Relationship Challenges in Infidelity and Therapeutic Practice

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DECLARATION

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PREFACE

This portfolio consists of three components; an empirical research project, a publishable manuscript based on this research, and a combined clinical case study and process report. The first two sections are concerned with infidelity in romantic relationships, whilst the clinical piece focuses on working through a therapeutic rupture with a young woman using Cognitive Analytic Therapy (CAT). Underpinning the three sections is a connecting theme of relationship challenges with both others and the self, which are also reflective of my journey over the course of this Doctorate. These three components are further described below.

Part One: Doctoral Research

Part one presents a qualitative research project that examines personal meanings and experiences of infidelity in committed relationships in the UK, and how these are shaped by the social context. Whilst there are many definitions of infidelity, which differ across culture, time periods, and in particular contexts within which it occurs, this research is concerned with individuals who have engaged in on-going affairs, alongside and not agreed with, their primary partners.

This research posits that the way infidelity is understood and experienced is influenced by the cultural context within which it operates, in relation to dominant relationship models and discourses. Despite increases in alternative relationship structures, monogamous relationships are presented as the ideal in Western society, whilst departures from this are constructed as wrong, immoral or immature (Kimberly & Harris, 2017; McLean, 2004; Moors, Rubin, Matsick, Ziegler, & Conley 2014; Reibstein, 2013). As such, discourses of romantic relationships provide normative expectations for how to 'do' relationships, including emotional and sexual exclusivity, as well as gender roles within relationships (Richards & Barker, 2013).

Consequently, this research perceives infidelity as a heavily socialised practice, whereby experiences and understandings are filtered through dominant discourses. These discourses provide a framework for how individuals should feel when confronted with infidelity, such as feeling hurt, crushed and shamed (Anderson, 2012). As such, infidelity can present a huge challenge to romantic monogamous relationships, which can elicit emotional upheaval and distress, and be experienced as a sense of failure for not meeting normative expectations, impacting upon the

mental health of all involved (Rachman, 2010; Reibstein, 2013). As relationships and connections are important for wellbeing (Mikulinier, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003), infidelity is important to further understand, and can illuminate romantic relationships and social processes.

My interest in this topic stems from my own family experiences of infidelity, in which I was motivated to further understand personal meanings of individuals who engage in infidelity. Growing up, infidelity in my family left me with a sense of betrayal and confusion as to why individuals would risk their family for an affair. I thus saw infidelity as unforgiveable and adopted a judgemental stance towards this topic. I think it was easier to adopt a black and white view of infidelity, rather than look at the nuances and grey areas involved in relationship dynamics, and I perhaps believed that adopting a zero tolerance stance would reduce the possibility of this happening to me.

When I began this research, therefore, I was judgemental about the topic of infidelity. However, I had worked through the emotional impact of my experiences and I was interested to further understand how individuals understand their affairs, particularly as I may work with infidelity in therapeutic practice, and hoped this could enhance my own and other practitioners' understanding of the topic. As I progressed through the research, I realised the complexity of infidelity and relationships, and how embedded understandings and experiences are within the social context and dominant discourses surrounding romantic relationships. I became interested in how to challenge normative expectations of how relationships "should" be and negative judgements around departures from monogamy, to embrace a more compassionate approach, as well as how to work with this in the therapy room, informing Counselling Psychology practice.

Whilst the topic of infidelity has been widely researched, little is known about personal meanings of on-going affairs for those who have engaged in them, and how these interact with dominant discourses, which this research aimed to explore. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), interviews with four women and three men were analysed to understand how they made sense of their affairs. The findings revealed useful insights into the experience of infidelity, as well as the nature of romantic relationships and the influence of normative expectations on these experiences. Participants' affairs were understood as a way to focus on their needs after experiencing issues of longing, frustration,

powerlessness and unhappiness elicited from relationship and life struggles, as well as exploring their relationship with themselves, which were shaped by dominant relationship discourses. These findings are discussed in relation to theories and the existing literature, and implications for Counselling Psychology and future research are considered.

Part Two: Publishable Manuscript

The second section presents a publishable paper titled "I'm not some sleazy dirty cheater": Understanding infidelity in romantic relationships. This presents a condensed version of the Doctoral research. The article highlights the unique way this research has been approached, as it examines the lived experience of infidelity using IPA, whilst attending to dominant discourses that are an important part of the social context, and differs to the phenomenological research that has been done before. Indeed, Smith (2012) discussed his hopes that IPA would become more socially aware in the future, accounting for discourses that contextualise experiences. The article aims to highlight the importance of not assuming there are "right" ways to engage in romantic relationships or to respond to deviations from normative expectations.

The article is intended for publication in the *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy* and follows the journal's guidelines for publication. This journal was chosen as it is concerned with the nature and challenges of relationships, which the article seeks to enhance knowledge on through examining the specific relationship challenge of infidelity and normative expectations. In addition, the journal is international, which helps to disseminate these findings to reach wider audiences, which could potentially help to inform clinical practice for psychologists and therapists, as well as helping them to assess their own assumptions towards infidelity and romantic relationships.

Part Three: Combined Clinical Case Study and Process Report

This section presents a piece of clinical work, using CAT with a young female client who's difficulties were rooted in relationships with others. This clinical piece explores my grapple working through therapeutic ruptures with this client, and reflects on my use of a relational and integrative approach to help her identify her relationship patterns, particularly when these were re-enacted in the therapy room. Indeed, a relational therapeutic approach feels more suited to my personal style and worldview, in which I perceive psychological difficulties to be rooted in relationships with others, which are also influenced by wider societal contexts. A segment from one session is

presented, which discusses my application of theory, our shared formulation, and a CAT tool to inform the work and make sense of our therapeutic rupture.

I chose to present this case, as it was the most challenging work I have encountered across my training and shaped my development as a practitioner. I was able to confront my own difficulties with conflict in the therapy room, which enhanced my confidence as a Psychologist. It also taught me the importance of tolerating uncertainty when I and the therapeutic relationship were under attack, and holding onto hope when my client was unable to do so. This work thus highlights the relationship challenges I encountered both professionally and personally as I tussled with myself, as well as the therapeutic relationship.

The theme of relationship challenges that underpins the three components of the portfolio is reflective of my own journey through the Counselling Psychology Doctorate. Although this journey has been extremely rich, stimulating and inspiring, it has also been incredibly challenging and demanding, in which I have had to dig into my deepest resources of resilience as I came face to face with relationship challenges in my therapeutic work, and more than anything, with myself. Through my academic and clinical work, I have wrestled with issues of confidence and frustration with myself, particularly in my last year of training as I searched to identify my professional identity and what it means to qualify as a Counselling Psychologist.

However, through allowing myself to experience these tensions and challenges, I was able to tolerate the ‘not knowing’ of my professional identity and trust that I would figure this out in time. I discovered that although my professional identity may continue to evolve, fundamentally, my therapeutic style is relational, whereby I view the therapeutic relationship as the vehicle for creating a trusting environment, in which another’s experience and suffering can be understood and tolerated together. This journey has taught me the importance of embracing my own limitations as a person and a professional, and of coming to terms with being “good enough”. I will continue to strive to be a reflexive practitioner and reflect on challenges as my learning continues. Indeed, this portfolio demonstrates learning and relationships are evolving and dynamic processes. I look forwards with curiosity at how my personal and professional identity and relationship with myself will continue to evolve, though I suspect a relational approach will always be at the heart of my identity as a Counselling Psychologist.

PART ONE: DOCTORAL RESEARCH

"It was a way of surviving": Searching for meaning in accounts of infidelity

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Supervised by Dr Julianna Challenor

Abstract

The Western relationship ideal of monogamy influences the way infidelity is understood and experienced. Consequently, infidelity can be experienced as destructive for relationships, shattering trust, self-esteem and security, eliciting feelings of shame for all involved, and is a frequent presenting problem in couples' therapy. Although there is an abundance of research examining this phenomenon, the experience and personal meanings of infidelity are still poorly understood.
This qualitative study utilised interpretative phenomenological analysis to examine individuals' experiences of engaging in infidelity, specifically affairs, and how these were shaped by Western society. Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with 4 females and 3 males who had engaged in an ongoing romantic relationship alongside and not agreed in their monogamous relationship. Participants were aged between 25-55 (M = 32.29, SD = 5.60) at the time of their affairs. Three main findings emerged from the analysis: *Something for Me*; *Coming to Life;* and *Negotiating Tensions.* The findings highlighted how participants understood their affairs as a way to focus on their needs, and appeared to heighten their senses, eliciting a sense of feeling alive. Participants also experienced a number of internal conflicts during their affairs, arising from maintaining the secrecy of their affairs, and negotiating societal expectations with their experience, which could elicit feelings of guilt. Participants' understanding of their experiences appeared to be filtered through dominant societal discourses, and provides useful insights into the nature of romantic relationships in the UK, and how they interact with social processes. Implications for Counselling Psychology and practice are discussed.

Key Words: infidelity, affairs, monogamy, romantic relationships, mononormativity, IPA, contextual-constructionism, discourses

1.Introduction

This chapter introduces the phenomenon termed infidelity, the focus of this research. After introducing my theoretical framework for this study and situating the research in the current context within which infidelity occurs, an examination of romantic relationships and infidelity literature follows. The chapter concludes with a problem statement of the literature and the relevance of this research to Counselling Psychology.

1.1.Theoretical Framework

This research takes a critical approach to the topic of infidelity. Adopting a contextual-constructionist epistemology, I believe knowledge about phenomenon is constructed in contexts within which they operate (Madill, Jordan & Shirley, 2000). Consequently, I do not believe there is one universal definition of infidelity, as it differs across cultures, time periods, and in particular contexts within which it occurs. At the same time, this research is interested in the lived experience of those who have engaged in what Western society deems infidelity, seeking to examine personal meanings of this within romantic relationships in the UK. Whilst there are many definitions of infidelity within Western society, dominant understandings and the literature include engaging in extra-dyadic sexual and/or emotional relationships, alongside an exclusive relationship, not agreed with the primary partner (Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Duncombe & Marsden, 2004; Hertlein, Wetchler & Piercy, 2005). This is the definition I refer to when discussing infidelity literature, unless otherwise specified, as I wanted to use researchers' language to sufficiently capture their work. I also maintain this is just one of many understandings within this time period, within Western culture, within the UK, and across the world.

1.2.Situating the Research

The nature of romantic relationships in the UK has changed dramatically in recent decades, due to complex shifts in political and socio-economic processes and advances in technology. Since the 1960s, marriage has declined and there has been an increase in divorce; 42% of marriages are expected to end in divorce in the UK (ONS, 2018; Richards & Barker, 2013). Recent trends show more couples, particularly younger cohorts, cohabitate and get married later in life (ONS, 2018), and there are increases in divorce and re-marriage in cohorts over 65 (ONS, 2017).

Furthermore, it is estimated that 25% of 20-34 year olds live with parents (ONS, 2016), there has been an increase in inter-cultural relationships (ONS, 2014), and relationship styles different to traditional marriage have become more common, including open relationships, swinging and polyamory (Conley, Matsick, Moors & Ziegler, 2017).

Despite these shifts, married and civil partnerships remain the most common family type in the UK (ONS, 2018) and same-sex marriage was legalised in 2013. This suggests that dyadic relationships continue to be "appealing across the sexual spectrum" (Gabb & Fink, 2018 p.3), and "the romantic ideal of finding "the one" who will meet our emotional and sexual needs persists in socio-cultural imaginary narratives" (Gabb & Fink, 2018 p. xvi). However, approximately 20-25% of romantic relationships in Britain are suggested to be of low quality (Reynolds et al., 2014), which has been associated with relationship dissolution and negative consequences for mental and physical wellbeing (Coleman & Glenn, 2009).

Walker, Barrett, Wilson & Chang (2010) suggest one of the main factors contributing to relationship dissolution is infidelity. Infidelity frequently occurs in the UK; surveys suggest 24% of individuals have engaged in extra-dyadic physical relationships (Sherwood, Kneale & Bloomfield, 2014). However, prevalence rates are difficult to estimate due to differing definitions across the literature, sometimes focusing on sexual only relationships, or conflating extra-dyadic relationships with infidelity, ignoring possibilities of consensual non-monogamy (Conley et al., 2017). Whilst attitudes towards infidelity vary according to different contexts, surveys in the UK indicate individuals, across age and gender, believe non-exclusivity in marriage is unacceptable (Clifton, Fuller & Philo, 2016). Furthermore, dominant discourses around infidelity are often negative, emotionally loaded and judgemental, constructing infidelity as a sign of a deficit in the primary relationship, lacking in love, and separation often holds higher regard than reconciliation (Anderson, 2012; Reibstein, 2013).

However, attitudes towards infidelity vary according to situational, historical and cultural contexts, intersecting with religion, class, sexual orientation, gender, disability, and race/ethnicity, amongst others. Indeed, historically and in some cultures, infidelity has been more tolerated amongst men (Betzig, 1995; Vandello, 2016), it is often condemned across religions (Schafer, 2011), and may be understood differently in non-heterosexual and non-white groups (Richards & Barker,

2013). Furthermore, attitudes towards infidelity may be influenced by personal experience and depend on situational contexts; individuals tend to be more accepting if their friends have more permissible attitudes towards infidelity (Jackman, 2015; Thompson & O'Sullivan, 2016). This demonstrates the importance of context in understanding attitudes and experiences of relationships and infidelity.

Infidelity, then, is not just an individual phenomenon; it can elucidate romantic relationships and social processes (Morgan, 2004). As infidelity has been found to contribute to relationship difficulties, which can have a negative impact on mental and physical wellbeing (Walker et al., 2010), and connections with others are important for wellbeing (Mikulinier, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003), it is important to further understand. Whilst there has been an abundance of infidelity research, it is limited by research design, often ignoring contextual factors influencing understandings and experiences. As Western society can generate negative and judgmental attitudes towards infidelity, limiting understanding, there is a need for more infidelity research to generate new understandings in this particular time and context.

1.3.Literature Review

1.3.1.Understanding Infidelity

The term infidelity can be understood in many ways; it varies across cultures and is often defined according to dominant romantic relationship models in societies. Consequently, I define infidelity as a social construct, which is generated and co-constructed using language within cultures in which it occurs (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). I thus take a critical view towards definitions in the literature, which tend to be one-dimensional.

Whilst understandings vary within Western societies, behaviours that violate an implicit or explicit agreement between a couple, often of emotional and sexual exclusivity, tend to be dominant definitions (Hertlein, Wetchler & Piercy, 2005). Behaviours constituting infidelity include sexual activities and emotional involvement outside of the primary dyadic relationship. Sexual infidelity includes various sexual activities, occurring through one-night stands, with sex workers, or ongoing sexual relationships (Blow & Hartnett, 2005). Emotional infidelity can refer to online, phone-based or ongoing romantic relationships, which involve the re-allocation of time, energy and attention to another (Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Moller & Vossler, 2015).

Infidelity can also involve a combination of sexual and emotional infidelity, in ongoing relationships, termed an 'affair'. Fundamentally these behaviours are not agreed with the primary partner and often involve levels of secrecy, lies and deceit to conceal or maintain the relationship (Duncombe & Marsden, 2004).

Understandings of infidelity in Western society can be subjective to individuals and couples (Norona, Khaddouma, Welsh & Samawi, 2005). In interviews with seven couples' counsellors from a UK charity, Moller and Vossler (2015) found definitions of infidelity differed between individuals and across situations. Participants reported their clients tended to view infidelity in terms of sexual activities (including online sex), emotional infidelity (where attention was re-directed from the principal relationship) and a sense of betrayal and secrecy. Participants did not always agree on which behaviours constituted infidelity, indicating an element of subjective interpretation; definitions may depend on partners' reactions and what it means to individuals. Indeed, couples often assume shared understandings of what constitutes infidelity (Rodrigues, Lopes & Pereira, 2017), suggesting individuals may rely on taken-for-granted norms of monogamy to construct and understand their relationships. However, the study relied on the hindsight of UK Caucasians and may not reflect other understandings of infidelity in other social groups (Moller & Vossler, 2015).

Definitions of infidelity can also expand according to changes in social processes. Technological developments have cultivated new aspects of infidelity; the Internet has simplified the process and increased opportunities to meet others in relative secrecy, introducing possibilities for online infidelity (Atwood & McCullough, 2016). Online infidelity involves emotional and sexual behaviours over the Internet outside the primary relationship, including sexting, porn, cyber-sex, sharing naked pictures and flirting often via emails and forums (Nelson, Piery & Sprenkle, 2005; Vossler, 2016). Internet infidelity can be experienced as distressing due to confusion over which online behaviours constitute infidelity, because they occur in the couples' shared space, and because the partner engaging in online infidelity may adopt different personas contrasting to their identity in their relationships (Vossler & Moller, 2019). This highlights the array of behaviours often classified as infidelity in Western culture and how definitions can expand according to social changes and developments. However, these understandings are underpinned, influenced and constructed by dominant relationship structures in Western society.

1.3.2.Romantic Relationships Literature

This section reviews the literature on romantic relationship structures and how these influence understandings and experiences of infidelity. It examines dominant Western models of relationships, before discussing theories and alternative relationship styles that challenge normative understandings.

1.3.2.1.Contemporary Monogamy in Western Society

Although there are various romantic relationship structures across the world, the perceived norm in Western society is to exclusively engage in one romantic and sexual relationship. This practice is termed monogamy in Western culture and is presented as the most natural and mature form of romantic relationships (Ferrer, 2018; Conley, Ziegler, Moors, Matsick & Valentine, 2012; Richards & Barker, 2013). The apparent naturalness of monogamy is known as mononormativity, upheld by heterosexuality (the attraction to and practice of relationships with a member of the opposite gender) (Richards & Barker, 2013). Monogamy is often central to heterosexual relationships in the West and heterosexuality is also considered natural; known as heteronormativity (Farvid & Braun, 2013). Consequently, monogamy and heterosexuality do not tend to be critically examined, influencing individuals' understandings and experiences of their relationships (Barker, 2011).

Mononormativity and heteronormativity not only shape what constitutes normal relationship and sexual practices in Western society, but also provide expectations for how individuals should organise and live their lives. Such expectations involve reaching milestones, including marriage, having children, and property ownership, as well as expectations for how relationships should be, from emotional and sexual exclusivity, to finding the perfect partner, and gender roles within relationships (Jackson, 2006; Richards & Barker, 2013). Those who adhere to normative expectations are often held in higher regard than those who do not, (including those who remain single or participate in non-heterosexual, non-normative relationships) (Gustavson, 2009). This is reified by engagements, weddings and anniversaries celebrating romantic love and monogamous couples, alongside the media and legal system; UK law protects monogamous couples, particularly in terms of marriage, family, and financial entitlements (Day, Kay, Holmes & Napier, 2011; Jackson, 2006; Klesse, 2014; Moors, Matsick, Ziegler, Rubin & Conley, 2013; Richards & Barker, 2013). Those who subscribe to such standards may feel a sense of failure if they are unable to meet these at any point (Richards & Barker, 2013).

The practice of monogamy and heterosexuality are influenced by cultural and historical contexts and social changes (Richards & Barker, 2013). Historically, marriage was often based on sharing resources, responsibilities and domestic labour for survival, rather than on romantic love (Barker, 2011; Fye & Mims, 2019). However, social changes, such as two World Wars, feminist and gay rights movements and developments in contraception contributed to the rise of the sexual revolution in the 1960's, altering the nature of relationships (Anderson, 2012; Brandon, 2011). This period saw a softening of attitudes towards sexual behaviours, including pre-marital sex, pre-marital cohabitation, increases in divorce rates and reduced marriage rates (Anderson, 2012). However, the AIDS crisis in the 1980s once again changed the nature of romantic relationships, as monogamy was presented as the morally superior relationship structure (Haupert, Gesselman, Moors, Fisher & Garcia, 2017; Willey 2006). This demonstrates how culturally and politically embedded meanings and experiences of romantic relationships are, and how they interact and shift with social changes.

