are taken for granted, such as the claim of a normative, single, and dominant form of masculinity. Through this research, male subjects will be appreciated as nuanced, multifaceted, and perpetually becoming, (Brown & Nash, 2010) as opposed to essentialized and static.

Additionally, these studies will look beyond centering only the most frequent experiences. Instead, they will explore the informative and influential aspects of unique outliers. Apart from being exceptions, these queer male presentations will be validated for their resilience in resisting. In celebrating diverse masculinities, a queer lens will help illuminate the tension between heteronormative and exceptional expressions of masculinity.

## **Manuscript 1 Overview: A Qualitative Metasynthesis of Male Client Experiences of Counseling**

The first manuscript, Chapter 2, is a systematic review of the recent qualitative research concerning male counseling clients. While some studies representing the first-hand perspective of male clients in counseling have been published independently, no publications exist to connect these unique efforts. Qualitative metasynthesis was utilized as a rigorous method to organize the independent research, offering characterization and



evaluation of the studies, as well as synthesis of material to suggest higher level schema. The metasynthesis includes 16 studies conducted between 2014 and 2019 which include first-hand accounts of how males experience counseling. The research question for this metasynthesis is: “How do men describe their first-person experiences of counseling?”

The characterization of studies provides an overall picture of qualitative research concerning male client perspectives. This consists of clarifying the purpose of the study, identifying the professional paradigm, describing the demographic characteristics and presenting problems of participants; identifying the research method; and noting the location (i.e. country) of the study. The evaluation of studies explores the integrity of the research within these qualitative publications. Kline’s (2008) model of coherence between research purpose and methodology; as well as Hoyt & Bhati’s (2007) suggestions to rate the researcher’s focus on data collection, use of settings, acknowledgement of researcher bias, and effectiveness in presenting results provide the structure for this critique.

In addition to these descriptions, synthesis of these studies was conducted to suggest higher-level schema. I utilized Sandelowski & Barroso’s (2007) framework of constant targeted comparison to suggest three larger themes: 1) recognizing, 2) risking, and 3) recalibrating. Within the recognizing theme exist categories of normalizing, attaching, and wanting more. Contained within the risking theme were categories of disclosing/not disclosing, experiencing nonjudgement, and setting the agenda. Within the theme of recalibrating were categories of understanding the structure and process of therapy, learning new skills, receiving confrontation, and gaining self-awareness.

## **Manuscript 2 Overview: A Netnography of Men Seeking Support Through an Online Discussion Forum for Victims of Infidelity**

The second manuscript, Chapter 3, is an ethnography of an online support forum, or a netnography, which describes how men seek support after experiencing the infidelity of a female partner. While some studies exist which explore how men experience the imagined scenario of discovering they have been cheated on, no peer-reviewed literature has been published concerning the lived, real-world experience of male victims of infidelity.

Netnography is utilized as an emerging and effective research method to study the experiences of men. This method consists of immersion within an online community and presentation of the manifold truths of the culture participants (Kozinets, 2010). For this study, the researcher entered a popular, open-access forum devoted to supporting members who have experienced the infidelity of a partner within a committed, long term relationship. Bypassing the interview process, this unobtrusive research seeks to access the raw and disinhibited experience of men who experience the challenge of a partner's infidelity and reach out for support.

The researcher began with the research question "How do men seek online support using initial forum posts when experiencing the infidelity of a female partner?" Through transcription, micro and macro levels of coding, constant comparison of data, memoing, and peer debriefing, a description was constructed. Men seek support through an online forum by rebuilding social supports, practicing expression of emotions, consulting for direction, requesting feedback, and asking for witness to vulnerability.

This support seeking includes various methods of enacting normative and exceptional forms of masculinity.

### **Publication Venues**

*The Psychology of Men & Masculinity* (PMM) is a probable venue for submission and publication for both manuscripts. PMM is a publication of the American Psychological Association's Division 51, the Society for the Psychological Study of Men and Masculinity. Among other missions, PMM describes a commitment to disseminating research from applied specialties, such as counseling, which explore the gendered experience of boys and men, and how socialization impacts interventions. PMM states a commitment to including diverse methodologies such as qualitative research.

### **Thematic Relevance**

The concept of multicultural competency, specifically competency to counseling male clients, links the two manuscripts. Manuscript 1 provides a synthesis of male client perspectives of counseling, in accordance with the mandate to more fully understand the diverse client's worldview. Manuscript 2 provides a first-person, naturalistic setting-based perspective of men who have been injured by infidelity and who are reaching out for support. By directly exploring the experiences of these two populations, counselors can better understand the complex experiences of men who are utilizing support services. These portrayals reach beyond normative notions of men as resistant to receiving help or ignorant of their affective experiences. As counselors and researchers gain a more genuine understanding of the depth of the male emotional experience, men's human desire for empathic connection, and the ability of men to grow and develop, they will be influential in making counseling more effective for male clients.

## Chapter 2

A Qualitative Metasynthesis of Male Client Perspectives of Counseling

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### Abstract

Research on the male client experience in counseling is a growing topic. In response to overreliance on quantitative and deficit models research, qualitative studies are emerging to more accurately depict men's perspectives. While some individual qualitative studies exist, no research has integrated these separate accounts. This qualitative metasynthesis synthesized 16 studies which contain first-person accounts of men who had participated in counseling. Analysis of the studies produced descriptions of three key themes: 1) recognizing, 2) risking, and 3) recalibrating. The discussion of this synthesis contains implications for practice, counselor education, and research.

*Keywords:* men, counseling, qualitative, metasynthesis, multicultural competency

As the profession of counseling renews its commitment to serve all (Ratts et al., 2015), the experience of male clients holds significant relevance. Although men, as a group, hold social, economic, and political privilege (Phillips & Phillips, 2009), not all individual men inhabit positions of power. For example, men represent a majority for those who are homeless (Henry, Shivji, de Sousa, & Cohen, 2015), incarcerated (Minton & Zeng, 2016), and victims of homicide (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2016). Additionally, men experience medical distress uniquely and disproportionately. Comparable to women, men have higher occurrences of chronic illness (Courtney, 2011) and, on average, die at an earlier age (Vos et al., 2015).

Regarding mental health, men are characterized as having unique symptoms. For example, boys and men are more often diagnosed with externalizing disorders such as ADHD, conduct, and anti-social personality disorders (Ali, Caplan, & Fagnant, 2010). Additionally, men meet criteria for substance use disorders at a rate of two to three times that of women (SAMHSA, 2014). Although men are found to be at risk for mental disorders at a rate equal to women (Kessler et al., 1995; 2005), they are half as likely to be diagnosed as suffering from depression (Lewinsohn, Rohde, Seely, & Baldwin, 2001). This discrepancy is further complicated by the staggering and consistent finding that men complete suicide, three to four times more frequently than women (American Foundation of Suicide Prevention, 2015; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017).

### **Studying the Male Experience**

Suggesting that men deserve unique attention as a group of counseling clients is contentious. Men, specifically white, middle class, heterosexual men, have historically held privilege in formal helping profession associations (Robinson & Morris, 2000),

constructed early theories of human development (Albee, 1994), and served as the research subjects to confirm these ideas (Coon & Mitterer, 2012). Conventional wisdom suggests that a continued centering of the male experience reduces resources for marginalized and oppressed populations, such as women (Smith, 2013).

It is true that men have never been neglected as research subjects in psychology. How they have been conceptualized, however, is problematic. Terman and Miles's (1936) *Sex and Personality* offers an example. This landmark publication presented a measure of personality based upon the opposing poles of masculine and feminine traits. In addition to pathologizing the female experience, this research launched a barrage of studies exploring the many ways that boys and men either met, or failed to meet, a set of prescriptive norms. By these new standards, successful development for men included endorsing high displays of aggression and dominance and low experiences of fear and sympathy (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1976). This new paradigm posited that problems emerged for men only when they failed to attain these notions of masculinity. Examples of pathologizing labels for men included those described as a weak, a passive father, or gay. Connell (1993) described the phenomenon of one version of maleness being given privilege over others as hegemonic masculinity.

The first challenges to hegemonic masculinity occurred in the 1970's, courtesy of 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminism which raised consciousness about the social construction of gender. The hallmark of this era consists of the idea that the male gender role is both learned and problematic. Brannon and David's (1976) description of the blueprint for masculinity is an often-cited example of what men are taught. According to this framework, men are conditioned to be competitive/successful, avoid femininity, to be tough, and to take risks



or be aggressive in support of such achievement. During this period, traditional notions of manhood were removed from a pedestal (Doherty, 1991), with suggestions that allegiance to these norms was hazardous (Goldberg, 1976) and resulted in a dark side of behavior (Brooks & Silverstein, 1995).

During this phase of addressing the male gender role, researchers and theorists posited that attempts to adhere to the male blueprint resulted in men becoming disconnected from themselves. For example, Levant (2001) suggests that through interpersonal punishments such as shame, boys are taught to suppress displays of emotion and eventually to dissociate from certain painful emotions, resulting in what he terms normative male alexithymia. Two of the most pervasive ideas were the related constructs of gender role strain (Pleck, 1995) and gender role conflict (O'Neil, 1982). Although unique in their perspective, these constructs share the suggestion that men and those around them, are damaged by attempts to live up to the hegemonic norms.

More recently, the study of male gender is looking beyond a singular experience of boys and men, to explore the nuances of men with diverse identities. Instead of studying the impact of one blueprint, researchers are looking at masculinities (Connell, 2005), or the idea that there are many contextually appropriate ways of being a man. This attention to the many identities, or intersectionality, of boys and men highlights the importance of understanding how males experience both privilege and oppression (Wong, Liu, & Klann, 2017). For example, while one individual who identifies as male may experience employment or personal safety benefits due to his gender status, his additional identity as a sexual minority may also place himself at risk for workplace discrimination or hate crime violence in the community.

## **Men and Counseling**

Normative research suggests that men are less likely to seek out formal psychological than females (Addis & Mahalik, 2003, Heath et al., 2017). This finding is frequently explained in relation to the impact of gender socialization. The common theory suggesting that boys and men will experience the interpersonal dependence characteristic of a counseling relationship as a threat to identity (Englar-Carlson, 2014). Counselors seem to corroborate this as they find male clients less emotionally expressive (Scher, 1990), asking fewer questions about the process (Courtenay, 2000), ultimately attending fewer sessions (Owen, Thomas, & Rodolfa, 2013).

In their research of psychotherapy outcomes, Owen, Wong, & Rodolfa (2009) suggest that counselors either possess or lack gender competency, and that specific counselors may be poor providers for men. One possibility is that that clinicians may be unfamiliar with the male gender role socialization process (Mellinger & Liu, 2006). As the composition of the counseling profession has shifted to include 70% identifying as female clinicians (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011), fewer professionals have first-hand experience of the damaging impact of the male socialization process.

Although under-studied, clinician biases also exist and are believed to sometimes manifest as generalizations about men based upon a counselor's personal history of negative experiences (Englar-Carlson, 2014). Others may view men in absolute terms, believing them to be a perpetrator group (Walker, 2001). Gender stereotyping has also been observed by counselors, such as a belief that men are more difficult to bond with (Vogel, Epting, & Wester, 2003) or that men are hypo-emotional (Heesacker et al., 1999). Studies have also shown that clinicians will rate a male client's functioning as

lower if they deviate from gender role expectations, such as being unemployed (Levant & Silverstein, 2005; Mintz & O'Neil, 1990; Wisch & Mahalik, 1999).

Existing research which explores how men view counseling is currently limited. For example, Reed (2014) conducted a qualitative study to explore the intersection of young men's views on masculinity and perspectives of counseling. Based upon interviews, these young subjects endorsed traditional views of masculinity such as being emotionally reserved and feeling expectations from society to be angry and sexually motivated. Not all of the participants had actual experiences with counseling, and so the perspectives included speculation of what they imagined it to be like. The study suggests that these young men felt counseling could be helpful, although only if issues were unable to be dealt with independently.

Bedi and Richards (2011) conducted studies to look at incidents that were helpful and harmful (Richards & Bedi, 2015) to alliance formation. The authors report that men highly value counselors who are able to effectively bring out the issues, and that men experience damage to the alliance when they experience a poor fit between what they are requesting and what a counselor is providing. Interestingly, this study utilized a quantitative analysis of agreement with an item pool that had been originally generated by female participants (Bedi, 2006).

### **The Study of Men and Mental Health is Problematic**

Although the fields of counseling and psychology display a fresh commitment to understanding the male experience of gender (Englar-Carlson, Evans, & Duffey, 2014; Wong & Wester, 2015), in some ways the trajectory of this specialization is problematic. For example, until recently most studies published in *The Psychology of Men &*

*Masculinity*, have been quantitative and specifically correlational (Wong & Horn, 2016). Based upon this methodology, masculinity and/or male gender role norms are portrayed as static or essential traits (Whorley & Addis, 2006). As a result, although ostensibly attempting to comprehend how men can be supported to develop, researchers and clinicians may be reinforcing negative beliefs about the ability of men to grow and evolve.

Additionally, within publications that directly address the topic of how clinicians can develop male client competency, the dominant perspective is usually authored by the clinicians themselves (Englar-Carlson, Evans, & Duffey, 2014; Good & Brooks, 2005). Although experts in the field have valuable viewpoints to share, it is also the case that clinicians can be poor reporters, for example, when describing the quality of therapeutic alliance (Bachelor & Horvath, 1999). One example is a qualitative dissertation which interviewed clinicians identified as experts in working with men (Dvorscek, 2011). During the process of member checking (i.e. reviewing interim findings with research participants to ensure trustworthiness) the one expert participant who did provide a response to the interview content suggested that many of the other experts were perhaps stuck in an “old paradigm” (p. 192) and utilizing stereotypes. It is noteworthy that several of the other experts in this study were authors of textbook chapters that inform male-client competency.

Research and training related to male gender issues has shown researchers and clinicians to hold a deficit model of masculinity (Heesacker & Snowden, 2013). The tendency for research to focus on the “dark side” of the male gendered experience (Levant, 1996) is easily observed. One of the most obvious demonstrations of a deficit

model approach is the widespread use of psychometric measurement tools based upon negative qualities to classify boys and men. The Male Role Norms Inventory (MRNI; Levant, Hall, & Rankin, 2013) is a frequently utilized measurement tool in correlational studies of men. The MRNI is composed of a seven-structure factor, with specific labels of Avoidance of Femininity, Negativity toward Sexual Minorities, Self-reliance through Mechanical Skills (formerly Self-reliance), Toughness (formerly Aggression), Dominance, Importance of Sex (formerly Non-relational Attitudes toward Sexuality), and Restrictive Emotionality. When studies are performed with tools that suggest normal attitudes for men are destructive, researchers start their work facing a specific direction.

### **Qualitative Research is Well-positioned to Study the Gendered Experience of Male Clients**

Wong and Horn (2016) promote qualitative research as an ideal pathway to counter the disproportionate use of correlational studies within the study of men. Due to the complex, socially constructed, political, and intersectional nature of gender across cultures, it is important to begin to utilize research methods that represent the individual experiences of men (O'Neil, 2015).

Currently, the use of qualitative research is on the rise in the study of the psychology of men and masculinity (Wong & Horn, 2015). Within mainstream journals that publish articles considering men as clients, a number of recent studies explore the first-hand experience of men engaged in counseling. These studies focus on diverse populations, consider male clients in both voluntary and mandated counseling scenarios, and use various qualitative research methods.

While the field of counseling has recently benefited from the meta-examination of research methodologies (Wong & Horn), journal content (Evans, 2013) and interventions

(Strokoof, Halford, & Owen) specific to men's issues, no study has synthesized the various qualitative studies dealing with male client experience. As a result, individual qualitative studies concerning the male client experience exist as "little islands of knowledge" (Glaser & Strauss, 1971, p. 181), lacking a connection between studies.

The method of qualitative metasynthesis offers an effective next step in the interpretation and utilization of existing yet independent studies of the male client perspective of counseling. Emerging from the efforts to integrate unique ethnographic accounts in the field of education (Noblit & Hare, 1988), qualitative metasynthesis was developed to systematically examine findings from individual qualitative research (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). This type of metasynthesis not only includes summarization and characterization of studies connected to a specific issue, it also provides a "third level" (Nye, Melendez-Torres & Bonell, 2016, p. 57) interpretation of the existing studies to advance knowledge and theory.

Within the field of men's psychology, metasynthesis is already emerging as an important way to make sense of the growing body of qualitative research. For example, *The Psychology of Men & Masculinity* published a qualitative metasyntheses to conceptualize the findings of studies dealing with symptoms of depression in men (Spendelow, 2015). By uniting the qualitative studies of the male client experience of counseling and providing a synthesis, metasynthesis will provide a valuable assessment of client worldview to advance the multicultural competency of working with male clients. This study begins with the research question: "How do men describe their first-person experiences of participating in counseling?"

## **Method**

### **Theoretical Lens**

Due to concerns that research about men in counseling may unintentionally perpetuate gender role stereotypes, a research paradigm was selected to intentionally challenge the status quo. Queer theory (Jagose, 1996) is a critical approach that attempts to debunk prevailing conceptions of gender and sexuality. As a lens, queer theory generally eschews surveys and static measures. Instead, it allows for subjects to be appreciated as perpetually becoming and evolving (Brown & Nash, 2010). In this way, queer theory is well situated as a theory to capture the process that men experience as they develop in counseling.

Queer theory takes ownership of the existence of a research agenda. Instead of suggesting that coding exists without bias, I am taking ownership of searching for and giving voice to exceptions to singular, hegemonic, and privileged forms of masculinity. Additionally, I will look beyond centering only the most common experiences. Instead, I will explore the adaptive and influential aspects of exceptional forms of masculinity.

### **Search Strategy**

The validity of a qualitative metasynthesis is dependent upon a comprehensive search of research reports utilizing clear parameters for the domains of time frame, topic, population, and methodology (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). All articles were searched for during September 2019. Initial article searching occurred through use of the peer-reviewed databases PsychInfo and EBSCO, using all possible combinations of the keywords: *Men, Man, Male AND Counseling, Therapy, Psychotherapy*. These terms

were also used in *Google Scholar* to identify reports or resources that might not be captured within traditional journal databases.

A final technique of performing a journal run (Sadelowski & Barroso), including comprehensive searching of specific journals based upon criteria identified by Addis & Whorley (2005) who identify journals that regularly published on the topic of the psychology of men, was conducted. Publications included in the journal run were *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, *Journal of Counseling & Development*, *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, and *Sex Roles*. Having obtained a core set of reports, footnote chasing and citation searching (Sadelowski & Barroso), the processes of exploring other studies used as references and referenced by the known reports, was utilized to search for otherwise uncaptured, or fugitive, literature.

### **Criteria for Inclusion and Exclusion**

Sixteen research reports appearing in peer-reviewed journals were selected for analysis. Initially several hundred reports with a qualitative methodology met database search criteria. Of this number, a more in-depth review of abstracts and methods sections revealed that less than 50 of these articles were relevant.

Reports that included only the perspective of counselors and therapists, perspectives of men discussing an imagined counseling experience, and those that had qualitative descriptions of client progress but lacked client perspectives about counseling were excluded. Non-peer reviewed dissertations, articles that were theoretical, and quantitative research studies were also excluded.



In accordance with an inclusive research lens, reports utilizing all types (e.g. voluntary, mandated) and quantity of participants were considered. The final timeline chosen for this metasynthesis includes the years 2014-2019. This timeframe is deemed appropriate to allow for a manageable and inclusive study of all identified studies within the period.

### **Researcher Disclosure**

Consideration of the “researcher as instrument” (Morrow, 2005, p. 259) is a characteristic of trustworthy qualitative research. Specific to gender-related research, reflexivity concerning the intersection of multiple identities, such as class, ethnicity, sexuality, life event position, is also essential (Ward, 2016).

As an individual, I identify as male and have participated in counseling in the past. I oftentimes describe myself as recovering from “bro-culture,” and am aware that male gender role socialization has been a significant, and frequently damaging (e.g. to relationships), influence. While I attempt to act against many of the early messages I received related to gender, I also frequently feel the not-so-subtle pull to “be tough.” I am aware that my gender, race (i.e. White), socio-economic status (i.e. upper middle class), and sexuality (i.e. passing as heterosexual) position me with significant privilege in society. I am a father to female identified daughters and married to a female identified partner. In too many ways my heart breaks as I learn of how they experience gender oppression. As a contrast, I am moved to tears with joy as I see my family members proudly resist such forces.

As a graduate student and professional, I am aware of my gender as oftentimes positioning me as a minority status (e.g. being surrounded by mostly female counselors).

As a rare opportunity, this has fueled my interest in exploring my gender and how others perceive it (e.g. the impact my male gender may have on clients). As a novice professional, I have been aware of feeling incompetent in my work with male clients, and as a developing counselor I often sense trepidation from male clients in the early stages of their work with me. My belief is that males are often shamed from an early age for expressing vulnerability, and that this can be a procedural memory which poses a challenge in counseling. In addition to the challenges that my gender as a counselor may provide, I also tend to believe that many clients seek me out as a therapeutic support because of my gender (e.g. as a model of how a male can function with full emotional experiences, despite having been traditionally socialized).

My identity as a counselor also informs this research. With good intentions, I am hopeful that my tendency to focus on a wellness model, to eschew the role of the expert, and to promote social justice/advocacy work are felt as threads throughout this research project. Although I have attempted to enter into this research with limited expectations about outcome, I am impacted by my experience with the literature concerning counselor's male client competency. I am aware of my own critical agenda including a hope to counter conventional wisdom that male clients are deficient in their emotional capacities, require a remedial approach, or can be categorized in a monolithic manner.

