Internet Infidelity

Perceptions, experiences & implications for therapeutic practice

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http://www.mamashealth.com/relationships/infidelitystatistics.asp
Workshop aims

1. Provide an interactive (and fun) space for thinking about your work with couples

2. Improve your knowledge about and confidence in working with Internet infidelity by:
   i. Presenting some of the theory and research findings on internet infidelity
   ii. Presenting some findings from our own research on internet infidelity
WATCH: I-SPY Episode 1 & 2

As you watch the films, what comes up for you as a couple counsellor?

Film 1: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btwrHLCSqvE
Film 2: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QtUsTRAizi8
Counsellor confidence: DISCUSS

• Research suggests that couple counsellors find infidelity the hardest couple issue to work with.

• Anecdotally there are suggestions that some counsellors feel ill-equipped to work with internet-mediated infidelity, because of a lack of familiarity with online/internet technologies.

To what extent does this chime with you?
Relevance of Internet infidelity for couple counsellors?

- Internet and social media (e.g. Facebook and Twitter) are now part of everyday life for most people
- Growing opportunities to engage in online activities that may be considered unfaithful in the context of a committed relationship - prevalence rising (Hertlein & Stevenson, 2008)

Often new territory for couples and practitioners ....
Growing opportunities to connect online

Many Paths to Connection

What is your online footprint?
How would you define online infidelity?

Discuss...

• What is NOT online infidelity?
• What clearly is ‘crossing the line’ online?
Definitional ambiguity

- E.g. cybersex, online flirting, exchange of sexual images
- Messiness of definitions and conceptualisations of internet infidelity - relatively new phenomenon
- Huge differences in how partner/couples perceive ‘problematic’ online behaviour – often multiple, sometimes conflicting views (e.g. on porn viewing)
- Practitioner’s definition: Dependent on client gender, therapist’s age and gender, religion and personal experiences with infidelity (Hertlein & Piercy, 2008).
- Ambiguity between the concepts of internet infidelity (primarily relational activity), internet addiction and sex addiction – difficult for assessment / treatment
Specific online relationship dynamics

- ‘Internet-related vulnerabilities’: Anonymity, Accessibility, Approximation, Affordability, Acceptability, Ambiguity

- **Online Disinhibition Effect**: People more likely to be open and revealing personal truths - sense of intimacy and trust created more quickly (strong emotional connections)

- **Internet can approximate a real-life situation**: allows users to simulated behaviour they might not feel comfortable participation in the real world

- **Disembodied self in cyberspace gives a ‘license’**: ‘It’s not cheating ...it is all in your head’ (‘Electronic polygamy’, Mileham, 2007)
Internet infidelity – Specifics (2)

Four properties of ‘cyberspace betrayal’ (Gerson, 2011)

1. **Suddenness of exposure** (discovery of hidden activities often abrupt)
2. Specific privacy issues as infidelity typically happens in the space of cohabitation *(blurring of public/private space)*
3. **Permanence of infidelity record online** (can make it potentially more difficult to rebuild trust between partners)
4. **Addictive quality of the internet** (easy accessibility and excitement, anonymity)
Activity

Please discuss in pairs (and thinking about your clinical experience working with couples and/or about Rhiannon and Oliver):

- Compare an online affair (e.g. online chat room and text/email exchanges) with a f2f affair – how is it similar or different?

- Do you think infidelity online is ‘as bad’ as infidelity offline? (in terms of impact on partner etc)?
Internet infidelity – potential impact

Limited research evidence:

- Internet infidelity seen and experienced as ‘real acts of infidelity’ (Whitty & Quigley, 2008)
- ‘Online acts of betrayal are perceived as serious as offline acts of betrayal’ (Hertlein & Webster, 2008).
- Can cause relationship distress and have a negative and deteriorating effect on marriages and families (Hertlein & Stevenson, 2010)
Most studies so far: US student samples rating hypothetical infidelity scenarios. Lack of research on

- the actual behaviour and its impact

This study:

Perceptions and experiences of Internet infidelity in the general public in the UK

- Focus on experience of those on ‘receiving end’
An online methodology

• Infidelity not uncommon BUT typically seen as wrong
• Disclosure of infidelity experience = risky/shameful
• Online survey maximises
  – anonymity (reduces risk for participants)
  – accessibility of research to potential participants
  – parallel between study method and what is studied
Partner experience sample N = 160

• **Overall sample = 272** (provided at least some data; much higher clicked onto survey)

• Excluded data for:
  o 16.5% [N=43] reported no personal experience of internet infidelity
  o **Those who reported engaging themselves in Internet infidelity** [N=79; 29% of whole sample; 42% of sample that reported personal experience]

Qualitative data analysis sample = 112
(excluding those who provided no qualitative data or no data about personal experience)

30% of sample ignored survey aim

Demographics

• **Sex:** Female = 87% (*overall sample = 78%*)
• **Age:** Mean = 41, range = 18-73
• **Ethnicity:** 92% self-reported as *White* or *Caucasian*
• **Residency:** 87% resident in the UK
• **Sexuality:** 81% self described as *‘straight’* or *‘heterosexual’*; 9% as *‘bisexual’*.
• **Committed relationship:** 61% were in relationship; average relationship length = 12.4 years, range <1-45 years
Experience of Internet Infidelity?

