



FAMILY SYSTEMS COUNSELING: INNOVATIONS THEN AND NOW

SECOND EDITION

INFIDELITY

A PRACTITIONER'S GUIDE TO WORKING WITH COUPLES IN CRISIS

Edited by PAUL R. PELUSO AND
TAYLOR J. IRVINE



Infidelity

This second edition brings together an impressive array of experts to discuss and provide understanding to the treatment of infidelity.

Bringing together voices from a range of disciplines and backgrounds, including couples therapy, family therapy, evolutionary psychology, relational research, and more, Peluso and Irvine help therapists understand and practically treat this common and complex issue. Divided into three parts, chapters begin by laying the foundations for understanding why couples commit infidelity before looking at different treatments, such as Gottman Method Couples Therapy, models of fidelity and forgiveness, and other integrative approaches. This new edition includes brand-new material on topics such as nonmonogamy, teletherapy, cyber-infidelity, and the impact of infidelity on couples and families from different social, cultural, generational, and sexual perspectives.

With revised referrals and resources at the end of each chapter; additional infidelity treatment methods; and examinations of gender, race, and power, this guide is essential reading for all practicing and training marriage and family therapists, counselors, psychotherapists, and social workers.

Paul R. Peluso, Ph.D., LMHC, LMFT, NCC, is the Norejane Hendrickson Endowed Professor and Chair of the Department of Human Development and Family Science at Florida State University. He is also a licensed mental health counselor and licensed marriage and family therapist in Florida. An accomplished author of ten influential books, Dr. Peluso's diverse body of work spans subjects like infidelity, couples therapy, family dynamics, and Adlerian theory, having contributed over 25 articles and 12 chapters in these areas. Dr. Peluso's areas of clinical expertise include couples therapy, infidelity, family therapy, traumatic grief and loss, and domestic violence. He also serves as the Past President of the International Association of Marriage and Family Counseling.

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FAMILY SYSTEMS COUNSELING: INNOVATIONS THEN AND NOW

Series Editor:

Paul R. Peluso, Ph.D., Florida State University

This series is aimed at both current practitioners and students who wish to learn about the historical power and boldness of the family systems approach, but who also need to see it applied to current problem situations. The books in this series will reflect on the pioneering elements of family systems approaches and how they might have been used previously with a particular issue or population.

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Edited by Paul R. Peluso and Taylor J. Irvine

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Working with Couples in Crisis

Second Edition

Edited by
**Paul R. Peluso and
Taylor J. Irvine**

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DEDICATION

To our families, whose endless support and encouragement have been our greatest source of inspiration throughout this collaborative journey.

This book is lovingly dedicated to my wife, Jennifer P. Peluso, and to my parents, Sam and Roseann Peluso. They have each taught me valuable lessons in fidelity.—Paul

I dedicate this book to my husband, Jose Rodriguez, whose unwavering love and support inspires me daily. This one's for you.—Taylor

*With heartfelt appreciation,
Paul and Taylor*



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About the Editors

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Holding licenses as a licensed mental health counselor (LMHC) and National Certified Counselor (NCC) in Florida, Dr. Irvine has clinical experience working with diverse client populations and presenting issues within the realms of community mental health and residential eating disorder treatment settings. Dr. Irvine currently serves as the Chair for Chi Sigma Iota (CSI) International's Counselor Community Engagement committee. In addition, she actively participates on several professional counseling committees and editorial boards. Dr. Irvine has achieved recognition as a past CSI Leadership Fellow and Emerging Leader for both the International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors and the Association for Assessment and Research in Counseling. Her primary research interests lie in couples and infidelity, as well as eating disorders and body image concerns. She has presented and published on these topics nationally and internationally, spotlighting culturally responsive and evidence-based methods across counseling research, training, and practice domains. In collaboration with the Gottman Institute, Dr. Irvine is working on an international randomized control trial to validate Gottman Method Couples Therapy for affair recovery. She also recently launched one of the first-ever international surveys on infidelity to identify the factors that facilitate or impede affair recovery among involved and uninvolved partners. In 2022, Dr. Irvine was honored by the American Counseling Association, winning the Best Practices in Research award for her work on couples and infidelity.

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Allison R. Thorson, Ph.D., is a professor and Chair of the Department of Communication Studies at the University of San Francisco. She is also the Director of the Interdisciplinary Committee on Children and Youth and the Child and Youth Studies Minor at the University of San Francisco. Dr. Thorson's research focuses on how individuals and families communicatively manage and maintain individual/relational well-being in the context of—often deemed taboo—unexpected, hurtful, or non-normative events (e.g., family communication surrounding parental infidelity) and underexplored relationship types (e.g., work-spouse relationships). Dr. Thorson's research is published in journals such as the *Journal of Family Communication*, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, *Family Relations*, and *Communication Studies*. Dr. Thorson is an active member of the National Communication Association, Central States Communication Association, and Western States Communication Association.