## Methodological Characterization of Qualitative Studies on Male Client Perspective of Counseling

Table 1

### *Characteristics of Qualitative Studies*

Author	Purpose of Study	Professional Paradigm/ Setting	Demographics	Presenting Problem	Research Method	Country
Al-Roubaiby, Owen-Pugh & Wheeler (2017)	Explore participants' experiences of psychotherapy	Individual psychotherapy	10 adult men; Iraqi exiles living in Sweden for between five-20 years; ages 21-51	Depression, anger, and/or PTSD	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis	Sweden
Bossio, Basson, Driscoll, Correia & Brotto (2018)	Determine if an empirically supported intervention for female sexual dysfunction is feasible for men with erectile dysfunction	Skills-based group therapy (i.e. mindfulness), sexual medicine	10 adults; ages 37-60; nine "opposite sex attraction," one "same sex attraction," seven Caucasian, one Asian, one mixed, one First Nations	Situational erectile dysfunction	Mixed method including "interviewing" which was presented as "themes" (mixed with quantitative method of <i>linear mixed effects</i> )	Canada
Chovanec (2014)	Understand the experience of men as they enter treatment for domestic abuse	Adult outpatient group, multiple month domestic abuse program	14 adult male group members (7 African American, 4 White, 2 mixed, 1 Asian), 8 facilitators (5 female, 3 male)	Domestic abuse	Content analysis	United States
Doherty, Conway, Clark & Merritt (2017)	Explore the impact of control on counselling experiences	Individual counselling	Seven young adults; ages 18-25	Unspecified	Narrative approach	Australia
Enosh & Buchbinder (2019)	Explore lived experience of men who participated in a batterers intervention program	Prison, social work	16 adult inmates; ages 32-55; nine Jews, six Muslims, one Druze	Interpersonal violence	Grounded Theory (Constructivist)	Israel
Franklin, Chen, N'cho, Capawana & Hoogasian (2015)	Explore how African American men engage in a therapeutic support group.	Outpatient group, independent practice	Five adult African American males	Support group	Consensual qualitative research	United States
Gold, Sutton & Ronel (2017)	Focus on the method of empowerment of group members	Outpatient, self-help group	Seven men: ages 28-54	Interpersonal Violence	Phenomenology	Israel

Holtrop, Parra-Cardona, Smith & Larance (2017)	Examine the perceptions and experiences of group participants that promote positive change	Outpatient, group, batterers intervention	15 men; nine White, four African American, 2 biracial; ages 23-57; 11 mandated and four voluntarily participating	Interpersonal Violence	Grounded Theory (post-positivist tradition)	United States
Kivari, Oliffe, Borgen & Westwood (2018)	Explore successful aspects of men's engagement in a military, therapeutic support program	Residential, military, group counseling	Seven Caucasian, adult men; six born in Canada, one born in Germany; ages 28-60	Military trauma and transition	Enhanced Critical Incident Technique	Canada
Kronner & Northcut (2015)	Explore how counselor disclosure affects therapy and therapeutic relationship	Outpatient, individual counseling	Eight gay clients, eight gay counselors	Gay clients with depressive or anxiety disorder diagnosis	Grounded Theory (although not explicitly identified)	United States
Provence, Rochlen, Chester & Smith (2014)	Formulate an understanding of gay men's relational experiences with straight men, including positive or negative outcomes of group participation	Outpatient, adult, group counseling with mixed gay and straight client attendance	12 gay men	Heterophobia	Consensual qualitative research	United States
Røberg, Nilsen & Røssberg (2018)	How clients experienced treatment, including expectations and explanations of why change occurred	Outpatient, stabilization group	5 males, ages 29-64, all identified as ethnic Norwegian	Complex PTSD including childhood sexual abuse	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis	Norway
Roy, Chateauvert, Drouin, & Richard (2014)	Look at meaning given by men to the concept of engaging in an Intimate Partner Violence group	Adult, outpatient, Intimate Partner Violence group	27 males from Quebec, average age of 37 years, varying beginner, regular, and drop-out status	Intimate partner violence	Generic qualitative/content analysis	Canada
Russell & Siesma (2017)	Explore the experiences of high risk (e.g. with BPD and ASPD diagnoses), forensic (i.e. with a history of violent offenses)	Outpatient, skills-based (i.e. DBT) group	Six men, mean age of 47 years with age range of 31-61 years old	Violent offenses	Thematic analysis	England

	population in a DBT group					
Seidler, Rice, Oliffe, Fogarty & Dhillon (2018)	Explore men's experiences in receiving treatment for depression	Outpatient, individual counseling	20 adult men; ages 23-64	Depression	Interpretive description	Australia
Spandler, Roy, & McKeown (2014)	Illustrate various ways in which a metaphor of football (i.e. American soccer) can facilitate psychosocial change	Adult, outpatient, male	38 male clients (majority were white and unemployed), 2 female clients although no data utilized, 6 group facilitators	Depression and anxiety, anger, low confidence and self-esteem, and problems with drug and alcohol use	Not indicated	England

Table 2

*Evaluation of Qualitative Studies*

Authors	Coherence	Research Focus	Setting	Researcher Role	Findings Presentation
Al-Roubaiy, Owen-Pugh & Wheeler (2017)	Moderate: Acknowledged rationale for purpose and methodology. Results presented in accordance.	Low: No description of interview process beyond description of using a "semi-structured interview."	Not stated	Low: No acknowledgment of researcher bias or attempts to minimize it apart from citing evidence of using lengthy direct quotes. No indication of auditors	High: over ten quotations, extended quotations, w/ identifiers
Bossio, Basson, Driscoll, Correia & Brotto (2018)	Low: No discussion of rationale for purpose or methodology	Low: No description of interview process.	Not stated	Low: No acknowledgment of researcher bias or attempts to minimize it apart from citing evidence of using lengthy direct quotes. No indication of auditors	High: over ten quotations, extended quotations, w/ identifiers
Chovanec (2014)	Moderate: Clear acknowledgement in relation to purpose and methodology. Results presented in accordance, although not clearly acknowledged.	Low: interviews were face-to-face and coders were provided with transcription; average time with participants and coder's access to participants is not indicated	Not indicated	Moderate: Identifies attempts to reduce researcher bias, used independent auditor, did not reflect on researchers possible biases or preconceptions	High: 5-9 quotes, extended quotations, identifiers are included
Doherty, Conway, Clark & Merritt (2017)	High: Clear acknowledgement in relation to purpose, methodology, and results.	Moderate: Author conducted the interview (not specified if face to face), interviews were 45-60 mins	Not specified	Moderate: Thorough description of researcher bias, no discussion of active attempts to reduce this, did not utilize auditors	High: over ten quotations, extended quotations, w/ identifiers

Enosh & Buchbinder (2019)	Moderate: Acknowledged rationale for purpose and methodology. Results presented in accordance.	Moderate: Authors conducted the interviews face to face, no length of interview was described	Natural	Low: No acknowledgment of researcher bias or attempts to minimize it apart from citing evidence of using lengthy direct quotes. No indication of auditors	High: over ten quotations, extended quotations, w/ identifiers
Franklin, Chen, N'cho, Capawana & Hoogasian (2015)	High: Clear acknowledgement in relation to purpose, methodology, and results.	Moderate: Coders viewed video of the group session, 90 minutes in length.	Natural	Moderate: independent auditors were used to increase rigor, researcher bias was not reflected upon, researcher does not explicitly express desire to minimize researcher bias	Moderate: over ten quotations, extended quotations, no identifiers
Gold, Sutton & Ronel (2017)	Moderate: Acknowledged rationale for purpose and methodology. Results presented in accordance.	Low: Coders did not conduct interviews, interviews were about 60 mins	Natural	Low: No acknowledgment of researcher bias or attempts to minimize it apart from citing evidence of using lengthy direct quotes. No indication of auditors	High: over ten quotations, extended quotations, w/ identifiers
Holtrop, Parra-Cardona, Smith & Larance (2017)	High: Clear acknowledgment in relation to purpose, methodology, and results (e.g. provided a visual representation)	Moderate: Study did not specify who conducted interviews or if they were face to face, interviews lasted approximately 40	Natural	Moderate: No acknowledgment of researcher bias, researchers collaborated to compare differing coding of same transcripts	High; Over ten quotations, extended quotations, w/ identifiers
Kivari, Oliffe, Borgen & Westwood (2018)	High: Clear acknowledgment in relation to purpose, methodology, and results	Moderate: No face to face contact between coders and participants, full interview length is not specified, coders had access to transcripts	Natural	Moderate: No discussion of researcher bias, attempts to reduce bias. Use of method expert was indicated as an independent check.	High; Over ten quotations, extended quotations, w/ identifiers
Kronner & Northcut (2015)	Moderate: Acknowledged rationale for purpose and methodology. Results presented in accordance, although not clearly acknowledged.	Low: No description of interview process.	Not indicated	Low: No indication of consideration of researcher bias	High: 5-9 quotations, extended quotations, w/ identifiers
Provence, Rochlen, Chester & Smith (2014)	High: Clear acknowledgement of rationale in relation to purpose, methodology, and results presentation.	Moderate: No indication of face-to-face contact with coders, transcripts provided for coding, no	Not indicated	High: Acknowledgment of researcher bias, desire to reduce bias, description of possible	High: More than 10 quotations, extended quotations, identifiers included

		indication of length of interview		bias, use of auditors to reduce bias	
Røberg, Nilsen & Røssberg (2018)	Moderate: Clear acknowledgment in relation to purpose and methodology. Results presented in accordance.	Low: written transcripts are provided to coders	Self-termed “natural setting” although not specified	Low: Brief mention of co-creation of meaning between participants and researchers, brief mention of possible researcher bias, no acknowledgment of auditors or attempts to reduce researcher bias	Medium: more than 10 quotations, use of extended quotations, not identified
Roy, Chateauvert, Drouin, & Richard (2014)	Low: research epistemology was not discussed overtly	High: Several face-to-face interactions including interviews, focus groups, and member checking	Not indicated	Low: Use of focus group and member checking, no identification of researcher bias, no reflection on possible bias	High: more than 10 quotations, extended quotations, with identifiers
Russell & Siesma (2017)	Moderate: Clear acknowledgement in relation to purpose and methodology. Results presented in accordance although not clearly acknowledged.	High: In some cases coder had been a facilitator for participant, face-to-face interviews, conducted by coders, lasting between 20-60 minutes	Natural	High: Clear acknowledgment of research bias, possible impact of bias, and attempts to reduce bias	High: More than 10 quotations, extended quotations, with identifiers
Seidler, Rice, Oliffe, Fogarty & Dhillon (2018)	High: Clear acknowledgement of rationale in relation to purpose, methodology, and results presentation.	Moderate: Some face to face (but mostly telephone) interviews by one author, interviews between 45 and 90 mins	Natural	Moderate: Brief mention of attempts to avoid “bias” through rigor, no mention specifically of researcher bias, use of research team to review coding done by primary author.	High: More than 10 quotations, extended quotations, with identifiers
Spandler, Roy, & McKeown (2014)	Low: research epistemology was no discussed	Moderate: Face-to-face interviews/focus groups	Not indicated	Low: no identification of researcher bias, no discussion of possible bias, no attempts to reduce bias	Moderate: More than 10 quotations, extended quotations, identified if client or facilitator but not individual identifiers

### Strategies for Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative studies refers both to the quality and rigor of the research process (Morrow, 2005). Often compared to research tactics employed to

increase validity in quantitative studies, trustworthiness in qualitative approaches is less formulaic and varies depending upon the research paradigm.

One aspect of trustworthiness is dependability, which is often compared to reliability in quantitative research. Within this qualitative metasynthesis, several strategies were employed to make the research process as clear and repeatable as possible. These include a full description of the search strategy, coding process, and displaying samples of the researchers memoing.

Specific to the aspects of this research which embrace a constructivist paradigm, or the belief that both study participants and the researcher construct meaning based upon their unique experiences, several strategies were employed. To buffer against the researcher using this study as a vehicle to promote his own pet theories, reflexivity and the subjective nature of inquiry are addressed. These include providing a clear researcher statement, ongoing journaling, peer debriefing, and negative case analysis.

Connected to the critical (e.g. queering) research lens that is being used, tactics used to increase trustworthiness include what Lather (1994) refers to as transgressive validity, or the degree to which the research will facilitate a more critical scientific conversation. In this instance, trustworthiness depends upon providing voice to those who may not normally be represented, uncovering the beneficiaries of the current status quo power structure, and identifying potential change making strategies.

### **Analysis**

In qualitative research, meaning is obtained through analysis, a process of organizing and transforming data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Constant targeted comparison was utilized (Sandelowski & Barasso, 2007) to examine, interpret, and



synthesize the results in order to expose commonalities and contrasts between the male client experiences of counseling.

Data were extracted from the results section of the included research reports. This included all information that followed the methods section and appeared prior to the discussion section of the research report (Thomas & Harden, 2008). All data were gathered from male clients who had participated in counseling. This resulted in approximately 62 pages of text (1-inch indent, single spaced, 12-point font) for analysis. The results of the research reports were coded line by line. Similar data were grouped together in categories, which were then assessed for inclusion under higher-level descriptive concepts or themes. The interaction of categories and themes was also considered.

## **Results**

Utilizing Sandelowski and Barroso's (2007) framework and the technique of constant targeted comparison of studies, three main themes emerged: (a) recognizing, (b) risking, and (c) recalibrating. Within the recognizing theme are categories of normalizing, defining, and wanting. Contained within the risking theme are categories of disclosing, steering, and enduring. Within the theme of recalibrating are categories of attaching, accepting, opening, learning, and contributing. Across all of the three larger themes, experiences are described in relation to dialectics of time, distance, and effort. In addition to the thematic commonalities between studies, trends in client and symptom representation are explored and several unique cases are examined for significance.

## Recognizing

As male clients described their experiences in counseling, many accounts centered on gaining awareness, or recognizing. Recognition, as its word-stem suggests, is a cognitive process. The following categories of normalizing, defining, and wanting exist as emerging thoughts.

**Normalizing.** One of the most frequent types of awareness described, found within eight of the 16 studies, was the experience of hearing that others had or were going through similar challenges. In their study of men participating in a Dialectical Behavior Therapy group, Russell & Siesma (2017) were told “Do you know what, I thought I was the only one that thinks that way, this man’s got exactly the same kind of feelings” (p. 53). Listening to the group therapy participants who had a history of childhood sexual abuse, Røberg Nilsen & Røssberg (2018) heard “I am not alone in it, somehow. It has helped. That you sit there with a group of people who have experienced the same as yourself” (p. 6). These two authors originally classified the previous two quotations under categories of “belonging” and “community,” suggesting that before the therapy process, male clients experience isolation and feel uniquely odd. This refrain was even heard within Kivari, Oliffe, Borgen, & Westwood’s (2018) study of military veterans, who ostensibly already possessed the shared military experience with their fellow clients:

The personal things they had to deal with. Not sleeping, the anger, the different things they described . . . over the last year or the last decades. How it’s changed their lives. The core issues are very similar. So right away that created for me an understanding, “Hey I get that,” “Fuck, I thought I was the only guy that would do that.” I’m an oddball in any group but I felt, “OK, I’m not an oddball in this group. (p. 245).

Kivara et al. simply, and powerfully, titled this subcategory “no longer alone.”

Normalizing also occurred within the individual counseling context, through the process of counselor disclosure when similar experiences, such as grief, were shared (Kronner & Northcut, 2015).

**Defining.** Nine of the studies contained descriptions of how the clearly defined nature of counseling, or lack thereof, significantly influenced the therapeutic outcome. For some the beneficial nature of “defining” counseling consisted of having difficult concepts explained in a straightforward way (Kivari et al., 2018), having a known and consistent structure for the sessions (Røberg, Nilsen & Røssberg, 2018), being encouraged to speak up when feeling skeptical, and overtly clarifying what the client wants to discuss in session (Seidler, Rice, Oliffe, Fogarty, & Dhillon, 2017).

For others, defining the process meant getting to “the heart of things” (Roy, Chateauvert, Drouin, & Richard, 2014, p. 429) and experiencing a “direct assault” (Holtrop et al., 2017, p. 1277), so that there was no ulterior motive that might be at play (Kivari et al.). Still another method of defining took place through formal procedures, such as ceremonies to provide validation (Provence, Rochlen, Chester, & Smith, 2014) or contracting with a signed document to facilitate commitment (Roy, Chateauvert, Drouin, & Richard).

Male clients were also aware of how counseling was structured and defined when these boundaries were adjusted or transgressed. For example, clients spoke about helpful interactions with fellow group members outside of the designated session (Gold, Sutton, & Ronel, 2017), receiving financial advocacy as a therapeutic intervention (Al-Roubaiy, Owen-Pugh, & Wheeler, 2017), and using the necessary time to complete a task with

integrity, even if it took longer than was scheduled (Kivari et al.). In these instances, boundary transgressions appeared helpful in signifying the unique importance of a client or pushing back against a one-size-fits all prescription.

**Wanting.** In five of the studies, male counseling clients also recognized their desire for more from the therapeutic experience, or “wanting.” This was noted in suggestions for more emotional processing in a mindfulness group for those with erectile dysfunction (Bossio, Basson, Driscoll, Correia, & Brotto; 2018), repeatedly asking for additional homework or techniques to practice for men who experience depression (Seidler, Rice, Oliffe, Fogarty, & Dhillon; 2018), and a desire for aftercare referrals following completion of a batterers group (Holtrop, Scott, Parra-Cardona, McNeil Smith, Schmitt, & Larance, 2017).

### **Risking**

Risk is defined as the possibility of loss or injury. The categories that compose the larger theme of risk have significant affective components, standing in contrast to the above cognitive aspects of the recognizing theme. For example, across the following categories, male clients acknowledge feelings of discomfort, anticipation of judgment, and distress of experiencing vulnerability.

**Disclosing.** Eight of these studies encountered risk in the form of male clients’ experience of disclosure. In Provence, Rochlen, Chester, & Smith’s (2014) study of gay men in mixed sexual orientation groups, many of the clients described a desire to practice disclosing their sexual orientation to others as a primary reason for participating in a therapeutic group. For some, the lower stakes of disclosing in a group, as opposed to with friends and family, was appealing. Some male clients anticipated responses such as

homophobia or judgment to their coming out to other members. Of note, researchers found, no instances of active negative responses. One group member was decidedly underwhelmed at the response to his disclosure, however, and felt a more active validation from the group would have been appropriate. In describing the response to his coming out, one participant noted “It was like, ‘Hey, my favorite color is blue.’ It was just like, ‘Oh yeah, I had Chinese for lunch today.’ ‘Oh, was it good?’ ‘Yeah.’ It was just a nonissue” (p. 432).

Other studies found that not disclosing impacted the counseling experience. In a group environment, a study participant in Kivari, Oliffe, Borgen, and Westwood’s (2018) veteran sample noted frustration when he felt others were not fully sharing. Within the same study, another participant described the least helpful time of the treatment to be the initial stages during which he felt he was wearing a “mask” (Kivari et al., p. 245). In an individual counseling setting, some Iraqi men who attended counseling in Sweden after their exile (Al-Roubaiy, Owen-Pugh, & Wheeler, 2017) viewed the stark contrast between their own identity and that of the counselor as a barrier that could not be overcome. For example, one client stated “Since she was Swedish I had to know what to avoid basically. I mean I could not really tell her everything I was thinking” (p. 467).

**Steering.** In 14 of the studies male clients experienced and mitigated risk through different forms of “steering.” Steering is an active process, and involves the use of a mechanism to direct a vehicle in a particular direction. For many, the mechanism which helped to steer was autonomy. For example, for some it was important to fully own the decision to attend (Doherty, Conway, Clark, & Merritt, 2017), to approve of the type of counseling that was being utilized (Seidler, Rice, Oliffe, Fogarty, & Dhillon, 2017), or to

have options within the specific approach (Roy, Chateauvert, Drouin, & Richard, 2014). A client in Doherty et al.'s study went as far as to identify that it was the specific crux moment of realizing it was up to him if he wished to return to counseling, when the process began to be helpful (i.e. "then it was good," p. 212). Others felt that they had already developed the motivation to change prior to engaging in counseling, that they were ready to "evolve" (Roy, Chateauvert, Drouin, & Richard, p. 429), finally ready to "get it over with" (Provence, Rochlen, Chester, & Smith, 2014, p. 432), or that the client was ready for any type of support and the therapist's role was to simply "just kinda listen" (Kronner & Northcut, 2015, p. 173) and not judge.

For those who strongly valued autonomy as a way to steer and manage risk, many male clients reported negative responses to therapists whom they experienced as overly directive. Doherty et al. quote a young male participant as saying "I needed personal space. . . topics would be confronting . . . I wanted to share in a way that wasn't so confronting and intimidating. . . I didn't want to be in an environment which intimidated me to speak" (p. 212). Others described their motivation as in a "starting" phase or that they were initially only participating as a legal requirement (Chovanec, 2014). In Holtrop et al.'s (2017) study of a diverse interpersonal violence intervention group, one client describes appreciating being pushed by the counselors, while others feel it is counterproductive. External motivation to steer counseling is also described by feeling accountable to other group members (Bossio, Basson, Driscoll, Correia, & Brotto, 2018; Spandler, Roy, & McKeown, 2014), wanting to disrupt an intergenerational cycle so the client's children will be healthier (Holtrop et al., 2017), and both positive and negative consequences observed in fellow group members (Holtrop et al.).

**Enduring.** Eight studies identified a final large subcategory within the theme of risk: “enduring.” While the previous category of steering involves experiences of feeling in (or out of) control of the counseling process, these experiences relate to moments in which clients have actively allowed themselves to be vulnerable. In Franklin et al.’s (2015) study of an African American men’s group, one participant speaks about the immediate experience of vulnerability for him as a man: “Even now, just, I feel uncomfortable letting this come up in front of y’all, regardless, even if I told myself that, you know, men do this, it’s a way of expressing yourself, whatever, even then I still feel uncomfortable” (p. 268). In Røberg, Nilsen, & Røssberg’s (2018) study of male survivors of childhood sexual abuse, a participant says it very directly, “It is all about trust. What you tell in the group stays in the group. You are not being judged by the others” (p. 4). While this was a smaller study of five participants, all five mentioned that safety and nonjudgment were essential.

In contrast to these positive outcomes, some clients reported negative results of being vulnerable. Several instances were reported by Iraqi men living in exile who attended counseling, such as microaggression involving the counselor repeatedly asking about the same identifying information, being lectured to as a political opponent, and feeling like the therapy itself was potentially harmful (Al-Roubaiy, Owen-Pugh, & Wheeler, 2017). Another example was described by a young male client who related that his brothers, upon finding out he was attending counseling, informed him he would be unable to find a good job if others knew about his use of mental health services (Doherty, Conway, Clark, & Merritt, 2017).

## **Recalibrating**

To recalibrate is to make adjustments to a tool or instrument in order to restore its accuracy. While the previous themes could be categorized as cognitive and affective, the process of recalibrating is consistently more behavioral and action-focused.