Figures indicate individuals who do not identify with any religion in the UK have increased by 46% since 2011 (ONS, 2019), which may influence the nature of romantic relationships. Barker and Langdridge (2010) suggest the apparent decline in religiosity, recession and demands of society may have reduced individual's sense of security, whereby romantic relationships may provide individuals with stability and validation, reified in films, music and literature that position monogamy as the key to happiness. Simultaneously, it has been argued that society has become increasingly individualised, advances in modern medicine mean individuals are living longer, and technological developments and social media have created new opportunities and choices for sexual partners, placing a greater demand on immediate gratification, independence and competition, reducing frustration tolerance (Brandon 2011; VanderVoot & Duck, 2004). It is possible these social developments mean individuals may more readily discard their relationships (Barker & Langdridge, 2010), and the increasingly sexualised society positions sex as central to validate romantic relationships (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Farvid & Braun, 2006). Thus, alongside an emphasis on interdependence, there is also an emphasis on individual equality, freedom and autonomy within monogamous relationships, placing enormous pressure on relationships to meet every individual need (Barker & Langdridge, 2010).

1.3.2.2.Challenges to Mononormativity

This section examines how historical, religious and cultural contexts, social constructionist and feminist approaches, and non-conventional and non-heterosexual relationships provide alternative understandings of romantic relationships and extra-dyadic relationships that challenge mononormativity, heteronormativity, and negative perceptions of infidelity.

1.3.2.2.1.Historical, Religious and Cultural Contexts

The way monogamy and infidelity are understood and experienced vary across time and cultures and have been influenced by religion, supporting the notion that meanings are constructed in society. Whilst culture and religion are distinct, there are overlaps between them. Culture refers to social beliefs, practices, and behaviours in societies, passed between generations, and encompasses religion (Eyre, Flythe, Hoffman & Fraser, 2012). As well as a shared belief system, religion is an aspect of culture, influencing traditions and lifestyle and has been historically embedded in political relations (Vandello, 2016).

The history of monogamy is tied to the institution of marriage and religion. Whilst historically non-monogamy, such as having concubines outside of marriage and polygyny, (the practice of men having more than one wife at a time), have been permitted across religious groups, (Betzig,1995; Zeitzen 2008), many religions today value marriage and consider infidelity immoral (Shafer, 2011). In White Christian Nations, MacDonald (1995) posits the Medieval Catholic Church influenced this shift. During the Middle-Ages, the Monarchy (State) and Church collaborated to compete with the aristocracy, meaning the Church held significant power, particularly over controlling sexual practices (MacDonald, 1995). As family inheritance was left to eldest sons of the Nobility, it was common for younger sons to become celibate priests or knights. Consequently, Churchmen introduced sanctions, including disallowing divorce, incest, re-marriage and having concubines, thereby making it difficult for Nobility to produce legitimate heirs, increasing the likelihood of the Church inheriting family estates (Betzig, 1995; MacDonald, 1995). Furthermore, the Church presented monogamy as the moral ideal, condemning adultery and so the institutions of marriage and monogamy became compulsory, controlling sexual behaviour and serving the State and Church's political interests of wealth and power (MacDonald, 1995). This historical context appears to influence dominant, particularly Christian, models of marriage and monogamy in the UK, including law and moral attitudes (Vandello, 2016).

Understandings and experiences of relationships and infidelity also differ across cultures, influenced by religious teachings. As it is impossible to discuss all cultural variations across the world without risking generalising or overlooking some cultures (Penn, Hernandez, & Bermudez, 1997), examples of relationship practices cited in the literature contrasting to dominant Western models, challenging normative understandings, are discussed. In India Madathil et al., (2008) argue marriage expectations differ to Western models, influenced by religion, particularly Hinduism. They describe marriage as sacred within Hinduism, connecting two families and continuing family lines. Consequently, arranged marriages tend to be preferred to love marriages, ensuring feelings do not impede family duties, and infidelity is stigmatised (Madathil et al., 2008). Whilst there are variations in religious affiliation within India and Hinduism, these relationship norms contrast to emphases on romantic love in the West, and shows different norms alter relationship practices and experiences.

Furthermore, similarly to the way dominant Western models have been politically influenced by Christianity, several societies across the world are governed by patriarchal political systems, influenced by conservative strands of religion, and influence dominant relationship practices and attitudes (Vandello, 2016). Some societies have used strands of Islam to justify male subordination of women and have high rates of honour based killings (Lowe, Khan, Thanzami, Borzy & Karmaliani, 2018), where values of male honour and authority are often emphasised, dependent on the virtue and fidelity of female family members (Chesler, 2009; Vandello & Cohen, 2003). A woman's infidelity therefore can be perceived as undermining male authority, often shaming for men and subject to severe penalties, including violence and death, perceived as necessary to reclaim male honour (Penn et al., 1997; Vandello, 2016; Vandello & Cohen, 2003). However, this is not insinuating all Muslims in such societies engage in honour-based violence, nor that there is one strand of Islam followed by all; Islam is a vast religion that differs across regions worldwide. Furthermore, honour-based violence occurs across societies and religions and intersects with other contexts. Rather, this point highlights the influence of political systems on the way expectations, attitudes and understandings of relationships are constructed and experienced, including violations to these. This demonstrates understandings of monogamy and infidelity are socially constructed and reproduced according to specific norms, and intertwined with religious and political influences. This challenges the naturalness or superiority of any particular relationship style, including monogamy.

1.3.2.2.2.Social Constructionism

Social constructionism challenges the naturalness of monogamy and heterosexuality, emphasising relationships are constructed and reproduced in society through language and discourses, and respond to societal shifts (Farvid & Braun, 2006). Consequently, social constructionist approaches do not believe there are universal meanings of infidelity, as meaning is dependent on historical and cultural contexts, whereby understandings and attitudes of infidelity are constructed according to dominant models of relationships in societies (Kitzinger & Wood, 2018).

Alongside examining how meanings and experiences of monogamy and infidelity vary throughout time and across cultures, social constructionists examine dominant discourses that perpetuate understandings of how relationships should be, which become a taken-for-granted-reality (Kitzinger & Wood, 2018). Discourses can be described as a set of templates, encompassing normative social principles, attitudes and behaviours, which individuals use to make sense of the world (Allen, 2003). Several discourses in Western society influence heterosexual, monogamous relationships, particularly heterosex, often positioning male and female sexuality as inherently different (Farvid & Braun, 2006).

Despite discourses around female sexual empowerment, agency and pleasure, dominant discourses in Western society position men as active sexual agents, emphasising their sexual prowess, whilst positioning women as passive sexual agents, seeking romantic love (Elliot & Umberson, 2008; Farvid & Braun, 2006). Furthermore, Hollway (1984) identified a number of discourses that permeate understandings and experiences of heterosex. These include the male sex drive discourse (the notion men have a biological need for sex and high sex drives); the coital imperative (conflates sex with sexual intercourse); the have/hold discourse (positioning women as motivated by love rather than sex and exchange sex for love in relationships); the permissive discourse (intercourse is positioned as natural for both genders); and the reciprocity discourse (men and women are entitled to sexual pleasure, resulting in orgasm) (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Gavey, McPhillips & Braun, 1999). Social constructionist approaches emphasise how discourses construct dominant ideals, expectations and sexual practices in monogamous, heterosexual relationships, as individuals draw on these to understand relationship experiences.

Dominant discourses also influence how infidelity is perceived and experienced; in Western society infidelity is constructed in opposition to monogamy, where

deviations from monogamy are considered wrong or a symptom of relationship difficulties (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Farvid & Braun, 2006; Kitzinger & Powell, 1995; Reibstein, 2013). Social constructionists challenge the notion infidelity is wrong, by emphasising it is not universal as meanings can and do change in response to changing social processes and differing cultural norms, and by embracing the existence of alternative truths and narratives about how relationships can be.

However, social constructionist approaches have been criticised for ignoring the material world, which can dismiss and undermine experiences, as they are considered a social construction. Whilst infidelity understandings may be constructed in society, infidelity still interacts with the material world; it has real consequences for individuals in society who deviate from monogamy (Taylor & Ussher, 2001) in terms of the stigma often attached to it (Conley et al., 2017).

1.3.2.2.3.Feminist Theories

Early feminist theories in the 1970s critiqued monogamy and heterosexuality as oppressive institutions serving men and capitalism and reinforcing gender inequalities by perpetuating traditional gender norms (Klesse, 2018). In traditional marriage, men were entitled to women's domestic, emotional and sexual labour, whereby women were considered male property, and expected to maintain family lineage, producing the workforce necessary for capitalism (Elliot & Umberson, 2008; Robinson, 1997). Feminist scholars criticised monogamy for romanticising jealousy, justifying male violence (Klesse, 2018; Robinson, 1997; Willey, 2006). Feminists argued the ideal of falling in love with the perfect partner deflects individuals from critically engaging with taken-for-granted norms, resulting in tolerance for unsatisfying or abusive relationships (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Klesse, 2018; Robinson, 1997; Willey, 2006), thus maintaining men and capitalism's control. This background underpins dominant monogamous, heterosexual relationship models in Western society, and gender inequalities traditionally experienced within them.

More recent feminist critiques have examined how the patriarchy and capitalism manifest and shape heterosexual monogamous relationships in the contemporary West. Despite emphasis on female sexual pleasure, Fahs (2014) argues women and sex are commercialised, often perceived as products for men. Indeed, sex toy shops and pornography can shape sexual desires in heterosexual relationships, often positioning the female ideal as somebody who constantly desires sex (Brown-

Bowers, Gurevich, Vasilovsky, Cosma & Matti, 2015; Fahs, 2014), meaning for women, sex can become obligatory, serving capitalism (as sex sells) and men (Thomas, Stelzl & Lefrance, 2017). Furthermore, although the feminist movement of the 1970s fought for gender equality, domestic and sexual freedom, discourses of liberation still conflict with traditional gender norms, particularly regarding domestic labour and sexuality, which women have to negotiate (Fahs, 2014; Fahs & Gonzalez, 2014; Gavey, 2012). Indeed, irrespective of occupation, women reportedly undertake a higher share of housework, and more emotional labour (attending to emotional needs) in heterosexual relationships (Brown-Bowers et al., 2015; Elliot & Umberson, 2008; Farvid & Braun, 2013; Jackson, 2006). Furthermore, although women's entitlement to sexual pleasure and freedom is promoted, women are socialised to comply, placate and prioritise others, particularly men's sexual desires, whilst men are socialised to be sexually entitled (Fahs, Swank & Clevenger, 2015; Sheff, 2005). This shows gender inequalities continue to permeate and influence heterosexual relationships, and how sex is still a man's domain; evident in the occurrence of women who have unwanted sex and fake orgasms (Fahs et al., 2015).

In a survey of 205 undergraduates in the USA, Fahs et al., (2015) found in the last month, 18% of women had been pressured or physically threatened to engage in vaginal or anal intercourse by their male partner. Additionally, Fahs and Gonzalez (2014) found women who had engaged in anal sex did not always want to, but succumbed to men's demands, sometimes due to real or perceived threat of sexual violence. Similarly, although female orgasm has been used as a marker of female sexual liberation, feminists argue it is now a symbol of male sexual expertise; something men 'give' to women in exchange for male sexual pleasure. If a woman does not orgasm during heterosex, therefore, it is often seen as a failure on behalf of the man. Coupled with the tendency for men's orgasms to end sex, women have reported faking orgasms to end unwanted sex, or to look after male sexual needs (Fahs, 2014; Thomas et al., 2017). Whilst this could also be perceived as women reclaiming power by deciding when sex ends, this research highlights how, even in a culture promoting female empowerment and liberation, women struggle to own and prioritise their sexual desires and threats of sexual violence make it difficult to refuse unwanted sex (Fahs, 2014). This demonstrates the continued influence of the patriarchy (Fahs et al., 2015), maintaining gender inequalities permeating and influencing experiences of heterosexual, monogamous relationships.

Other feminist arguments have criticised the way women's sexuality is constructed in society. Tiefer (2004) expressed concerns over society's medicalisation of sexuality, particularly for women and introduced the New View Campaign to challenge this. She argued societal or emotional factors are often ignored in diagnoses of sexual difficulties as dysfunctions, including low sexual arousal, inability to orgasm and sexual pain in women, which colludes with the drug industry, promoting the medical model, and distancing women from their bodies (Tiefer, 2004; Tiefer, 2010). Such medicalisation likely influences what counts as 'normal' sex in heterosexual relationships, including faking orgasms, as women may believe they have a biological problem if they are not able to experience arousal, faking orgasms to appear normal (Nicholson & Burr, 2003).

Women's heterosexuality and sex thus appear to be embedded in power relations with men and capitalism, influencing experiences of heterosexual relationships, providing the backdrop against which infidelity occurs. Infidelity may represent a site of resistance for women against oppression and conforming to men's needs, whilst for men it may be due to sexual entitlement (Williams & Knudson-Martin, 2013). Feminist approaches challenge mononormativity by highlighting how it can reinforce structural oppression, impacting experiences of monogamous heterosexual relationships and infidelity. They highlight the importance of considering monogamy and infidelity through alternative frameworks to mononormativity and heteronormativity, and of considering the influence of gender inequalities, power relations and cultural contexts (Williams & Knudson-Martin, 2013).

However, Willey (2006) argues feminist scholarship originated from middle-class heterosexual women and does not always consider intersections with age, class, sexual orientation, disability and race/ethnicity. Furthermore, although focus on female inequality is important due to historical and on-going female oppression, current society in the West also presents men with challenges and inequalities; not always considered in feminist literature. Hegemonic masculinity emphasises hypersexuality, sexual prowess and sex without emotion in men, which may make it difficult for men to understand their emotional needs in romantic relationships (Sheff, 2006), demonstrating gender inequalities do not always work in the best interests of those who hold perceived societal privilege in relationships.

1.3.2.2.4.Non-conventional Relationships

Although monogamy is the perceived norm in Western cultures, only 15-18% of societies across the world are reported to be monogamous, indicating non-monogamous relationships are more prevalent (Fye & Mims, 2019; Kimberly & Harris, 2017; Moors, Conley, Edelstein & Chopik, 2015; Richards & Barker, 2013). Furthermore, increases in divorce since the 1960s and occurrence of infidelity indicate monogamy may not be ideal for everybody (Richards & Barker, 2013) and 4-5% of individuals in the USA are estimated to have agreed sexual and/or romantic relationships outside of their primary relationships, known as consensual non-monogamy (CNM) (Haupert et al., 2017; Moors et al., 2015; Richards & Barker, 2013). CNM relationships challenge mononormativity and heteronormativity by highlighting alternative ways relationship boundaries can be organised (Adam, 2006; Wosick-Correa, 2010).

CNM is an umbrella term for numerous relationship structures, the most common including open relationships, swinging and polyamory. Open relationships involve engaging in sexual only relationships with others outside of primary relationships (Richards & Barker, 2013). Swinging refers to couples, usually heterosexuals, who engage in sexual practices with others, often at public parties (de Visser & McDonald, 2007; Richards & Barker, 2013). Polyamory tends to be more varied than open relationships and swinging, and is considered both a social identity and practice of engaging in several emotional and sexual relationships simultaneously (Klesse, 2014; Richards & Barker, 2013; Sheff & Hammers, 2011). Polyamorous relationships can be structured around a main unit of two or more people, known as dyads, triads and quads, or they can be formed in V structures (where one individual has a relationship with two people), or families (where all partners are in relationships with each other), known as polyfidelity (Barker & Landridge, 2010; Richards & Barker, 2013; Strassberg, 2003). CNM relationships offer alternative ways of practicing relationships, challenging mononormative notions that sex or romance outside of the primary dyad is catastrophic.

Similarly, the practice of Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission (BDSM) challenges mononormativity and heteronormativity, particularly gender power relations during sex (Barker, 2005). BDSM includes a range of practices, from fantasies of bondage and biting, to sexual role-plays where individuals may dress up and exchange power, as well as giving or receiving physical sensations and psychological stimulation (Richards & Barker, 2013; Sheff & Hammers, 2011; Taylor

& Ussher, 2001). Consent is of primary importance during such practices and is constantly negotiated before, during and after experiences. BDSM practice challenges normative heterosexual relationships as it redefines what constitutes normative sex (Richards & Barker, 2013), highlighting alternative sexual practices, offering ways of challenging power and gender inequalities.

Whilst there are variations between different types of CNM and BDSM, it is common for partners to negotiate boundaries, often emphasising flexibility, equality, communication, openness and honesty, to protect the primary relationship and manage jealousy (Bonello & Cross, 2015; Conley & Moors, 2014; Kimberly & Harris, 2017; McLean, 2004; Richards & Barker, 2013; Wosick-Correa, 2010). Such boundaries include whether or not to disclose extra-dyadic relationships to their partners, terminating threats to primary relationship(s), not sleeping over, and maintaining a sense of specialness in the relationship. Furthermore, it is common for rules to be re-negotiated, particularly following violations, suggesting individuals recognise relationship needs evolve (Bonello & Cross, 2015; Wosick-Correa, 2010). Non-conventional relationships show how fidelity can be organised differently, challenging the need for exclusivity and indicating jealousy may be constructed in a mononormative and capitalist culture that endorses possession and exclusivity, and need not be inevitable (Strassberg, 2003). This highlights how understandings of infidelity are dependent on dominant relationship models and challenges notions infidelity is wrong; rather it is constructed as wrong.

However, as with infidelity, non-conventional relationships are often stigmatised in Western society, as they deviate from monogamy (Moors, Matsick, Ziegler, Rubin, & Conley, 2013). BDSM and CNM relationships are often considered abnormal, sexually unsafe, a marker of relationship problems, and unhealthy (Conley et al., 2013; Rubel & Bogaert**,** 2015**;** Kimberly & Harris, 2017; Moors, Rubin, Matsick, Ziegler, & Conley 2014). This highlights how pervasive mononormativity is and how it underpins commonplace understandings of how relationships should function (Conley et al., 2017). It also highlights the power of taken-for-granted norms, which still influence alternative models that challenge them.

CNM highlights extra-dyadic sex in relationships can be negotiated in a non-catastrophic way and the complex nature of infidelity, influenced by mononormativity, and how behaviours that constitute infidelity under norms of monogamy are understood and experienced differently under norms of CNM. This shows the

importance of further understanding the impact of mononormativity on infidelity experiences and understandings in Western society. However, emphasis on self-awareness and high communication skills in non-conventional relationships risks creating new norms that position them as superior to other relationship types (Rubin et al., 2014). Additionally, some relationship structures, such as BDSM and swinging, are often geared towards white, middle-class individuals, due to the expense of props and events (Richards & Barker, 2013). Furthermore, it may be harder for individuals in less privileged positions to engage in non-normative relationships; they are often scrutinised and stigmatised more than those in advantaged positions, and may experience harsher outcomes for their non-conformity (Sheff & Hammers, 2011). Whilst non-conventional relationships challenge mononormativity and heteronormativity, it is important to consider how these interact with other sectors of society, to understand what such relationships are like for individuals in less privileged positions.