Kimberly N. Usbeck was born and raised in Quito, Ecuador. Kimberly has earned a B.A. degree in psychology with a minor in couples and family therapy from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Kimberly's passion for mental health grew while she worked in a lab and volunteered for several organizations in her community during her undergraduate career. She is currently enrolled in the M.S. program in Couple and Family Therapy at UNLV's Kirk Kerkorian School of Medicine. Kimberly has previously worked in other chapter publications and intends to grow this element of her career alongside her clinical work.

Andreas Vossler is a senior lecturer in psychology in the School of Psychology and Counselling at the Open University in the UK, where he is Deputy

Director of Teaching (Counselling). In this role, he is leading the development of core counseling curriculum and courses for the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) of counseling practitioners. Andreas is a trained systemic couple and family psychotherapist and completed his training in clinical psychology in Germany, where he continues to provide training for students and professionals. He has a deep belief in the value of research for counseling and psychotherapy practice and has been conducting research on family and couple counseling and intimate relationships for more than 20 years. He was member of the Research Committee of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP, the biggest UK counseling professional organization in the UK) for four years and currently serves as a member of the Research Advisory Group of the Association for Family Therapy and Systemic Practice (AFT) in the UK. His current research interests include intimate relationships, digital intimacies and online infidelity, therapist's and clients' experiences of online counseling, and sex and intimacy while aging.

Gerald R. Weeks, Ph.D., is an emeritus professor in the Couple and Family Therapy Program at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas. He is a licensed psychologist, approved supervisor, and clinical fellow of the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy, and a diplomate and senior examiner of the American Board of Family Psychology. He has published 30 professional textbooks in the fields of sex, couple, and family therapy. Among his publications are *Couples in Treatment* (3rd ed), *Paradoxical Psychotherapy*, *Erectile Dysfunction*, *Treating Hypoactive Sexual Desire*, *Treating Infidelity*, *A Clinician's Guide to Systemic Sex Therapy* (3rd ed), *Systemic Sex Therapy* (3rd ed), and *The Handbook of Family Therapy*. He received the AAFMT Outstanding Contribution to Marriage and Family Therapy and was named Family Psychologist of the Year by Division 43 of the American Psychological Association. Dr. Weeks has lectured extensively throughout North America and Europe. He is currently in private practice near Seattle, WA.

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Dana A. Weiser, Ph.D., is an associate professor and Chair of the Human Development and Family Sciences Department at Texas Tech University. Dr. Weiser's research program mainly focuses on how family experiences

shape adults' relationship experiences and sexual behaviors. Dr. Weiser explores how parents communicate and model behaviors that later influence individuals as they enter their own relationships and become sexually active. Specifically, Dr. Weiser studies how and what families teach us about infidelity, sexual health, and sexual violence, as well as predictors of and reactions to infidelity. Dr. Weiser's work utilizes a variety of perspectives, including feminist theories and social cognitive theory. Dr. Weiser is an active faculty affiliate in the Women's and Gender Studies program.



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Preface

Infidelity often poses a challenging scenario to confront in couples therapy. Numerous questions typically emerge, such as: What will the reactions and attitudes of the couple be? How will the uninvolved (or hurt) partner react when they find out? Will the involved partner (or the one who had an affair) be remorseful and end the affair or be defensive and blame the other person? Some couples present in therapy only wanting to talk about the affair (to the exclusion of everything else in the relationship), while others prefer to talk about anything but the affair. Additionally, the diverse array of intense emotions expressed by couples (e.g., anger, despair, betrayal, bitterness, sorrow, and pain) can hinder therapeutic progress. Last, there is also the ever-elusive goal of resolution. At what point does the affair get “put behind” the couple? Many couples may appear to be progressing well, then suddenly lapse into an earlier pattern of anger and defensiveness (seemingly) without a cause or trigger. This frequently leaves practitioners uncertain about how to proceed. Often, therapists resort to an improvisational approach, veiled as “meeting the clients where they are.” However, in reality, it signifies the difficulty in keeping pace with them.

After encountering this challenge numerous times, we sought a treatment model to assist couples dealing with infidelity—a task that is easier said than done! Would the trauma model fit? This is where the therapist primarily walks clients through the experience, desensitizes the emotions, and reintegrates the aberrant experience into the relationship narrative. Although this approach can help with “flashbacks” and other intense emotions, it doesn’t necessarily fit for every couple. The grief model, another approach, requires partners, especially the uninvolved or hurt one, to bid farewell to the old relationship or their expectations of it, navigating various stages in the grief cycle. While this approach makes sense in light of the mourning process and emotional upheaval (shock, denial, anger, bargaining, etc.), it may not resonate with all couples.