**Attaching.** In nine of the studies recalibrating took the form of developing significant interpersonal relationships, or “attaching.” Several clients within mandated groups that confronted behaviors of interpersonal violence referred to their fellow members as “friends” (Enosh & Buchbinder, 2019, p. 578; Gold, Sutton, & Ronel, 2017, p. 3183). These within group attachments were characterized by descriptions such as “we still loved him” (Kivari, Olifee, Borgen, & Wetswood, 2018, p. 244), “I actually care a great deal about the people here” (Franklin, Chen, N’cho, Capawana, & Hoogasian, 2015, p. 268), and “you feel like buddies in the group” (Røberg, Nilsen, & Røssberg’s, 2018, p. 7). Ways in which this attachment was experienced included depending upon others in the group (Russell & Siesmaa, 2017), knowing that others would help (Spandler, Roy, & McKeown, 2014), and learning from feedback (Enosh & Buchbinder, 2019). Not surprisingly, clients also made references to improvements in their relationships outside of the group such as experiencing a less reactive partner (Bossio, Basson, Driscoll, Correia, & Brotto, 2018), improvements in how they “relate to people” (Russell & Siesmaa, p. 53), and being able to look at confrontation as a potential learning process (Enosh & Buchbinder).

**Accepting.** A second way in which male clients describe their experience of recalibrating is through “accepting.” This description was found in four of the studies. A respondent from the interviews of men with erectile dysfunction participating in a



mindfulness group is a telling example. Although symptoms persisted, one male client's suffering, or resistance to the experience, decreased. He stated "I became more comfortable with having situational ED" (Bossio, Basson, Driscoll, Correia, & Brotto, 2018, p. 1485). In other studies, male clients reported that their tolerance for situations that would previously cause them to react with anger, such as their children's behavior (Chovanec, 2014) or conflict with a partner (Holtrop, Parra-Cardona, Smith, Schmittel, & Larance, 2017) were negotiated more effectively with acceptance. Circling back to the topic of self-concept, one male client who was a victim of childhood sexual assault noted increased self-understanding through accepting that it was "the things he...experienced," not him as a person, that were wrong (Røberg, Nilsen, & Røssberg, 2018, p. 6).

**Opening.** In 10 of the studies, male clients describe a recalibration involving "opening-up." As a contrast to this progress, several men note the energy devoted to the maintaining the established coping mechanism of being closed-off. For example "I spent a lot of time holding that stuff in," (Franklin, Chen, N'cho, Capawana, & Hoogasian, 2015, p. 268); "You keep things compressed in your guts" (Gold, Sutton, Ronel, 2017, p. 3182), "The hardest thing to do is to let it out," Holtrop et al., 2017, p. 1281). In relation to counselor competency, multiple clients viewed the facilitator as helpful when they knew "how to dig things outta you" and "get you to open up" (Holtrop et al., p. 1281). Another client complained that his therapist "wouldn't allow any of my personal opinions to come out" (Doherty, Conway, Clark, & Merritt, 2017, p. 212). Successful counseling experiences often included comments such as "I have to say it was finally nice to have some type of outlet," (Bossio, Basson, Driscoll, Correia, & Brotto, 2018, p. 1484); "You get into it, and you get in, and you share of yourself, and you give of yourself, and you

get everything out of yourself,” (Enosh & Buchbinder, 2019, p. 578-579); “I unfolded my arms and I began to open up,” (Roy, Châteauvert, Drouin, & Richard, 2014, p. 428).

**Learning.** In nine of the studies, male clients described the benefits of “learning.” For most who described this category, this included the implementation of more instrumental approaches to counseling. Specific to seeking support for depression (Seidler, Rice, Oliffe, Fogarty, & Dhillon, 2017), one client reported that having a therapist listen was “great,” but “it doesn’t really help you day to day, doesn’t help you change your lifestyle patterns” (p. 6). Some clients described learning as helpful through a theoretical perspective, such as gaining knowledge about the suggested mechanisms for how anxiety impacts situational erectile dysfunction (Bossio, Basson, Driscoll, Correia, & Brotto, 2018). Others noted that they benefitted from learning unique definitions, such as being taught about the amygdala (Røberg, Nilsen, & Røssberg, 2018), psychodynamic terminology (Chovanec, 2014), and the definition of abuse (Holtrop et al., 2017). A significant number of clients described the learning of certain skills, such as mindfulness meditation (Bossio, Basson, Driscoll, Correia, & Brotto), assertiveness (Provence, Rochlen, Chester, & Smith, 2014), and using a daily log (Chovanec, 2014). An additional population described practicing the skills in session with their counselor as helpful (Kronner & Northcut, 2015). Several clients made the distinction that other group members were more helpful than facilitators for their own learning process, due to the fellow clients’ relatability (Enosh & Buchbinder, 2019; Gold, Sutton, & Ronel, 2017).

**Contributing.** Within the recalibrating theme, a final category of “contributing” was described in four of the studies. One client noted that he could give back to others through teaching them how to respond to feedback (Enosh & Buchbinder, 2019). A few

participants viewed their “help” (Gold, Sutton, & Ronel, 2017, p. 3184) as essential, in that others success depended upon their commitment (Kivari, Oliffe, Borgen, & Westwood, 2018). Others felt a less specific responsibility, but noted that they considered genuine engagement to include giving energy to the group (Roy, Châteauevert, Drouin, & Richard, 2014).

### **Inter-thematic Dialectics**

Three unique dialectics centering on the topics of time, space, and effort emerged across the larger themes. As with dialectics, each topic can be thought of as a bipolar spectrum, with each extreme both appearing in contrast and being necessary or helpful to understanding the other.

**Dialectic of time.** In several studies clients discussed their process in terms of time. For most, counseling was a process that took place gradually, or in steps. In relation to recalibrating, one client noted that “It took me some time to recognize that this was my time” (Franklin, Chen, N’cho, Capawana, & Hoogasian, p. 269). Within the risking theme an example includes initially “wearing our masks” and not disclosing, but “eventually getting beyond that” to learn “about each other really intimately on the emotional level” (Kivari, Oliffe, Borgen, & Westwood, 2018, p. 245). In contrast, within the recalibration theme, some clients spoke about change that seemed to happen “suddenly” (Gold, Sutton, Ronel, 2017, p. 3183). The overwhelming majority of reports, however, tend to describe the change experienced in counseling as happening methodically, e.g. being noticeable “over the course of a year” (Holtrop et al., 2017, p. 1277).

**Space.** A second dialectic across themes was that of space. For some, increasing closeness to others, both physically and emotionally, was an essential part of the counseling process. The therapeutic use of touch (Provence, Rocheln, Chester, & Smith, 2014) and the trial-like nature of enduring direct confrontation within a group setting (Enosh & Buchbinder, 2019) are beneficial examples of closeness within the theme of recalibrating.

The majority of discussion about space, however, involved attempts to maintain or increase distance. Within the risking theme, clients spoke about needing personal space (Doherty, Conway, Clark, & Merritt, 2017), wanting to get away from thinking about certain topics (Franklin, Chen, N'cho, Capawana, & Hoogasian, 2015), and keeping one's distance during high conflict (Gold, Sutton, & Ronel, 2017). In several of the studies, in terms of recognizing their own patterns, this recognizing was often most effectively done through listening to the stories of others, versus looking directly at themselves (Chovanec, 2014; Enosh & Buchbinder, 2019). For one male client, the fear of closeness resembled a fear of dismemberment, that he would be “psychoanalytically picked apart” (Provence, Rocheln, Chester, & Smith, 2014, p. 432).

The use of language also demonstrated this desire for distance. Across studies clients frequently used second and third person pronouns, instead of first-person language which would have indicated ownership of the experience. For example, when discussing a category of admitting abusive behavior, one client switches between pronouns to distance himself from negative components, “the program, I mean it helps you to acknowledge your abusive actions and your tactics,” to then take ownership of the more

positive aspects of his process, “It’s made me notice where I’ve been accountable in my life” (Holtrop et al., 2017, p. 1281).

**Effort.** A third common dialectic was that of effort. In descriptions of counseling, male clients viewed the process as both a challenge and as something that could include comfort or ease. Oftentimes effort was viewed as an externally produced variable. One common example was being confronted by other clients within a group setting, which could range from being described moderately as a challenge (Holtrop et al., 2017) to more significantly causing and shame and humiliation (Enosh & Buchbinder, 2019). Examples of increased comfort attributed to external sources include being made to feel at ease by a therapist (Kronner & Northcut, 2015) and viewing a group counseling setting as a low stakes environment in which to practice new behaviors (Provence, Rochlen, Chester, & Smith, 2014).

While descriptions of comfort and ease do exist, the majority of reports from male clients frame their experiences as being a challenge. This discomfort of entering into the work of counseling was diversely noted to be similar to feeling “sick” (Enosh & Buchbinder, 2019, p. 579), to be “eerie” (Kronner & Northcut, 2015, p. 175), and “scary” (Røberg, Nilsen, & Røssberg 2018, p. 7).

### **Additional trends**

**Sample characteristics.** To continue synthesis of these qualitative studies, it is helpful to observe some of the additional characteristics of this research. In five of the studies, the largest trend for samples of the 16 articles that met criteria for inclusion, the male clients being represented are identified as perpetrators of interpersonal violence, and the counseling is presented as legally mandated. The experience of men as victims, in

this case specifically related to childhood sexual assault, is only explored in one study from Norway. Of the five studies conducted in the United States, two focus on the experience of gay men (one on a group experience), two on the group experiences of batterers, and one on the group experience of African American men. The lone study exploring the experience of male clients in receiving treatment for depression occurred in Australia.

### **Significant, Unique Experiences**

**Use of metaphor.** In addition to themes and categories that appeared frequently, unique and differing experiences are also essential pieces in understanding the male client experience. In relation to the process of counseling, in Spandler et al.'s (2014) study of using football as a metaphor, a client spoke about the helpful use of humor to balance the gravity of difficult topics. In total, references to the use of metaphor were found in seven of the studies. The metaphor of a guitar string being plucked or strung out was referenced in two separate studies (Enosh & Buchbinder, 2019, Franklin, Chen, N'cho, Capawana, & Hoogasian, 2015). Other metaphors used were a computer (Gold, Sutton, & Ronel, 2017), tornado (Holtrop et al., 2017), toolbox (Holtrop et al.), mask (Kivari, Oliffe, Borgen, & Westwood, 2018), and an ostrich (Roy, Châteauevert, Drouin, & Richard, 2014).

**Anger.** Anger was referenced in five of the studies. An Iraqi exile in Al-Robaiy's (2017) study speaks about a change in his experience of anger correlated to his counseling by saying "I suppose it was nice and helpful in that I'm not as angry as I was. I was angry almost the whole time" (p. 466). In Chovanec's (2014) study of batterers, although no major themes were identified as helpful topics introduced by facilitators,

three of the four program drop-outs referenced “teaching strategies to deal with anger” (p. 339) as what was helpful to them. In Seidler, Rice, Oliffe, Fogarty, & Dhillon’s (2017) study of men who experienced depression, one client notes that the opportunity to have “a good rant just made me angrier” (p. 6). In contrast, a client who is a veteran described how he was able to hear anger from another group member in response to his sharing an experience of low self-worth as an expression of support, resulting in the start of his own “self-compassion” (Kivari, Oliffe, Borgen, & Westwood, 2018).

**Gender.** The notion of gender explicitly emerged in six of the studies. Most frequently this involved the consideration of group composition and how therapy could be most effective. In Kivari, Oliffe, Borgen, & Westwood’s (2018) study of group counseling for veterans, one participant shared:

You place a female in that room and just the basic instinctive dynamics would change. [It] would have shut down aspects of what they had to say or how they felt about things. One of the big bonding things was, “Fuck I feel the same way. I’ve had the same experience.” And if I didn’t hear that out loud, which you wouldn’t have in front of a woman . . . I would not have connected with that person. If I’m not connecting with that person I’m not connecting with that group. (p. 245).

In Røberg et al.’s (2018) study, several participants agreed an all-male group was preferred, with some having experienced mixed sex groups in the past. One client states “... I think it is easier to open up when it is a men only group and stop to think: ‘What will she think about me when I say this?’” (p. 7). Within this particular group, 40% of the members had been sexually abused as a child by females, with some directly describing that it felt safer to be among men. Within the same study, one male client noted that he preferred an all-male group, speculating that in a mixed gender group he or others might defer to the emotional experience of females as experts.

In several studies, clients noted that they witnessed challenges to or saw opportunities to push back on traditional and toxic forms of masculinity. In Seidler, Rice, Oliffe, Fogarty, & Dhillon's (2017) study of clients who experienced depression "Pushing back against those dangerous stereotypical conceptions of masculinity was part of the solution as well" (p. 7). Within the mixed-sexual orientation group, one gay male client noted that he witnessed emotional intimacy between heterosexual men for the first time (Provence, Rocheln, Chester, & Smith, 2014). As a contrast, other clients spoke about employing masculine norms, such as being active in one's response, as strengths (Siedler et al., 2017). Considered together, gender seems to be a shifting variable which some male clients acknowledge as having shaped them in unhelpful ways, yet also in need of consideration and respect when treatment group composition is considered.

**Critical incidents.** Al-Roubaiy, Owen-Pugh, & Wheeler's (2017) study of Iraqi refugees offers an interesting look at the wide range of both positive and negative critical incidents in the treatment of men. Some clients reported benefitting from a cathartic release, feeling significant, and advocacy efforts. Other clients noted feeling unimportant or that their responses were ignored and forgotten (i.e. microaggressions), they were preached to as a political opponent (e.g. specific to the topic of women's rights), the process of counseling was not made transparent, the therapist was incompetent, and the profession of counseling is not useful. Although the exact ratio is unknown, based upon use of pronouns in the clients' statements it is known that at a minimum, five of the 10 clients had a female therapist and one client had a male therapist.

**Veterans.** As a stark contrast to the experience of Iraqi refugees, Kivari et al.'s study of the veteran transition program describes a therapeutic program which



researchers tout as extremely effective. In addition to boasting a zero percent attrition rate, this approach utilizes “soldiers helping soldiers,” is a 10-day inpatient commitment, was experienced as transparent in process, seen as fully effective due to the single sex composition of clients, and has a large group therapy component. In looking at potential crucial contrasts, it seems as if this study included clients and counselors that had much more in common in terms of their identities and cultural experiences.

### **Discussion**

This metasynthesis of qualitative studies of the male client experience of counseling represents a unique perspective in counseling research. Male clients describe three themes of recognizing, risking, and recalibrating.

Within the theme of recognizing, men described moving from isolation to connection, as they realized their experiences were shared. Based upon the sample within this metasynthesis, such normalization is most likely to happen in a group setting. This is consistent with Shepherd and Rabinowitz’s (2013) suggestion that men’s groups are an effective antidote to shame.

Related to risking, despite the heteronormative perspective that most men prefer to remain distant from emotional pain (Wexler, 2009) or that they may avoid counseling due to fears of vulnerability which is associated with femininity (Englar-Carlson, 2014), many male clients identified the importance of having at least one space (i.e. counseling) to be vulnerable. This, coupled with the findings that these men had previously chronically closed off their emotional experience, suggests that men are not hiding from their experience, but rather hiding it from others.

Based upon normative, and sometime stereotypical research about male client competency, men are said to desire an active or instrumental approach. Based upon this research, several male clients did, in fact, endorse the importance of being taught skills that they could implement. This fits with previous literature which suggests men might benefit from concrete approaches (Lee, Blando, Mizelle, & Orozco, 2007), not as a set treatment plan for all men, however, but as part of a flexible spectrum of approaches.

The notion that men may be more comfortable when they are able to contribute within the larger helping process (Addis & Mahalik, 2003) was observed in these studies. This fits with ideas of generativity based upon positive psychology/positive masculinity approach (Kiselica & Englar-Carlson, 2010).

This research also identified the topic of gender dynamic between counselor and client as significant. The male client and male counselor dynamic has historically been viewed with caution, as competition (Scher, 2005) or collusion may inhibit the therapeutic process (Brooks, 2010). These first-person perspectives, however, suggest that having an all-male therapeutic experience can be viewed as a necessary component to facilitate being able to share genuinely.

### **Limitations**

Based upon the specific nature of these accounts, these findings are not generalizable, or transferable, outside of the populations that have been studied. While the strength of qualitative studies lies in the thick description of a smaller number of sample subjects, and this research focuses on common themes and categories, the findings discussed are indeed unique to the specific context of the study participants.

In considering men as clients, it is interesting that there was no representation of male substance abuse clients. Men are diagnosed twice as frequently as women with substance abuse, yet not studied as a specific diagnosis within these studies. I hypothesize that studies of men who struggle with substance abuse may not yet utilize a gender specific lens in their research, and therefore have fallen outside of the current study's search criteria.

### **Recommendations for Policy, Practice, and Future Research**

Several recommendations are made based upon this research. In relation to policy, based upon the powerful experience of normalization, it is imperative to continue the distribution of public information concerning the prevalence of mental health issues for men. As men are made aware of the common occurrence of mental health issues and the modalities of treatment, they will be able to engage in appropriate services and connect with others, potentially normalizing their otherwise shameful experiences.

Related to the practice of counseling, this research underscores the importance of providing user-friendly informed consent and engaging in role induction. Because counseling can be a unique experience for men, male clients will benefit from a structuring of the process and a priming of "how things work."

It is also important for clinicians to keep in mind that, just as the therapists in these studies were unaware of men's constantly assessing for safety, their male clients may be hypervigilant and/or not feeling safe to disclose information. While this male perspective of risk may be foreign, it is potentially present and worthy of the counselor's curiosity.

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## Chapter 3

A Netnography of Men Seeking Support Through an Online Discussion Forum for  
Victims of Infidelity

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### Abstract

This article presents the results of a netnography that describes how men who have discovered the infidelity of a female partner seek support through initial online posts. The study fills a gap in the literature regarding the experience of men as victims of infidelity. Posts were sampled from a widely used online discussion forum and analyzed with specific attention to the influence of heteronormativity. The findings describe five themes: 1) connecting with social supports 2) expressing emotions 3) requesting direction 4) seeking evaluation and 5) disclosing vulnerability. The discussion presents implication for practice, counselor education, and research.

*Keywords:* men, infidelity, netnography, help seeking, qualitative research

Infidelity is common. Aggregate data suggests that 20-40% of marriages will experience affairs (Blow & Hartnett, 2005). When non-married couples and secretive emotional relationships are included, this number increases dramatically, up to 70% in some populations (Birnbaum et al., 2019). Media and tabloid headlines suggest that as a culture, the United States is fascinated with infidelity, a phenomenon that has been observed in every known culture (Betzig, 1989). At the least, all relationships are impacted by the potential of infidelity.

### **Infidelity is a Significant Issue for Counselors**

Research suggests that 50% of those who present for couples counseling self-report infidelity as a primary concern (Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997). Additionally, marriage counselors describe infidelity, alongside physical violence, as one of the most challenging issues to treat (Whisman et. al., 1997). Many clinicians express countertransference reactions to infidelity, both of disapproval and endorsement (Baines, 2006).

General public sentiment suggests that the majority of people disapprove of infidelity, and a significant number consider it unforgiveable (Negash, Cui, Fincham, & Pasley, 2014). Religious beliefs are often connected to a strong, moral stance on prohibiting adultery, both in the flesh and in the mind. As such, it is necessary for counselors to have competence in effectively supporting clients who are experiencing the complexities of infidelity.

### **Competency to Treating Those Dealing with Infidelity**

One aspect of competence in counseling includes specific and accurate knowledge of the worldview of the population that is being served (Ratts, et. al., 2015). In support of

this approach, research on infidelity contains a number of studies that attempt to describe the populations perpetrating infidelity. For example, responses to quantitative measures indicate that those most likely to participate in extra-dyadic affairs live in larger cities, do not attend church, are either cohabitating or dating, and are male (Blow & Harnett, 2005). ‘Involved’ partners are variously connected to specific personality traits (Brewer, Hunt, James, & Abell, 2015) and attachment styles (Cohen, 2005). Research suggests they describe their primary relationships as either lacking (Atkins, Baucom, & Jacobson, 2001) or generally healthy (Wiggins & Lederer, 1984).

Counselor competency is also informed by research and theory which addresses the consequences of infidelity. The bulk of studies indicate that the discovery of infidelity results in negative experiences for the injured partner. This may include symptoms of anxiety, depression, and PTSD (Cano & O’Leary, 2000; Fincham & May, 2017). An emerging body of research counters this as the dominant narrative, however, and suggests that many couples will grow following the confrontation of infidelity (Heintzelman, Murdock, Krycak, & Seay, 2014; Laaser, Putney, Bundick, Delmonico, & Griffin, 2017). An even more radical voice exists from the practitioner perspective which suggests that affairs, or the threat of an affair, can be a supportive variable to maintaining eroticism in the primary relationship (Perel, 2007).

Competency to treat infidelity includes having specific intervention skills to support those dealing with the challenge. Researchers and clinicians agree that the complexity of infidelity requires a basic map, for both clients and counselor, to assist in navigating (Dupree, White, Olsen, & Lafleur, 2007). Evidence-based couples treatments, such as Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy and Integrated Behavioral

Couple Therapy, are frequently presented as potentially helpful for couples dealing with infidelity, although there is not a body of evidence to suggest they are effective specific to this context. Gordan, Baucom, and Snyder (2004) offer an intervention specifically designed to promote recovery from affairs. Common elements of treating infidelity across intervention models are creating a trusting environment to allow exploration of meaning, highlighting relational patterns of interaction, addressing attachment injury, attending to disclosure and confidentiality, and anticipating relapse (Dupree, et al., 2007).

### **Emerging Trends in Infidelity and the Closing of the Gender Gap**

Competency also includes maintaining current knowledge of changes in a field. An emerging trend in infidelity studies is the closing of the gender gap (Havlicek, Husarova, Rezacova, & Klapilova, 2011; Martins et al., 2016; O'Sullivan, & Ronis, 2013). Historically, men have been found to promote acceptance of and participation in infidelity more than women. Many have argued that this is a biologically influenced issue, with potential evolutionary benefits for men having as many partners as possible (Buss, 1994). On the flip side of this argument, the dominant evolutionary strategy for women has been described as focus on a single partner with ample resources. What then to make of studies that suggest that over the last 20 years women are reporting a 40% increase in infidelity, while men hold steady (Smith, Marsden, Hout, & Kim, 2012)? In some cases, the prevalence between genders is found to be equal to (Adamopoulou, 2013; Mark, Janssen, & Milhausen, 2011) or even higher for women than for men (Brand, Markey, Mills, & Hodges, 2007).