1.3.2.2.5.Non-heterosexual Relationships

Non-heterosexual relationships challenge mononormativity and heteronormativity as they show how monogamy can be experienced differently to traditional norms. Whilst I recognise non-heterosexual relationships refer to a multitude of sexual orientations, practices and communities within the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual (LGBTQIA+) population, it would be beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss them all. Accordingly, this section focuses on lesbian, gay and bisexual relationships, as much research has been conducted within these communities and provides a helpful comparison to heterosexual monogamous relationships and infidelity (Richards & Barker, 2013).

Non-heterosexual relationships have developed in different historical and cultural contexts to heterosexuals, shaping their relationships. Homosexuality has historically been, and still is in many cultures across the world, considered abnormal, illegal and listed as a mental illness in psychiatric diagnostic manuals, including the DSM until 1973 (Richards & Barker, 2013). Furthermore, the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s was associated with gay men and bisexual sexual practices, which has had a lingering effect on perceptions of non-heterosexuals today (Anderlini-D'Onofrio & Alexander, 2009). In the UK, incidences of hate crimes still occur (Richards & Barker, 2013) and in 70 UN member states, same-sex relations are illegal, resulting in the death penalty in some (Mendos, 2019). Such experiences of stigmatisation and homophobia are likely to increase stressors in non-heterosexual relationships, impacting upon

partners. Minority stress theory suggests on-going stigmatisation may lead to internalised homophobia, which can elicit anxiety and shame that non-heterosexual individuals have to negotiate in their relationships (Brown, 2015), impacting on their experiences differently to heterosexuals.

Furthermore, non-heterosexual individuals often have different rules, communities and sexual practices than heterosexuals, which likely shape their relationships. Indeed, those in same-sex relationships are equal in terms of gender, whereby there are no societal gender roles in terms of emotional, sexual, and domestic work that govern heterosexual relationships (Adam, 2006), creating possibilities to create their own roles. Additionally, in gay sexual communities for example, public venues such as toilets, parks and gay bars provide opportunities for sexual activity, which may shape sexual practices and relationships differently to heterosexuals (Bonello & Cross, 2010). This may be reinforced by masculinity scripts promoting hypersexuality, adventure, dominance and sex without emotion, which may shape how male same-sex relationships are structured, likely differing from heterosexual relationships (Adam, 2006; Braun, Terry, Gavey & Fenaughty, 2009; Brown, 2015). Indeed, research has found monogamy is not fixed or assumed in gay relationships; it is often re-negotiated throughout the relationship and individuals can become secretly or openly non-monogamous over time (Adam, 2006; Bonello & Cross, 2010).

As a result of past and on-going discrimination, some non-heterosexual individuals may wish to resist mainstream practices associated with heteronormativity, whilst others may want to fit in as much as possible and conform to mainstream relationship practices (Brown, 2015; Richards & Barker, 2013), which may be influenced by the movement to legalise same-sex marriage. Whilst gay men and bisexuals are more likely to be engaged in non-monogamous relationships than heterosexuals, lesbian women are more likely to engage in monogamous relationships (Adam, 2006; Wosick-Correa, 2010), indicating conformity to monogamous models. This demonstrates the variations within non-heterosexual relationships and how the particular historical context, on-going stigmatisation and different communities and sexual practices influence how these relationships are structured and experienced (Richards & Barker, 2013). Consequently, non-heterosexual monogamy may be experienced differently to heterosexual monogamy.

This further demonstrates understandings of monogamy are constructed in societies and can be experienced differently according to subcultural norms and contexts. It

highlights alternatives to normative models, challenging notions monogamy can only be experienced in a certain way, and how extra-dyadic sex can be understood differently when under alternative norms. However, although non-heterosexual relationships challenge heteronormativity and mononormativity, such relationships are often still structured in the same way as conventional models of relationships, such as maintaining the ideal of 'the couple'; often central to gay, lesbian and bisexual relationships (Gustavson, 2009). This demonstrates how pervasive normative practices are even in groups who resist these practices and construct their own relationship boundaries.

The naturalness of monogamy and disapproval of infidelity are thus challenged by cultural and time variations, feminist and social constructionist literature, and non-conventional and non-heterosexual relationships, demonstrating relationship practices are constructed, illuminating gender inequalities, sexuality and social processes. However, normative constructs of sex and relationships are pervasive in Western society and impact the way infidelity is understood and experienced. Given there are multiple understandings of infidelity, it is important to examine its different layers to enhance knowledge in this time and culture.

1.3.3.Infidelity Research

This section focuses on existing infidelity literature relevant to the research question. It examines consequences and therapeutic difficulties working with infidelity issues, theories, correlations, and experiences of those who have engaged in infidelity.

1.3.3.1.Consequences of Infidelity

The consequences of infidelity vary across time and according to cultural norms; in some nations sexual relationships outside of marriage are illegal and can result in the death penalty (Mendos, 2019; Sharpe, Walters, Goren, 2013). Within a Western mononormative framework, infidelity is often linked to negative consequences for both members of the couple and their families, including depression and anxiety (Fincham & May, 2017). Discovery of infidelity has been linked to homicide; one third of murders of women by men result from suspected or discovered infidelity (Leeker & Carlozzi, 2014). Furthermore, relationship outcomes are often negative following infidelity, frequently resulting in separation. The National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles found 23.6% of women and 18% of men in the UK cited infidelity as their reason for relationship dissolution (Gravningen et al., 2017). This demonstrates

the pervasive influence of mononormative standards on experiences when individuals depart from these.

Mononormativity provides a framework for how individuals should feel and respond when confronted with infidelity. Due to emphases on choosing one partner over others to confirm specialness in monogamous relationships, infidelity is often seen as a sign of a deficit in the primary relationship, such as a lack of love. Those on the receiving end are expected to feel hurt, crushed and shamed (Anderson, 2012). Research suggests infidelity can shatter emotional security, self-esteem and trust, eliciting disbelief, rumination, hurt, reduced sexual and emotional confidence and rage, and elicit trauma symptoms including flashbacks, intrusive thoughts and hyper-vigilance (Boekhout et al., 1999; Lusterman, 2005; Rachman, 2010). In interviews with 13 individuals, the majority of whose partner had engaged in infidelity, Olson, Russell, Higgins-Kessler and Miller (2002) found participants reported their emotions vacillated from anger, confusion and self-blame, as well as preoccupation with why it happened. This further demonstrates influences of dominant relationship models on experiences and responses following departures from monogamy.

Furthermore, infidelity can negatively affect partners who have engaged in infidelity who may feel guilt, shame, anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017). As individuals often wish to be perceived in a positive light, which infidelity in Western society tends to contradict, they may experience inner turmoil for their behaviour (Hall & Fincham, 2006). This highlights how infidelity can be distressing for all involved.

However, this literature appears to be based on assumptions reflecting mononormative discourses that infidelity is wrong and catastrophic, which is challenged by research indicating the positive consequences of infidelity. Infidelity can elicit excitement and passion, which often declines in long-term monogamous relationships as they become familiar (Rubin, et al., 2014). Whilst familiarity can provide security, it can also reduce desire and sexual frequency (Conley et al., 2017; Elliot & Umberson, 2008) as it contradicts the need for uncertainty and novelty that fuels passion and eroticism (Berscheid, 2010; Perel, 2007). The novelty of a new, secret relationship, and breaking the rules therefore can be exhilarating, as individuals fulfil their individual needs (Perel, 2007). Furthermore, receiving attention from another can increase an individual's sense of specialness, increasing self-esteem (Jeanfreau, Jurich and Mong, 2014a; Jeanfreau, Jurich and Mong, 2014b)

and enhance communication, bringing couples closer together (Walters & Burger, 2013). This highlights alternative consequences to departing from mononormative expectations.

Infidelity has also been found to have positive outcomes for the relationship (Walters & Burger, 2013). Whilst Olson et al., (2002) found participants experienced devastation in relation to infidelity, the affairs also enhanced couples' communication, highlighted what was important to them, and the couple grew closer. This demonstrates infidelity can lead to personal growth, strengthening relationships. Whilst consequences of infidelity can be painful, positive consequences show alternative ways infidelity can be experienced.

However, research into both negative and positive consequences of infidelity are often based on mononormative assumptions of infidelity and are mostly conducted with individuals who have been on the receiving end of infidelity, rather than those who engage in infidelity, limiting knowledge. Further research is needed to understand experiences of infidelity for those who engage in it, to further understand its impact.

1.3.3.2.Therapeutic Difficulties with Infidelity

Infidelity has been identified as one of the most common presenting problems in couple's therapy and one of the most challenging issues to work with (Hall & Fincham, 2006), possibly due to the array of behaviours infidelity encompasses and the heightened emotional intensity clients often experience in therapy (Duba, Kindsvatter & Lara, 2008). Practitioners need to balance conflicting positions of each partner and be sensitive to the intricacies of working with infidelity, which make it a demanding task (Hertlein et al., 2005). Numerous guidelines and ways to address infidelity in therapy have been produced (Bagorozzi Sr, 2007; Dupree, White, Olsen & Lafleur, 2007; Parker et al., 2010; Schade & Sandberg, 2012). However, these tend not to be empirically supported and more research is required to support the usefulness of these approaches.

Therapists are often influenced by mononormative and heteronormative assumptions, which may inhibit clients who have engaged in infidelity from opening up (Parker, Tennyson, Berger & Campbell, 2010). In interviews with seven British experienced couple counsellors, Vossler and Moller (2014) found participants struggled to balance differing needs of both partners, particularly due to highly

charged emotions following discovery, whilst trying to remain impartial. This was exacerbated by counsellors' personal experiences with infidelity, which could hinder empathy with certain members of the couple. The framework from which they helped clients understand their affairs, particularly the idea infidelity is a symptom of underlying relationship issues, also influenced participants. This study highlights the need for therapists to be mindful of their own experiences, understandings and pre-conceptions of infidelity, and how dominant relationship models of monogamy influence these. This study further illustrates the need for more understandings of personal meanings of infidelity, to help both therapists and couples explore this, rather than relying solely on mononormative assumptions.

This literature shows the importance of approaching infidelity in a non-pathologising way in therapy and highlights the need for therapists to be aware of societal discourses and mononormativity that influence relationship distress, meanings of infidelity and their own assumptions towards this (Parker et al., 2010). The lack of clear approaches and difficulty therapists have reported to feel when working with infidelity is reflective of its complex nature and demonstrates the need for further research to enhance understandings of this topic, particularly around what infidelity means to individual clients and therapists, and how this interacts with mononormativity and heteronormativity.

1.3.3.3.Theories of Infidelity

This section explores theories proposed to understand why individuals may engage in infidelity, including evolutionary, attachment and psychodynamic theories.

1.3.3.3.1.Evolutionary Theory

Evolutionary theory posits human behaviours are evolved adaptions from our ancestors to ensure survival and increase the likelihood our genes will be passed onto the next generation (Delamater & Hyde, 1998). Regarding monogamy and infidelity, an evolutionary perspective posits selection pressures created different reproductive strategies for men and women (Buss et al., 1999). Men, who can never be certain of their paternity, increase their number of mating partners to enhance their likelihood of reproducing, whilst women, who are certain of their maternity, seek partners who possess resources to help care for their offspring. This theory posits monogamy has formed to ensure the survival of offspring by promoting bi-parental care, and to share resources to ensure their own survival and ability to reproduce. In terms of infidelity, men are considered more likely to engage in, express more

jealousy for, and break up over, sexual infidelity, whilst women are more likely to engage in, express more jealousy for, and break up over emotional infidelity (Confer & Cloud, 2011).

Buss et al., (1999) examined this theory over four experiments with American, Korean and Japanese undergraduates using hypothetical scenarios of emotional and sexual infidelity. They compared this to the double-shot hypothesis (sexual infidelity may be perceived as distressing if individuals believe sexual infidelity intrinsically includes emotional infidelity, therefore the appraisal of the threat is distressing). Findings supported the evolutionary hypothesis across all four experiments; more men than women found sexual infidelity more distressing, and more women than men found emotional infidelity more distressing.

However, these studies used forced-choice measures, where participants could only choose one type of infidelity or the other as more distressing, limiting results. Additionally, student samples may be inexperienced with romantic relationships, possibly drawing on their imagination or scripts of masculinity and femininity, rather than representing how they would respond to these situations in reality. Furthermore, responses to infidelity may vary across life stages; students are unlikely to be thinking about having children and reproductive strategies may not be salient to them (Sabini & Green, 2004). Indeed, Sabini and Green (2004) found gender differences were less distinct in non-student samples; the majority of men and women reported emotional infidelity was worse than sexual infidelity, demonstrating other factors may explain gender differences, including the sample and design of previous methodologies.

The essentialist nature of evolutionary theory studies suggests findings are a universal truth, ignoring social contexts on gender differences in infidelity and relationships, and how they vary across time, cultures, age groups, class, race/ethnicity and sexuality. Evolutionary theory reinforces discourses that women are not as naturally sexual as men. Reducing gender differences to biological drives and evolutionary reproductive behaviours seems simplistic and may perpetuate gender inequalities whereby male sexual infidelity is perceived as more permissible than female sexual infidelity due to their biological and evolutionary sexual need, reducing their responsibility. Evolutionary theory thus perpetuates mononormativty and heteronormativity by promoting the natural drive of reproduction, assuming

heterosexuality, and by reproducing discourses of the male sexual drive and female gender roles.

Whilst evolutionary theory provides insights into evolutionary influences of infidelity, it does not sufficiently capture its complexity and multitude of other influencing factors, and appears to perpetuate gender inequalities. Additionally, it takes away the agency of individuals to understand their own personal reasons for engaging in infidelity, highlighting the need to understand subjective meanings and experiences.

1.3.3.3.2.Attachment Theory

Bowlby (1973) proposed individuals are biologically driven to form attachments with caregivers and early experiences are internalised and develop into internal working models (templates of relating to the self and others). A consistent, attentive and supportive caregiver provides the child with a template of others as reliable and caring, whilst inconsistency in care may provide the child with a template of others as untrustworthy and uncaring (Platt, Nalbone, Casanova & Wetchler, 2008). Attachments also play an important role in helping individuals regulate emotions in distressing situations (Wang, King & Debernardi, 2012) and often affect the quality of relationships, including connection, communication, and problem-solving (Fish, Pavkov, Wetchler & Bercik, 2012). Attachment styles may, therefore, play a role in infidelity, perhaps as a way of coping with stress.

Several attachment styles have been identified, on axes of secure and insecure, and anxious and avoidant (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991). Individuals with secure attachments often exhibit low anxiety and avoidance. Insecure attachments include insecure preoccupied (individuals are often anxious others will leave them), insecure dismissive (individuals are highly avoidant of others and intimacy) and insecure fearful (highly avoidant and anxious others will let them down) (Fish et al., 2012). Individuals with insecure attachments may lead individuals to engage in behaviours that regulate their fear of rejection (anxious attachments) and/or dependence (avoidant attachments), such as through infidelity (DeWall et al., 2011; Parker & Campbell, 2017).

Research has examined the role of attachment styles on the likelihood of individuals engaging in infidelity. Yumbul, Cavusoglu & Geyimci (2010) found childhood trauma, particularly neglect, was associated with avoidant attachment styles and a higher likelihood of engaging in sexual infidelity in adulthood, suggesting infidelity may have

been a way of avoiding intimacy in romantic relationships, as they learnt others cannot be trusted. Similarly, Fish et al., (2012) found anxious attachments are also associated with sexual infidelity, which may be a way of seeking comfort or avoiding dependence on others to increase self-worth in times of relationship distress. Attachment theory and research highlights interesting findings about potential influences of attachment styles on infidelity and may also explain individual differences in infidelity, further highlighting its complexity and how it cannot be understood by one factor.

However, this research adopted positivist paradigms, assuming findings represent a 'truth', ignoring contextual factors such as the way individuals have been socialised and life events. Thus it is difficult to untangle the extraneous variables that may also impact on infidelity when looking at correlational research. Furthermore, this research examined attachment styles on dimensions of anxious and avoidant, suggesting individuals fit into one or the other, when attachment is likely more complex and individuals may shift between them. The research also appears to be influenced by a white frame of reference, excluding other groups and cultures. Indeed, much of the research into attachment styles and infidelity has been conducted in America and Europe, which may be influenced by Western contexts and norms, such as the relationship ideal of monogamy (Parker & Campbell, 2017).

The focus on the primary dyad in the attachment literature and measures of attachment styles and relationship functioning appear to be based on mononormative assumptions that deviations from monogamy are problematic, as they hold the primary dyad as the healthy and desirable relationship structure. Consequently, attachment literature reproduces and maintains mononormativity, and pathologises infidelity as a deficit within the individual or the relationship. Attachment theory also ignores personal meanings infidelity has for individuals, highlighting the importance of further understanding experiences of infidelity, and how this interacts with social processes.

1.3.3.3.3.Psychodynamic Theories

Psychodynamic theories suggest infidelity may be linked to early childhood experiences, particularly the Oedipal developmental phase, which is unconsciously re-enacted in adulthood. The Oedipal complex refers to the stage when a child is thought to experience sexual desire towards the opposite-sex parent and rivalry towards the same-sex parent with whom they have to compete (Mendelsohn, 2014).

The child becomes aware their primary caregiver has a relationship with a third object, which could be the other parent, another caregiver, or work, with whom the child has to vie for affection and come to terms with loss of the dyadic relationship (Britton, 2004). The Oedipal complex thus provides a model of how to deal with love triangles, as the child learns to manage jealousy and competition towards the threat to their dyadic relationship (Josephs, 2010).

If the Oedipal triangle is not resolved, children may utilise defences to protect themselves against loss and anxiety, such as splitting. Loss of the dyadic relationship may leave the child feeling betrayed, with hostile impulses and unconscious desires for retaliation, projected into the third object they compete with, whilst they idealise the desired parent. Splitting parents into all good and all bad acts as an escape from hostile feelings, whist allowing the child to remain close to the good parent (Josephs, 2006). In adult relationships, therefore, if the partner engaging in infidelity was unable to resolve the Oedipal triangle in childhood, they may re-enact this by inviting a third into their relationship, experiencing desire for the forbidden relationship and attempting to master rivalry and defeat from childhood (Mendelsohn, 2014). Indeed, rather than having to compete for the desired object, the partner engaging in infidelity becomes the desired object to be competed for, and the affair allows them to release unconscious hostility and retaliate against the Oedipal figures (Person, 1988).

Psychodynamic theories provide an interesting dimension to understanding infidelity, offering deeper understandings of infidelity, acknowledging its complexity. However, these theories position infidelity as a problem within the individual, which they are not aware of, and fail to consider how culture may impact on experiences of infidelity and relationships.

1.3.3.4.Correlational factors

Numerous factors have been correlated with infidelity. This section will focus on the main correlations relevant to this research.

1.3.3.4.1.Gender

Although higher rates of sexual infidelity in men have been reported in the UK (Johnson et al., 2001), the gender gap is closing in Western society (Adamopoulou, 2013). It may be women previously did not report as much infidelity as men, rather than this demonstrating an increase in infidelity occurrence per se, as it was less acceptable for women and had more severe consequences. Indeed, there are still

some countries where female infidelity is punishable by death (van Hooff, 2015). Additionally, the sexual double standard (male sexual activities, such as casual sex, are more socially acceptable and aligned to masculinity than for women) may have prevented women from reporting infidelity (Duncombe & Marsden, 2004). The increase in women in full-time employment may also have enhanced women's autonomy, making them less dependent on men (Leeker & Carlozzi, 2014). Together, these factors may reduce risks for women engaging in infidelity.