WARNING! facebook may lead to adultery
Commonly a relationship-ending event

- We have separated because of it
- Upshot is he dumped me for her
- Needless to say now an ex-partner!

Response to question about whether currently in a relationship:
- Not after what I found out
- In the middle of a divorce
- Separated
- Thought I was but not with all this happening
Long-term relational damage

For those that did stay together,
  – Tremendous and lingering sense of betrayal
  – Legacy of lack of trust
  – Sometimes ongoing ambivalence about the relationship

• *We have achieved a good relationship again after many years of working hard to do so, but things will never be quite the same again*

• *Now every time he spends too long on Facebook for example I feel the old stab of betrayal*

• *Even now I still question why I’m still with him and why I stayed*
Emotional impact = huge

• After trusting a partner for over twenty years I experienced something which destroyed my confidence, stole my trust and rape(d) my soul

• It was as if someone very dear to me had died unexpectedly

• The pain was unbearable

• It was the worst thing that had ever happened to me

• Remembering those events, even after time healing, is incredibly distressing
Similarities with conventional infidelity
Affairs that are online (or start online) are similar in many ways to ‘regular’ infidelity

Key experience:
– Secrecy and deceit
– Breach of exclusivity

Focus on both sexual and emotional infidelity

Distinction online/off-line not always clear – reflects broader changes in communication
What is different about internet infidelity?
Online infidelity often occurs at home

- my ex-husband never accepted that his behaviour on the Internet was anything to do with me or the children it was "private" despite it invading our life on a daily basis

- Keep pictures of ex-lovers on show on social media (social media is like someone's living room - would you have pictures of you and your ex hanging around your home whilst being in (or working towards) a relationship with someone else?
Internet creates confusion over what is Real/not real?

• He admitted he knew it was basically cheating but insisted he would never actually be intimate with another in 'real life'

• His reasoning is that's it's ok as he is never going to meet these people...that it's just fantasy

• They had an online affair for some time, which eventually turned into a real one

• I find LIVE pornographic videos / chats unacceptable. My partner was not aware of this. We discussed it and he agreed not to do it anymore, and only to view 'pre-recorded' pornography
Online vs. ‘real’ self

• I have a deep mistrust in the internet, and feel it massively facilitates infidelity. My ex-husband is inherently a very shy man, but online he is able to act much more confidently and attract the attention of other women. I strongly believe he would have had so many affairs without the internet.

• On purchase of a 'not so smart phone' my husband’s behaviour changed. From a loving, caring man into a vain, self-absorbed individual. He constantly checked his phone to the point of obsession. His behaviour to me became hostile while on line he was polite, funny and laughed a lot. I felt like a[n] intruder in my husband’s life.
Internet creates opportunity: Happenstance or opportunistic?

- My marriage wasn't going well. My now ex-husband reconnected with a girlfriend he had in his teenage years on the Friends Reunited website.
- My husband reconnected with an ex-girlfriend from his uni days through Facebook.
- We met through a dating site. We decided to enter into a relationship but he never removed himself from the site despite telling me that he did.
Opportunity for intentional infidelity?

- Multiple pathways to infidelity
  - My husband interacting in an online emotional relationship with a woman half his age, sending her gifts in exchange for sexual conversation and photographs

- The internet is such a vast place...
Anonymous, accessible, affordable, acceptable, ambiguous

- I think online cheating may be on the rise. Communication is hidden behind pin protected computers and phones. Evidence, easily destroyed.
- It seems to be a fact of modern life
Internet is addictive

• My husband of 7 years became addicted to internet pornography, chat rooms, and infidelity websites

More data on this aspect in the data set from those who engaged in infidelity

• Friends who knew about it called it 'a cancer in my mind ....I tried to stop but neither of us could
Discussion, limitations and implications
Findings of this study confirm prior research with US/student samples.

Provide evidence for seriousness of internet infidelity – both as a phenomenon and in terms of potential impact.

Suggest that despite the similarities between face2face and online infidelity, online infidelity has specific/particular aspects.

Suggest cultural shift – e.g. part of broader shift in technology-mediated relational intimacies.
Activity

Please work together in pairs for this activity:

What do you think are implications for practice from this research?
Practice implications

• Need to be aware that couples will present with issues related to internet infidelity
• Individuals may have unique understandings of what is/is not ‘OK’ online – and these may differ from their partner’s
• Potentially useful to initiate discussion about preferences related to couple boundaries and behaviours online

Plus – see later workshops!