Some suggest that the actual behavior may not be changing at all; i.e. women have always participated in extradyadic affairs, but that they have not historically

disclosed infidelity for fear of consequences related to violating social norms (Allen & Atkins, 2005). Other researchers propose that as female presence in the work force increases, providing opportunities of mobility and interaction with potential partners, women may also feel more empowered to behave in a manner that has traditionally been considered masculine (Fincham & May, 2017). Whatever the reason, the reality of emerging research is that more women are reporting being the involved partner.

The flip side to this phenomenon is the potentially increasingly common experience of the male injured partner. Unlike perspectives that suggest increases in infidelity as an empowerment for women (Perel, 2017), there is no current body of research focusing on the impact of this phenomenon on the men who are made aware of infidelity. Following the ideas about potential consequences of infidelity, however, it is logical to assume that these men may have an experience ranging from negative mental health symptoms to viewing the event as an opportunity to grow in the relationship.

### **Current Research on Men Who Are Injured by a Female Partner's Infidelity**

The current, peer-reviewed research that specifically considers the first-person account of injured male partners is marginal. One explanation for this lack of information is that men who have been cheated on are very reluctant to discuss this topic, especially in a formal research environment. As a result, a typical research study addressing how men experience infidelity would ask participants to imagine a particular scenario and then to rate discomfort (Buunk, & Dijkstra, 2004). Although this is admirable as an attempt to work with limited resources, research with female injured partners has shown that imagined responses do not correlate with the actual, real world experience of discovering a partner's infidelity (Harris, 2003).

Research on the response to imagined infidelity consistently focuses on either confirming or failing to confirm that men are more distressed by physical, rather than emotional, infidelities of their partner (Tagler, 2010). In some articles this phenomenon is described as men being ‘better able to separate sex from love.’ Despite the perseverance of researchers in their hopefulness of connecting current behavior to evolutionary influences, a meta-analysis of 54 studies that explored physical and emotional variables of imaginary experiences of discovering infidelity found that social constructs, e.g. how individuals learned their gender roles, were the primary influence when sex differences were observed (Carpenter, 2012).

The general tone of research on men who have been injured by infidelity is negative. Men are consistently compared to women, with men described as tending to experience anger and a propensity to violence (e.g. toward their partner’s affair partner) (Shackelford, LeBlanc, & Drass, 2000), while women will experience sadness and enlist the help of friends (Miller & Maner, 2008). Additionally, men are described as more likely to end the relationship when they are injured through infidelity (Shackelford, Bass, & Bennet, 2002). Research concerned with the outcomes of infidelity, however, suggests that not all infidelity scenarios end with dissolution of the relationship.

### **Qualitative Research is Well-positioned to Study the Gendered Experience of Men Injured by Infidelity**

For counselors to fully understand the emerging trend of men as partners who can be injured by infidelity, it will be important to conduct qualitative research. Wong & Horn (2015) promote qualitative research as an ideal pathway to counter the disproportionate and deficit-model promoting use of correlational studies within the study of men. Due to the sensitive nature of identifying oneself as a male injured partner, it



will be necessary to obtain data in a manner that reaches the direct actual experience of men and avoids a researcher influence that may alter their presentation. The researcher began with the research question “How do men seek support online when making initial posts after experiencing the infidelity of a female partner?”

### **Method**

In this study I employed a netnography method to access data in accordance with a combined constructivist and queer theoretical lens. Netnography is a form of ethnography, or the scientific study of a specific culture in a naturalistic setting, which occurs on the Internet through virtual communities (Kozinets, 2015). A netnography approach is effective for studying sensitive topics, which may be difficult to observe through in-person interviewing. Examples of subcultures that have been studied using a netnography method include men who experience depression (Gough, 2006), men who experience infertility (Hanna & Gough, 2016), and men seeking support for testicular cancer (Seymour-Smith, 2013).

The interviewing of men is notoriously challenging (Walls et al., 2010) and poses many logistical challenges in terms of recruitment and interviewing. Many men self-select out of the process due to logistical constraints such as time commitment. During the interview process, issues related to vulnerability or the interaction of the researcher's gender are also at play to distract from content. For example, some men may present to a female interviewer differently than they would with a male interviewer. Netnography also offers insight beyond that afforded by interviews as it benefits from the anonymity and disinhibition (Suler, 2005) that individuals can experience when interacting online.

Additionally, netnography is able to display how men speak to each other in a naturalistic setting, rather than how men speak to a researcher in a research setting.

This study examined the culture of men seeking support online who identify themselves in relation to infidelity as the injured partner. The current research question is: “How do men seek online support using initial forum posts after experiencing the infidelity of a female partner?”

### **Theoretical Lens**

This research will utilize two complementary theoretical lenses. The first is constructivist. A constructivist approach rejects the idea that there is an objective reality which can be measured if observed accurately. Instead, the constructivist perspective proposes that jointly-constructed understandings underpin any assumptions that are made about reality. In relation to this research, it is important to acknowledge that men are influenced by others through socialization, to make meaning of their experiences. It rejects the idea that men are essentially a certain way. Additionally, this researcher believes the process of research is a construction of reality based upon how the researcher interacts with participants. One example of how researchers influence their data is the dramatic difference in prevalence rates of infidelity when face-to-face interviews are used versus confidential, computer-based survey techniques (Whisman & Synder, 2007). Whether explicitly stated or not, the choosing of topics, focus on populations, and manner of gathering data are all shaping the eventual product of the research. In this way it is important for the researcher to be clear about intentions.

A second research lens of queer theory (Jagose, 1996) supported this research. Queer theory, by its nature, is difficult to explain as a unified concept. At its core,

however, queer theory intentionally resists the influence of heteronormativity (Warner, 1993), or the social pressure to conform to binary gender roles and inhabit spaces approved by patriarchy.

This research actively interrogated how men manage heteronormative expectations. Related to the male gender role, research has identified that a hegemonic masculinity exists, in which certain types of behavior are given privilege over others (Connell, 1993). The Male Role Norms Inventory (Levant, Hall, & Rankin, 2013) provides one example of the wide range of patriarchal beliefs and behavior that men can either adopt, discard, or balance. The MRNI consists of Avoidance of Femininity, Negativity toward Sexual Minorities, Self-reliance through Mechanical Skills (formerly Self-reliance), Toughness (formerly Aggression), Dominance, Importance of Sex (formerly Non-relational Attitudes toward Sexuality), and Restrictive Emotionality. This study will actively consider if the men in this study perpetuate norms, general stereotypes, and current research findings concerning male partners injured by fidelity.

### **Researcher Disclosure**

Consideration of the “researcher as instrument” (Morrow, 2005, p. 259) is a characteristic of trustworthy qualitative research. Specific to gender-related research, reflexivity concerning the intersection of multiple identities, such as class, ethnicity, sexuality, life event position, is also essential (Ward, 2016).

As an individual, I identify as male. I believe that my male gender role socialization has been a significant influence throughout my development. Early in my life I was successful in competition (e.g. sports, academic, etc.), which earned me regard from parents, teachers, coaches, and dating partners. During this development, the only

lesson about vulnerability I received was the implicit message to avoid it, as it was usually followed by a loss of status. It was not until well into my adult years, and after unsuccessfully participating in relationships, that I gained an appreciation for the necessity of vulnerability for the development of relationships.

I am aware that my gender, race (i.e. White), socio-economic status (i.e. upper middle class), and sexuality (i.e. mostly heterosexual, passing) position me with significant privilege in society. I am rarely in true survival mode in my day-to-day routine. With resources made available to me through my privilege, it is less of a risk for me to depart from the traditional male gender role. My perspectives about gender are also vividly contrasted and informed by being a father to daughters and married to a female identified partner.

I am impacted by infidelity. This element is perhaps the most essential item to disclose as I position myself in the research process, although the details of this experience are not as interesting as the impact. As a young man without much skillful language to process the experience, I did my best to manage this hurt on my own. The reality, however, was that this big experience influenced my identity, resulting in my development of defenses to counter the vulnerability that I experienced.

My identity as a counselor also informs this research. I have worked with men who are struggling to find some clarity after being injured by infidelity. Some of these men have turned to online forums looking for the advice of others who have been through similar experiences. I view this as a positive in that men are looking for support. I am unsure of my final assessment of advice that is doled out online in these spaces. I am

curious about how they experience putting themselves in these spaces and asking for help.

### **Sampling, Participants, and Setting**

In designing for this research, a search was conducted for online, English language forums that focused on the male experience of being injured by infidelity. The following key terms were used: “Forums &/ Online discussion boards + men/dealing with infidelity/coping with infidelity.” Initial results indicated that many forums existed, although there were no substantive forums which were solely devoted to the male experience.

This research will draw from a single online forum that advertises itself as a support for those, both men and women, who have experienced infidelity within a long-term relationship. It was selected due to its location as a sub-forum within a larger website that estimates its membership at over 300 million users. This site is well established and has a structured culture of rules and moderators. It is open access (i.e. with no registration or password required) with the assumption that what is posted has the potential to be viewed by many people, not just a small community of online users. A common convention of this forum is for the posters to identify themselves and their partners by age and gender in their initial posts, as a framing of their narrative. In this way, men who have experienced infidelity are easily identified.

### **Data Collection**

The posts for analysis included initial posts by male partners who have experienced infidelity of a female partner. Although posts often requested a certain kind of feedback, initial posts are unique in that they are a participant’s first experience in

reaching out and they tend to hold a sense of urgency in presentation. In other words, initial posts have an intensity to them that is of interest. Although this research will focus on the initial presentation of the poster, responses and interactions from the thread will also be gathered, allowing for additional analysis of conversation in future research endeavors. In line with previous analyses of online posting content (Stommel & Koole, 2010), this research will collect about 20 initial posts.

Data was harvested from the forum on four separate dates between May and October of 2020, resulting in 19 posts. The most recent chronologic posts were considered until about were obtained. Posts were excluded if they were indicated to be from a female poster, or if the gender of the poster and partner were not indicated. Posts that indicated they were a follow-up or update to a previous post were excluded. Although the possibility of encountering a fictitious post was anticipated and consultation with advisor to determine authenticity was put in place if needed, all posts within the sample were deemed authentic.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006). This approach was chosen to be able to compare patterns, or themes, of meaning across data sets. Thematic analysis is an inherently flexible method, which is able to be applied to both inductive and deductive qualitative research endeavors.

This particular research, while based upon data, also begins with a clear motivation: the search for ways in which men either endorse or depart from a hegemonic male narrative. As such, it is misleading to simply describe that analysis will give rise to certain topics that exist. More accurately, thematic analysis is also appropriate when the

researcher has a specific agenda. The flexibility of thematic analysis is therefore helpful as this research attempts to move beyond the superficial, semantic meaning of men's help-seeking, searching for implications based upon latent aspects, or unspoken assumptions.

Initial posts will be printed, read, and re-read while notes are taken to provide familiarity. The data will then be broken down into its smallest units, extracts, which are coded for features of interest. Next, codes are collated into potential themes as relevant information is gathered together. Moving forward, as themes are reviewed, they can be confirmed or discarded, with yet more re-readings of the data occurring so that extracts are viewed through the current lens provided by existing themes. The refined themes are then clarified and named, with specific, simple examples being chosen for report. With the themes finalized, researchers have the option to analyze deeper meanings. This can be done by reflecting on questions such as: What are the implications of this theme? Why do people talk about this thing in a particular way as opposed to other ways? What is the overall story the different themes reveal about this topic?

### **Ethical Issues**

This research will adhere to the ethical precedents of work using online open-access data. Eysenbach and Till (2001) suggest consideration of three aspects to judge the private versus public nature of online sources. The first consideration is if one needs to register to have access. The second concerns the number of members. The third is related to how the members perceive the site.

In the case of the site utilized for this research, no registration is required to access the material, the larger website estimates membership of over 300 million

participants, and users frequently cite the awareness of others viewing their narratives. While awareness of public views is different from consideration of being viewed as a research subject, it is important to consider as the public nature of the site is assessed. As a final consideration, there is an option to privately message in this forum, which is further criteria to suggest that when users post, they have made a conscious decision to present their stories for many people instead of just one person (Hookway, 2008).

### **Trustworthiness**

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), qualitative studies demonstrate trustworthiness when they display credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility refers to the extent to which the research study depicts the actual experience of the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Specific to increasing credibility, this researcher participated in prolonged engagement, or the process of spending adequate time with the participants, data, and general culture of male forum posters to be able to fully understand nuanced complexities. During this process, the researcher also explored the impact of his own biases and positioning on the research process. As suggested by Morrow (2005), this included the utilization of a reflexive journal. Additionally, the researcher reflected upon the analytical direction of the research with “disinterested” peers, to employ peer debriefing. Notes from this discussion are in Appendix A.

Transferability refers to the ability of study readers to make a determination about whether or not the study under examination can be applied to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This research, although not designed to be generalized beyond men who seek out support from a specific online forum, hopes to increase its transferability by



including thick and rich description of data, participants, and settings. One example of this is the use of extended and identified quotes.

The idea of dependability refers to the extent to which study results can be reproduced and the idea of confirmability to the researcher's adherence to objectiveness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This researcher will address both by creating a distinct audit trail so that future research may have access to exact research design and analysis techniques. Additionally, after de-identifying participants, the post data and coding decisions will be preserved for review by auditors if so desired. No auditors are currently being used at the dissertation stage. Post data is provided in Appendix B. Examples of emerging coding and memoing are provided in Appendix C.

## **Results**

Five themes highlight how men seek support from an online forum after experiencing the infidelity of a female partner. These are rebuilding supports, practicing emotional expression, requesting direction, seeking evaluation, and disclosing vulnerability. Within each theme men adhere to or deviate from heteronormative masculinities.

### **Rebuilding Social Supports in the Aftermath of Infidelity**

Men describe inadequate social supports due to overdependence on their female partner and collateral loss of resources. Challenging notions that men prefer independence, these posters seek connections with others in the forum who have shared

experiences. While rebuilding emotional supports, however, the men in this study also deploy normative structures such as monogamy and a focus on property.

**Seeking Shared Experiences.** When making initial posts, these men identify the importance of finding others who have also experienced the infidelity of a partner. Posters invite those who have been in a “similar situation” (Oliver) or “anyone who can relate or empathize” (Quintavius) to provide feedback. Elliot immediately addresses the community and provides appreciation. He entitled his post “Found you guys on my worst day. Thought I’d share.” Additionally, he gives unsolicited advice to others who may be “in my shoes.” In this way, Elliot positions himself as in need of and able to provide care for this community based upon his experiences.

Although Elliot offers advice, many of these posts challenge normative research about men’s preference for instrumental support. Instead of looking for direction about what to do next or using the tag “advice,” over half of the posters select the tag “need support.” Benny, who posts in anticipation of attending couples counseling the next day, suggests “Any kind words would be appreciated.” Assuming he is asking this of other male forum members, Benny invites them to challenge a normative mandate that men should not provide affection to other men.

**Displaying Inadequate Social Supports.** Men who post provide clues about why connection is a priority. For some, their female partner had provided an essential emotional component in their life. Benny discloses that prior to discovering his wife’s affair, he considered her to be his “best friend.” Elliot subscribes to the trope of the female savior, claiming his wife had “saved” him from the “just me and the dog forever funk.” Now that he has experienced injury due to her infidelity, he feels “shattered” and

“absolutely destroyed.” Men who have emotionally over-depended upon their female partner experience significant isolation in the aftermath of an affair.

An alternative experience is described by men who lose social supports as collateral damage to the affair. Marcus shares his belief that the couple’s friends colluded with his wife to conceal her affair. He has evidence to this effect, as the affair partner was his “best friend of over 35 years.” Gio describes his wife’s affair partner is someone “very, very close.” While these men had countered heteronormative expectations by developing significant friendships outside of their female partner, the injury of the affair also forecloses these supports.

Men who post describe a third variation of inadequate social supports. These men have remaining supports outside of their female partner, but they are reluctant to disclose the affair to them. Robert states “I don’t have anyone to talk to because I don’t like to talk about it and have anyone we know be judgmental.” Steven adds that he is unprepared for the “humiliation” as their “friend circle” is made aware of events. For them, being seen by friends to have been the victim of infidelity will result in judgment and humiliation. As men encounter this type of shame, the anonymity of an online forum offers an alternative route of support.

**Signaling Commonality with a Shared Language.** As men seek to belong to this online forum, they position themselves in relation to the existing community. Some directly display appreciation and reverence for the existing forum culture. Quintavius cops to being a “longtime lurker” and Elliot gushes that he has benefitted from “scouring this sub.” Others attempt to join by employing vocabulary that is specific to the forum. Keshawn and Alex invoke the term “trickle truths,” an experience of an unfaithful partner

disclosing details over time, but only when they are discovered. Oliver, like several others, begins his post by identifying “D-day,” or that date of discovery of the affair. In these direct and indirect ways, men who seek belonging within the forum signal a willingness to assimilate to the existing structure.

Others seeking a shared experience choose to describe their background. In these cases, men frequently focus on narratives which include heteronormative markers. For example, Oliver feels the need to lay out that he met his wife in high school, that she was the only woman he has had sex with or loved, and that they “spent a long time grinding our way to nice things in life we always wanted.” Others use brief phrases such as “House, two kids, three dogs” (Benny). In attempting to display evidence of a shared experience, these men claim adherence to the default norm of finding one’s soulmate (i.e. monogamy) and establishing domestic security through property.

### **Practicing Expression of Emotions in a Low-Stakes Setting**

Men in this study use initial posts to experiment with moving beyond anger, and share various emotions such as sadness, hurt, worry, and despair. Normative conceptions of men suggest they are relatively unaware of their emotions, and that anger is the only sanctioned affect. Additionally, men injured by infidelity are portrayed in research as directing their anger toward the male affair partner.

**Anger as a Facilitating Affect.** Some men who make initial posts describe ineffective communication with their partner following the discovery of an affair. In many cases, they cite anger as a barrier to expression. For example, Benny reports “I can’t even cry about it though because there is so much rage mixed up in the sadness.”

Keshawn portrays a similar paralysis as he is “wanting to cry and scream at her,” yet he holds back from sharing these intense feelings. For some, communicating in person with their partner is avoided due to risks that it will be driven by too much anger.

Within initial posts, however, men are able to proceed at their own pace and with the ability to edit text. Through their own creation, men often utilize anger as a life preserver, while venturing into the deep water of less socially sanctioned forms of emotion. For example, Keshawn positions his anger strategically when he writes “I cried, I was angry, I was hurt.” As Carlos makes a public proclamation that he still loves his wife, he makes sure to note more than once that his motivation for posting is “resentment.” Through this method of partnering a queer masculine experience (e.g. of sadness) with a normative expression (e.g. of anger) which suggests agency, men can experiment with the expression of emotions beyond just anger.

In contrast to the suggestion that men direct their anger toward the male affair partner, no evidence of this sentiment was discovered. Men speak about being angry with their female partners for a variety of reasons. Dante describes anger as a protective measure. He experiences his wife as making “threats” and running a “smear campaign” against him. For him, anger is utilized to maintain distance and resist engaging when he feels attacked.

**Varied Masculine Emotional Expression.** Beyond anger, men share descriptions of varied, independent, and conflicting emotions. Most commonly, posters write about being “hurt.” While some use this exact language (Benny, Keshawn, Leon, and Percy), others reference somatic ways in which they feel injury. Steven describes the sexually explicit text messages he has found as “tearing me apart,” Elliot’s discovery of video

evidence is a “punch in the gut,” and Marcus experiences his wife’s disclosure as him being “chopped into tiny pieces.” The experience of hurt is frequently positioned beside descriptions of “deceit” (Percy).

Men who make initial posts also describe anxiety. Frederick struggles to manage the ambiguity of his wife’s continued attraction to another. He states “I can’t control my anxiety and we do nothing but fight and say horrible shit to each other.” Alex suffers from “anxiety attacks” as he “found evidence,” although his wife continued to deny having an affair. Oliver “worried” his wife was on drugs and what this would mean for his family structure. Thematically, this anxiety is expressed in relation to uncertainty about what will happen next.

Men making initial posts also describe despair. These expressions are usually connected to uniquely intense experiences. Gio states “I have never felt so hopeless in my life.” He, along with others, discloses thoughts of death and/or suicide to accentuate his emotional pain. Oliver states “I’m not suicidal, but I feel like I wish I was dead. I essentially hate my life.” His description of despair is positioned alongside a disclosure that he has intrusive, “graphic” thoughts of his wife’s affair. Keshawn shares a similar experience that when “something triggers me or I begin to think about it, I spiral so far down into this pit of despair.”

Ike, provides an example of successfully holding a conflicted emotion. He positions himself as having previously navigated infidelity, yet also now having a concern that he may perpetrate infidelity. In his post, Ike shares what he had learned and his perspective that he found it to be “a wonderful, miserable, eye-opening experience.”

These varied emotional experiences stand in contrast to the normative assessment that men only express anger and struggle to be aware of other feelings. Men who post also counter normative research that suggests they are angry at the male affair partner.

### **Requesting Direction to Recuperate Power**

Men utilize initial posts by requesting advice on what to do. These requests are considered with normative expectations for men to prefer active, solution-oriented support, to be self-reliant, and to be dominant.

**Managing Confusion and Awareness of a New Reality.** A universal experience of men who make initial posts is that they are “confused” (Elliot). Many are disoriented by having been surprised. Oliver describes that finding out his wife “didn’t love me and hadn’t for ‘a longtime,’” “completely blindsided” him. Leon shares that he is “so hurt because...I really felt loved the whole time this was happening.” Julio, who states that previously he “would never even have to think about worrying of her cheating” is “blown away” that this happened “right underneath my nose.”

Having been made aware of the limits of their perception, some men request help to decide what to do. In many cases, men indicate they are unsure of finding the right, basic direction. Oliver asks “should I stay or should I leave her?” Frederick inquires about the best approach to manage his response. “So [forum name] community, what do I do here? I have read about being firm and just cut her off at the knees and I’ve read about accepting it all and just showing affection with patience.” Steven is direct and open to any help. He writes, simply, “What do I do?”

These requests are often thematically related to feelings of being subject to another. Frederick who is the “provider” in the family, now finds himself dependent upon his wife to “make a decision.” Steven is also feeling without options. His request for direction comes directly after his wife describes divorce as taboo. In these instances, men struggle when they are unable to inhabit the normative male role of relational dominance.