Whilst both men and women engage in infidelity, differences have emerged regarding the types of infidelity men and women are likely to engage in as discussed previously, and differences in their experiences. Research has shown whilst men and women reported they gained validation, love and sex from their affairs, men were more likely to partition their affair from their marriage, explaining their affairs were for sex and they remained committed to their wives. Conversely, women emphasised their marital unhappiness to explain their affairs (Allan, 2004). This may reflect differences in how men and women are socialised and experience monogamous, heterosexual relationships. Men possibly utilised masculinity scripts that promote sexual promiscuity, whilst women possibly drew on femininity scripts that promote emotional involvement, possibly affecting their reported experiences (Allen, 2004). This demonstrates how infidelity is gendered and understood according to norms. Such gender influences also interact with other factors, such as age and class.

1.3.3.4.2.Age

Research has found individuals across the lifespan engage in emotional and sexual infidelity (Atkins, Baucom & Jacobson, 2001; McAnulty & Brineman, 2007), indicating infidelity may be related to life stage. For example younger cohorts often have competing development needs, such as building intimate relationships, as well as exploring new partners as part of their self-development, which may be difficult to reconcile and contribute to engaging in extra-dyadic relationships (Feldman & Cauffman, 1999). This demonstrates age can alter ways infidelity is understood and experienced across groups.

1.3.3.4.3.Socioeconomic-status

Whilst defining socioeconomic-status is complex, research has measured this based on incomes and levels of education. The literature suggests rates of infidelity are higher in individuals who have higher incomes and higher levels of education. It has been suggested this may be linked to increased opportunity and sense of entitlement

possibly because the workplace can increase opportunities for infidelity, due to spending time away from home with an array of individuals (Blow & Hartnett, 2005). Individuals with lower incomes may have more to lose financially by engaging in infidelity, and more social stigma for deviating from dominant relationship models (Klesse, 2018). However, defining socioeconomic-status in terms of income and levels of education does not necessarily capture the intricacies of class and power hierarchies. Given the potential higher risks of infidelity for individuals in less advantaged positions, such individuals may have felt deterred from participating or reporting honestly in research; infidelity likely occurs across all classes of society. This demonstrates the importance of considering how person dimensions influence experiences of phenomenon.

1.3.3.4.4.Religion

Research has found frequenting religious gatherings is linked to lower rates of infidelity (Atkins et al., 2001). This may be because most religions tend to condemn infidelity, and offers a community, possibly helping individuals to conform to religious teachings (Shafer, 2011). However, defining religion as attendance at religious services does not account for all religiosity; not all religious individuals are able to attend services and it ignores individuals who have a faith but do not follow a specific religion (Blow & Hartnett, 2005). Thus such research is limited and religion likely interacts with other contextual factors.

1.3.3.4.5.Race/Ethnicity

It has been suggested rates of infidelity are higher amongst some groups, including African American individuals (Treas & Giesen, 2000; Eyre et al., 2012). It has been suggested this may be influenced by the history of slavery, whereby families were torn apart, and physical and emotional violence may have impeded individuals' abilities to form secure attachments, as well as ongoing racism and discrimination experienced by many African Americans, particularly in the USA (Eyre et al., 2012; Penn et al., 1997). This may reduce work opportunities and resources, creating stress and instability, possibly impacting on reported high mortality rates and low overall health, perhaps contributing to reported lower sex ratios of men to women in African American populations. Such factors may add stress to relationships, providing the context for infidelity occurrence (Penn et al., 1997).

However, many African Americans in the USA and UK also have a strong religiosity, including adherence to Christianity and Islam (Glaude Jr, 2014), which condemn

infidelity (Shafer, 2011), and so attitudes within this population are likely to differ greatly and intersect with gender, age and class. That this group has been the focus of research in the USA rather than other race/ethnicities may indicate an existing bias in how such research is focused and approached, perhaps based on racial stereotypes. Indeed, it has been argued that Black individuals were historically stereotyped as hypersexual and uncivilised to justify slavery and reinforce power and class hierarchies, whilst monogamy was equated with civilisation, representing the achievement and superiority of White Christian nations (Klesse, 2014; Klesse 2018; Willey, 2006). This further demonstrates the complexity of infidelity and how race/ethnicity interacts with culture and the way the social world is experienced.

1.3.3.4.6.Mental Wellbeing

Infidelity is linked to psychological distress. Across two studies in a sample of students, Hall and Fincham (2009) found individuals who reported higher distress were more likely to have engaged in infidelity at a later date, and experience more distress following infidelity, compared to those who had not engaged in infidelity. This suggests distress may be a precursor to infidelity; stress may affect decision-making or makes individuals more vulnerable (Hall & Fincham, 2009). However, this research relied on self-report measures; participants may have reported higher rates of distress to compensate for their socially unacceptable behaviour, and results are limited.

1.3.3.4.7.Relationship Satisfaction

Research indicates long-term relationships increase investment, possibly reducing the likelihood of infidelity, as individuals may be less willing to risk their relationship (Treas & Giesen, 2000), and levels of commitment may mediate relationship satisfaction (Rodrigues et al., 2017). However, many individuals who have significantly invested in their relationships, including those with children still engage in infidelity and relationship investment does not guarantee relationship quality or prevent infidelity from occurring

The association between relationship satisfaction and infidelity has received mixed findings. It has been suggested infidelity reflects relationship difficulties, rather than causing them, which may be influenced by life events, such as bereavement, ageing and financial concerns, as well as mononormative or heteronormative scripts about how relationships should be (Apostu, 2016). As individuals may draw on scripts of relationship dissatisfaction and infidelity to justify infidelity, it is difficult to determine

the role of relationship satisfaction in infidelity. For some, relationship dissatisfaction may contribute to infidelity, whilst individuals in satisfying relationships may also engage in infidelity (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017), further highlighting its complexity and interaction with mononormativity. Relationship satisfaction is also difficult to measure as relationships are so diverse and influenced by a myriad of complex and intertwined factors, and satisfaction in one area may not undermine satisfaction overall. Indeed, in a large-scale, mixed-methods study examining long-term relationships with over 5000 participants in the UK, Gabb and Fink (2018) found relationship quality was influenced by age, gender socioeconomic-status, culture, religion, as well as upbringing, previous life and relationship experiences, external stressors, economic and political factors, and the demands of raising children. This illustrates the highly complex and diverse nature of relationships and satisfaction, which cannot be reduced to a singular measure. Thus it is important to examine subjective experiences of individuals who engage in infidelity.

Research into infidelity correlations highlights its many dimensions and complexities. However, the correlational nature of much of this research means most of the factors explored are speculative. The reliance on self-report measures may have skewed findings due to participants' potential apprehension about honesty regarding a socially loaded phenomenon. Additionally, this research adopts a positivist stance, taking findings at face value and suggesting these factors are a universal essence of infidelity. Furthermore, many of the variables interact with each other, further complicating the research, and different correlates are often taken out of context; it is unlikely any factor alone can be used to understand infidelity, yet they are often considered in isolation, ignoring other social influences. This further highlights infidelity is influenced by the society in which it is embedded; stressing the importance of context to further understand infidelity.

1.3.3.5.Experiences of individuals who engage in infidelity

As infidelity is often subjective to individuals, it is important to further understand the experiences and personal meanings of infidelity for those who engage in it, as well as the influences of social processes on understandings and experiences.

It has been proposed that those who engage in infidelity may experience *cognitive dissonance;* a conflict between beliefs and behaviours (Foster, & Misra, 2013). Foster and Misra (2013) suggested symptoms of cognitive dissonance include self-concept discrepancy, psychological discomfort and poor affect and strategies may be

utilised to reduce these symptoms including de-emphasising the meaning of infidelity (known as trivialisation), and attributing behaviour to external factors to redistribute blame. This demonstrates how mononormativity influences experiences of infidelity, as individuals internalise societal expectations that infidelity is wrong, conflicting with their experience.

Jeanfreau, Herring and Jurich (2016) suggested cognitive dissonance can be reduced by giving oneself permission to have an affair. They interviewed four married women who reported previous involvement in extra-marital affairs in the USA. They found participants gave themselves permission using techniques that reduced cognitive dissonance, including reporting their partner was evil, rationalising their affair, placing blame on their husband and compartmentalising. This indicates the process individuals may go through when engaging in infidelity, to overcome the conflict between mononormative expectations and infidelity, allowing them to continue their affair. However, this does not explain how individuals understand their experience.

Anderson (2010) conducted another qualitative study examining experiences of those who engaged in infidelity. He interviewed 40 (26 of whom reported engaging in physical activity outside of their relationship) purposefully selected, white, heterosexual, non-religious men between 18 and 21 years from a British university. Participants reported infidelity was influenced by alcohol consumption, sexual monotony in their primary relationships and strong libidos, and they experienced guilt and anxiety that their infidelity would be exposed to their partner and social network, resulting in a perceived social mandate for the relationship to be terminated. This provides an insight into experiences of those who have engaged in infidelity, and influences of mononormativity on such experiences.

However, these findings may only be relevant to adolescent males at university; there are increased opportunities for casual sex, which is encouraged and related to masculine identity. Furthermore, whilst the sample was purposefully chosen to closely examine how mononormativity affects a particular group who depart from monogamy, more research is necessary to understand what infidelity is like for other sectors of society, including those in less privileged positions. Finally, infidelity was defined by sexual activities, which does not explain why individuals engage in other types of behaviours that constitute infidelity in Western society. For example, on-

going relationships are often more risky than one-off sexual encounters, due to the effort to maintain and conceal them, and therefore may be experienced differently.

Jeanfreau et al., (2014a) and Jeanfreau et al., (2014b), examined two different samples of white, heterosexual married women who reported having on-going affairs and their findings differed to those reported by Anderson (2010). They found affairs often began as friendships, whereby they shared personal information. They found a lack of attention from, and inability to resolve conflict with their husbands influenced their affairs, which made them feel valued and were maintained with encouragement from social networks. This research demonstrates how on-going affairs may be more complex than one-off sexual encounters, due to managing different dynamics as affairs progress, and the process involved in maintaining them. However, these studies focused on white, middle-class women, ignoring other sectors.

Fosse (2010) found different experiences of infidelity in a non-white, non-middle-class population. He interviewed 38 low-income African-American men in two Boston neighbourhoods, 18 of whom claimed to be non-monogamous. Using grounded theory, he found non-monogamous participants believed women were likely to exploit and deceive them (based on their own deceit towards their partners); they experienced an obligation to their social group who they felt had always supported them and believed they ought to conform to group values; and their mortality awareness was perceived as a justification to take advantage of whatever gave them pleasure. This study provides an alternative perspective on personal meanings of infidelity in a non-white, non-middle-class sample, and shows how experiences of relationships depend on cultural norms and can differ within subgroups and between individuals. Lower-income men may have different motivations than more affluent individuals; in a society where a successful career can be a measure of masculinity, infidelity may be a way to increase masculinity to compensate for low work status (Fosse, 2010).

These studies demonstrate how experiences of those who engage in infidelity are varied and subjective, influenced by the context within which they operate. It also illustrates the influences of dominant relationship models and norms on individuals' experiences and personal meanings of infidelity, once again highlighting there is no fixed understanding of monogamy and infidelity. However, most of this research has been conducted in the USA, which may have nuanced differences in relationship practices and norms compared to the UK. Whilst Anderson's (2010) research was

conducted in the UK, this focused on physical activities, rather than other behaviours constituting infidelity, such as on-going relationships. As on-going relationships involve different dynamics and processes, there is a need for further research into experiences of those who engage in affairs, and how these are influenced by mononormativity, in a UK sample.

1.4.Conclusion

The current literature illustrates how pervasive mononormativity and heteronormativity are on understandings and experiences of infidelity in Western society. Historical, religious and cultural contexts, social constructionist and feminist approaches, non-conventional and non-heterosexual relationships demonstrate there is no fixed definition of infidelity, as understandings of monogamy and infidelity are embedded in power relations and change according to socio-political shifts and different norms, whereby extra-dyadic relationships are not always deemed infidelity. This highlights the importance of critically examining these constructs and contexts within which they operate when exploring how they are experienced and understood.

The infidelity research has revealed its many dimensions and theories, and how mononormative assumptions can negatively affect those experiencing infidelity, who may feel a sense of failure for departing from monogamy, as well as contributing to challenges in therapeutic work. However, many of the studies have relied on quantitative, often correlational, research using hypothetical situations and self-report measures in undergraduate samples, as well as wide-ranging definitions of infidelity, often focusing on sexual activities. Defining infidelity in this way assumes infidelity and sexual activities have a singular meaning, and fails to shed light on contextual influences and personal meanings of infidelity (Moller & Vossler, 2015).

The theoretical, quantitative and qualitative literature has often been conducted from a White perspective, whereby participants' understandings are influenced by White privilege, and does not illuminate how those in less privileged positions experience the phenomenon (Sheff & Hammers, 2011). Furthermore, the literature often assumes monogamy and heterosexuality are the ideal, not only in measures of relationship functioning, but also in theories of infidelity, assuming the naturalness of the heterosexual, primary dyad, pathologising deviations from this. As such research has mainly been conducted in Western societies, participants may have drawn on societal scripts of monogamy, masculinity and femininity, particularly research into gender differences. This illustrates how mononormativity and heteronormativity both

influence and are perpetuated by the research, which may unwittingly perpetuate gender inequalities.

1.5.Problem Statement

Despite research examining dimensions of infidelity, understandings in UK culture are limited, and research often does not take into account mononormative influences on how infidelity is understood and experienced. As infidelity is common in modern life, and can shed light on relationship practices, as well as sexuality, power and gender relations within these, which govern social order, more research is necessary to understand infidelity, particularly affairs, in the UK. Furthermore, mononormativity and heteronormativity can negatively impact the way romantic relationships and infidelity are understood and experienced, impacting on mental health. As relationships are important for connection and mental wellbeing (Mikulinier et al., 2003), it is important to further understand experiences and personal meanings of infidelity and how these interact with mononormativity and heteronormativity in the present cultural context.

1.5.1.Research Question

The research question is: How do individuals who have engaged in infidelity in a committed relationship make sense of their experience?

1.5.2.Research Aims

The study aims to examine the experience and meaning of individuals who engaged in affairs in their monogamous relationships, to develop understandings of infidelity, and how this is influenced by mononormativity. There are three aims.

1. To understand experiences of engaging in infidelity in a monogamous relationship
2. To understand how individuals make sense of this experience
3. To examine mononormative influences on experiences and meaning-making of infidelity

1.6.Relevance to Counselling Psychology

Given negative consequences following infidelity, the number of couples and individuals that seek therapy for issues relating to infidelity, and the difficulty working with this (Hall & Fincham, 2006; Vossler & Moller, 2014), it is an important topic for Counselling Psychology. Indeed, such difficulties are often influenced by

mononormativity, whereby those who depart from these standards can be left with a sense of failure and distress. This research could therefore help to challenge normative assumptions about how relationships should be outside of the therapy room, as well as informing Counselling Psychology practice working with infidelity, such as developing a more holistic and compassionate approach, which acknowledges its complexity and reduces judgement. Indeed, Milton (2010) emphasises the importance of considering the impact of Counselling Psychology beyond the therapy room. This is also congruent with the values of Counselling Psychology, which appreciates the complexity, subjectivity and personal meaning of human experience (Rafalin, 2010).

2.Methodology

2.1.Overview

This section outlines the research design, chosen methodology and rationale, followed by the theoretical and philosophical paradigm of the research. The procedures of the study, ethical considerations, reflexivity, and quality and validity of the research are then discussed. In the remaining chapters, the terms infidelity and affairs in relation to this research refer to an on-going relationship alongside monogamous relationships, not agreed with primary partners.

2.2.Design

The introduction highlighted that the majority of research into infidelity has been mainly conducted in the USA, focused on sexual infidelity or utilised quantitative methods, often ignoring contextual factors. Consequently, in depth understandings are lacking and there is a need for more research into different types of infidelity, specifically affairs, in a British sample that examines this phenomenon in depth and in context. As I aimed to examine the complexity and depth of meaning and experiences, an inductive (examining the data from the bottom up) and idiographic (focusing on unique, individual experiences) approach was required rather than a deductive (testing ideas or theories) and nomothetic approach (focusing on universal similarities and how these can be generalised) (Smith et al., 2009). A qualitative approach thus seemed to chime with both the gap in the literature, and the aims of the research.

Qualitative research allows for detailed examination of the meaning of diverse experiences to enhance knowledge of phenomena (McLeod, 2015), allowing rich data to be produced, accounting for the changeability and context of meanings (Finlay, 2006). Qualitative research often views knowledge as embedded in the social world and constructed through language and contexts (Langdridge, 2007), therefore knowledge produced is considered context-specific and subjective (Finlay, 2006). Qualitative research highlights the impact of the researcher on the research process, and how their interests, values and assumptions impact upon research findings (McLeod, 2015). This approach seemed more appropriate than a quantitative methodology, which seeks an objective truth across contexts and cultures to find causal explanations used to predict future behaviours (McLeod, 2015).

A qualitative approach was considered congruent with the philosophy and values underpinning Counselling Psychology, highlighting the importance of valuing individuals' subjectivity in making sense of their experiences (Strawbridge & Woolfe, 2010), as well as acknowledging and valuing the context, complexity and differences of experiences (Rafalin, 2010).

Although several methodologies were considered for this research, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was chosen, as it aims to explore participants' lived experience in depth and in context to understand how they ascribe meanings to phenomena, which seemed appropriate for the research aims, and my theoretical position. To further justify the choice of methodology over others, the main aspects of IPA will be discussed.

2.3.IPA

IPA aims to examine individuals' lived experience of phenomenon that is meaningful to them. Individuals are viewed as meaning-makers who ascribe importance to their experiences, which IPA aims to capture (Smith et al., 2009). Exploring participants' experiences is complex and requires researchers to step into participants' shoes and then look beyond their accounts to examine the ineffable aspects of experience (Lyons, 2007). Interpretation of participant accounts is therefore important to examine the experience beyond what participants articulate using language; developing a more complete understanding of phenomenon (Smith & Eatough, 2007). IPA involves what has been termed a *double hermeneutic*; researchers make sense of how participants make sense of their experiences to fully grasp the subjective reality of the topic being studied.

IPA is influenced by symbolic interactionism; all interactions and responses to other individuals or objects in the social world involve interpretation. This interpretation is in turn influenced by social interactions, and by language, which is viewed as a symbol of socially shared meaning. Meaning and interpretation are therefore dependent on the culture within which the individual is embedded (Ashworth, 2008). IPA acknowledges the social contexts of participants, influencing how they ascribe meanings to their experience using language, and how the researcher interprets this.

IPA is an inductive approach; it is grounded in the data and research questions, rather than testing theories (Smith, 2004). It recognises that researchers' and

participants' prior knowledge and experience inevitably influences participant responses and findings (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006).

IPA shares similarities with cognitive psychology, in that both view meaning-making as a cognitive endeavour, using mental processes and perceive "a connection between people's talk and their thinking and emotional state" (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p.54). However, IPA also acknowledges the complexity of how individuals talk about experiences, and how contexts influence what participants disclose, therefore language is not considered to directly represent participants' experiences, and interpretation is necessary (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

IPA draws on the work of four main philosophers; Husserl (1931), Heidegger (1962), Merleau-Ponty (1962), and Sartre (1969). There are three main theoretical underpinnings to IPA; phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography.