Beyond these paradigms, we considered specific counseling theories to address infidelity. Post-modern approaches, such as the narrative approach, encourage couples to externalize the problem (infidelity) as an entity they collectively confront instead of blaming each other. This, of course, may be hard to swallow for some partners since it avoids blame (especially when one partner is bent on getting revenge) and can seem to circumvent important underlying dynamics that led to the infidelity. The solution-focused approach, another post-modern theory, refrains from problem-centered language and urges couples to identify past instances of a functional and healthy relationship, guiding them to recreate those dynamics. However, it may invalidate the hurt partner's pain. Ultimately, none of these theoretical approaches comprehensively addresses the complexities of infidelity in couples. As a result, practitioners often find themselves ill equipped, leading to discouragement and doubts about their competence as couples therapists.

In discussions with colleagues, we discovered that many of them also felt unprepared to handle infidelity's complex issues. This experience is partially attributable to the absence of formal training for most couples and family therapists in dealing with infidelity. Surveys conducted by researchers like Whisman et al. (1997) and Softas-Nall et al. (2008) corroborated that infidelity remains a prominent reason for seeking counseling, yet practitioners often feel ill prepared. Alarming, our own survey found that approximately 90% of practitioners had never received specialized infidelity training during their graduate programs, and nearly 50% had never attended such training in their careers, despite revealing that they had treated couples for infidelity in the past (Irvine & Peluso, 2022). These challenges, coupled with limited research on the topic, emphasized the need for a practitioner-oriented text to enhance clinicians' ability to conceptualize and treat infidelity effectively. When searching for existing materials on infidelity, we found an abundance of books for laypeople on detecting cheating or salvaging relationships following an affair, but few resources exist for clinicians to address complex issues faced by couples in therapy. Fortunately, most of the authors we identified were willing to contribute a chapter to this text.

Despite the daunting nature of infidelity, it offers unique engagement for couples therapists due to the raw emotions involved, the couples' motivation for therapy, and the rapid disclosure of truth in many cases. The challenge is to harness this momentum effectively. Couples are often ready to make substantial changes to salvage the relationship, but therapists must strike a delicate balance between assigning blame and accountability and addressing underlying relationship dynamics. Ultimately, this balance represents the primary goal of couples counseling, attainable only by the most skilled practitioners.

When invited to contribute to the Couples and Family Therapy series, we reflected on our experiences and asked ourselves, "What resource would have been most valuable to us when treating these complex cases?" We considered

the dearth of training for clinicians in this area and the lack of a comprehensive professional reference for students and practitioners seeking insights from clinicians and researchers on infidelity. Until now, there hasn't been a single source that incorporates diverse perspectives and selected topics relevant to the practice of couples and family therapists. This revised volume aims to fill that void.

—Paul R. Peluso and Taylor J. Irvine

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Thank you all for being part of this journey and for making this book possible,

—Paul and Taylor



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PART I

Understanding Infidelity



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Infidelity

Introduction and Overview

PAUL R. PELUSO AND TAYLOR J. IRVINE

“I feel as if I’m caught in an undertow, being swept out to sea. I can’t seem to swim back to dry land, and I’m getting pulled under the water.” With this poignant metaphor, a client described the feelings she was navigating upon the shattering revelation that her husband of over 20 years had engaged in an affair. This is a fitting metaphor for the experience of many couples when they first enter into therapy following an affair or infidelity. Couples struggle to keep some form of connection to one another despite powerful emotional forces arrayed against them. However, they get swept away and pulled under by the emotions of betrayal as they seek to reach an understanding of how to be a couple after one (or both) have violated the relationship. This violation may be physical or emotional in nature, and the agreement between the partners may be unspoken, explicitly agreed to, or codified in a ritual of marriage. Questions about the meaning of the infidelity for each person, and the uncertainty about their commitment to one another, often propel these couples to seek help. The reality is that when couples come to therapy, they are looking for a way to keep their heads above water and not allow their relationship to become sucked down and drowned in the undertow of the affair.

It is a fact, however, that the help that these couples want is difficult to get. According to many couples therapists, infidelity is a topic they feel least

able to handle, even though it is the most often cited reason couples come for counseling (Irvine & Peluso, 2022; Whisman et al., 1997). In order for a practitioner to be able to begin to be prepared to understand the intricacies of a topic like infidelity, it is important to understand some of the basic dynamics of the topic, such as the prevalence of infidelity, issues related to treatment, and the effectiveness of couples therapy with infidelity. This chapter will begin by examining the available statistics regarding the prevalence of infidelity in couples. Next, the authors will provide an overview of the subsequent chapters in this book, which delve into treatment nuances and the effectiveness of couples therapy in helping clients navigate (and heal from) the complexities of affair recovery. The ultimate objective of this text is to equip helping practitioners with the tools needed to effectively guide couples towards a path of healing following an affair's discovery.