**Looking for the Specific Skill.** Other posters ask questions about more specific issues. Julio titles his post as “Advice on my feelings now?” Robert wants to know what words to say after having found a flirty text string. After listing several acts of vengeance, Hans asks “Which of the above do you have experience with and recommend I do/don’t do for the best chance of a peaceful life?” In these cases, the posters are under the impression that a single skill or insight about an exact issue will make the difference. In this way men adhere to a notion that an active behavior may solve a problem. By seeking consultation from peers, however, these men deviate from the male norm of being self-reliant.

### **Wanting Evaluation of Rationale, Concerns, and Actions**

Men make initial posts to seek evaluation from others. These posts are considered in light of norms for men to be dominant and make definitive decisions in relationships. Normative research suggests that men leave the relationship following an affair and view emotional affairs as less painful than physical/sexual infidelity.

**Regarding Her Rationale.** Some men seek insight into why their partner would be unfaithful. Posters reference the irrationality of their female partner wanting more.



Alex asks “How could she do this?” and Oliver is “confused on why it would happen?” In these cases, the posters describe that their partners already “had everything” (Alex) and were living a “typical middle class American dream” (Oliver). Oliver focuses on his wife’s “walking out on your family for someone you don’t know.” These two men are unable to comprehend alternative motivations from their partners.

**Validity of Wanting to Stay or Go.** Men seek feedback regarding the validity of their desire to either stay in or leave the relationship. Having compared themselves to others in the forum, both Julio and Percy, for example, question the validity of their perspective. Percy suggests his situation “doesn’t seem as terrible a thing as many here have posted about” while Julio notes “compared to cheater responses I see on this sub, she seems to be genuinely sorry.”

In each case, the poster is confronted by narratives that challenge how he believes he should feel or act. Despite his scenario being less “terrible,” Percy is “hurt, and pessimistic about continuing.” Julio is aware of a forum norm to break up with his partner after discovery, however he is also fearful about being alone. Julio asks “Is it toxic for me to want to recover...for a chance to get back together?”

**Evaluating Decisive Behavior.** Posters also ask for comments related to their own behavior. These frequently include acts of unilateral decision-making. Frederick titles his post “I just kicked her out this morning and I don’t know if that was the right thing to do.” Nelson wants to “make sure that I’m not crazy” after having non-consensually disclosed his wife’s affair. After finding a flirty text string, Quintavius is seeking consensus on the “morality of snooping.”

In these cases, men have acted quickly or in an entitled manner. Nelson enjoys viewing himself as “helpful and supportive” although his wife’s reaction to his tactic causes him to have doubts that she experiences it as such. Regarding his invasion of privacy, Quintavius says, “I couldn’t help myself, I looked.” His choice of words suggests an understanding that there may have been something “helpful” about resisting the urge. Frederick’s use of privilege regarding house ownership was immediately appealing as an escalation tactic, although his later experience is one of uncertainty.

In the context of asking for feedback, these men and others are displaying a narrative of property ownership. Percy speaks in paternalistic terms, and declares “I don’t approve of drinking, smoking, marijuana use in my marriage.” Elliot demands video surveillance of his wife in the home while he is deployed, Benny instructs his wife to “cut” the affair partner out of her life, and Hans cancels his wife’s visa while she is out of the country.

### **Seeking Repair from Shame Through Vulnerability**

The studied posters use initial posts to disclose vulnerability in a variety of ways. In these cases, the men seek witness, which they now lack in ‘real life,’ to a set of imperfections and previously hidden shame. In this vein, posting can be seen as a functional response to aspects of identity and feelings that are not normative (imperfection and fear) and that isolate the men from their normal social networks. Normative research suggests that men avoid help seeking through formal services due to fear of experiencing vulnerability.

**Imperfect Partners.** Some of the men use their initial posts to share their belief that they have fallen short as partners in ways that disrupt their traditionally masculine identities. Benny, who feels “broken inside,” admits he has not actively been attempting to engage his wife. Steven, who is feeling torn apart, discloses new knowledge that his wife describes never having been sexually attracted to him. Marcus, who refers to himself as a “bereft shell of the man he used to be,” adds that he assumes his wife to consider that he “epically failed at the husband part.”

**Disclosing Fear.** The men in this study also disclose vulnerability through sharing their fear in a variety of direct and indirect ways. Some describe trauma-like symptoms, such as intrusive thoughts of the affair (Carlos, Keshawn, and Oliver) or sleep problems (Leon). These men tend to focus on “being replaced” (Carlos). Keshawn notes he had previously called off the relationship because he couldn’t “bear to be second best.” The assumptions of masculine competition and the default of monogamous structures in relationship lead men to the final conclusion that they have lost.

Some of these men describe having attempted to repair the relationship. This may include being assured contact with the affair partner is severed (Keshawn), reassurance of love from their partner (Oliver), or being given access to their partner’s digital accounts (Leon). Keshawn posts about his girlfriend’s pledge to “spend the rest of her life making it up to him.” Despite the corrective actions, however, these men are still seeking ways to “figure out this pain” (Leon).

**Releasing the Weight of Shame.** As noted above, due to the barriers created by shame and resultant disconnection from their customary social support, these men are suffering in isolation. As Robert succinctly concludes, “I’m just stuck in my head all

alone right now.” Without their usual support, these men are unable to have their experiences witnessed, their insecurities accepted, and their experiences normalized. Keshawn writes “I don’t really know what I’m asking for, I just...needed to tell somebody who might be able to understand the pain I feel right now.” Leon shares “I think I am writing this because I need to get this off my chest. I want the pain to at least simmer down and not come out of nowhere.” He concludes with “Those who read this. Thank you. I just needed to say something.”

**Table 3**

*Presence of Theme in Post*

	Connection	Expression	Direction	Evaluation	Vulnerability
Alex	x	x		x	
Benny	x	x			x
Carlos		x	x		x
Dante					x
Elliot	x				x
Frederick	x	x	x		x
Gio	x	x	x		
Hans	x	x	x		
Ike		x	x		
Julio	x			x	x
Keshawn	x	x			x
Leon		x			x
Marcus	x		x		
Nelson	x	x		x	
Oliver	x	x	x	x	x
Percy				x	
Quintavius	x	x		x	
Robert	x		x		x
Steven	x	x	x		x

## Discussion

This manuscript presents a netnography exploring men's use of an online forum in response to discovering the infidelity of their female partner. Themes were analyzed based upon the central research question, "How do men seek online support using initial forum posts when experiencing the infidelity of a female partner?" Men's help seeking consisted of themes which both reinforced and challenged existing normative assumptions about males, gender role performance, and help seeking. The findings of this study are relevant for culturally competent practice by exploring the performance of varied masculinities as men seek assistance through an informal, preferred support structure.

### **Thematic Qualities**

The importance of connection for men is demonstrated by the theme of *rebuilding social supports in the aftermath of infidelity*. This pattern of reaching out for support challenges research which suggests men are reluctant to seek help (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). Instead, it demonstrates men's preferences for lay networks and peer supports when seeking help (Fogarty et al., 2015). Within this theme, several cases mirror heteronormative relationship structures in which men over-depend on their female partner for emotional support (Hamlet, 2019), thereby leaving them without adequate support when conflict in the relationship emerges. While men are seemingly left unprepared by adherence to this normative structure of singular, companionate intimacy, they nevertheless return to heteronormative narratives of monogamy and property as a way to signal their worthiness to be included in the forum. Exceptional masculinities, such as men asking other men for emotional care, were also present within this theme.

The theme *practicing expression of complex emotions in a low-stakes setting* counters historical research suggesting men have remedial affective awareness (Levant, 1992) or are only allowed to be aggressive (Brannon & David, 1976). Rather, men are aware of and express a broad range of emotions, violating the mandate of a uniform, hegemonic masculinity to avoid admitting pain (Connell, 1995). The self-paced process of posting online offers a reduced stress environment to unpack a wide range of emotion including sadness, hurt, worry, and despair. Unlike emerging research which suggests men are angry or violent toward the affair partner (Shackelford, LeBlanc, & Drass, 2000), no instances of such a focus was found. Instead, men's anger was directed at their female partner and frequently partnered with queer emotional expressions.

The theme *requesting direction to recuperate power* highlights the disorientation and powerlessness that men feel when discovering the infidelity of a partner. These men describe challenges with feeling subordinate and request direction from others. While the process of asking for help deviates from normative male mandates for self-reliance (MRNI; Levant, Hall, & Rankin, 2013), the desire for instrumental approaches and the focus on positioning to re-obtain power-over (Brannon & David, 1976) perpetuate heteronormative ideas about how men perform gender.

The theme *wanting evaluation of rationale, concerns, and actions* displays the confusion, doubt, and possible regret that men can experience. As some of these men had been operating from a position of privilege in which they were their main focus, they were neglecting to consider their partner's unique or differing experiences. These findings show men to demonstrate concern for the validity of their assessments when comparing themselves to others and question their actions after negative partner

responses. Connecting to research on social comparison, this finding fits with the theory that social comparison can cause worsened mood and self-esteem (Gerber, Wheeler, & Suls, 2018). Thematically, men who sought evaluation also demonstrated unexamined entitlement to their female partner and/or her privacy as property.

As men experienced fear and are not able to benefit from other tactics of ensuring reconciliation, they progressed to *seeking repair from shame through vulnerability*. These men challenge heteronormative assumptions that men choose to avoid vulnerability in help seeking (Englar-Carlson, 2014). Instead, they share shortcomings, an inability to tolerate outside attraction, the feeling of being broken, and a fear of abandonment. While a monogamous relationship structure is not overtly referenced, it operates with influence and authority (Easton et al., 2011) as men position themselves in competition for their partner's sole attention. These men rely upon having access to a specific and nonjudging audience as they display vulnerabilities.

### **Limitations**

This the findings of this research are limited based upon the specific population that was studied. It is not appropriate to generalize the findings to all men, as these subjects are unique. For example, the way in which gay men seek out support online after discovering infidelity may be thematically different than those in heterosexual relationships. In addition to identity characteristics, these subjects are assumed to be internet savvy, with enough resources to access the forum, and have self-selected to utilize this type of support. Less digitally connected and/or more interpersonally connected men may seek support differently and/or with contrasting concerns and

influences. These limitations are presented for readers to consider in the evaluation of this study.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study highlights the importance of men finding social connection to process a female partner's infidelity. Future research might focus on the interactions following the initial post, including analysis of responses and counter responses between poster and readers. Additionally, follow-up interviews with those who utilized such an online forum would provide an opportunity to explore a first-person interpretation of the experience and inquire about in-person applications of online interactions. Within such interviews it would be an option to further examine how the various identities (e.g. race, class, ability, etc.) of the men who posted influenced how they access and received support.

### **Conclusions**

This netnography provides a qualitative description of how men seek support online through initial posts after the discovery of infidelity by a female partner. This study illuminates men's use of an informal support resource, countering notions that men are resistant to asking for support. In addition, this study highlights how men operate by either endorsing or deviating from heteronormative expectations.



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## **Chapter 4: Conclusion**

This dissertation consists of two manuscripts presented in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3. The two manuscripts are thematically linked in that both explore the first-person accounts of men seeking support. Chapter two presents the results of a metasynthesis with the central research question of, “How do men describe their first-hand experiences of participating in counseling?” Chapter three presents the results of a netnography study with the central research question of ““How do men seek online support using initial forum posts when experiencing the infidelity of a female partner?”

This dissertation responds to the call for more qualitative research in the area of men’s gendered experiences of seeking support. Qualitative research has particular contributions to make on this topic because it emphasizes the learned and evolving experiences of men, while contrasting historically static and essentialized methods used to portray men. This emphasis is important to promote multicultural competence in supporting men in helping professions.

### **Manuscript 1 Conclusions**

The first manuscript, a metasynthesis of existing qualitative research, serves to consolidate and integrate the male client experience of counseling. It contributes to the published literature by focusing on men as a multicultural population and illuminating their actual experiences of counseling. The findings of this metasynthesis demonstrate the cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes for men as they engage in counseling. The results indicate men successfully utilize counseling to reduce isolation and feel normal, may feel unsafe to disclose information, and often experience the gender of their therapist as significant.



## **Manuscript 2 Conclusions**

The second manuscript presents a netnography study of the experience of men seeking online support for a female partner's infidelity. The specific sample consisted of men making initial posts to an Internet forum devoted to supporting those who have been injured by infidelity. This sample provided access to naturalistic descriptions of men's experiences that were not altered through interviewer influence. This research provided insight into how participants seek help and either employ or deviate from heteronormative expectations related to their male gender role. Specifically, this study produced the themes of *rebuilding social supports in the aftermath of infidelity*, *practicing expression of complex emotions in a low-stakes setting*, *requesting direction to recuperate power*, *wanting evaluation of rationale, concerns, and actions*, and *seeking repair from shame through vulnerability*.

Within the themes of this netnography, men were observed to perform heteronormative and/or queer masculinities. Normative gestures included overdependence on a female partner for emotional support, assumptions of monogamy, focus on competition, and exerting control through property ownership. Exceptional masculinities included prioritizing social connection, asking for emotional care, expressing a range of emotions, asking for help, and being vulnerable.

## **Dissertation Conclusions**

The combined work of the manuscripts of this dissertation contribute to understanding the male client's experience of seeking support. Manuscript 1 begins by exploring the first-hand experiences of men as clients in formal counseling and

manuscript 2 progresses to illuminate a unique, informal process of support seeking. As the manuscripts are considered together, several themes work in a complimentary manner. For example, the unique connection and normalization between men is noticed both through groups and as a request online. Additionally, the risk of vulnerability in person is also seen through displays within initial posts.

### **Implications**

The results of this metasynthesis and netnography study produced implications relevant to practice, training, and research.

**Practice.** These manuscripts offer a rich description of men's use of supports. Both studies highlight the desire for men to feel control related to understanding the structure of their support. As such, counselors will benefit from attending to informed consent and the client's perspectives about how counseling works. Additionally, as men may prefer to receive support from those with shared experiences, counselors will do well to consider their own identity and experiences, and how this may or may not facilitate a feeling of safety for their clients. Counselors may also wish to explore if the presence of inadequate social supports impacts the client's worldview, including their experience of isolation or hiding shame. Counselors are in a unique position to offer normalizing information and help clients experiment with vulnerability in person.

**Training.** Research suggests that male clients are rarely considered in academic training programs for counselors. Additionally, based upon the historical trends of the existing research on men, they are often regarded as resistant and essentialized (i.e. with static traits). These studies include information about how

men access support and what this process looks like over time. As counseling is focused on the development of clients, it is important to show the type of studies that portray men as benefitting and evolving from the process.

**Research.** These manuscripts demonstrate the usefulness of employing novel, qualitative, and rich descriptions of men in research. By listening to the first-person accounts of men, counseling can better understand what works instead of quantitatively focusing on the traits that prevent men from adjusting to the way counseling is presented. Future research should continue to meet men where they are, including the exploration of contexts in which they are naturally seeking support.

### **Overall Conclusions**

The research contained in these manuscripts adds perspective to the experiences of men and help seeking. The results of the two manuscripts presented in this dissertation demonstrate men's ability to engage in both formal and informal support seeking, utilizing both normative and exceptional forms of masculinity. As with all qualitative research, the application of these findings will be the responsibility of readers based upon the appropriateness of each unique client's setting and population.

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## Appendix A Notes From Peer Debriefing

### Queerness of men

emotional experiences (broad not just anger)  
asking for help  
asking for emotional support  
wanting to stay in relationship

### Enlisting Heteronormativity

use of anger as buffer/normalizer/creating agency  
gender or sexually showing through epiphanies  
viewing focus on propriety

### The Straight Jacket of Heteronormativity

not having social/emotional supports to process  
reframing women as having been responsible for relational aspects of relationship  
viewing self as shattered, losing sense of self  
not enough  
• prioritizing children over own suffering  
• loss to control vs. curiosity about partner's experience

## Normative

- expression of anger (funnel)  
Give 'Em Hell
- knowing what to do
- penis in vagina sex
- keeping female partner satisfied
- knowing everything about your partner
- female partner is biggest/only social support
- discarding defective female partner
- being the provider
- proudly report blame (Tannen) [under stress]
- being numero uno
- being stoic
- consummate love
- view as possession (jealousy)

## Queer

- expression of sadness
- asking for direction (admitting confusion)
- emotional intimacy
- female partner worthy more
- having secret parts
- having significant friends outside relationship
- looking at self/wanting to stay in relationship and grow
- having a desire to nurture family
- discussing rapport take ownership
- being a significant part but not always center
- admitting injury, fear
- Skerberg's varieties
- view as human

## Appendix B

### Post Data

#### ***“Alex”***

I have tried but I can't continue

##### NeedSupport

Where do I start? Before Christmas I (m33) started suspecting something happening with my wife and I questioned her for weeks asking what was wrong and why was she being so distant. Even when I found evidence she still lied and made me out to be a crazy, jealous maniac. For weeks my mental health was massively strained and I couldn't see light at the end of the tunnel due to anxiety attacks and borderline depression. After pulling myself together she came clean that she had met someone and clicked on an emotional level but nothing more, stating that “we are damaged”. Not wanting to separate, I pleaded with her to stay and that we could move on from this hiccup or if she didn't want to be with me then to end it!

She decided to stay and insisted she put an end to their encounters!

After a few weeks of seemingly blissful life together, I receive an anonymous tip off that there was more to this than met the eye and sure as hell it sent me in downward spiral!

She continued to lie and make me out to be the crazy one, but the emotional abuse I received stepped up a notch, I'm guessing that was out of resentment for me or guilt!

Anyway, during national lock down due to Covid I found out the truth, that she had in fact physically cheated and invited my children to spend days out with the AP!

With lockdown being so strict in my country I had nowhere to go and we worked on things.

But I've got to the stage in my life where I am seconding guessing everything, my self worth is shattered and essentially I am broken man!!!!

How could she do this? She paints it all on me and refuses to talk about it yet every few months I get trickled truths which don't line up with the original story!

I guess I just need some advice or support or even a platform to vent my thoughts because I am simply devastated and can't continue living in such a destructive relationship!

I would consider myself a model husband/father always putting everyone else before my own needs. Yet I can not understand why she did this to me!

She had everything and chose to throw it/me/us away!

#### ***“Benny”***

Just found out the painful reality of the seven year itch

##### NeedSupport

Background: Wife (37F) and I (34M) married for seven years, together for ten. House, two kids, three dogs. We both struggle with mental health issues - mostly hers around negative self-image, anxiety, and a bully for a mother. Mine are around relationship insecurity, anxiety and overplanning, and recurrent major depressive episodes. I also just



recently discovered I have pretty bad ADHD, and the rejection sensitivity dysphoria from the ADHD makes severe rejection go straight into suicidal ideation and major depression. Because pandemic, our social life has basically ended. We do not have a lot of friends that are geographically close. After a few weeks, it was clearly bugging her that she didn't have a social outlet for herself. We met online (World of Warcraft), and she wanted to play again for the social action. She said she did not want to do hardcore raiding again, after I expressed concerns for her finding a timesink while we have little boys to raise. That was probably in March.

The setup: For the past month and a half she's ritually been up past midnight playing, full tilt in a raiding guild, and got progressively more venomous when I tried to talk to her while she was playing. I got written up at work for failing to meet a timeline (preoccupied with helping run the household as wife and I grew more distant, plus ADHD and executive dysfunction played a huge role in that). I wanted to die, I was so upset with myself for disappointing my team. I got tested for ADHD at that point - I had been meaning to before, but the wait for any psych office to open was a month. I got lucky and called immediately after a cancellation for the next week, and they slotted me in. So now I have a formal clinical diagnosis and follow-up steps for approaching medication and therapy solutions. (We both actively have therapists.)

Last week, she tells me that one of our mutual friends invited her to do something (very abnormal as this friend is generally a shut-in) and I told her to take up the opportunity to spend some time with her. Wife gets absolutely lit, shits herself on the way home kind of lit. We get her upstairs and into the bathroom, and I start stripping her down to help clean her up. She didn't want me touching her until I explained I was trying to clean her off (she has extremely low libido and has been a pain point previously). She started apologizing and said something about how she was sorry it got so far and that she was sorry she'd let me down. I was confused, and she told me to get her phone. Turns out that she has been in an emotional affair for a few weeks with a guy from her guild. My depression was toxic to our relationship, and instead of talking to me about it, she was venting to this guy who was also going through a breakup. They made each other feel special and got addicted to the butterflies they gave each other. I wasn't sure if I wanted to kill myself, wipe the shit back on her, or just disintegrate like Thanos snapped me out of existence. We are scheduled for marriage counseling tomorrow afternoon - I already told her to cut him out of her life, and that I wanted to see her do it. She says she did, although without me there, which makes me question if she actually did it. But her emotional response the last few days suggests that she did, in fact do it. She was crying this morning, and I tried to check on her. She told me she was upset at the loss of a good friend, but that she did it for me and did it without hesitation. I couldn't even respond to her - she has apologized for hurting my feelings, and offered generic "sorry" responses, as though I am painting the entire situation as exclusively her fault. I lost my best friend, god fucking dammit - I can't even cry about it though, because there is so much rage mixed up in the sadness I can't let any of it out. I don't know how to trust her any more. I

don't know if I can. We have both said we want to fix it, but if anything, the wall of ice between us has grown into a glacier since I found out. She didn't apologize for not talking to me about it (she says she didn't think I could emotionally handle it because of the depression, which is a fair guess for her to make), she didn't apologize for letting it get to that point, she didn't apologize for making that decision. She didn't apologize for the harm she did to our marriage. But she took the first step, and I hope that in counseling, she will understand that the apology needs to be much, MUCH more thorough. But for right now, I just need to keep my head above water to not drown in everything that is going on. I feel broken inside, moreso than before.

Any kind words would be appreciated. I never tried to push her away, but by not continuing to try to keep her, I guess she would have drifted regardless.

Thanks for reading.

:|

### ***“Carlos”***

I'm Starting to Resent My Wife

#### Advice

Hey y'all. I'm posting from my main account because at this point, I just don't care if she sees.

So, I'm starting to resent my wife for her affair. It wasn't sexual, as far as I know, only a kiss, but I still feel so betrayed. She says it was because she felt I didn't love her. I admit, I'm partially at fault for not doing enough when she told me over the course of 2 months that we were growing distant, but I didn't know the cause of it. I keep trying to fix our relationship, but I just don't think it's working out.