2.3.1.Phenomenology

IPA draws on different branches of phenomenology. Husserl (1931) developed transcendental phenomenology, aiming to explore *lived experience* in depth to discover the essence of phenomenon. Husserl (1931) proposed human beings possess *a natural attitude*, consisting of expectations and biases about the world, which obstructs identification of the essence of experience. He believed that if the natural attitude could be put aside (bracketed), the essence of phenomenon could be revealed (Flood, 2010). According to Husserl (1931), the notion of *intentionality* is central to conscious experience; the idea that consciousness is always directed at something. Intentionality involves noema (where awareness is directed) and noesis (the process of awareness) (Ashworth, 2003). The aim of researchers is to bracket the natural attitude, allowing examination of the intentionality of awareness, revealing the essence of phenomena (Flood, 2010).

However, existential and hermeneutic phenomenologists did not believe it was possible to fully bracket the natural attitude and placed more emphasis on context. Merleau-Ponty (1962) argued that whilst it is possible to empathise with individuals, experience is influenced by social context and previous experiences, which are unique and can never be fully shared with others. Sartre (1969) emphasised how individuals are constantly evolving or *becoming* themselves which is always in relation to the world in which they inhabit.

IPA adopts aspects of Husserlian phenomenology, whereby the researcher focuses on participants' lived experience, but places less emphasis on revealing its essence, focusing instead on the subjectivity of individual experiences in the social context, congruent with existential phenomenology. IPA emphasises the importance of the researcher's own experiences and knowledge on the analysis, which inevitably influences findings (Smith et al., 2009). IPA posits that researchers can only gain partial access to participants' experiences in particular contexts by examining the meaning participants ascribe to this (Larkin et al., 2006).

2.3.2.Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics was influenced by Heidegger (1962) and considers how meaning is ascribed to experience in the context of the world. Heidegger (1962) disagreed with Husserl's (1931) claim that assumptions and past experiences can be completely bracketed, as individuals and their experiences are embedded in their *lifeworld*, including cultural and historical contexts, invariably influencing perceptions and experiences. He claimed people are interconnected in the world and their beliefs are influenced by the dominant values of their society (Spinelli, 1989). He referred to this as *Dasein* (being-in-the-world); the person is always viewed as a *person-in-context* (Heidegger, 1962*)*. Heidegger (1962) proposed knowledge is gained from interpretation, which is influenced by previous events, expectations and presumptions and is vital to understanding Dasein and experience.

Heidegger (1962) also spoke about the temporality of existence; present knowledge is influenced by past experiences and anticipation of the future, and our existence is temporary as we are always moving towards death, which gives rise to humans' meaning-making of conscious experience. IPA aims to examine this meaning-making and reflection (Langdridge, 2007).

IPA agrees with the importance Heidegger (1962) placed on interpretation; researchers seek to interrogate the phenomenon as diligently as possible, yet they understand this becomes interpretive (Smith et al., 2009). Interpretation is necessary, as participants' experiences are intertwined in the social world and their past experiences, which cannot be fully expressed using language. There is a need to interpret contextual influences on experiences to get closer to the phenomenon under investigation thereby producing a more complete picture of the experience (Smith et al., 2009).

2.3.3.Idiographic

IPA is idiographic; it aims to elicit detailed exploration of specific individual experiences in individual cases (Smith et al., 2009). IPA research tends to utilise small, purposive, homogenous samples to enable a detailed analysis. To achieve this, analysis is conducted on each transcript one-by-one, before comparing the transcripts for common themes. The aim is to highlight commonalities between participants to learn about the phenomenon under study, and to discover the unique individual circumstances and gain insights into the quality of experience (Smith, 2004).

2.4.Rationale for IPA

Whilst qualitative research methodologies share common themes, including acknowledging the role of the researcher, the influence of language and culture and that findings are context-dependent (Finlay, 2006), there are differences in the questions they ask, the assumptions they make about the world, and what knowledge can be produced (Willig, 2013). Given the underlying principals of IPA seek to produce a detailed exploration of individual experiences and meaning of phenomena, whilst also allowing for consideration of historical, temporal, and socio-political contexts, it seemed an appropriate approach for investigating experiences and personal meanings of infidelity, as well as considering the wider contextual influences such as mononormativity.

I was particularly drawn to the hermeneutic aspect of IPA, as I agree language is used to understand experiences, but that it cannot express all aspects of experience, which is influenced by societal contexts and past experiences, therefore interpretation is necessary to go beyond language and examine wider contexts that may have shaped the experience. This is particularly important in infidelity research, whereby dominant discourses in the UK are often disapproving of infidelity and may influence how participants portray their experience. The hermeneutic aspect of IPA was therefore useful in examining what participants may not feel able to say to gain a fuller picture of infidelity. Furthermore, the exploratory and idiographic nature seemed ideal for accessing the detail and complexities of experiences of infidelity.

As I was interested in capturing the detail of individual experiences of engaging in infidelity, descriptive phenomenology was also considered; rooted in Husserlian phenomenology, aiming to identify the essence of experience (Giorgi, 1997). Although I respect the importance of the descriptive part of phenomenology and

grounding analysis in participant accounts, I agree with Smith et al., (2009) that all description involves interpretation, as one always has a frame of reference that makes understanding possible. I was also interested in how individuals interpret their experience in context, rather than focusing solely on the essence of infidelity experience. IPA is a good balance between capturing individuals' subjective experiences of infidelity in context, whilst allowing for both participants' and researchers' interpretation.

Given the influence of mononormativity and heteronormativity on experiences of romantic relationships and infidelity, as well as my epistemological position, I considered using discourse analysis due to its social-constructionist nature. Two main strands of discourse analysis have been identified; discursive psychology and Focauldian discourse analysis (FDA) (Willig, 2013). Discursive psychology focuses on how phenomena are constructed through talk and how individuals use language and discourses to perform a function in specific contexts and social interactions, such as justification or rationalisation (Willig, 2013). This approach tends to solely focus on discourses in a specific conversational context and does not consider subjectivity or the wider social contexts beyond the data (Willig, 2013). This approach would focus on how participants talk about infidelity and what function this would serve for them, which would not be congruent with the research aims exploring experiences and sense-making of engaging in infidelity.

FDA does allow for examination of subjectivity and wider social contexts, as it examines how individuals construct their experiences using dominant discourses, which are embedded in power relations (Willig, 2013). FDA examines how "dominant discourses privilege certain versions of social reality that legitimate existing power relations and social structures" (Willig, 2013, p.130) and how these are used to construct experiences of the world (Willig, 2013). Furthermore, these discourses are seen to provide expectations for organising life, offering individuals ways of positioning themselves in social interactions (Willig, 2013). An FDA approach would examine how dominant discourses of romantic relationships privilege the institutions of monogamy and marriage, which serve the interests of those in power and those who benefit from these institutions, legitimising them as the norm and correct version of social reality, and how subjective experiences of relationships and infidelity are constructed through these discourses. However, the focus would be on how these discourses are used to position participants and construct experiences. Whilst the aims of this study included examining the influence of mononormativity and

heteronormativity on experiences, the focus was on capturing an in depth contextual account of individuals' experiences, rather than on the discursive activity of these. As Smith et al., (2009) acknowledge IPA "subscribes to social constructionism but a less strong form than discursive psychology or FDA" (p.196), it was considered IPA would be a better fit to the study's aims and my epistemological position, allowing for the detailed examination and sense-making of experience, whilst also considering the impact of contexts and normativity on these experiences.

IPA seemed the most appropriate choice of qualitative methodology when taking the topic of infidelity, the research question and aims into account. It seemed IPA would capture the subjective experience of individuals who have engaged in infidelity, whilst also providing the opportunity to examine what this meant for them, and contextual influences. Furthermore, the theoretical underpinnings fit well with my ontological and epistemological position.

2.5.Theoretical Paradigm

My assumptions about what is reality, or what exists in the world (ontology), and what can be known about this existence or reality (epistemology) influences all stages of the research process, particularly how we gain access to knowledge, the questions asked, how data is collected, examined, and analysed (Lyons, 2007). Consequently, Willig (2012) emphasises the importance of understanding the epistemological and ontological frameworks underpinning research to evaluate the research.

My ontological position can be described as critical realist, which sits between realist and relativist positions (Fletcher, 2016). This is because I do not agree with naïve realism that we can gain access to objective reality through objective methods, perceiving experience to provide direct access to reality. Furthermore, I cannot align with a relativist position, claiming there is no objective reality, as reality is socially constructed, dependent on language, and so no absolute truths exist (Fletcher, 2016). Aligned with critical realism, I believe a real material world exists, which impacts individuals in their physical and social existence, and which individuals impact on, but that this is independent from human knowledge and separate from language (Bhaskar, 1997; Roberts, 2014).

From a critical realist position, I believe meanings of infidelity and relationships are socially constructed through everyday interactions, but that these constructions of

infidelity have real consequences for what happens in the world in a material sense, such as the stigma that can arise when departing from the institution of monogamy. Furthermore, constructions of infidelity also have roots in the material world, in that they constitute attempts to make sense of experiences that impact people in their physical and social existence, such as sexual attraction (Willig, 2016). Consequently, I believe reality can only be partially accessed because it is always embedded in the social context (Roberts, 2014). Findings in this study therefore cannot fully or directly access the reality of infidelity or make any truth claims, as they are seen to reflect participants' experiences and interpretations of infidelity, which are shaped and mediated by the personal, social and cultural lenses within which they are embedded (Willig, 2012). This is congruent with the theoretical underpinnings of IPA, which assumes the existence of shared experiences, but that these are influenced by wider contexts (Willig, 2016).

IPA is compatible with various epistemological positions, providing the focus is on generating phenomenological knowledge in context (Larkin et al., 2006). This study seeks to generate phenomenological knowledge, as I am aiming to explore experiences and meanings of infidelity (Willig, 2012). At the same time, I acknowledge experiences and meaning-making of infidelity are influenced by the social world within which they are embedded, including socio-political, economic, and historical contexts, prevalent discourses and norms and that participants are located in (Willig, 2012). Consequently, I believe the phenomenon under investigation can be experienced differently between individuals and across contexts, and understood differently over time, giving rise to different versions or interpretations of infidelity. As such, I adopt a contextual-constructionist epistemology (Madill et al., 2000).

A contextual-constructionist epistemology assumes knowledge is intertwined within the social environment, including cultural, historical and linguistic contexts, and fluctuates between settings and perceivers' perspectives, meaning different perspectives and insights can be generated about the same phenomenon at different times and across contexts (Brendl & Jaeger, 2004; Flood, 2010). This research adopts Coyle's (2007) definition of context as "social systems and feedback loops through which an individual is embedded" (p.17), including "partnerships, family relationships, occupational networks" and "broader social systems, such as age, gender, social class, ethnicity and sexuality and these in turn are permeated by macro-social ideologies or narratives" (p.17).

Central to this position is the relationship between the researcher and participant, and how their contexts interact with each other, co-constructing meanings and knowledge (Coyle, 2007). The perspective of the researcher therefore unavoidably influences findings and what can be known (Madill et al., 2000). A contextual-constructionist epistemology emphasises the role of language on the understanding of meanings (Lyons, 2007). Indeed, knowledge of reality is dependent on the ability to articulate it. However, aligned to the phenomenological aspect of this study, I do not view experiences as purely constructed through language and discourses. Different conceptualisations of the relationship between discourse and experiences have been identified, on a continuum between those that suggest experiences are constructed by discourse, to those that suggest experience pre-exists discourse but that discourse limits how experiences can be talked about (Willig, 2017). I sit between the two; I view experiences as influenced by a myriad of factors, including early experiences and attachments, but that these experiences are also mediated and shaped by available discourses and language in the culture individuals are embedded in, which provide context for understanding experiences (Eatough & Smith, 2006; Eatough & Smith, 2008; Willig, 2017).

Thus, whilst the lived experience of infidelity is the primary focus of this research, I acknowledge that the term infidelity is constructed in society, and is a heavily socialised practice. Consequently, I perceive any experience of infidelity, sexuality and relationships to be necessarily shaped by society and discourse and therefore the lived experience of infidelity will inevitably be filtered through particular discourses. Indeed, to ignore discourse would be to ignore the context participants' experiences are embedded within. This research thus attempts to take account of this by attending closely to the discourses in the literature and in the analysis influencing participants' experience and sense-making. Whilst this makes this study different to typical IPA studies, this is also consistent with IPA, my epistemology and the topic under investigation. Furthermore, Smith (2012) is supportive of IPA studies paying attention to the social aspects of experiences.

A contextual-constructionist position can therefore be understood as a moderate social-constructionist stance; I acknowledge wider societal structures and dominant discourses influence participants' experiences, rather than constructing them, as a radical social-constructionist stance would argue (Willig, 2017). From a contextual-constructionist stance, I assume knowledge is context-dependent, whereby context refers to wider structures, dominant discourses, and historical and cultural influences.

My epistemological position therefore can be seen as sitting between naïve realism and radical constructionism (Lyons, 2007).

Whilst from this position I consider the concepts of monogamy, marriage and infidelity to be socially constructed through language and discourses, the ontological realism of this study acknowledges that experiences are not purely constructions; they represent individuals' inner realities shaped by past experiences, wider discourses, contexts and systems, which is the focus of this research. The analysis should reflect interpretations of experiences of infidelity, but these are contextualised within the wider structures and discourses participants are embedded in (Willig, 2012). Providing these interpretations are grounded in participants' accounts, the findings can generate phenomenological knowledge about the experience of infidelity in the social context of the UK. The status of the text thus represents the inner realities of participants, shaped by the wider social contexts and discourses; the research is not attempting to make universal claims about individuals and infidelity, but aims to enhance understandings of this phenomenon in this particular time and context. This fits well with my ontological position and theoretical underpinnings of IPA.

2.6.Procedures

2.6.1.Sampling

As IPA research adopts an idiographic approach, aiming to gain in-depth knowledge about individuals' lived experiences, sample sizes tend to be small. However, there is no set number of participants recommended in IPA and sample sizes have varied across research, ranging from single case studies to a sample of 42 (Smith & Eatough, 2007). The number of participants depends on a myriad of factors, including the aims of the research, the richness of the data collected, the context of the research, and limitations of time and participant recruitment (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Furthermore, rather than recommending any number of participants, Smith et al., (2009) recommend between four to ten interviews for a Professional Doctorate. This suggests sample sizes are flexible and depends on the aims and context of the research project.

Given that the current study was undertaken for the accomplishment of a Professional Doctorate, aiming to produce in depth accounts of individuals'

meaning-making and experiences of engaging in infidelity, this study aimed to recruit between 6-8 participants. It was considered this would provide enough material to examine the unique subjective experience of individuals who have engaged in infidelity and how they make sense of this, whilst retaining the idiographic nature of the study.

IPA recommends researchers recruit a purposeful, homogenous sample, carefully selecting participants based on specific, shared criteria aligned to the research question and aims (Smith et al., 2009). It is proposed these criteria can generate deeper insights about the phenomenon under investigation, as they will have more in common and there will be less variation complicating the analysis (Robinson, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). As this study aimed to explore idiographic experiences and meaning-making of individuals who have engaged in an affair, participants were selected on the specific premise that they had all previously engaged in an on-going relationship not agreed within and alongside their committed, mutually exclusive relationship.

However, the issue of homogeneity was a source of tension in this research. As I understood homogeneity as reflecting a shared experience of the phenomenon under investigation, I did not specify characteristics, such as gender, age, race/ethnicity, sexuality and socioeconomic-status in the sampling criteria. As previous research has possibly been influenced by bias or stereotypes based on white frames of reference, I also wanted to maintain an openness to hear individuals' experiences in the diverse cultural context of Britain, and could not justify privileging any groups over the other at the time without making assumptions. Furthermore, as infidelity is a sensitive issue and I anticipated recruitment would be difficult, I wanted to keep the criteria as open and flexible as possible, to enhance chances of recruitment. However, as my reading on the topic developed, I understood the gendered nature of romantic relationships and infidelity experiences, and how social identities intersect with understandings and experiences. Consequently, the sample was more diverse and heterogeneous than a typical IPA study. Whilst this is a limitation of this study, it can also increase the transferability of findings and contribute to the wider context and empirical research (Smith et al., 2009). More reflection on this can be found in discussion section 4.3.2.

2.6.1.1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria stipulated that participants would be male and female adults who had previously engaged in a relationship alongside their committed monogamous relationship, but not agreed with their primary partner. This was because my research is looking at a specific type of infidelity; an on-going relationship. Cohabitation was deemed to constitute a committed relationship, as it indicates a level of investment in the relationship. As previous research has focused on younger adults who may have had less opportunity than older adults to experience a long-term relationship in which they engaged in infidelity, participants had to be over 25 years old. These criteria were attempts to recruit a homogenous sample, where participants shared the experience of engaging in infidelity in a specific type of relationship. However, as discussed in the sampling section, this overlooked the gendered nature of experiences, as well as the impact of other social identities. In hindsight I would have narrowed the criteria down, perhaps to focus on men or non-white groups, given much previous qualitative research has been conducted on White, middle-class women (Jeanfreu et al., 2014a, Jeanfreu et al., 2014b; Sheff & Hammers, 2011).

Participants' affairs had to have lasted for at least one month and excluded one-night stands. This is because an on-going relationship often requires more effort to maintain (Jeanfreu et al., 2016). Participants in consensually non-monogamous relationships at the time of their affairs were excluded, as this research is interested in the experience of the phenomenon of infidelity, which they did not agree with their partner.

The definition of a romantic relationship was left open for participants to interpret, as infidelity and romantic relationships are subjective to individuals and couples, and I did not want to impose my definition of infidelity onto them, whilst at the same time highlighting I was looking at the experience of infidelity, in particular an affair. I carefully considered the language on all recruitment documentation, attempting to avoid any negative or potentially judgemental language. However, in hindsight some of the language used could be perceived as judgemental, such as 'unfaithful'.

Although participants could still be involved in either their primary relationship, or with the person they had the affair with, the affair itself had to have been over for at least six months at the time of participation. There is some debate regarding the appropriate amount of time for interviewing individuals about their experiences; some

suggest it is better to collect data as close to the experience as possible before details are forgotten, whilst others argue there needs to be time to process experience (Elmir, Schmied, Jackson & Wilkes, 2011). Whilst in hindsight 6 months seemed arbitrary, at the time this was considered to be enough time for participants to be able to reflect on their experience, which may have been difficult if they were still involved in the affair and experiencing heightened emotions (Elmir et al., 2011).

2.6.2.Recruitment

Participants were recruited by distributing recruitment fliers (appendix A) in public places (with permission from the managers), such as community centres, hairdressers, and pubs. I also circulated the advertisement on the Internet, such as on social media, Internet forums and online advertisement and community websites. A snowball sample was also used, which involved circulating the research study through word of mouth (Robinson, 2014). Snowball sampling is useful when it may be difficult to recruit participants due to the potential stigma of the topic, and may require a level of trust for participants to volunteer (Robinson, 2014). As dominant understandings around infidelity are often disapproving in Western society, it was considered that individuals may be reluctant to volunteer for the study, and so snowball sampling was considered a useful way of attempting to increase chances of recruiting participants. I therefore asked friends, other professionals and the participants (following interviews) if they knew of anybody who may be interested in participating in the study and to pass the advertisement onto people they knew of. It was made clear to friends and professional colleagues that participants and I should not personally know or know of each other, to ensure participants did not feel uncomfortable and that we did not have preconceptions of each other that may impact on data collection or analysis.