PREVALENCE STATISTICS

Just how pervasive is infidelity? This question is up for much debate in the literature. Some of the best estimates say somewhere between 20% and over 50% of all couples have engaged in an infidelity (Peluso, 2019; Starratt et al., 2017; Weiser & Weigel, 2015). According to Glass and Wright (1992), approximately 25% of all couples entering couples therapy report infidelity as the presenting concern, and an additional 30% eventually reveal infidelity in the relationship. Yet, according to Peluso (2019), the best information comes from large, national surveys. Labrecque and Whisman (2017) utilized the General Social Survey, sampling households in the United States on a variety of health and lifestyle topics every two years. Each time the survey is conducted, a new sample is collected, and comparisons across surveys represent a cross-section of the general adult population (18 years and older). They examined over 13,000 responses from nine waves spanning from 2000 to 2016 to see how people's responses to questions related to extramarital sex have changed or remained the same over the last 16 years. Overall, 3% of married individuals in a given year will report having extramarital sex. Lifetime rates of infidelity for married couples range from 22–25% of men and 11–15% of women. Ultimately, infidelity impacts about 1 out of every 3 couples in the United States, equating to about 21 million people (Spring, 2020).

Another indication of the prevalence of infidelity is people's attitudes toward it. Again, in larger samples of heterosexual couples, people tend to disapprove of infidelity. However, this finding is somewhat weakened when factors like culture, sexuality, behavior (type of infidelity), and past engagement in infidelity are taken into consideration (Blow & Hartnett, 2005). According to a 2013 Gallup poll, over 90% of people surveyed felt that having an affair is morally wrong. However, in their review of the General Social Survey, Labrecque and Whisman (2017) found that the percentage of adults who reported that extramarital sex was "always wrong" significantly declined

from 79.4% in 2000 to 75.8% in 2016. At the same time, the percentage of respondents who reported that extramarital sex was wrong “only sometimes” significantly increased from 7.1% in 2000 to 8.7% in 2016, while the percentage of individuals who thought it was “always wrong” and “never wrong” remained constant (11.8% and 1.9%, respectively). Not surprisingly, Glass and Wright (1992) found that those who committed adultery also had a more permissive attitude toward infidelity. Approximately 90% of men and women who were unhappy in their marriage felt that there were conditions where an affair could be justified. This seems to indicate a divergence of opinions on the question of infidelity, particularly in certain communities or subgroups of the population. For many of these subgroups, however, the attitudes on nonmonogamy are based on the idea that it is (a) a function of biological needs, (b) not destructive to the primary relationship, or (c) both. This seems to indicate that the “definition” of infidelity, and the meaning ascribed to this act, are serious mitigating factors for couples. There are important dynamics for couples therapists to take into account when working with these couples.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

Given the complexity of this issue on the clinical, research, and theoretical levels, as well as its centrality in couples therapy, the chapters in this text have been assembled to provide the reader with an overview and understanding of virtually all aspects of the topic of infidelity. This text is organized into four main sections. The first section provides an overview of topics related to the understanding of infidelity and includes the following chapters.

In Chapter 2 we present one of the first expert interviews with Janis Abrahms Spring. Her first book, *After the Affair: Healing the Pain and Rebuilding Trust When a Partner Has Been Unfaithful*, has sold more than 600,000 copies. She also authored *How Can I Forgive You? The Courage to Forgive, the Freedom Not To*, a Books for a Better Life Award finalist in the category of Best Psychology Book that has sold more than 100,000 copies. Her wide-ranging interview for this chapter presents her current thinking about the treatment of infidelity and the challenges that practitioners face today.

In Chapter 3: “Treating Monogamy and Consensual Non-Monogamy Fidelity: Preventing Relationship Crisis,” by Marissa A. Davala and Grace A. Mims, the authors discuss the growing recognition of consensual non-monogamy in relationships and the intersection with ideas about infidelity. They also explore monogamy theory and the role it can play in strengthening couples and their fidelity practices for both monogamous couples and polyamorous relationships. A case study is presented to anchor and demonstrate the theory in action.

In Chapter 4: “Sociosexuality and Infidelity: Incorporating Individual Differences with Couples in Crisis,” Dana A. Weiser and Randi Black discuss one of the individual characteristics most commonly linked with infidelity,