Let me give a bit of backstory real quick. We've been together for 3 years now, and she told me about the affair 3 weeks ago. She didn't give me a name, who he is, or basically the full story. She at first told me it was an emotional affair, that he had TRIED to kiss her, but she told him that she was married. However, I recently found out that he HAD kissed her. I could forgive an emotional affair, but a physical one? It's just a bit too much...

Anyway, I'm currently in Therapy trying to ascertain my feelings and whether or not I should keep trying to work on our relationship, but I feel so drained and resentful. She's constantly on her phone talking to her friends, she barely sleeps in the same house with me anymore, and before, when this whole thing started, she told me that a part of her doesn't want to continue the relationship. She won't go to therapy with me, so currently I'm the only one going. She even got hostile at the suggestion of it.

How do I deal with this? I still love her, more than anyone, but I just can't trust her anymore. Everyday, I imagine what she did. What they talked about while he replaced me in her heart, and I'm starting to wonder if maybe I deserved it? Please give your advice. I know I'm leaving out a lot, but it's for at least a little privacy's sake.

TL,DR: Need advice for trusting wife again.

### ***“Dante”***

Realizing I never knew what my ex was

#### PostSeparation

I left my wife because I she finally confirmed that she cheated years ago. The details she was willing to give are disgusting, so what really happened must be much worse.

She also claimed that was the only incident, but I don't believe someone who is capable of doing what she did would only cheat once.

Since leaving she has attempted to turn our kids against me. She has made threats. She has ran a smear campaign where she paints herself as the victim and claims I must've found another woman.

Last night she contacted me claiming she saw me on a dating app. I'm not on a dating app so this didn't trigger me.

She then claimed she had been hearing rumors about me being seen out with other women. This didn't work either.

She then began attacking me as a father and I engaged. We had a few back and forth exchanges before I told her I've moved on and to not contact me. She responded by calling me pathetic.

I said that pathetic is a woman who threatens to leave her children with an adult male stranger in order to force the father to leave a family event in a city 2 hours away so he can come watch the kids so she can go out and have sex with a married man who is also having sex with her friend so that's why she's so desperate to hook up with him first.

She responded with "lol that was 12 years ago get over it"

I said it's all brand new to me and ceased communicating

My hang up is that I never thought for a minute that she was this type of person. I want her to feel bad for what she did, but I know that will never happen. After everything is said and done she will convince herself and whoever else is willing to listen that I left her to be with another woman. I haven't even dated nor have I attempted to since leaving her

### ***“Elliot”***

Found you guys on my worst day. Thought I'd share.

#### Rant

So, I usually just lurk reddit but after scouring this sub and getting some mental help I thought I'd share my history is, well terrible.

Divorced once. Cheated on. Engaged. Cheated on. Married again. Divorce in work.

In the past I've gotten through it myself. Too much drinking. Rebounds. And alot of gym.

This one stings though. I'm military. Sent to Korea for a year 3 months ago. 2 months in my wife, the woman that I thought was amazing. Who pulled me out of my funk, my I'm never dating or getting serious just me and the dog forever funk. I thought she saved me.

We got married last November, small nice wedding immediate family, bigger one after my year in Korea. Never trusted a woman more than this girl.

2 months after I leave she calls me. Blindsides me with she wants a divorce. I'm in shock. I don't believe it. Can't wrap my head around it. We were happy. Everything she's telling me is either a surprise or easily refuted. So confused. Says she's been thinking and just doesn't see it working long term.... It's been 4 years. Whatever. This is shit but I'm not fighting for someone who gives up so fast and easily. Turning into Ross from friends.

Moving on

Well we agreed she'll live in the house. My house. Where I own 99% of everything in it. She'll care for the dog and my stuff. Pay rent. Move out the month before I come home. Today she forgot I have a separate camera in the garage. This whole time her reasoning didn't sound right as I assume some of you figured. Caught her trying to unplug our security system driveway camera. Made her plug it back in.... Just in time to see her new guy pull up to pick her up for the night. I was over it. Making strides.... But that's a punch in the gut I've never experienced before. Shattered me. Absolutely destroyed me. And over here I'm in no position to be shattered. Especially this week. I lost it but called a friend. Got calmed down and reeled it in... Until my evening when I have no distraction. So. Thank you. I know I rambled. Mistakes may have been made. Layout might be shit. But from the bottom of my heart. Thank you. Been reading and downloading the motivation and it's helped so much. Just know I'm lurking in here and you're all helping. If your in my shoes. Stay positive. It'll pass. Try the gym.... It helps to get mad and take it out in there.

### ***“Frederick”***

[Need Advice/Guidance] I was told to cross post here. I just kicked her out this morning and I don't know if that was the right thing to do.

#### NeedSupport

My (41M) wife (34F) has been having an emotional affair for months now. She talks openly about her feelings for him openly and I'm losing my mind.

We have been married for almost five years, been together for over 10.

About a year ago a "friend" from her past contacted her on Facebook. From what she has told me prior to all of this, she wanted nothing to do with him. He was not someone she was into him then and she was unsure if she wanted to talk to him.

Fast forward to June, she takes our oldest daughter out on a road trip to the state where this guy lives. One thing after another starts throwing up red flags on my end and I called her out on the whole trip.

What she divulges is that she has feelings for him, that she is "in love" with him and she wants to see how things work out between them. She tells me that it hasn't been physical except that she kissed him.

The next few days I start to lose my shit with her recalling how awful a human being I have been the whole 10 years of our relationship. I won't deny any of the words that she

said about me, I haven't been the greatest partner this whole time. I realize this and take action. I started going to therapy and have gone every week for the past 3 months. It has worked, I am not short-tempered with our younger children, they don't dread me coming home from work at the end of the week. They are more loving towards me and I truly love them and enjoy spending time with them.

A few weeks after I started therapy I asked her if I could go on her camping trip with her and our children. She agreed, only on the condition that "he" comes along for the second half of the trip. I reluctantly agree to this. In the days leading up to the trip I can't control my anxiety and we do nothing but fight and say horrible shit to each other. My part of the trip didn't go smoothly. We laid there in the cabin on an air mattress and I asked her "Do you think there is hope between us"? She said I hope so, but it is hard to decide when you love two different people. I keep my shit together that night but it stayed in my head for the next day.

Another night we tried to project a movie for the kids to watch. I was trying to figure it out on her tablet when she rips it out of my hands. I start getting antsy and I asked her what's on there that you don't want to see. Apparently this guy would send her videos just telling her how much he loves her.

Before this post gets too long I will say that she has now seen him three more times and wants to spend a weekend alone with him to see if she really wants to be with him. To see if he will annoy her or if this is the happiness she is looking for.

I have tried showing her more affection and proof that I love her. We have had a few date nights and they have gone well and we both admitted that we felt a connection being built again. But she also tells me that when she thinks things are getting back to normal between us, he calls and she gets more confused again.

The only thing saving us right now is that he is out of state, she can't legally take the children there for relocation. Her other reason for still being with me is that she is the one that built this family and everything that we have. I am the provider while she is the caregiver.

To end the post I will just say that I am at my wit's end. I have been making progress and sabotaging the relationship every step of the way. I said to my therapist for a date that I would want her to make a decision on if she wants to be with him or to make our marriage work.

So reddit community, what do I do here? I have read about being firm and just cut her off at the knees and I've read about accepting it all and just showing affection with patience. I am at a loss.

### ***"Gio"***

Don't know how to move forward.

#### NeedSupport

Kind of a long story but I'll try to keep it short lol. I'm in the military and am currently deployed in Afghanistan. My wife cheated while I was here with someone very very

close to me. Drugs(prescription) and alcohol were involved. Been probably 7 months since d day. I don't wanna do this anymore but she refused to accept that and will likely be in my house when I get back. I can't even stand the thought of being in the same room let alone have her trying to sleep with me when I get back. I know I'm never going to be the same towards her and it's better if I just leave. Wtf am I suppose to do? I have never felt so hopeless in my life. There is enough stuff here I have to deal with and process and after being here for as long as I'm going to I have to go home and deal with this. I feel like I won't have a break and that I don't have a safe place to go and decompress and am worried I am going to snap somehow when I get back and get put into this situation. Sorry for the lack of details. Just trying to stay incognito. Don't know what else to do. Very often feel like it's better if I just never made it home.

### ***"Hans"***

DDay is approaching fast

#### Therapy

Well I am just about to "drop the hammer" as one of my friends has put it so eloquently. The only thing is I'm not sure how far I want to go.

I know now that reconciliation, at this stage at least, is not an option. She knows how I feel about infidelity however continued to have a relationship with someone for the last 2 months at least. And then there's the pic of the positive pregnancy test that I found on icloud....

Basically I'm going to tell her how much she's hurt and betrayed me, that I don't think I can ever trust her again etc and cut her off apart from contact with our daughter (I would never cut them off, for my daughters sake).

But I don't know how far I should go. I have access to her fb, which is where I gathered a lot of the evidence, which she doesn't know about. It has both our families on there so I could go full nuclear and post what has happened.

I also have a fake fb profile (which she knows about but I've changed the name, I like to argue about political things on there) and I know how to find and message his closest family members who I know don't know the full story about my wife. I feel the truth needs to be told.

A large number of her family are friends with me on my real fb, and would be devastated /extremely disappointed in her if they knew the truth so I could post on there.

I still keep in contact with my stepdaughter who would be devastated/extremely disappointed if she knew what was going on, and I don't think the guys family know about her.

The one thing I know is that I won't be sending her any money anymore (she's in her home country, I'm in mine). I've noticed for the past few days she only contacts me to ask for money.

I also know that my daughter won't be going over there as planned (I now know she was planning to keep her there) so I have hidden her passport and the permission letter for her



to get the passport of her mum's nationality (yes I have been completely gaslighted but things seem to be going in my favour.

I will also be cancelling her return flight and telling her I've cancelled her visa for the UK.

Which of the above do you have experience with and recommend I do/don't do for the best chance of a peaceful life?

*“Ike”*

Admitting to wife that I have a crush on a colleague

Advice

I don't want to make this a super long post but a bit of context will help. I (m33) have been together with my wife(f33) for 12 years, married for 7. One kid, another on the way. I broke up with her after a few months of dating at the beginning of the relationship when I went for military service for a year. She had been unfaithful to his ex throughout their relationship (some good reasons, some not at all) and as the first thrill of the beginning started to fade away, I did not see how I could trust her during my year away. This broke her and she changed a lot after the breakup. I was going back and for between her and my ex when I wasn't in active duty during the year. Douchbag, I know.

I never really over her. So we started seeing each other again exclusively when I finished my service. Our sex life had been awesome at the beginning of our relationship, but had now taken a nose dive. We headed towards a dead bedroom due to several reasons. And after our daughter was born 4 years ago, our connection in and outside the bedroom dwindled.

To be honest I did not know what a "connection" was. Neither did she. We never worked on it consciously. But we were awesome together.

Last year we started fighting a lot and while our connection was really bad, she started getting a lot of attention from a colleague. Well, she's really hot and has always received a lot of male attention but had not been opened to it before.

She ended up having a two month long affair with this guy. I found out earlier this year after she had left him and I had worked my ass off reconnecting with her. She is still fighting tears sometimes when talking about how she regrets what she did. Says how sorry she is about what happened. Really takes care of me.

It has been a miserable, wonderful, eye opening experience that has finally shown me what people mean when they say that their partner continuously makes them a better person. We have regained the connection we had and more. We have promised to stay truthful to each other. Also decided to have a second child that is now due in January. Just before the covid outbreak a new colleague joined my department. This was when my relationship was having some of its darkest times. She was totally unlike my wife but for some odd reason I started to pay attention to her. Liking her... well as a person and colleague. I admitted this immediately to my wife and she was worried but said its fine to have female friends.

Fast forward to the office reopening its doors and me starting to see more of the colleague again. We go out with our department to have lunch. Almost every time either she sits next to me or I look to see where she is so I can take the seat next to her. We find each other hilarious. At a company party a few weeks ago we hung out most of the time. We talked for hours. About iconic movies we like (my wife only watches romantic comedies), politics (wife not interested), philosophy (wife not interested), relationships (wife quite short tempered and admits that she does not know how to approach people), etc. It was really nice.

This week, my colleague started talking one-on-one about how she is having difficulties with her relationship. Her bf is moving to another city and it is going to be a long distance relationship. I listened and supported her. Now I am having trouble sleeping. I wake up at 4am every morning. I do not know if this is the reason but I do keep thinking about her when I wake up.

Now I have organised a nice date night with my wife for this evening. We have shared a rough year and I have not done anything wrong yet, but I am worried about where this relationship with my colleague is headed. I am going to admit to her that I have a crush on this colleague and we have to figure this thing out together. But I do not want to hurt her.

How do I approach her with this so I do not hurt her? What do I say? Any advice?

### ***“Julio”***

Just uncovered the year long affair my girlfriend of 10 years had. Advice on my feelings now?

#### Advice

I'm still just blown away. I have made the comment to many people in the past about her that I would never even have to think about worrying of her cheating because she's so faithful and loves me so much. We moved in together in September so months before we even moved in, she was cheating on me. It was a married man (33) with a kid that she (24) made friends with through an event multiple years ago. I knew about him and didn't like how often they talked but didn't want to be controlling or set off her anxiety if I couldn't be her entire emotional support. I understood friends are important and I've had plenty of female friends in the past so it would have been hypocritical if I got possessive. It started out as an emotional dependency on him because she didn't get everything she needed from me I guess (I take medication that kind of numbs my emotions and makes it difficult to connect sometimes) and she was afraid to talk about it. Then it really transitioned into emotional cheating and then moved into online sexual cheating. It never got to the point that they were sending nudes but it was lots of very suggestive flirting. To her, it was basically an escapist fetish where she got to be a different person and live in a different world. Of course that is partly her wanting to be a different person but it also involves her wanting to be with a different person than me.

Not once in any of the messages was I mentioned. I made her dinner for her birthday just last month and she sent a picture of it to him saying she made it for herself. I would find



pictures and texts that I could tell when they were sent and it was right underneath my nose. She said it never got physical and she never planned on it. By reading her voice and body language it seemed honest, but I can't trust a word she says now.

So we've been together for 10 years and share so much with each other. Our lives are painfully intertwined and I don't even know the first step to resolving that. That being said, I still love her and compared to cheater responses I see on this sub, she seems to be genuinely sorry and willing to do whatever it takes to change and earn trust.

### ***“Keshawn”***

I can't stop visualising what happened.

#### NeedSupport

TL/DR: my girlfriend cheated on me and I'm trying my best to still make this work, but I'm plagued by the thought of what she did. I can't stop visualising his face and the two of them in bed together, it hurts indescribably and I can't sleep.

Sorry for the long read, but thank you to those who give their time to get through it.

It's not been long since I found out that my girlfriend had cheated on me with her friend on 4 separate occasions over the course of a month. She'd been spending time with him more and more and being less and less intimate/affectionate as the month went on. I had always done my best to be loving, caring and supportive but it clearly wasn't enough. I suspected what was happening almost from the start, but kept being reassured he was just a friend, she only loved me etc. Eventually the trickle-truthing started.

At first she admitted that her anxiety had recently been really bad because she was hiding the fact she had some feelings for this guy, it was “just a crush” but she felt guilty and didn't know how to tell me. I cried, I was angry, I was hurt, but after a few hours of venting and talking i eventually got her to agree to cut contact with him and work on our relationship.

The day after, she changed her mind. She didn't want to lose him as a friend, and I couldn't bear to be second best so I broke up with her. The day after that i went to her house to drop off her things, she lives with her grandparents due to her parents kicking her out at a young age, And so I spoke to her nan and her aunt who I told about the cheating. They were supportive and kind, and it was awful saying goodbye to them.

The day after that, she came back begging for another chance, she made an awful mistake and she couldn't bear to lose me, she was prepared to give her ‘friend’ up for me and wouldn't talk to him again, i was all that mattered and she'd spend the rest of her life making it up to me, etc, etc.

I should have given it more thought, or used my head instead of my heart because I soon decided to give her a chance. I'm hesitant, I haven't forgiven or forgotten and I'm not sure I ever will, but I'm really trying to move past what happened.

It's been a few weeks since then, and so far we've been good. She herself has been fine, she's been loving and affectionate, Ive felt really appreciated so far and it seems like

she's trying to put the effort in. The problem I'm having is my own head and my own thoughts.

Once something triggers me or I begin to think about it, I spiral so far down into this pit of despair, and anger and hopelessness and I have no idea how to make the hurt stop. I'm just sat up in bed with her sleeping beside me, wanting to cry and scream at her for what she did, I can't stop seeing the guy's face, and visualising what they did together and it's making me sick to the core. I love her but it's so crushing knowing she gave her body to someone else not once, but four times and lied to me so many times.

I don't really know what I'm asking for, I just can't sleep and I hurt, and I needed to tell someone who might be able to understand the pain I feel right now.

### ***"Leon"***

Wife cheated 11 years with significant quantity for the past 6 years

#### NeedSupport

I caught my wife on the phone when I was at work 3rd shift. From there, she was caught in a tornado of lies to cover who she was talking to. I did get honesty. She was busted and scared of the repercussions of her actions. (There is absolutely no domestic violence)

As she came clean, she looked as if there was more. I was not overreacting and at that point I wanted to open a door to come clean.. because I knew if there was more I didn't know about, and found out later, I don't think it would have turned out as well as it was going.

I have never cheated. We were together 5 years before we got married. I was/am happily married. I love her. We have 3 children. One she brought into the relationship and 2 I brought into the relationship. We were never able to have one of our own(I think my count is low).

So I had 2 phrases and said with the answers provided there will be no retaliation or yelling.

First one was " tell me something I don't know" Second one was " tell me something I don't want to hear"

This opened the world she had outside of home and things were primarily done at work. She communicated with her child's father behind my back since 2015. (she abandoned him at conception and I have been her child's dad since she was three. She's 14 now.) Then there was a bout of revealing that drew out 19 men over the past 5 years and the details of her actions with them. She has not slept with anyone, but had had intimate contact.

I don't know how I survived this.

I am so hurt because.. she kept this from me and I really felt loved the whole time this was happening. I mean really like nothing was wrong.

She demonized me to them as her line in she explained. Some of what was bothering her we could have communicated better but she made the decision to use those issues a

different way. They weren't super bad issues and and we were able to address them as we were airing out what went wrong.

There is so much to write.

It's so weird how I can actually see her love for me in her eyes.

So the pain is .. weird. It is so destructing at times ... and I do that cry where my body shuts down. I don't cry very well. I am a strong man at 42. (Not bad looking) She is 34 (Extremely Beautiful) . She is very pretty. She was nice to me. I do not regret getting married because I liked her and loved her and intimacy is still healthy because we had a pact the the marriage would not be based on sex.

I think I am writing this is because I need to get this off my chest. I want the pain to at least simmer down and not just come out of nowhere. I have only slept 26 hours since I caught her. I am loosing weight fast. I am stupid for wanting to be with her. But I am so addicted to her.

She has admitted fault and disgust in herself and based on her level of transparency I think she wanted out of that life. She said she felt relieved getting caught. She handed over her phones and all digital accounts voluntarily.

This is such a mess. But the pain... I need to figure out this pain.. through airing things out hashing things out and unraveling everything, it's as if her doing what she did was the only thing wrong.

The pain of this scares me.

Those who read this. Thank You. I just needed to say something.

### ***“Marcus”***

Please, tell me how.

#### NeedSupport

Glad you had your chance to spill your guts. Now, please let me talk. Please explain to me how to “get over it” and “move on”? Let me know how I (48m) can make you (43f) feel better after you ripped my heart out, chewed it up, spit it out, stomped on it then chopped it into tiny pieces bits? Please tell me how. Please tell me how I need to “man up” after you fucked by best friend of over 35 years? The friend with whom he and I each comforted the other after breakups in our younger days? The friend with whom we each comforted each other when my father died and his mother died a few years later. The friend who I comforted for a week when his dog died a few years ago. The friend that was the best man at our wedding. The friend I would spend every Sunday with during the football season. The friend you’ve said from day one you thought didn’t like you. Don’t worry about how I deal with him, this is between you and me right now. Please, tell me how?

Tell me how I talk to my children about how their mother, my wife, cheated on their father and how he is now a bereft shell of the man he used to be? Tell me the best way to wipe the tears off of my daughter’s cheeks when she realizes the dad she has known all her life is no more? Tell me how to talk to my son about how to be a good man, husband and father when, apparently, I epically failed at the husband part?

Tell me how I face our friends when you told me that some (and probably all) of them knew about what was going on but none of them said anything?  
 Tell me how I can fall asleep after your “soul cleansing confession”?  
 Tell me how? Where’s the book? Where’s the checklist? What are the steps?  
 Tell me how the person I trusted to hold my soul sacred, as I did for yours, laughed at it, spit on it then threw it away?  
 Tell. Me. How.

### ***“Nelson”***

Talked with the wife of the person my wife cheated on me with.

#### Advice

So today I told my (35m) wife (33f) of 14 years that I informed the wife of the guy that she was in a relationship with about what’s going on.

Back when I was deployed for the Army in 2010 my wife met somebody online and then met him in person. They had, according to her, and emotional and not very physical relationship. Our daughter was one year old at the time so I worked on the relationship and we move past her infidelity at the time. She swears there is no intercourse but just touching and kissing and things like that when they actually met.

Fast forward another 10 years and at the beginning of August I found that they had reconnected online and were planning on meeting up while I was away on a trip. So since that time we’ve been separated but as we now have three kids we are trying to make things work.

My wife has mental illness issues and previous trauma from when she was abused sexually as a child. So I’m fairly understanding that her actions are symptoms of what she’s been through but understand that she is still making the choices that she makes. On Sunday she asked that I help her not contact this individual anymore. I’ve been supportive and helpful so that she can get to a good mental state so that both of us can then decide whether or not we want to continue our relationship or get a divorce.

I was reading some of the posts on this sub and saw a lot of comments on letting the other party know what’s taking place. So I searched online and found the wife of the guy that she’s been cheating on me with. Yesterday I called her on the phone and let her know what her husband has been doing behind her back. Let’s call her Kay. I sent Kay screenshots of their emails and text conversations. Kay was obviously shocked to find out that this was going on and again that this happened back in 2010.

So today I told my wife about the conversation I had with Kay. My wife freaked out. I know that because of her mental state she’s not stable and she has told me that she’s not sure who she wants at this point. I know a lot of it was shock and embarrassment for my wife that now Kay knows. But I just want to make sure that I’m not crazy in having contacted Kay as well as now considering the divorce without my wife being in a solid mental state because her reaction showed exactly what I feared, she cares more about their relationship than ours.