Participants who expressed an interest in participating were first asked screening questions (appendix B) based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, either over the telephone or email. Participants who fit the criteria were then given at least 24 hours to consider the information sheet (appendix C).

During recruitment, I encountered difficulties gaining participant response, and those who did respond to online advertisements frequently asked for financial or sexual compensation due to the personal nature of the topic. I explained this was not possible due to the research being for the fulfilment of a Doctorate and as such was not funded, and sexual compensation was inappropriate. This was a stressful time,

and I began to feel unsafe about meeting strangers, even in booked rooms in the university. I also worried that I may not get enough participants, particularly due to the disapproval around this topic and understandable reluctance of participants to open up about their experience to a stranger. I therefore relied more heavily on gaining participants through word of mouth from acquaintances and friends. I also encountered difficulties with this, as many acquaintances did not feel comfortable asking those they knew who had engaged in infidelity to participate. However, participants who were recruited through mutual acquaintances were happy to participate and may have felt more trust towards me knowing our mutual acquaintance trusted me. Three participants responded to the recruitment fliers, I met one participant in a chance encounter, and friends and professional colleagues referred the other participants to me. More reflection on the impact of this recruitment experience is considered in discussion section 4.3.2.

During the recruitment process, I gained some Internet responses from individuals residing in other parts of the UK who were willing to participate, but unable to travel to London. As it was not practical for me to travel there due to time and financial restraints, and I did not want to exclude participants based on geographical location, I amended my ethics application to include the use of Video Skype interviews, which was granted (appendix D). This provided a new flexibility and convenience for interviews, and two were conducted over Video Skype. Indeed, online interviews are less time-consuming as they eliminate the need to travel to a location, enhancing convenience, which may increase chances of participation (Seitz, 2016). However, there are limitations to conducting interviews over Video Skype, including the need for a reliable Internet connection, which can often be unpredictable, resulting in pauses or delays during the interview, as well as potentially dropping calls and disrupting the rapport with participants (Seitz, 2016). Researchers can only see participant's faces and upper body, limiting the range of non-verbal communication that can be read, and the image may be blurry so it is harder to see participants' facial expressions, affecting the researcher's ability to monitor their emotional state. This may affect the level of intimacy and rapport developed (Janghorban, Roudsari & Taghipour, 2014).

However, testing the Internet connection beforehand, and discussing back-up plans for if calls are dropped, as well as paying attention to participants' tones of voice can somewhat mitigate these limitations. It has also been suggested that participants may feel more comfortable with Video Skype interviews as they are able to choose a

familiar location, which may enhance their openness and authenticity than face-to-face interviews (Janghorban et al., 2014). Although online and face-to-face interviews may differ in how rapport is built, it has been suggested that online interviews still have good quality and authenticity, as researchers still have access to non-verbal communication (Janghorban et al., 2014; Seitz, 2016). Whilst using a mixture of face-to-face and Video Skype interviews was far from ideal and led to inconsistency in the data collection, there are also advantages and, due to the difficulty recruiting, I needed to be as flexible as possible during the recruitment stage. Nevertheless, this is a limitation of the study, which is reflected more upon in the discussion section 4.3.2.

2.6.3.Participants

Four male and four female participants initially took part in the research. Participants had all engaged in an on-going romantic relationship of at least one month at the same time as their primary monogamous relationship, in which they were cohabiting, indicating homogeneity of their experience. However, participants differed in terms of gender, age, race/ethnicity, sexuality and occupations (indicating differences in socioeconomic-status). As discussed in section 2.6.1, the diversity in the sample compromised the homogeneity of this study. Whilst the differences in gender, age, race/ethnicity, and occupation were considered to influence participants' experiences, and inevitably bring variation into their accounts, they had also been socialised in Western British society with the dominant discourses surrounding monogamy, infidelity and romantic relationships. Whilst the Asian British participants may have had to negotiate their heritage with dominant norms in the UK, they were also raised in the UK and followed the institutionalised boundaries and rules of monogamy. Accordingly, it was considered participants' experiences would be embedded within this context, influenced by mononormativity and heteronormativity and indicated a reasonably shared and homogenous experience of infidelity in monogamous romantic relationships.

The self-identified gay male (SIGM) participant, on the other hand, was not born or raised in the UK and may have been influenced by different cultural norms and expectations. Furthermore, as discussed in the introduction, non-heterosexual individuals may have different communities, sexual practices, historical contexts and everyday challenges related to their sexuality, including homophobia, which may shape their relationship experiences differently to heterosexual relationships (Adam, 2006; Mendos, 2019; Richards & Barker, 2013). Indeed, research has found non-

heterosexuals often create their own boundaries in their romantic relationships, rather than the institutionalised boundaries in heterosexual monogamy and marriage (Adam, 2006; Bonello & Cross, 2010; Kimberly & Harris, 2017; McLean, 2004; Richards & Barker, 2013; Wosick-Correa, 2010). Furthermore, research indicates gay sexual communities often endorse casual sex, sex without emotion and hypersexuality, and male same-sex relationships may secretly or openly move away from sexual monogamy throughout their relationships, emphasising emotional fidelity instead, re-negotiating their relationship boundaries over time (Adam, 2006; Brown, 2015; Bonello & Cross, 2010). Additionally, same-sex relationships remove the influence of gender inequalities and gender-specific roles that permeate heterosexual relationships (Adam, 2006). These differences indicate a unique social context, which may have shaped the SIGM participants' experiences whereby fidelity and monogamy may be organised or experienced differently to heterosexual relationships.

Given these factors, as well as my epistemological position and the emphasis on homogeneity in this research, it was considered that the SIGM participant's experiences would vary too much from the heterosexual participants to shape the primary conclusions of the research. Furthermore, whilst the SIGM participant was involved in a monogamous relationship when he engaged in infidelity, it was considered that evaluating his experiences alongside heterosexual norms and practices would risk overlooking the unique aspects of same-sex relationships, as well as his experiences in same-sex communities and sexual practices (Bonello & Cross, 2010). Consequently, the decision was made to extract his data from the main analysis.

This was a difficult decision, as I did not want to silence his voice or dismiss his valuable contribution to the research. Furthermore, as I did not narrow down my inclusion criteria to include only heterosexuals, it felt ethically challenging to remove him from the findings. As a compromise, I included my analysis of his transcript in Appendix Q. This was considered the best way to retain his voice and contribution to this research study, as well as preserving the homogeneity and epistemological consistency of this research. Accordingly, the findings were based on three male participants and four female participants. The seven remaining participants were aged between 28-57 (M = 40.71, SD = 11.35) at the time of the research and between 25-55 (M = 32.29, SD = 5.60) at the time of their affairs. Further participant details can be seen in Table 1.

Pseudonyms were used for the names of participants and any names they mentioned in their accounts. Whilst using pseudonyms is common practice in qualitative research and necessary to ensure confidentiality of participants, Lahman et al., (2015) argue the importance of choosing pseudonyms is often overlooked or not reflected on in research; most research studies do not describe how they chose pseudonyms, and there are no guidelines on this. This is problematic, as pseudonyms can potentially alter participants' identities, as names are often associated with characteristics such as gender, age and race/ethnicity for example (Lahman et al., 2015). Lahman et al., (2015) emphasise researchers' responsibility when choosing the pseudonyms for participants and how they need to fully consider and reflect on the implications of this, aiming to choose names that are reflective of participants' characteristics and identity. This is what I endeavoured to do when choosing the pseudonyms in this research, particularly with the non-white participants, so that I accurately represented them. It is important to note that whilst Michael was Asian British, he did have a Western name. It was considered that choosing a similar name would be most reflective and appropriate to his identity.

Table 1: Demographics of Participants

Name	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Sexuality	Occupation	Relationship Status	No of Children	Age of Children
Rosie	30	Female	White British	Heterosexual	Manager	Cohabiting	0	
Steve	44	Male	White British	Heterosexual	Professional	Cohabiting	2	12, 4
Michael	28	Male	Asian British	Heterosexual	Self-employed	Cohabiting	0	
Ehsun	40	Male	Asian British	Heterosexual	Services and Sales	Married	2	8, 5
Rachel	30	Female	White British	Heterosexual	Professional	Cohabiting	0	
Sarah	56	Female	White British	Heterosexual	Services and Sales	Cohabiting	0	
Maya	57	Female	White British	Heterosexual	Services and Sales	Single	3	19, 15, 11

2.6.3.1.Pen-Profiles

The circumstance and outcome of participants' affairs are briefly discussed below.

Rosie was 28 at the time of her affair and had been in a relationship with her partner for 5 years, having lived with him for 4 years. She met her affair partner at work, and described an emotional connection building before work evening drinks resulted in sexual activity. This was the beginning of a one-month relationship whilst she was still with her partner and triggered her to break-up with her partner. She is now in a relationship with her affair partner.

Steve was 40 and had been in an 18-year relationship with his partner at the time of his affair and has two children with her. He met his affair partner on a work trip away and began a two-year affair with her. The affair eventually ended when Steve would not commit to leaving his partner. His affair partner revealed the affair to his primary partner. He is still with his primary partner, though reports on-going difficulties and he has expressed his wish to have another relationship. At the time of the research they were waiting to begin couples' therapy.

Michael is currently in a four-year relationship and began having multiple affairs a year into his relationship, when he was aged 25 and living with his partner. He knew his affair partners from his friendship circle, and the affairs began online. He reported a number of relationships alongside his primary relationship, the longest lasting for one year, ending 6 months before the time of the interview. At the time of the interview he was not seeing anybody else, was still in his primary relationship and his partner did not know about his affairs. He discussed his wish to leave the relationship.

Ehsun had previously been married and had multiple affairs, which were discovered by his first wife and ended in divorce. He had two children with his first wife, aged 8 and 5. He has been re-married for five years and had been going online to meet new women for sex or a relationship around 5 months into their marriage. He had multiple affairs, but his longest was 8 months with a woman he met online. This ended when he would not leave his wife for her. His wife did not discover his affair and they are still together.

Rachel had been with her partner for eight years, and married and living together for 8 months when her affair began. She was 25 at the time of the affair. Her affair partner was a friend of her husband's who spent time at their house regularly. The affair began following a kiss at Rachel's party and continued for 3 months. Rachel left her marriage for her affair partner, who she is still in a relationship with. Her husband never discovered their affair.

Sarah had multiple affairs across different relationships over her life. This began in her second serious relationship in her 30s, in which she was completely in love with her partner yet had relationships with men alongside this. These affairs were not discovered. She is currently in an 18-year relationship and has had multiple affairs throughout this, beginning one year into their relationship when she was travelling. She was still in this relationship at the time of the interview, with her affairs undiscovered, and had recently communicated to him her wish to have other relationships.

Maya was 37 at the time of her affair and had been in her marriage for around 10 years. They had three children together. She met her affair partner at work and had a brief affair for around 3 months before both her husband and his wife were diagnosed with cancer and ended their affair. When her affair partner's wife died, Maya disclosed the affair to her husband and left him to be with her affair partner. She was with him for 10 years before she left him after she discovered his affair. She is currently single.

2.6.4.Piloting

Once ethical approval had been gained, and before the recruitment of participants, two pilot interviews were carried out, one with a colleague and one with an acquaintance, who met some of the inclusion criteria for the study. The aim was to trial the interview process, identifying any problem areas with the procedure of the interview and/or interview questions, and to identify whether anything would need amending, adding or removing. Pilot interviews can be a useful opportunity to enable resolution before the data collection begins (Kim, 2010).

Pilot interviews were conducted in a booked room in the university. I followed the interview procedure, abiding by ethical guidelines. The pilot interviews highlighted some issues with the flow of the interview questions. For example, one question 'Is there anything you would like to say about your family growing up?' seemed to come out of the blue for my pilot participants, and jarred the interview slightly. I therefore considered how to bring this into the research interviews in a more fluent way, by linking it to earlier points participants had made in the interview, or being transparent with participants about how this may seem out of the blue but it is a useful question for gathering background context.

The pilot interview highlighted it was useful to have notes of the main points in front of me when introducing the study, including confidentiality, and practicalities in case of distress during the interview. This ensured I covered all the important information before the interviews began.

2.6.5.Data Collection

Although various data collection methods are appropriate for IPA, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were chosen. This is a commonly used data collection method in IPA, congruent with the theoretical underpinnings of this research (Smith et al., 2009). Interviews allow the researcher to gather detailed accounts of experience to examine how individuals ascribe meaning to this. The semi-structured nature creates flexibility for questions that might arise from participants' responses (Wilkinson, Joffe & Yardley, 2004). These seemed more appropriate than focus groups, as the topic of infidelity could be sensitive for some individuals, and given dominant societal disapproval of infidelity, participants may not have been comfortable speaking about their experience of infidelity in a group setting. All interviews were transcribed verbatim.

2.6.5.1.Materials

A demographic questionnaire (appendix E) was used to collect contextual information about participants. This was based on the information I considered most relevant to collect at the time. In hindsight, important demographic information, including religiosity, number of children and their ages, educational background and relationship satisfaction were missed, which would have provided a more holistic context of participants, particularly as these factors impact upon relationships, as discussed in the introduction (Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Gabb & Fink, 2018). Some of this information was gathered in the interviews and added into the demographic table in Table 1.

An interview schedule (appendix F) was constructed based on Smith et al.,'s (2009) guidelines. After deciding on the research topic, I identified a number of areas I wanted to explore in the interview, based on the research question, aims and the literature, including participants' relationship with their primary partner and feelings at the time, their relationship with their affair partner, any relevant background information, and their feelings and understandings of this experience now. The questions were revised and re-revised with my supervisor. In hindsight it could be perceived that identifying these areas may have guided the interviews or distorted their experience, rather than allowing participants' experiences to emerge. However, all participants began by speaking about their primary relationship, before I asked this question, rather than distorting their experiences.

The questions were open and started off broad to ease participants into the interview (Smith et al., 2009). Prompts for questions were also included for instances where participants wanted to clarify the question or drifted away from what was being asked. The interview schedule was used as a guide to help focus the interviews, though the order of questions varied depending on how participants responded to the questions asked. Interviews lasted between 59 minutes to 2 hours and 23 minutes, lasting 1 hour 28 minutes on average.

2.6.5.2.Interview Procedure

All interviews were arranged in a mutually convenient location in the UK, namely London and the surrounding areas, and they were conducted in a booked room in libraries and the university. Whilst attempts are made to bracket prior knowledge, thoughts and preconceptions during data collection, IPA acknowledges this is not fully possible as our prior knowledge is implicated in how we understand and interact

with others (Smith et al., 2009). Accordingly, it is better to embrace this and be transparent about the impact this may have had on the interview. Before and after the interviews were conducted, I wrote my thoughts and feelings down in my research journal in an attempt to bracket these as much as possible and to allow me to remain open to participants' experience (Kim, 2010). An example can be seen in Appendix G.

At the beginning of the interviews, for both face-to-face and Video Skype, I introduced myself, provided an overview of the study, and what was required of the participants, including completing an informed consent form (appendix H), demographic questionnaire (appendix E) and debrief (appendix I). I explained the interview was for me to learn about their experience in as much depth as possible, and that I had a set of questions that would serve as a guide to the discussion. I made it clear there were no right or wrong answers. I reiterated that participants did not have to answer any question they did not feel comfortable with, and that at any time they could take a break, stop the interview or ask to reconvene at a later date if preferred. I asked participants to let me know if they became distressed at any time and that we could pause the interview. I explained the interview would be digitally recorded and transcribed, which would be kept on a password-protected computer for a maximum of five years, aligned to British Psychological Society's (BPS) (2014) requirements.

For the Video Skype interviews, participants agreed to read and electronically sign the informed consent form and demographic questionnaire over my university email before the interview began, and the debrief form was sent to them after the interview. They were informed that the email address is secure, although the university has the right to monitor emails if they have reason to believe users are misusing the email address, such as breaches of university confidentiality, and sending inappropriate emails of harassment, aligned with their Email Acceptable Use Policy (City University of London, 2018). Participants were informed that I was in a private, quiet location where we could not be overheard, and I positioned my camera in a way that only the window in the room was visible, to minimise distractions, and maintain a professional image. I advised participants that it would be ideal for them to also be in a quiet location. Participants were informed that Skype uses Advanced Standard Encryption Software to prevent online eavesdropping by malicious users, and that, although unlikely, Skype was able to monitor the conversation and access user accounts. Before the interviews began, I tested out my Internet connection with a friend. I

advised participants that if the Internet connection was poor quality, or the call was dropped, we could continue over the telephone or audio Skype. However, this did not occur in the two Video Skype interviews conducted. The Skype interviews were audio recorded using the same devices as with the face-to-face interviews, which I tested before the interviews began. This did not have an effect on the sound quality of the recording, which I could hear clearly.

Although I could only see a headshot and upper body of participants, and their non-verbal communication was less clear than the face-to-face interviews, I was still able to read their facial expressions and tone of voice, allowing me to monitor the emotional impact of the interview. I did not experience a huge difference in quality of the rapport or elicitation of rich data between the face-to-face and Video Skype interviews.

During the interviews, I attempted to display my interest in participant responses, and aimed to build rapport by giving participants space to share their experiences and feelings. Using participants' language in my responses and utilising listening skills such as reflection and paraphrasing, ensured the conversation flowed and demonstrated it was a non-judgemental and empathic space (Wilkinson et al., 2004). This appeared to help participants to feel safe to open up and engage in the interviews. I also paid attention to participants' verbal and non-verbal communication to attend to the emotional impact the interview may be having. Although some participants did become emotional speaking about their experiences, they did not feel the need to pause the interview when offered, and saw this as part of their process of discussing their experience.

Before the interviews, I memorised the interview schedule, in an attempt to enhance the flow of the interview, whilst also following participants' lead (Smith & Osborne, 2008). I did not always ask the interview questions in order, and many new questions emerged from the discussion with participants. This allowed me to enter into participants' worlds and explore different areas (Smith & Eatough, 2006). I held the research questions and aims in mind throughout to keep the focus of the interviews.

2.6.5.3.Data Storage

All data was audio recorded and transcribed, which was stored on a password-protected computer. The data was anonymised; pseudonyms were used and any identifying information was altered before the data was analysed. Following

completion of the research, hard copy data is to be kept for five years following publication, to adhere to the BPS' Code of Human Research Ethics (2014).

2.6.6.Transcription

The process of transcription is often considered part of the analysis process in IPA, particularly the stage of familiarisation of the data (Smith et al., 2009). As the aim in IPA is to interpret the meaning in accounts, I endeavoured to capture as much detail as possible in the interviews, including pauses, hesitations, laughter and inconsistencies in participants' speech, to best reflect the interview and aid meaning-making (Smith et al., 2009). Every line of the transcript was numbered and space was left at each side for coding.

2.7.Analytic Strategy

The analysis was an iterative process, whereby I moved between descriptive and interpretative accounts of the data set. This process represented the hermeneutic circle, whereby I shifted between the part (segments of the transcripts) and the whole (transcript) and back again, to understand participants' experiences and how they made sense of this. This highlights the iterative process of meaning making, which involves the interaction between assumptions of the world and interpretations. My own assumptions of infidelity therefore influenced how I interpreted participants' transcripts (Willig, 2013). Findings in IPA reflect the researcher's inferences of participants' thought processes, so interpretations involve researcher subjectivity (Smith et al., 2009). Although subjective, the analysis stage is also thorough, as the researcher systematically interrogates the data (Willig, 2013).

During the research process, I endeavored to use empathic interpretation (aiming to put myself in participants' shoes to get close to their experiences), as well as adopting a more questioning and critical interpretation, to interrogate the data and gain insight into what participants may be unable to say (Ricouer,1970; Willig 2013). This more critical approach involved questioning which wider contexts, including discourses, might be impacting on participants' accounts. As this research argues experiences of infidelity and relationships are filtered through discourses, it was considered these were an important context of participants' experiences. A balance between empathic and questioning interpretation allowed me to stay grounded in participants' accounts, whilst also gaining a deeper understanding.

Although there is no 'correct' way of conducting IPA, Smith et al., (2009) outline six steps that provide a framework for analysis, which I used as a guide throughout analysis of participant transcripts.

2.7.1.Step 1: Familiarisation of the data

The first step involved familiarising myself with the data by transcribing the interviews verbatim and reading through each transcript, one-at-a-time, as I listened to the audio recording simultaneously. Initial comments were noted on the transcripts to keep track of preliminary observations and to keep the focus on the participant (Smith et al., 2009). An example of initial comments can be found in Appendix J.

2.7.2.Step 2: Initial Coding

Step two involved recording comments on each line of the transcript. An example can be found in Appendix K. I attempted to remain open to whatever emerged from the transcript. Comments at this stage were descriptive, linguistic and conceptual. Descriptive comments reflected participants' words, which stayed close to the text, whilst linguistic comments explored participants' use of language and meaning of their experience, including metaphors, laughter, pauses and repetition. Conceptual comments were more interpretative, often using my own intuitions and understandings to make sense of what participants were saying (Smith et al., 2009).

2.7.3.Step 3: Developing Emergent Themes

Step three involved collating all initial coding from step two into emergent themes, which were more interpretative than the initial coding. Some related to each other and formed clusters; an example of which can be found in Appendix K. The names of emergent themes attempted to capture participants' experience, along with my interpretation, and were mainly empathic interpretations (Willig, 2013). During this stage I tried hard to put myself into participants' shoes to enter into their lifeworld as much as possible and stay close to the text. I also looked out for any dis-confirmatory evidence or contradictions in participants' accounts and made a note of these alongside the theme name. Once I had collated emergent themes across the transcript, I found supporting extracts for each of these (Appendix L), which also allowed me to see if any themes did not fit and discard them.

2.7.4.Step 4: Developing Superordinate Themes

Before organising the emergent themes into superordinate themes, I went back through all of the emergent themes alongside the supporting extracts and paid

attention to any indication of contextual influences in the extracts, including age, culture, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender and mononormative and heteronormative discourses that could be interpreted as influencing the account. I made a note of these influences in a different colour ink under the initial emergent theme name.

Following this, I concentrated on organising the emergent themes into subordinate themes. I printed out a list of all emergent themes and supporting extracts, placing a mark next to all emergent themes that seemed related. I clustered these together on a word document, including the extracts from the transcript, and gave this cluster an overarching name. I then returned to the list of emergent themes, marking the related themes and repeating this process until all the emergent themes and extracts had been clustered.

This stage could feel overwhelming at times, due to the sheer amount of emergent themes to organise. Different strategies were used to organise the emergent themes, such as abstraction (collating related themes), subsumption (placing themes under a more representative overarching theme), polarisation (identifying conflicts within the themes) and contextualisation (examining cultural and historical contexts) (Smith et al., 2009). This stage became more interpretive, though I also endeavoured to keep the superordinate themes grounded in the transcripts and use experiential labels for the superordinate themes, aligned with the phenomenological underpinnings of this research (Willig, 2013).

As I had identified possible contextual influences on participants' accounts, including mononormative and heteronormative discourses, as well as age, gender, race/ethnicity and culture in the emergent themes, I considered whether to collate these into a superordinate theme. However, as they appeared to be interwoven throughout participants' experiences, it seemed more appropriate to keep a note of these next to the supporting extracts for the superordinate themes, and interweave discussion of these when presenting the themes in the write up (see appendix M).

This process gave way to a hierarchy of superordinate, subordinate and subthemes, which were recorded in a table for each participant. Extracts supporting each theme were collected. An example of this process can be found in Appendix M.

2.7.5.Stage 5: Moving to the next transcript

Stage five involved moving onto the next transcript and repeating stages one to four of the analysis. As it was important that I remained open to the new transcripts, I took at least three days break between transcripts. This helped me to step back from the analysis and to return with a fresh perspective. However, in IPA, it is recognised that the first transcript may influence the analysis of the remaining transcripts (Smith et al., 2009). Once all transcripts had been analysed, I revisited all of the transcripts to look out for anything I may have missed.

2.7.6.Step 6: Connecting themes across transcripts

Once analysis of all transcripts was complete, I compared themes across each transcript to find master themes that represented the complete data corpus. I used the tables of themes for each transcript and examined them for convergence and divergence. Some themes were discarded or renamed, and I kept a record of those master and subthemes that applied to each participant (Appendix N) (Smith et al., 2009). I used this record to go through the extracts I had collected for each participant's superordinate themes in stage 4 and select quotes, retaining notes of any contextual influences, for the write up. An example of this can be seen in Appendix O.

2.8.Ethics

Ethical permission was gained from City University of London Ethics Committee (appendix P). The BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2014) was followed in this research.

2.8.1.Informed Consent

Informed consent was gained from all participants. Participants were informed of the nature of the study and what was expected of them, enhancing their autonomy to make an informed decision. They were also informed of the duration, purpose and consequences of the research, including potential publication in the future and plans for dissemination. They were informed of their right to withdraw up until analysis was complete, and that they could stop the research interview at any time without reason or penalty.

2.8.2.Confidentiality

Participants were informed that their information would remain confidential, unless they disclosed information that indicated risk of harm to themselves or others, or any

illegal activity. All identifying information was removed from transcripts and findings, and pseudonyms were used for names of participants, recruitment sites, services and any others mentioned in the interviews. Participants were advised that all data would be destroyed 5 years after publication, congruent with BPS (2014) guidelines on data storage.

2.8.3.Risk vs Benefit

Participants were informed that, although no harm should come to them other than what they would experience in every day life, there was a small risk that speaking about their experiences could touch upon painful issues. Participants were advised to inform me should they become distressed at any point and that they did not have to answer anything they did not feel comfortable with. Benefits to participants were that they were given a confidential, non-judgemental space to share their experience and potentially enhance understandings of infidelity and clinical practice. There was a potential risk that I could become distressed from the research, due to my experiences with infidelity. However, I monitored my own feelings and noted these down in my research journal. To combat risks, such as to my safety, all interviews were conducted in a public location in the daytime with other individuals in the building, such as in a private room in the university.

2.8.4.Debrief

Participants were advised that there would be time for questions or to discuss their feelings after the interviews had finished. Adequate time was given for discussions with participants at the end of the interviews and a debrief form (appendix I) was given to all participants. This had the contact details of myself and my supervisor, as well as for Samaritans and Relate (a counselling service for relationship issues) if they wanted to seek further support.

2.8.5.Dissemination

The research will be disseminated in City University of London library and freely available online at City Research Online. The research may potentially be used at conferences or in journal articles if published in the future. This would make it available to students or the general public. Participants were informed of this, and also that quotes would be included in the analysis chapter.

2.8.6.Ethics of Interpretation

In addition to these guidelines, the ethics of interpretation were also considered. IPA research strives to strike a balance between empathic interpretation grounded in participants' accounts, and interrogating the data in a way that does not take the accounts at face value (Willig, 2017). During the process of analysis, I found this balance difficult to manage, particularly when interrogating the data on a more critical level, such as examining the wider contexts and discourses that may be shaping participants' accounts, congruent with my epistemological position. I worried that I may be making assumptions about participants or that I may misrepresent them and inadvertently take their voice away. Furthermore, whilst epistemologically I perceive experiences to be influenced by dominant discourses and social contexts, I was also conscious of not undermining participants' experiences or autonomy in practice. Consequently, there were times when I perhaps attempted to be overly empathic, which perhaps resulted in over-interpreting the accounts, which were not grounded in the data. This was also the case for deciding on theme names and supporting extracts, as I did not want to lose sight of participants' experiences. This process brought home to me my responsibility and power as a researcher in shaping the knowledge produced about participants' experiences (Willig, 2012).

However, I also recognised that it was important to go beyond the description of participants' accounts to gain a fuller picture of their experience, which I do view as being inevitably influenced by prevalent cultural understandings. This research is also taking a critical stance towards the culture participants are trying to navigate and in this way is empathic towards participants. Furthermore, to strike the balance between empathy and interrogation, I went through the emergent and superordinate themes several times to ensure my codes were grounded in their accounts, which was consolidated in the write up.

To further address these ethical concerns, I considered Willig's (2012) recommendations for ethical interpretations. I kept the research question in mind to focus the analysis and justify which themes were discarded. I was also mindful my interpretation was influenced by my own background and knowledge, and so this is just one interpretation of participants' accounts. I practiced reflexivity throughout the analysis, noting times when I felt my assumptions may be influencing the analysis (appendix H). Furthermore, I made sure I attended to dis-confirmatory evidence within the transcripts, and segments which contradicted the themes or other segments of the transcript. Indeed, I noted any contradictions as I worked through

the transcript, and commented on this throughout the write up. I believe these steps helped me to stay focused on the research aims and to find a balance between empathic interpretations and interrogation that were consistent with IPA and my epistemological position, as well as grounded in the accounts.

2.9.Reflexivity

Reflexivity is important for qualitative researchers to reflect and examine how the research choices and processes, as well as personal contexts of the researcher and participants, influence the production of findings or knowledge (Langdridge, 2007; Finlay, 2002). Reflexivity also functions as a form of quality control for the research, through disclosing all choices and influences of the investigation (Finlay, 2003).

Different areas of reflexivity are important to emphasise in qualitative research, including personal, epistemological, methodological and procedural reflexivity. Personal reflexivity focused on my motivations, assumptions, and values (or axiology) in relation to the research, as well as the ways in which the research has influenced me. Methodological and procedural reflexivity refers to my consideration of the chosen methodology and procedures and how these may have influenced the research (Finlay, 2003). Epistemological reflexivity focused on how my ontological and epistemological position influenced the research throughout the process, how I managed my personal position throughout the research and how relationships with participants influenced findings (Willig, 2008). As it was considered the methodological, procedural and epistemological reflexivity sections were important aspects to evaluate the quality of this research, these are addressed in the discussion section 4.3. This section deals with personal reflexivity, and how this impacted upon the topic and research questions.

My interest in infidelity stems from my experiences of this within my family and a wish to further understand the experience of those who engage in infidelity, particularly those who have affairs in seemingly happy relationships. I was aware that conducting this research would not necessarily provide answers as to why members of my family engaged in infidelity, but as it also appears to be common, I was curious to understand more about individuals' experiences of infidelity.

Growing up with familial infidelity, I found it difficult to make sense of why certain family members had affairs and I had a very fixed view that infidelity was wrong and

unforgiveable. I was aware of this strong moral standpoint going into the research, and that this experience would inevitably influence the lens in which I conducted the data collection and analysis. In attempts to guard against this influence, I strived to remain open and curious to participants' experiences and to recognise that their values, experiences and assumptions may be different to mine, congruent with my epistemology, and as I would in clinical practice.

Given my familial experience of infidelity, and as I am in a monogamous relationship in which I am cohabiting, I hold certain values about relationships, which I view as being built on trust, and respect. I was therefore mindful that the research could potentially affect me. However, I felt that I had worked through the emotional impact of my experience of infidelity, both over time and in personal therapy, and endeavoured to note any emotional responses, assumptions or judgements that came up throughout the research in my journal. However, I was surprised to find that, rather than experiencing distress or judgement in the interviews and analysis, I experienced a deep empathy for participants and their difficulty negotiating cultural norms and scripts. Consequently, I found my views on infidelity and relationships relaxed, as I realised how complex and layered relationships and infidelity are. This may have led me to interpret the data through a more positive lens.

2.10.Quality and Validity

Initially, the evaluation of qualitative research was based on quantitative measures of reliability, validity, generalisability and objectivity (Lewis, 2009). However, this criterion for quality is not consistent with qualitative research, as small sample sizes typical of qualitative research cannot be generalised to the larger population and researchers are subjectively involved in data collection and analysis, which influences findings and obscures objectivity. Furthermore, quality often depends on the methods and epistemological frameworks used (Madill, et al., 2000).

More recently, emphasis has been placed on dependability (assessment of the rigour of the research process, particularly data collection and analysis), transferability (whether the results can be used to explain the phenomenon under study in other contexts), confirmability (whether the conclusions drawn from the results are clear and can be reached by others based on the data provided), and credibility (determining the credibility of the results) for assessing the quality of qualitative research (Goldblatt, Karnieli-Miller, & Neumann, 2011; Lewis, 2009).

To ensure this criterion as much as possible, I followed Yardley's (2000) four guidelines for strengthening quality in qualitative research, which have been used across a range of qualitative methods and epistemological frameworks. These are: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance.

2.10.1.Sensitivity to Context

Sensitivity to context refers to a number of contexts researchers need to consider and attend to during the research process, including theory (application of theory to explain findings and demonstrate different perspectives, enhancing rigour), the data (respecting all aspects of the data including contradictions), socio-cultural contexts (acknowledging historical, cultural and linguistic influences and the relationship between participants and researchers) and power dynamics (between the participant and researcher) (Yardley, 2000).

To remain sensitive to theoretical context, I conducted a thorough literature search on existing romantic relationship and infidelity research; examining different perspectives, approaches and theories on the topic of infidelity. I ensured my chosen methodology had a clear rationale and was grounded in a theoretical framework, clearly stating my epistemological and ontological positions, to enhance rigour.

Sensitivity to participants' socio-cultural context was followed by explaining the rationale for the sample of participants, considering how their person dimensions interacted with mine, and how this may have impacted upon their accounts, and thus the findings. I ensured I remained reflexive throughout the research process, noting my assumptions in my research journal. I also considered the power dynamics with participants, particularly the ethics of interpretation and having the power of representing their voices. I attempted to equalise the power dynamics as much as possible during the interviews, by aiming to create a safe environment and ensuring they knew they did not have to answer anything they did not want to.

To remain sensitive to the data, I embraced the philosophical underpinnings of IPA; idiography, phenomenology and hermeneutics (Smith et al., 2009). During analysis, I immersed myself in each participant's transcript, one-at-a-time, which allowed me to remain close to participant accounts, and I grounded my interpretation in participant accounts, as well as acknowledging my influence on this (Smith & Osborne, 2008). I

also considered contradictions and wider contexts in participant accounts and discussed these in relation to existing literature and theories.

2.10.2.Commitment and Rigour

Commitment and rigour refers to the comprehensiveness of the research, including data collection and analysis. It is important to examine whether the sample provided sufficiently rich data for analysis, and whether the interpretation is rigorous enough to take into account the complexity of participant accounts (Yardley, 2000).

I demonstrated commitment and rigour by attending sensitively to participants and the analysis, as well as ensuring the design, methodology and research procedures were systematically explained and carried out (Yardley, 2000). The sample was purposive; all participants met the inclusion criteria and were sufficiently homogenous to represent the research question and IPA. The interviews followed a similar format to each other, whereby participants were asked the questions on the interview schedule, along with further questions that elicited more detail about participants' experiences. The analysis was thoroughly conducted following the six guidelines of IPA (Smith et al., 2009), and explaining how I arrived at the findings, supporting these with plenty of participant quotes, and presenting contradictions in participants' accounts. I also used triangulation, whereby I used other sources to evaluate my findings, such as comparing them to existing research (Lewis, 2009).

2.10.3.Transparency and Coherence

Transparency and coherence refers to disclosure of all research processes and how the researcher may have influenced these; consistent with the values of qualitative research, which acknowledges the role of the researcher. Indeed, coherence refers to the consistency throughout the research, such as how the research questions fit with the design, and that the findings are consistent with participant extracts (Yardley, 2000).

Transparency has been demonstrated throughout the research, documenting the process of each stage, including engaging in reflexivity to explain my rationale and interest in the research topic, and how this and my worldview impacts on the data collection and analysis. I reflect on the limitations of the procedures in section 4.3.2, demonstrating transparency about my thinking at the time. I kept a paper trail of all steps of analysis and the research process throughout (Lewis, 2009). I provided examples in the appendices of my reflexive journal, my process of analysis with

annotated transcripts, participant extracts, and recruitment and data collection materials. I also demonstrated my accepted ethics form and amendment form for Video Skype interviews.

To ensure coherence, I provided sufficient extracts from the transcripts for readers to assess whether the analysis was representative of the data (Smith, 2011). I also provided a clear rationale as to my choice of IPA, and followed the theoretical framework and epistemological position by eliciting rich detail of the phenomenon of infidelity in context, and my interpretation (Smith et al., 2009).

2.10.4.Impact and Importance

Impact and importance refers to how the research can be used or applied in wider settings, which depends on the aims and intention of the research and the implications (Yardley, 2000). This research was interested in the experience of individuals who engage in a particular type of infidelity, and the influence of mononormativity, which was missing in the literature. This research is therefore relevant to individuals who are embedded in Western society in the UK and have engaged in an affair in their monogamous relationship. As the findings demonstrated the conflict many found navigating cultural influences, this research has implications for other individuals who struggle with this in their romantic relationships, as well as for Counselling Psychologists to reflect on their biases and how they may be influenced by these dominant scripts when working with individuals.

These quality checks ensured that I increased transferability, creditability and confirmability and that I was consistent with IPA, in that I am not aiming for an objective truth about people, but a tentative contextual knowledge about the phenomenon of infidelity.

3.Findings

3.1.Overview

This section presents the findings from my analysis and cross-comparison of all seven participant transcripts. Three master themes emerged from the analysis, which represented how participants made sense of their affairs and what their experience was like for them. Each master theme encompassed subthemes, which were interconnected, to provide a more cohesive account of participants' experiences and meaning-making. Convergences and divergences were noted within and between participant accounts.

Throughout participants' accounts, mononormative and heteronormative influences seemed to emerge. These influences are considered and discussed throughout this chapter, which seemed more appropriate than collating these into a separate theme. Each theme will be discussed, supported by participant quotations, followed by my interpretation. Extracts considered to best represent each participant's experience and sense-making were chosen. Pseudonyms have been used in all extracts, including for any third parties mentioned in participants' accounts, and identifying information replaced with a description of the information, such as: [location]. The symbol […] indicates the removal of dialogue to ensure relevance to the theme being discussed, whilst three dots (…) indicate pauses in participant's accounts.

All themes can be seen in Figure 1. These themes are: Something For Me, which refers to how participants' affairs allowed them to focus solely on themselves; Coming to Life, which refers to how the affairs heightened their senses, making them feel alive; and Negotiating Tensions, which represents the number of tensions participants had to manage whilst engaging in their affair.

Figure 1: Master Themes with Subthemes

3.2.Master Theme One: Something For Me

This master theme refers to how participants described their affairs as personally gratifying, in which they could solely focus on themselves and their needs. Some participants described they felt something was missing in their primary relationship, giving rise to a sense of unmet needs. Additionally, participants' affairs could also be a way for them to cope with feelings emerging from life and their relationships. Some participants actively searched for, or did not limit themselves from, pleasure to fulfil their needs, and some described how they were able to explore and connect to other parts of themselves during their affairs. Four subthemes reflected these points.