***“Oliver”***

My story, followed by a question.

NeedSupport

D day was 09/09/2019.

I (M33) met my (ex)wife (F30) in high-school. We fell in love pretty quickly and ended up getting married soon after high-school was over. She was my first and only sexual partner and the only woman I've ever loved, where she had been with a few guys before. We spent a very long time grinding our way to the nice things in life we always wanted, nice house, cars, toys, typical middle class American dream, since we both grew up very poor. In this situation I grew in my career where my (ex)wife wasn't stable in the job market. During our marriage she would often tell lies where they weren't needed and make promises she wouldn't keep. We ended up having a son, which is something we spoke about wanting our whole marriage.

On 09/09/2019 I woke up to a text message saying she was leaving me. Completely blindsided me. Worst day of my life. I come to find out she cheated on me with someone she met one month before, at a job she just took. She told me she didn't love me and hadn't for “a long time”. I never saw signs of anything going wrong. She moves out and rents a room with this guy. I beg her to come back over and over, but she refused. She came to see our son once a week for about an hour at a time, but mostly it was to get her things or ask me for money. The one month mark it turns out this guy she left me for kicks her to the curb. She tries confiding in me, which I told her to never speak to me about.

After this guy leaves her she didnt stop there. She tells me that she is sleeping around on tinder. It's weird because she was treating me like I was a friend she could brag about this stuff to. I told her how much it hurt me but it didn't phase her. In total she slept with the guy she left me for and three random guys on the internet. Then decided that she was sorry and didn't want to be like that anymore. She came back home after being gone for 2 months. At this point I had a divorce submitted to the courts.

I wanted nothing more than to have my family back, the pain was so terrible. I would cry every day worried about her (I thought she was on drugs), I would cry at work, I was devastated. I took her back because I love her. At first it was like the biggest relief. I got my wife back and everything will be okay. We went to couples counseling, then found out we were pregnant. That was scary. It's a sick feeling to think your wife could be carrying someone else's child and it's a stranger. Good news, the dna showed my daughter is mine.

It's been a very rough time, however I feel a lot of terrible emotion. I feel violated, confused on why it would happen, how could you walk out on your family for someone you didn't know? How could you leave your child like they are nothing? How can you walk out on a 13 year marriage?

As the months pass by I feel like I love her less and less. I'm afraid of being alone. I'm afraid she can just leave again like it was nothing. She tries to reassure me that she loves me, she made a mistake, she slept around because she thought it would make her feel good but it didn't. I feel like I'm the only one who has to deal with the pain. I'm back in IC but I don't feel like it's helping. I have graphic thoughts of her infidelity and don't know I can get over it. I'm not suicidal, but I feel like I wish I was dead. I essentially hate my life. I see my son loving her and paying more attention to her than he does with me, and I think to myself - that woman left us for someone she didn't know and wouldn't come see you. He was too young to remember. She is aware of how I feel.

I want the pain to go away but I know it isn't that easy.

The question: Should I stay or should I leave her? Will the pain go away? I now have two children with her, she is a stay at home mom and if I leave her she will be in a very terrible spot. No vehicle, no money, she would have to move in with her parents who live 100miles away in a area that is off grid.

I would like to have input from people in a similar situation, people who had a life long relationship and what you went through to either pull past the infidelity or move on from it.

TIA

### ***"Percy"***

"Just" an emotional affair, but the lying is what gets me the most.

#### NeedSupport

Our neighbor revealed an emotional affair between her husband and my wife just a week ago. I feel like if it were just the emotional affair, I might be able to accept it easier and continue to work on our marriage, but there has been so much deceit.

For context, I don't approve of drinking, smoking, marijuana use in my marriage, and especially illegal drug use. My wife has a history with them all, but I don't know of any hard drug use since before our marriage more than 8 years ago. However, she has lied a lot to me throughout our marriage about drinking, smoking, and marijuana use, as well as prescription drug abuse and especially her eating disorder.

After our last bout of marriage counseling, I was told that in order to build our marriage, I would have to let myself be vulnerable and trusting. I did that, and it worked, I started feeling like I was more in love than I had ever been, and that things were going better than they ever had. Come to find out, for the last 8-12 months, she has been hiding money using an account that I knew about, but didn't have access to, and using the money to buy alcohol. Over the last 7-8 months, she has been frequently drinking, getting much of it from our neighbor (his intentions I don't know). He has also been giving her a lot of marijuana, and from what I did discover, likely at least offered her LSD and mushrooms. Assuming she is telling the truth now, "only" drinking, smoking, and consuming marijuana while having this emotional affair, and saying she didn't have control because she says that she recently got a bipolar diagnosis, it doesn't seem like as terrible a thing as



many here have posted about their spouses cheating. So am I wrong to feel so hurt, and pessimistic about continuing our marriage?

We have kind of started talking, and sometimes I do feel bad for her, and like maybe I should try to make it work, but I think about the deceit that went on so long in so many ways, I feel like there is no point.

### ***“Quintavius”***

The line of infidelity and emotional affairs.

NeedSupport

Longtime lurker, first time poster. Sorry for the random musings.

How does infidelity really look in our lives? There are extreme cases I've experienced or heard of, but there's an awfully large “grey zone” in relationships. I figure much of how we view the line of infidelity is a personal choice, but I'm wondering if there's any consensus among this group.

About 1 1/2 years ago: I found flirty and sexual conversations between my SO and her old pot dealer while she was in the midst of a depressive episode that had ended with a DUI/arrest. She admitted her wrongdoing, told me everything and we talked about why she had been talking to him. It wasn't easy, but through honest and frequent communication we worked on us and were stronger than ever.

Last week: After a small rough patch for a week id been feeling distant and questioning the relationship. One night I notice she's being extra protective of her phone and alarm bells go off. I looked through who she'd been messaging and no one out of the ordinary but an old friend who had previously expressed disinterest in me/the relationship. I couldn't help myself, I looked. Found that within the last two weeks of intermittent texting he'd said he needed a girlfriend and asked her to make the switch (her response: I could do that 😊 you're such a bachelor these days women will swoon) and then asked her for naked pictures (her responses: lol right good luck with that) and they continued to talk for over a week as if nothing had happened.

Did she do anything especially egregious? I cannot gauge that. Did she break my trust? It's hard to know right now. Do I feel like shit? Yes....

Don't have any advice I'm specifically seeking, although I don't know what to do next so anyone who can relate or empathize I'd love to hear your thoughts. More so am wondering what you consider the line of infidelity, especially in terms of emotional affairs.

(And also - what's the general opinion on the morality of snooping on someone's phone?)

### ***“Robert”***

Need relationship help

NeedSupport

So.. this is a throw away account for obvious reasons, but me and my wife have been married a long time and awhile back I suspected her of having an online flirtatious

relationship and asked her if she was cheating she said no and I felt like complete garbage for it, but there was signs of it she used to never keep her phone by her and then it went to 24/7 she wouldn't let it out of her sight just weird shit to me out of the ordinary, well recently her phone was left on and I wasn't even snooping someone had texted her and I looked just to tell her who it was, well lone behold I see what she has really been doing because she left the chat open between her and the other person she was talking to and it blew me away i was right all along. We have been together a long time and I dont know what to do. I dont have anyone to talk to because I don't like to talk about it and have anyone we know be judgemental about my wife idk its just how I am, but how or what would any of u do? I'm just stuck in my head all alone right now.

### ***“Steven”***

My wife (27F) said she cheated on me (31M) because she was never attracted to Asian men. We are both Asian and have a 4 year old son together.

#### Advice

I am 31 and my wife is 27. We married when she was 22 and I was 26.

Friday outside of work I was confronted by a man (49) I kind of knew of but didn't know. He asked if I knew who he was and then started saying how powerful he was in his industry and how he rarely loses, and sure as hell wasn't going to go without a fight. As I was getting my bearings, he drops the bombshell that he's been sleeping with my wife and that he's not going to let her go, and she loves him too.

I try to keep my composure as I drive home. For the first time in my marriage I did a deep dive into her iCloud. In it I found a bunch of infuriating and disgusting text messages such as him comparing his dick size to mine and saying that he's surprised an Asian man could have taken her virginity.

Then other texts about how she could not resist white men. There were texts from him jealous that she had hooked up twice with this other guy. This other guy was also white- I knew that because he's the face of a local boutique hotel his parents own and the family's pretty well known.

The earliest text message that showed infidelity was a rouge conversation with someone she met at a party who asked if he should book a hotel room. He sent over selfies and he was this actor type.

The worst part is her thanking him for really expensive gifts and I realize she probably has a secret bank account somewhere.

I go and pick up my son and send him to his grandma's. My wife comes home and I confront her. She starts crying and saying that I'm the only man she's ever loved. That I was the father of her kid, and that she had built a home with me. And that she doesn't regret marrying me- it was the happiest day of her life.

I said that these text messages are absolutely disgusting and are tearing me apart. She first tried to say that he initiated most of those conversations and the context of the messages was skewed. I asked what that the heck that even meant.



She paused for a long moment and said that he made her feel desired. That a lot of these guys loved all her features and would say they were so obsessed with her that they literally love any woman that looks remotely like her. And that they continued to influence various promotions, and helped her network and increase her earnings astronomically.

Then she broke down and admitted that she was never physically attracted to Asian men. And that she was never attracted to me, and throughout the marriage, she became even less attracted to me. And that the only people she felt sexually excited about have been white. And that was the main reason she cheated, and feels it hard to resist white men. But then she said that we work better together as a team, and we have a son to raise. She said I would be ruining his life if I put him through an ugly divorce and I would only see him part of the time.

What do I do? She said she can't help what she is attracted to. We usually have sex at least once a week and I'm satisfied with regular sex and thought she was too. But it burns me that it was probably duty sex all along.

Another problem is that her affair partner she confesses says he wants to have a kid with her and be a family with her. That he'd give her a better life and that he wasn't going to let her go. And that he was persisting and always was with her on business trips. She confessed that she did feel some kind of passion with him that's addicting and sometimes imagines the what ifs.

Help.

Our families know each other and our friend circle is also very much established- I'm totally unprepared for the humiliation of rollercoaster of emotions ahead.

## Appendix C

## Emerging Coding and Memoing

Normative experience (from literature)

- Anger as primary emotion, specifically toward affair partner RE
- Wanting to end relationship ER
- All fault is with female FF
- Physical/sexual affair is worse than emotional EA

Male role norms inventory (MRNI) factors

- **Avoidance of femininity** (in choices of activities: e.g. play with trucks, watch football, not wear make-up)
- **Negativity toward sexual minorities/Homophobia:** never compliment another man, never show affection toward another man
- **Self-reliance (through mechanical skills):** men should know how to fix house or car SR
- **Toughness:** take risks, investigate if there is a noise at night, make his way in the world, respond with toughness T
- **Dominance:** men should be the leader, men should make the final decision, provide discipline DOM
- **Importance of sex** (always like sex, never turn it down, always be ready to have sex) IS
- **Restrictive emotionality** (never admit when his feelings are hurt, be detached in emotionally charged situations, not be too quick to tell others that they care about them, not react when others cry) RF

Doing these things results in painful outcomes  
 Deviating from these things results in painful outcomes



Carlos

Posted by  
u/CTArtist  
6 hours ago

9.22.20

## I'm Starting to Resent My Wife

### Advice

Hey y'all. I'm posting from my main account because at this point, I just don't care if she sees.

community  
sees.

So, I'm starting to resent my wife for her affair. It wasn't sexual, as far as I know, only a kiss, but I still feel so betrayed. She says it was because she felt I didn't love her. I admit, I'm partially at fault for not doing enough when she told me over the course of 2 months that we were growing distant, but I didn't know the cause of it. I keep trying to fix our relationship, but I just don't think it's working out.

PA

FF

SR

Let me give a bit of backstory real quick. We've been together for 3 years now, and she told me about the affair 3 weeks ago. She didn't give me a name, who he is, or basically the full story. She at first told me it was an emotional affair, that he had TRIED to kiss her, but she told him that she was married. However, I recently found out that he HAD kissed her. I could forgive an emotional affair, but a physical one? It's just a bit too much...

emotional  
vs.  
physical  
emotional

physical/vs.  
emotional

Anyway, I'm currently in Therapy trying to ascertain my feelings and whether or not I should keep trying to work on our relationship, but I feel so drained and resentful. She's constantly on her phone talking to her friends, she barely sleeps in the same house with me anymore, and before, when this whole thing started, she told me that a part of her doesn't want to continue the relationship. She won't go to therapy with me, so currently I'm the only one going. She even got hostile at the suggestion of it.

ER

→ woman is distant

## Coding examples

### Physical vs. emotional (how is the emotional affair described)

A – physical cheating was finally admitted to, in same sentence though he describes children spending days with AP

B – “rage” response to emotional affair, online in WoW, (venting about husband’s depression, ap was going through break-up); “they made each other feel special and got addicted to the butterflies they gave each other”. “lost my best friend”

C – “It wasn’t sexual, as far as I know, only a kiss, but I still feel so betrayed “ initially describes only emotional affair, then describes as physical affair, i.e. she was kissed by him (intrusive imagining of her with partner), Everyday I imagine what she did, what they talked about while he replaced me in her heart

F – hasn’t been physical except that she kissed him, has feelings for him, that she is in love with him

J – transformed from emotional dependency, to emotional cheating, to online sexual cheating (suggestive flirting, no nude picture sharing) (husband admits lack of emotional connection due to medication) (most difficult part was that husband was not mentioned)

K – visualizing his face and the two of them in bed together, can’t sleep; crushing knowing she gave her body to someone else, not once but four times

N – emotional and not very physical relationship

O – have graphic thoughts of her infidelity

Q – does this count as infidelity (or emotional affair)?

### Context of anger and other emotions

A – second guessing everything, my self-worth is shattered

B – I lost my best friend, god fucking dammit – I can’t even cry about it though, because there is so much rage mixed up in the sadness I can’t let any of it out. (admits history of depression, has flat mouth emoji as signature/conclusion). Confusion: I wasn’t sure if I wanted to kill myself, wipe the shit back on her, or just disintegrate like Thanos snapped me out of existence

C – describes “betrayed,” trying to ascertain my feelings in therapy, drained and resentful

D – disgust

E – I'm in shock, so confused

G – hopeless (very often I feel like it's better if I just never made it home)

H – hurt and betrayed

J – afraid (of single life)

K – I cried, I was angry, I was hurt, but after a few hours of venting and talking I eventually got her to agree to cut contact. Once something triggers me, I spiral so far down into this pit of despair, and anger and hopelessness

L – so hurt. The pain of this scares me

N – fear (that she cares more for the ap relationship than theirs)

O – hurt (being told about her sleeping around on Tinder, as if he was a friend she could confide in); scary (not knowing if wife was pregnant with his or another's child); violated, confused; afraid of being alone

Q – feel like shit

R – lonely (in relation to not having others to process this with)

S – infuriated and disgusted, burns me that it was probably duty sex all along, unprepared for the humiliation of roller coaster emotions ahead

**Surfing binary between a) Being firm/cutting off and b) accepting with patience and affection**

A – Exception: pleading with her to stay or decide she doesn't want to be with me (i.e. responsibility is on her)

B – scheduled for marriage counseling, wanting a more extensive apology, I already told her to cut him out of her life, and that I wanted to see her do it

C – suggested therapy, she got hostile at suggestion

D – She then began attacking me as a father and I engaged. We had a few back and forth exchanges before I told her I've moved on and not to contact me. She responded by calling me pathetic. I said pathetic is a woman who...I said it's all brand new to me and ceased communicating

E – This is shit, but I'm not fighting for someone who gives up so fast and easily. Turning into Ross from Friends

F – title language: “I just kicked her out this morning, and I don’t know if that was the right thing to do”. I have tried showing her more affection and proof I love her. I said to my therapist for a date that I would want her to make a decision on if she wants to be with him or to make our marriage work. I stood there with a smile on my face and told her not to come home tonight

G – I don’t want to do this anymore but she refused to accept that and will likely be in my house when I get back

H – Well, I am just about to drop the hammer (e.g. tell family, cut off financially), “cut her off” apart from contact with our daughter)

J – I told her we’re done and no matter what I need to move out and have time off. But is it toxic for me to want to recover mentally and emotionally for the chance to get back together?

K – I couldn’t bear to be second best so I broke up with her

### **Anxiety**

A – For weeks my mental health was massively strained and I couldn’t see the light at the end of the tunnel due to anxiety attacks and borderline depression

B – anxiety and overplanning as previous issues

E – I lost it but called a friend. Got calmed down and reeled it in...Until my evening when I have no distraction.

F – On the days leading up to the trip I can’t control my anxiety and we do nothing but fight and say horrible shit to each other. I start getting ansty

G – worried I am going to snap somehow when I get back and get put into this situation

K – once something triggers me

### **Wanting to stay**

A – Not wanting to separate, I pleaded with her to stay

B – We have both said we want to fix it, but if anything, the wall of ice between us has grown into a glacier since I found out

C – I keep trying to fix our relationship, but I just don’t think it’s working out. Anyway I’m currently in therapy trying to ascertain my feelings and whther or not I should keep trying to work on our relationship

D – I’ve moved on

E – I was over it

**Binary between A) Things were perfect or B) Man acknowledging role in challenges of relationship**

A – I consider myself a model husband/father always putting everyone else before my own needs. Yet I can not understand why she did this to me! She had everything and chose to throw it/me/us away!

B – My depression was toxic to our relationship, and instead of talking to me about it, she was venting to this guy; She didn’t apologize for not talking about it (she says she didn’t think I could emotionally handle it because of the depression, which is a fair guess for her to make

C – I admit, I’m partially at fault for not doing enough when she told me over the course of two months that we were growing distant, but I didn’t know the cause of it; I’m starting to wonder if maybe I deserved it?

E – Blindsides me. Mistakes may have been made.

F – I haven’t been the greatest partner this whole time (temper and intimidating kids)

G – drugs and alcohol were involved

I – I had worked my ass off trying to reconnect with her

J – I would never even have to think about worrying of her cheating; I take medication that kind of numbs my emotions and makes it difficult to connect sometimes

**“Broken”**

A – my self-worth is shattered and essentially I am a broken man

B – I feel broken inside, moreso than before

C – I keep trying to fix our relationship, but I just don’t think it’s working out

E – Shattered me. Absolutely destroyed me. And over here I’m in no position to be shattered. (seeing her get picked up by boyfriend on camera)

**Therapy**

B – we both have individual counselors. Hope that in couples counseling she will realize apology has to be MUCH more thorough

C – she won't go to therapy, even got hostile at the suggestion of it

F – A few weeks after I started therapy I asked her if I could go on her camping trip

### **Concluding ask/statement**

A – How could she do this? (need support)

B – Any kind words would be appreciated (need support)

C – How do I deal with this? Please give your advice. (advice)

D – I want her to feel bad (post separation)

E – Been reading and downloading the motivation and it's helped so much. Just know I'm lurking here and you're all helping. If you're in my shoes, stay positive. (Rant)

F – So reddit community, what do I do here? I have read about being firm...I am at a loss. (need support)

G – Don't know what else to do. Very often feel like it's better if I just never made it home (need support)

H – Which of the above do you have experience with and recommend I do/don't do for the best chance of a peaceful life? (therapy) – no mention of therapy

I – How do I approach her with this so I do not hurt her? What do I say? Any advice? (Advice)

J – Am I a fool for making this a personal goal? Is it toxic for me to want to get back together? (Advice)

K - I don't really know what I'm asking for...I needed to tell someone who might be able to understand the pain I feel right now (Need Support)

L – Those who read this. Thank you. I just needed to say something (Need Support)

M – Tell. Me. How. (Need Support)

N – But I just want to make sure I'm not crazy in having contacted AP's spouse. (Advice)



O – I would like to have input from people in a similar situation, people who had a lifelong relationship and what you went through to either pull past the infidelity or move on from it. (Need support)

P – So, am I wrong to feel so hurt, and pessimistic about continuing our marriage? (Need Support)

Q – Don't have any advice I'm specifically seeking, although I don't know what to do next so anyone who can relate or empathize I'd love to hear your thoughts. More so am wondering what you consider the line of infidelity, especially in terms of emotional affairs (And also – what's the general opinion on the morality of snooping on someone's phone?) (Need Support)

R – What would any of you do? (Need support)

S – Help. (Advice)

### Memoing

How do men describe their experience and current needs as a betrayed partner within initial posts to an online forum devoted to coping with infidelity?

What type of support do men seek when making an initial post to an online forum devoted to coping with infidelity?

- How do they define the presenting problem?
- What is their experience with their current needs not being met?
- What have they tried already to find a solution?
- What do they think will be helpful?

For many, the revelation of a partner's infidelity is an overwhelming event. When such behavior is brought out into the open, the injured party is forced to soberly confront inaccurate assumptions. For heterosexual couples, this may include indictments of rigid and limiting gender roles and/or the implicit and unrealistic expectations of monogamy. For men who experience the infidelity of their female partner, this trial also involves their negotiating deviance from the socially expected role of perpetrating infidelity, to that of being a "victim." Furthermore, men may also be reckoning with the sudden appearance of information that was previously hidden in the blind spots of male privilege. Not surprisingly the men included in this study universally described confusion. Oftentimes this uncertainty was superficially situated next to or immediately attributed to actions of their female partner. Through comparison of the group as a whole including informative outlying accounts, however, men were found to be disoriented, not in relation to their partner's actions, but rather concerning their own identity.

### Connection

Partner was best friend  
 Social supports knew but didn't tell him  
 Doesn't want to enlist friends as judges of partner (or himself)  
 Forum was helpful

#### Value

Me vs. the other guy (her choosing)  
 Her having needs outside of me  
 She didn't think I could handle it  
 Scared of having no identity alone, being abandoned again  
 I failed as a husband, father  
 Invoking of property

#### Morality

Is it okay for me to be upset?  
 Did I do something wrong?  
 I tried really hard (put her first, made changes)  
 I know I had some role  
 She is a shameful person

#### Agency

What actions I took  
 What actions can I take  
 I want her to feel a certain way  
 I am aware I may not be prepared

	<b><u>Validation</u></b>	<b><u>Advice</u></b>	<b><u>Evaluation</u></b>
Desire	Safety	Ability	Morality
Experience	Alone	Confused	Guilty/Righteous
Hallmarks	pain of emotional infidelity	Re-experiencing (PTSD)	Non-consent
Display	motivation to stay	what they've tried so far	
	Deficits of partner		
Anger	To modulate sadness	As motivation to engage	To inflict pain

#### **Misc**

Use of audience perspective, bringing in third  
 Heteronormativity/privilege (pressure for primary status, property, dictating outcome;  
 want of social supports)  
 References to therapy

### **Establishing Connection to Social Supports**

The choice to make an initial post is an act of attempting to connect with others. The men in this study oftentimes describe inadequate social supports due to an overdependence upon their partner, the collateral loss of friends, and an unwillingness to utilize existing friends. Through initial posts, men seek support through external processing, connecting to others who have a shared experience, and asking for encouragement. As they seek admission to this online community, men employ a common language and often display heteronormative relationship markers.

#### **In the context of inadequate social resources**

Some men in this study describe the heteronormative scenario of emotional overdependence on their female partner. For Benny, his female partner was his “best friend,” and with the discovery of an infidelity, he now views that support as “lost.” As Julio considers his situation, he describes being “painfully intertwined” with his girlfriend, resulting in his worry that he is a “coward” who does not know how to live independently. For these two, the discovery of infidelity results in immediate loss of their primary support.

In other cases, men report experiencing the loss of additional social supports due to the affair. Marcus notes that the couple’s friends colluded with his partner to conceal the affair. He also identifies that the affair partner was his “best friend of over 35 years” (Marcus); while Gio notes that his wife cheated with “someone very, very close.” In these cases, social supports are felt to be appropriated by and now exclusive to the female partner.

Other posters identify existing social supports, but are reluctant to disclose the affair to them. Robert states “I don’t have anyone to talk to because I don’t like to talk about it and have anyone we know be judgmental.” Steven adds that he is unprepared for the “humiliation” as their “friend circle” is made aware of events. In these cases, being known by friends to have been the victim of infidelity is shameful and forecloses on their availability as supports. As such, the anonymity of an online forum becomes appealing.

#### **Asking for support, not advice**

Contrary to stereotypes that men are mostly interested in the active process of fixing things, more than half of the posters selected the tag “need support” rather than “advice.” In some cases, support is sought through external processing. Alex who begins his post by stating in his title that he “can’t continue,” concludes that “I guess I just need...a platform to vent my thoughts.” What seemed hopeless as he began his narrative became less overwhelming as he concluded.

Others ask for support with reference to a desire for connection to others who may share parts of this experience. Keshawn writes “I don’t really know what I’m asking for, I just...needed to tell somebody who might be able to understand the pain I feel right now.” Leon combines the use of external processing with a desire to connect to others. “I need to figure out this pain...through airing things out hashing things out and unraveling everything.” He concludes with “Those who read this. Thank you. I just needed to say something.”

A third variation on seeking support, rather than advice, is displayed by Benny. As mentioned above, Benny is now without his wife in the role of best friend. He finishes his post by suggesting to the readers “Any kind words would be appreciated.” He seeks support through requesting the active encouragement of others.

### **Deploying a common language**

Many initial posters make a bid for social inclusion within the forum by displaying their knowledge of common and unique vocabulary. Keshawn and Alex invoke the term “trickle truths,” during which details of the infidelity are gradually disclosed only upon discovery. Many posters refer to “D-day,” or that date of discovery of the affair, so that the readers can frame up the chronologic freshness of the experience. Oliver begins his post with a simple sentence “D day was...” and then he cites a specific date. Hans shows he has not done his homework as he titles his post “DDay is approaching fast” and misinterprets it to symbolize the day he takes vengeful action to confront his partner about her already known infidelity.

Some men also choose to describe the degree to which their relationship hits heteronormative markers. Oliver, who also employs the D-day date as an opening line, makes sure to identify himself as adhering to a default set of societal expectations. He met with wife in high school, she was the only women he has had sex with or loved, and they “spent a long time grinding our way to nice things in life we always wanted.” He adds that he was successful in his employment while his wife was not. They also had a son, “which is something we talked about wanting our whole marriage.” For Oliver, the display of his heteronormative resume comes before any other information and accounts for approximately 20% of his post content.

### **Practicing Confrontation with (ex) Partner**

#### **In the context of feeling unskillful**

A significant shared experience among posters is that they feel unskillful in their communications with their partner. Several men recount experiences during which they suspected infidelity, inquired about it, and were further deceived. Robert describes that he “asked her if she was cheating she said no and I felt like complete garbage for it.” With much discomfort, Carlos experiences his spouse as distant. She told him “a part of her doesn’t want to continue the relationship. She won’t go to therapy with me, so I’m the only one going.” Carlos’ narrative also overlaps with Dante, in that both posters experience their partner as somewhat aggressive; i.e. “hostile” (Carlos) and “attacking” (Dante). Although Dante is seeking space from his partner, he is also frustrated when he allows his buttons to be pushed and he engages.

#### **Role playing**

Marcus, who identified his injury as having been betrayed by his wife with his best friend, practices confrontation in the form of a role play. His post title, “Tell. Me. How.” frames up a rhetorical demand he is making for his wife to provide him with the steps needed to recover from a trauma that has left him a “bereft shell of a man.” He proposes that she has been afforded a “soul cleansing confession,” yet he is now without recourse and “chopped into tiny pieces” regarding identity as a husband, father, and friend. In this dramatic monologue, Marcus is even able to be mindful of his wife’s (anticipated) technique of attempting to distract him by focusing on the misdeeds of Marcus’ best friend. To this, Marcus replies “Don’t worry about how I deal with him, this is between you and me right now.” It is also significant that Marcus uses the tag of “need support” and not “rant” in this initial post.

#### **Publicly declaring**

Carlos, who struggles with his wife's distancing of herself, practices confrontation somewhat courageously and without anonymity, as he posts from a "main account" which places him with a specific human identity, instead of the normative "throw away" account that is uniformly used for "obvious reasons" (Robert). Carlos begins and titles his post to indicate that he is angry in the form of resentment. He states that "I just don't care if she sees" which feels more like he is wanting there to be the potential for her to read the post. He builds upon his foundation of anger (i.e. resentment). Instead of blocking expression, however, as it did for Benny, it motivates Carlos to be bold and speak up with accountability. He transitions into refuting his wife's claims that he doesn't love her. He ends his post by musing "I wonder if I possibly deserved it?"

### **Self-talking**

Dante, who is sometimes drawn into defending himself against his ex-wife's allegations, takes a third route. He directs his focus to himself, and suggests he was a poor judge of who his ex-wife was as a person. Dante is able to identify his unrealistic desire to have her feel bad. He accepts that she is fixated on having him be perceived by others as the partner who strayed. His narrative includes owning up to being provoked into a hot-tempered response. Within this retaliation Dante recounts a specific episode designed to counter her name-calling of him as "pathetic." In his post he focuses his judgment on her prioritizing sexual activity over her care taking of children. Choosing not to speak about the event in first-person, he adds that the incident forced "the father to leave a family event in a city 2 hours away" because "she's so desperate to hook up." Dante's concluding remark, and reminder to himself, is that he has not "even dated nor have I attempted to since leaving her." His path to maintaining his composure includes disconnecting from himself, maintaining a stoic path forward, propped up through public declaration and self-mantra.

## **Requesting Direction for What to Do Next**

### **In the context of confusion**

In addition to seeking emotional support and practicing confrontation, many of the men who make initial posts are desiring action and requesting direction. Quintavious, in his initial post concerning what he is calling a potential "emotional affair" by his partner, states "I don't know what to do next." His confusion about possible next actions is shared by others who describe "I dont [*sic*] know what to do" (Robert), "I don't even really know the first step to resolving that" (Julio), and "Don't know what else to do" (Gio). Unlike many stereotypes of men who refuses to ask for assistance, the second most popular tag of initial forum submissions is "advice."

Requests for suggestions about next steps range from very general and big picture to specific regarding unique actions. Oliver's first question for those who read his initial post is "Should I stay or should I leave her?" Frederick is curious about the general tone of how he should be responding when he invites others to weigh-in, "So [forum name] community, what do I do here? I have read about being firm and just cut her off at the knees and I've read about accepting it all and just showing affection with patience. I am at a loss." As Hans considers a long list of possible acts of retribution, he presents the possibility of the separate versions of disclosing his partner's affair: to her family, the affair partner's family, and/or his partner's daughter. He concludes his post with the

inquiry “Which of the above do you have experience with and recommend I do/don’t do for the best chance of a peaceful life?”

### **Feeling as if without power**

Several of these requests for direction exist within contexts of feeling powerless, or a loss of control. Frederick, who struggles to feel confident about which approach to take, also admits that he struggles with his wife’s admitted ambivalence about with whom she would like to be. Leading up to a vacation with his wife, which will be followed by her planned time with her affair partner, he describes “I can’t control my anxiety and we do nothing but fight and say horrible shit to each other.” Frederick, who also actively sought support through counseling, adds “I said to my therapist for a date that I would want her to make a decision on if she wants to be with him or to make our marriage work.” Without the ability to tolerate the unknown without escalating to bad behavior, Frederick wants to find an approach into which he can place his trust.

Steven is also feeling without power. Immediately following his description of being informed that the option of divorce would be “ugly,” “ruining his [son’s] life,” and that he would not have full access to his child, he asks “What do I do?” Steven, who identifies himself and his wife as Asian, shares that his wife has been having multiple affairs with white men. By his post she disclosed that she is only sexually attracted to white men and that “a lot of these guys loved all her features and...that they literally love any women that looks remotely like her.” In addition to hearing about his wife’s complicit behavior as she is reduced to her parts, Steven notes “the worst part” for him was reading text messages in which she thanks an affair partner “for really expensive gifts.” He confirms the significance of his wife’s financial motivations when he recounts her description that “they [white affair partners] continued to influence various promotions and helped her network and increase her earnings astronomically.”

Steven’s personal experience of powerlessness is directly influenced by his wife’s attempts to negotiate both gendered and racist oppression, to which she also likely feels held hostage. Under such structural racism, it is not surprising that Steven and his wife are not able to creatively problem solve. As a result, amicable separation or the cognitive reframe that Steven’s existence as a father who is held hostage will probably be the most damaging influence on his son don’t initially present as options. Reaching out for direction from others not as immediately pressured is a healthy coping strategy.

### **Coping by claiming property**

Several of the men who make initial posts cope with feelings of powerless or lack of control by claiming property. Elliot, an actively deployed serviceman who is “so confused” by his wife’s request for a divorce, finds power in demanding that she plug in their home video surveillance system. He shares that he had previously thought his wife “saved me” from “my funk, my I’m never dating or getting serious just me and dog forever funk.” Upon witnessing footage her interactions with whom he assumes is her affair partner, he describes her as a “girl” and claims that he allowed her to remain in “My house. Where I own 99% of everything in it.”

Percy, upon describing his wife’s emotional affair which involved use of substances states that I don’t approve of drinking, smoking, marijuana use in my marriage.” His use of the word “approve” suggests that he sees himself as positioned with power to grant or restrict certain behavior from his wife. Oliver, who, as noted above while he describes the markers on his heteronormative relationship trajectory, also

discloses a fear that he could be abandoned again without warning. He uses language that he “wanted nothing more than to have my family back.” Even after being informed that his wife had been unhappy for a significant period of time, he longs for the bliss of his past perceptions where nothing was wrong. For these posters, the claiming of property is enacted to counter feelings of powerlessness.

### **Inviting a Reality Check**

In addition to confusion about what actions to take, many of the men posting indicate that they are unsure of how they are perceiving their situation and, therefore, unsure of themselves. Percy wants to know, “Am I wrong to feel so hurt?” while Nelson shares some of his self-doubt when he says, “I just want to make sure I’m not crazy.”

#### **Regarding emotional affairs**

For a few of these initial posters, uncertainty is perched on the slippery slope of what they may label as their partner’s emotional affair. Quintavius directly identifies his ambivalence as he notes to the community that he is “wondering what you consider the line of infidelity, especially in terms of emotional affairs.” After he has stumbled across a one-off, flirtatious text exchange that seemed to quickly end, he shares “Did she do anything especially egregious? I cannot gauge that. Did she break my trust? It’s hard to know. Do I feel like shit? Yes...” For Quintavius, he enlists the opinion of the forum to help him answer the unresolved items.

Percy, who has been discussed above as either granting or withholding paternalistic “approval” in “his” marriage, is also left wondering if he has over-reacted. To him, the emotional affair is not “as terrible a thing as many here have posted about their spouses cheating...and sometimes I do feel bad for her.” Percy is clear about his main concern and notes it in his post title, “‘Just’ an emotional affair, but the lying is what gets me most.” His wife’s secrets have included substance use with his neighbor, her eating disorder, and “hiding money is an account that I knew about, but didn’t have access to.” He also notes that his partner has recently argued she “didn’t have control” because she “got a bipolar diagnosis.” Percy directly links an experience in marriage counseling during which he was “told that in order to build our marriage, I would have to let myself be vulnerable and trusting” to his being taken advantage of with secretive behavior. Percy is ambivalent about putting himself at future risk of being deceived.

Julio is torn between his long and meaningful history with his girlfriend, and his fear of entering into the world without her as a support. Within his post he makes sure to clarify his intention of ending the relationship for now, then asks “But is it toxic for me to want to recover mentally and emotionally for the chance to get back together? I can’t tell if it’s just because of how valuable our 10 years together has been or if I’m just a coward afraid of the unknown single life.” He provides a narrative in which he is depreciates his value as a partner. He both takes “medication that kind of numbs my emotions and makes it difficult to connect sometimes” and “couldn’t be her entire emotional support.” Left unsaid, Julio implies that if he was more capable and could be a proper partner (i.e. one who meets all of her needs) he would have spoken up to have her sever her outside friendship with this person. As with Quintavius and Percy, Julio is influenced by notions that proper, companionate partnership involves total fulfillment and exclusivity, while also prohibiting unknown identities or behaviors of one’s partner.

#### **Making moral considerations, with blindspots**

Some men who make initial posts describe that they are concerned about acting ethically, and suggest they want to do the right thing. Oliver, who has been identified as operating from a paternalistic perspective of ownership, and who admits confusion as to if he should stay or leave the relationship, also seems aware of the contrast in resources between himself and his wife. He offers that “If I leave her, she will be in a very terrible spot. No vehicle, no money, she would have to move in with her parents who live 100miles [*sic*] away in a [*sic*] area that is off grid.”

Within his previously noted context, this consideration of his wife’s potential hardship sounds less like empathy, however, and more like either leverage for her to be forced to stay, or a terrible punishment that he isn’t ready to apply. Oliver has not described a hypothetical separation as also possibly difficult for him as resources are divided to provide basic necessities of housing and transportation to both parents, or that he might need to alter his work schedule to accommodate childcare as his wife enters the workforce. The automatic entitlement he assumes to maintain his level of financial comfort limit Oliver’s ability to accurately and equitably consider his wife’s experience. As a result (and stemming from) this perspective, he operates in isolation, feeling as if “he’s the only one who has to deal with the pain.” Recall that Oliver states he is “confused on why it [his wife’s infidelity] would happen.” For those who are wondering how intensely he experiences discomfort, he offers “I’m not suicidal, but I feel like I wish I was dead. I essentially hate my life.” In this circumstance, there is a strong correlation between Oliver’s depression and the blindspots that male privilege affords. Also recall his request for the most basic advice about if he should stay or leave the relationship.

Nelson also wants to do the right thing. After the discovery of his wife’s plan to meet with an old flame, they have “been separated but as we now have three kids we are trying to make things work.” He does not offer any first-person motivation for working through challenges with his partner. Nelson also applies stigma generously in his description of his wife, “My wife has mental illness issues and previous trauma from when she was abused sexually as a child. So I’m fairly understanding that her actions are symptoms of what she’s been through.” Having portrayed his wife as helpless and concluding that her infidelity is about her illness and abuse rather than her current relationship experiences, Nelson describes that “On Sunday she asked that I help her not contact this individual anymore.” He adds that he’s been “supportive and helpful so that she can get to a good mental state so that both of us can decide whether or not we want to continue or get a divorce.” Through Nelson’s report we learn that it is important for him to be viewed as supportive.

Nelson then reveals that he “was reading some of the posts on this [forum] and saw a lot of comments on letting the other party know what’s taking place.” Nelson describes his disclosure of the affair, to the partner of his wife’s affair partner, without the consent of his wife. He makes sure to use a pseudonym when referring to the affair partner’s wife. He describes that when his wife found out, she “freaked out.” Nelson states that his post is an attempt “to make sure that I’m not crazy in having contacted [pseudonym used].” He also asks for assurance that he is not “crazy” for “considering the divorce without my wife being in a solid mental state.” Nelson interprets his wife’s reaction as showing “exactly what I feared, she cares more about their relationship than ours.”



Nelson's interpretation of his wife's response, as indicative of her priorities and not related to her history of trauma, again demonstrates the difficulty of extending empathy for those operating from a paternalistic perspective. Similar to Oliver, Nelson is considering what his abandonment of his partner might produce. Nelson, however, has asked a leading question. He wants assistance, and is asking for permission, to entertain the idea of leaving. Because his actions have been focused on making unilateral decisions about what is good for his wife and kids, focusing on, or at least admitting he is considering his own wants may be a new experience. Because he does not view his wife as capable of autonomy, he fails to see his previous actions as tyrannical. Nelson would prefer that his wife remain the "crazy" partner. Unfortunately for him, he is starting to doubt the righteousness of his actions.

### **Safely Disclosing Vulnerability**

On a meta level, identifying isolation, acknowledging skill deficiencies, asking for direction, and admitting uncertainty are all behaviors which may produce vulnerability for men. Within the content of these initial posts, however, men disclose descriptions of the unique contexts in which they experience vulnerability in the form of feeling unsafe. For some making their initial post, they have already processed, emoted, and acted in accordance with general forum suggestions.

#### **Dipping a toe in**

Elliot is an example of a traditional masculine typology; a soldier. He is deployed in the military, he has weathered previous betrayal, he is speaking to others to offer advice and support as a part of his continued recovery. As stated above, he copes by claiming property through surveillance and ownership, correlated to management of confusion and not feeling power. Despite his initial stance of being past a crisis point, he shares that he has recently felt "shattered. Especially this past week." And that because of where he is deployed, "I'm in no position to be shattered." He reassures the readers of his post that he sought out a friend, "got calmed down and reeled it in."

Then Elliot oscillates back to disclosing concern as he says "Until my evening when I have no distraction." And then, whoosh, immediately back to providing appreciation to the forum "So. Thank you." He underlines that he has found constructive ways to cope such as going to the gym "to get mad and take it out in there" and "downloading the motivation" of this forum. Elliot has labeled his post as a "rant" although, in relation to most of the content, it is a celebration of his success. Elliot's post is multifaceted, though, and in addition to suggesting mastery over an opponent, if the reader is looking for it, they will hear his admitted susceptibility to an ever-"lurking" and sinister reminder that he can be "absolutely destroyed" by experiencing rejection from another person. In military terms, he camouflages this disclosure

#### **Getting it all back**

Keshawn provides a more direct description of feeling unsafe. He discusses the trickle-truth nature of discovering his girlfriend's affair. He describes that because she was wanting to keep her affair partner as a friend, he "couldn't bear to be second best so I broke up with her." He walks the readers through how he then disclosed the affair behavior, without consent, to his ex-girlfriend's grandparents, with whom she would have to live. He notes that "They were supportive and kind, and that it was awful saying goodbye to them." Keshawn later decided to "give her a chance" when she agreed to

“give up her ‘friend’” and “spend the rest of her life making it up to me, etc, [sic] etc.” Keshawn’s initial post narrative includes operating from a companionate perspective of relationships, appropriating his girlfriend’s family for his own emotional support, and agreeing to reconcile when his terms were met and under the agreement that he was owed a lifelong debt.

Since getting back together, he describes that “she herself has been fine...I’ve felt really appreciated so far and it seems like she’s trying to put the effort in.” But...he continues, “The problem I’m having is my own head and my own thoughts. Once something triggers me...I spiral so far down into this pit of despair, anger, and hopelessness and I have no idea how to make the hurt stop.” He discloses he has intrusive images of the affair partner’s face and visualizes “what they did together.” He concludes by describing “I love her but it’s so crushing knowing she gave her body to someone else not once, but four times and lied to me so many times.”

Keshawn has gotten what he requested. However, even with such a set-up, he is experiencing hypervigilance indicating his nervous system anticipates future threat. Keshawn’s post concludes with “I needed to tell someone who might be able to understand the pain I feel right now,” suggesting that he wishes to obtain new and specific support. Unlike Elliot who is hiding his request for connection, Elliot is direct about his need to connect with a support. He is tormented that he was not enough and his girlfriend could seek out the attention or validation of another. Now he needs another.

### **Finding nothing wrong**

Leon is in a bad spot. His post is somewhat disorganized, with odd focal points. The title is representative of this “Wife cheated 11 years with significant quantity for the past 6 years.” He discloses he is losing weight quickly and that he has only slept 26 hours since discovering the infidelity (although he does not say over what period of time, so the readers are effectively entering into his experience of disorientation). Leon’s use of measurement, whether the time frame of the affair or number of affair partners (i.e. 19), is designed to convey the gravity of his discovery. He also notes that he is “so hurt because...she kept this from me and I really felt loved the whole time this was happening. I mean really like nothing was wrong.”

This focus on things seeming otherwise okay, is significant. Leon goes on to describe that whatever the issues between he and his wife were, “they weren’t super bad,” and they have since easily addressed any conflict. He discusses his wife’s apparent relief at getting caught, her willingness to hand over phones and digital accounts, and her admitted disgust in herself. Leon brags a little as he quotes two skillful questions he asked to help his wife disclose her infidelity, suggesting he would be okay to hear information that was hurtful.

And yet, “I need to figure out this pain...The pain of this scares me.” Leon is experiencing fear and anxiety at not being able to pinpoint a cause of his wife’s behavior. She must have been unhappy about something, but what? Similar to Elliot and Keshawn, Leon is confused. The context of his relationship is different, however, as he does not experience his wife as choosing another over him. Although he is disoriented and suffering from lack of sleep, he has an intuitive sense that he is satisfied with his relationship. He has felt cared for by his wife. Leon is operating under the assumption that affairs are due to marital dissatisfaction, and since this is not apparent, he feels unsafe. Absent from his considerations are notions that satisfied partners cheat,

monogamy is difficult or impossible for many women, and/or that there is value for some in the excitement of having a secret or participating in the taboo. He is most likely right that there is a reason for her infidelity, but he may be surprised it has little to do with him.