3.2.1.Something Missing

Participant accounts revealed they perceived something to be missing in their primary relationship, giving rise to a sense of unmet needs, and which some found in their affairs. Some participants described how a connection was missing with their primary partner:

> *'…I know if we were really connected I wouldn't want to…' (Sarah, page 80, line 1503)*

> *'…I know that I was definitely really unhappy […] we'd go on holiday and we never really enjoyed the holiday. It was just kind of going through the motions, like we'd get up, we'd do like sight seeing and it was kind of very much going through like that…' (Rosie, page 6, line 80-106)*

Sarah seems to interpret her engagement in affairs as reflective of a disconnection between her and her primary partner on some level. That she feels she would not want to engage in affairs if she was connected to her partner indicates she does not feel completely fulfilled within her relationship. Similarly, Rosie indicates she is emotionally disconnected from her partner, whereby it was difficult to feel a sense of satisfaction or enjoyment when she spent time with him. The phrase "going through the motions" indicates a mechanical component to their relationship, as though they were doing what was expected but were detached from their emotions. It seems the missing connection in her relationship left her feeling unhappy, as though something was not quite working. There is a sense she could not quite identify what this was as she goes on to describe her confusion at her unhappiness:

> *'…I convinced myself that I was happy because what's not to be happy about, like we were both earning quite good money, like we had a good lifestyle, we do what we want, we go on holidays, like why? Why am I not happy about it?' (Rosie, page 11, line 143)*

Rosie appears to struggle to describe what was missing or not quite working in her relationship, particularly as on the surface she appeared to have a good quality of life. She went onto describe how her affair confirmed her unhappiness, as *"even if nothing happens with Daniel now, it's shown that, you know, there is more out there" (page 36, line 468),* which was "*the trigger point" (page 18, line 243)* for her to exit her relationship. It may be Rosie's understanding of what it meant to be in a relationship relates to heteronormative expectations for how to live a satisfying life, such as being in a couple, having a well-paid career and going on holidays. This appeared to have influenced her appraisal of her relationship, believing she should be happy for aligning to these norms.

Steve's account revealed that, whilst he had a *"great practical relationship" (page 21, line 980)* with his partner, he had *"a general sense of feeling like I wasn't quite connecting with this person on some level" (page 5, line 200).* He interpreted this as a result of feeling as though his partner does not love his "true" self:

'…She doesn't love the person who I perceive as being the true me […] I can't share certain aspects of myself which feel truer to me…' (Steve, page 3-4, line 113-181)

That Steve feels unable to share parts of himself with his partner indicates a feeling of insecurity, as though he feels unsafe or unwelcome to fully be himself, perhaps leaving him feeling unwanted, and presenting a barrier from them fully connecting. This seemed to contribute to a sense of loneliness in his relationship, described below:

'…Yeah massive […] loneliness in that relationship, yeah. Really really lonely […] if you could be there on a Sunday lunchtime […] with those three people who should be the core of your life and you can feel as lonely as you have in your life […] that's really hard […] it's not the children [...] Like this thing that's meant to be the heart of my life has failed...' (Steve, Page 10, line 460).

The use of the word 'massive' and 'worst feeling' to describe his loneliness, as well as the repetition of 'really' and 'lonely' indicates this is pervasive and deeply painful for Steve. It appears he believes it is unnatural to feel this way with those central to his life, eliciting a sense of failure and turmoil that confuses him. There is a sense he feels adrift and alienated from others, as though he is different, unable to feel a sense of belonging in his family or live up to his expectations, which permeates his feelings of failure. Steve is quick to emphasise it is not his children that make him feel this way, but his relationship with his partner. His use of the words 'core' and 'heart' highlight how deep the missing emotional connection runs for him and elicits the image of a shell; an empty centre.

Steve described how the emotional connection he longed for was found with his affair partner:

'…I think what I was looking for in the other relationship was a romantic connection which I did get […] I felt like I was getting what you're meant to get from life and having that relationship that I always wanted to have, erm and being colossally happy and being with somebody I really liked...' (Steve, Page 11-24, line 524-1155).

Steve found the relationship he had been longing for in his affair. The emotional connection with his affair partner appeared to have an essence of specialness and the use of the word 'colossally' to describe his happiness indicates a sense of the elation and irresistibility of his affair. It seems he has found a sense of belonging in the relationship, contrasting to the insecurity he described in his primary relationship. It is striking that, as a male, Steve emphasised the emotional side of his affair, which does not align to heteronormative discourses around male sex-drive. Indeed, Steve emphasised *"sex is not a driver" (page 1, line 44)* for his affair, as sex with his partner "*got better and better and better*" (*page 13, line 621),* whilst the sex with his affair partner *"wasn't quite working" (page 13, line 613).* One could interpret mononormative scripts that infidelity is wrong may have influenced Steve's account, whereby he may have emphasised the emotional aspects to defend his affair and reduce potential judgement.

Other participants distinguished between different types of love, in which romantic love was missing from their primary relationships. Indeed, Rachel described how she enjoyed her husband's company, but *"there was never that really intense level of like physical and mental connection" (page 58, line 1081)* and Sarah reflected on how she cared about and loved her partner *"very deeply"* but she is *"not in love with him" (page 62, line 1165).* It appears it was important for participants to highlight this distinction to make sense of their affairs, which may relate to discourses that romantic love is an intense physical and emotional experience and central to relationship happiness. Maya also described how romantic love was missing with her husband:

> *'…There was never any of er all this bubble love and fantasy love, but there was a strong love and a protection for our unit…' (Maya, page 51, line 950)*

Maya's account distinguishes between different types of love, whereby her love for her husband seemed to be safe, reliable and family-oriented, as though they are a working team, which contrasts to the dreamy nature of 'bubble love and fantasy love' which seems to bring a lightness and excitement with it. She described how this contrasted to her love for her affair partner, with whom she felt she *"physically and mentally fit into"* as though she had *"found a piece of the jigsaw" (page 73, line 1361),* which conveys just how special and unique this was, which has been missing before. She further indicated how this specialness seemed to be missing with her husband:

'…he never stopped me from doing what I wanted to do. But it's a very fine line of giving people the freedom to do everything they want to do and the feeling that they don't really want you because they let you go and do what you want…' (Maya, page 33, line 613)

Maya appears to worry that the freedom and space she experienced in her marriage may be an indication that her husband did not 'want' her. The use of 'fine line' indicates this is a blurred boundary for her, whereby she is not sure where she stands with him, doubting his feelings and possibly his attraction towards her. This appears to elicit feelings of insecurity. One could wonder whether mononormative discourses promoting the togetherness of the couple and independence influenced Maya's concern over whether the amount of freedom and independence she had within her marriage was "normal" or not, leaving her feeling that specialness and feeling wanted were amiss in her marriage.

In contrast, Michael described how he did not feel he had enough freedom in his relationship:

'…the relationship started becoming a dictatorship where I was being told what to do, who I can and can't see […] she started becoming insecure, telling me I can't do this or "who's this?" and questioning me, I don't like that…' (Michael, page 3, line 52-54)

Michael's use of "dictatorship" to describe his relationship indicates he feels his partner is controlling, constantly checking up on him. There is a sense he has no space for himself and feels smothered, not able to do what he wants without being questioned. He interprets this as resulting from his partner's insecurity, and a lack of trust, which he does not feel comfortable with, and longs for more freedom. He further describes how he found space in one of his affairs, in which their relationship was *"different, just relaxed*" with *"no hassle, no drama" (page 8, line 144-147).*

Other participants described a sense of incompatibility with their partners, which their affair partners highlighted:

'…I think I got on with him better than I ever had got on with Lewis like even before, Lewis and I didn't have—we weren't, erm, our personalities weren't really matched, erm, in that kind of way…' (Rosie, page 20, line 262)

Rosie highlights how her personality did not feel compatible with her partner's, which may not have previously been salient to her as she was caught up with the idea of having a boyfriend and what this meant. It appears she felt more compatible with her affair partner, which perhaps brought home to her what had been missing in her relationship. That Rosie appeared to notice her incompatibility with her partner after she had engaged in her affair may be related to mononormative scripts that infidelity is a symptom of relationship issues, which she drew on to understand her affair.

Other participants described their unmet sexual needs in their relationship with their partner, contributing to a sense something was missing. Sarah described how her and her current partner *"don't have so much sex anymore" (page 76, line 1420),* whilst Maya described how having three children and her husband's diagnosis of cancer "*put an end to the sexual relationship" (page 63, line 1191)* as she had *"become his nurse and nanny" (page 7, line 63).* Similarly, Rachel explained she *"wasn't really sleeping with my partner at the time"* (page 13, line 238) because her health condition made it painful to have sex. It seemed important for participants to provide this context, perhaps to highlight another level in which they felt they were disconnected from their partners. It may be participants' understanding of their reduced sexual frequency may be influenced by mononormative expectations in which sex is often central to affirm relationships, and may have influenced their sense something was amiss in the relationship.

Ehsun described a lack of variety in his sex life with his wife, and how sex with his affair partner was more exciting for him:

> *'…I mean at home it's just straightforward sex, there was nothing dirty you know. It's just straightforward, a quick ten minutes and then you're finished, you know…' (Ehsun, page 23, line 309)*

> *'… with Trisha she used to start talking dirty and all that and that's what turns me on…' (Ehsun, page 45, line 609)*

Ehsun conveys a sense of boredom with his sexual relationship with his wife, indicating it is routine, bland and short-lived. This may suggest sex has become a duty rather than something enjoyable they share together. Ehsun indicates that his wish to have "dirty" sex, which arouses and excites him, was not available from his wife, and his affair partner provided "dirty" talk which fulfilled this need. It is

interesting that Ehsun refers to his wife as “the wife”, which could suggest he is de-sexualising her, positioning her in her domestic role rather than as a sexual being and one could wonder whether expectations of marriage influenced this view. One could also wonder where Ehsun’s understanding of “dirty” sex comes from. As he goes on to describe his preoccupation with pornography during sex with his wife, it may be this is influenced by the porn industry:

> *‘…when we were having sex I started thinking about other women you know, just porn women, porn stars you know and my mind started drifting about other women on porn…’ (Ehsun, page 37, line 497)*

The pornography Ehsun watched may have influenced his desires and his understanding of what constitutes satisfying sex, which entered into his relationship with his wife and how he makes sense of his affair as something missing sexually in his primary relationship.

3.2.2.A Way of Coping

This subtheme reflected how participants interpreted their affairs as a way of dealing with their feelings arising from their unmet needs in their relationships, or from life events. Some participants discussed how their affairs provided an outlet for their feelings, and was *“the only way I knew how to act” (Rachel, page 24, line 448)* at the time, particularly as their attempts to communicate their feelings to their partners had been shut down. This is reflected in Michael’s account:

> *‘…But I’ve tried, it’s not like I, I, I, I’ve been there and I’ve tried you know like take away and talked to her, I’ve asked her what’s troubling her and tried to reassure her, I’ve done all of that, but you know…it doesn’t work. I still get the drama…’ (Michael, page 35, line 651).*

> *‘…I didn’t have a choice. But I did have a choice, but for me I think I had to do it, otherwise I would have just been stewing over it […] Yeah, I did it cause I thought it’s the only way I’m gonna get over this…’ (Michael, page 38, line 704-710)*

Michael’s communication attempts did not seem to be enough to improve their relationship, which appears to leave him with a sense of sadness that he cannot give his partner what she needs or live up to her demands. His repetition of “I” indicates

his struggle to explain how much he has tried to make his relationship work, and his confusion as to why this was not enough. It is as though he is constantly fighting a battle with his partner, which seems to leave him with a feeling of exhaustion, frustration and powerlessness that nothing he does is enough. Although Michael acknowledges he had a choice over his affair, he also indicates he did not feel he had any other options on how to deal with the "drama" and frustration. It seems his affair was an outlet for these feelings, providing him with a space to release them rather than being stuck in them. Indeed, the word "stewing" elicits the image of a simmering cooking pot, about to reach boiling point.

Similarly, Steve described how the missing emotional connection in his relationship and feeling *"stonewalled" (Page 2, line 72)* when he attempted to discuss his feelings with his partner left him feeling emotionally dead:

> *'…I was dead anyway, I was already dead […] with her I was dead. So yeah, I died. I did, I died […] certainly my emotional life was dead…' (Steve, page 17-19, line 798-905)*

And how his affair offered an outlet for these feelings:

> *'…It was definitely a valve. A massive valve […] And my reasons for doing that were that I didn't feel I could survive as a person in this world without that behaviour. So it was almost—it was a way of surviving…' (Steve, page 17-27, line 794-1297)*

Steve conveys how despairing he was before the affair started and how his emotional survival depended on it. The repetition of the word "dead" and "I died" suggests it was important for Steve to convey how bad he felt before his affair began. This quote conjures up an image of a zombie; a walking corpse, emotionally absent. It is as though the affair was the only thing that could keep him connected as a person. There is a sense of despair and feeling lost, with no idea how to move forwards. Similarly to Michael and Rachel, Steve seems to convey he felt he had no other choice than to have an affair as he did not know how else to deal with his relationship issues and resulting feelings. The metaphor of a valve suggests his affair may have allowed his feelings to escape safely without explosion or damage. One could also wonder whether Steve and Michael's accounts are influenced by a desire to show how bad they were feeling and how much they had tried to address their

relationship issues, intending to justify their affairs, which could indicate the influence of mononormative discourses that infidelity is wrong.

Other participants discussed how their affairs provided comfort and protection from their difficult feelings arising from their relationship and life events. Rachel described how she put her life on hold and sacrificed her needs to help her husband, which elicited a sense of inequality within the relationship:

> *'…Erm and I was limiting myself from what I wanted to do to be with him, to get married, to have a house and things like that and it was always […] "I'll sort myself out one day, it's fine, we'll just get you sorted first". […] you could only do that for so long before you break and just say […] "I'm miserable, I'm not happy at all"…' (Rachel, page 49, line 907)*

Rachel understands that her focus on her husband resulted in her needs being neglected or forgotten by both herself and her husband, in which unhappiness steadily built. It seems this realisation took her by surprise, leaving her feeling 'miserable' and potentially resentful that her needs had been unmet and unacknowledged in their marriage. There is a sense of inequality and sadness that she invested in her husband but this was not reciprocated for her. It is striking that Rachel seemed to perceive she provided all of the support in their relationship, which may relate to socialised gender roles of women as providing emotional work in relationships. One might wonder whether Rachel's socialisation as a woman influenced her adoption of this role in her relationship and thus experience and sense-making of this.

Alongside the prolonged personal sacrifice in her relationship, Rachel also described her first year of marriage as "*the year when just so much bad stuff happened and everything just fell apart for me" (page 33, line 613),* as she was faced with new responsibilities moving into her own home, financial pressures after her husband lost his job, and being confronted with her step-father's illness and death of her brother-in-law. She described how her affair became a safe haven for her:

> *'…that was my safety, that was my comfort, Chris actually felt incredibly comforting and supportive when my husband was totally absent…' (Rachel, page 34, line 629)*

The prolonged sacrifice in her relationship and series of negative life events appeared to leave Rachel with a sense she was unravelling, indicated by her use of "falling apart". It seems her affair provided a safe haven, containing her distress from life events and her relationship, providing comfort, which she felt she could not receive from her husband.

Whilst Sarah previously discussed her affairs were partly influenced by feeling as though something was missing with her current partner, she described another relationship in which she "*was so in love that I had no need or desire to have affairs" (page 12, line 221)* but interpreted her affairs as a way of gaining reassurance and power, to cope with her fear of rejection and powerlessness:

> *'…And it was the first time in my entire life I'd ever felt jealousy and envy […] it was so powerful and it actually really physically scared me […] there was this real fear here of rejection…'* (Sarah, page 5-47, line 85-881)

> *'…They were very rich and powerful men and attractive as well and they had […] pursued me and I would play with them and toy with them and they would all be like at my feet […] they made me feel powerful, you know, and in control…' (Sarah, page14-52 line 253-963)*

Here Sarah emphasises her fear of the intensity of her feelings for her partner, and her shock at her emotional and physical responses to him. There is a sense she felt as though she was not in control over her emotions, potentially leaving her feeling powerless. Her affairs, particularly with powerful and attractive men, appeared to protect her from her fear of rejection and powerlessness by giving her a sense of control. Her description of how she played and toyed with them brings the image of a puppet, in which she operated the strings. Her relationship with her affair partners seems to be disconnected from emotion, as though they were there to serve her purpose only. It is striking Sarah seemed to gain power from sex with men, and one could wonder whether she is influenced by heteronormative discourses where women's sexuality can be used to gain control over men.

Finally, Michael's account revealed his affairs were sometimes a way of retaliating or gaining revenge for how his partner treated him, helping him deal with his frustration:

'…There are times where she has just laid it on thick to me and […] I've just gone to see someone else and then I sit back and think "ohh I've cheated on her, I feel better now"…' (Michael, page 37, line 687)

It seems Michael's way of dealing with his unhappiness and perceived ill treatment in his relationship was to retaliate by engaging in affairs. This seemed to help him deal with his frustration. It is as though there is a power struggle in his relationship, in which he gains a sense of control by punishing his partner's behaviour by having an affair.

3.2.3.Pursuit of Pleasure

This subtheme refers to how some participants described how their affairs were for sexual pleasure and fun, whereby they actively pursued and freely followed their desires without limit or restraint from enjoyment or pleasure. Sarah described how she seeks affairs for sexual pleasure:

'…And then sometimes I'm feeling physical and I want somebody, you know. Cause alright you can do it yourself, but it's not the same is it as being with somebody…' (Sarah, page 41, line 770)

Sarah highlights her desire for a physical relationship with another when she desires sex, rather than masturbation. It seems she actively pursues sexual relationships with others to fulfil her sexual needs. It is interesting that Sarah emphasises the sexual side of her affairs, which contrasts to heteronormative discourses that women value the emotional sides of relationships over sexual aspects and indicates her resistance to these discourses.

Ehsun also describes his pursuit of other relationships outside of his marriage for pleasure:

'…I mean I already had two women, the wife and another one, but I still you know tried to get another date […] It was just the excitement you know, I dunno how I kept it going, I mean having two women […] For me it's a buzz thing, you know. I dunno, maybe sleep with as many women as I can…' (Ehsun, page 11-18, line 148-243)

Here Ehsun describes his excitement for having another relationship alongside his marriage. It could be interpreted that Ehsun views attracting and maintaining two relationships as a personal achievement, perhaps as a validation of his sexual prowess. There seems to be an element of disbelief and pride that he achieved this and his use of the word "buzz*"* indicates his sexual arousal from seeking more sexual relationships. One may wonder whether this becomes a challenge, or game for him to further validate his charm or sexual ability.

Similarly, Michael highlights how one of his affairs felt like an accomplished mission, as he had fantasised about that person for a while:

> *'…There was a girl that I'd wanted to see for a long time, so when I got to see her, it was a bit like "mission accomplished"…' (Michael, page 38, line 715)*

This contrasts to Michael's previous accounts whereby he described his affairs as a way of coping with his relationship stress, and demonstrates another side to his affairs. Michael and Ehsun's accounts also seem to relate to masculinity discourses that promote sexual promiscuity and prowess, influencing their accounts and sense-making of their affairs.

Other participants explained they engaged in affairs as they did not want to limit or withhold from pleasure or fun:

> *'…I just feel like—that by holding back and being faithful in long-term relationships when you're young, you're missing out […] So I just think…I'd rather have fun…' (Michael, page 51, line 950)*

Michael appears to interpret long-term monogamous relationships as a barrier to experiencing other opportunities and having fun. His use of the third person to discuss his experience also suggests he may be trying to normalise his experience, or justify his affairs to himself. It seems Michael indicates age was also an important context to make sense of his affair, as though youth is a time for exploration. It appears Michael did not want to limit himself from what he wanted to do and miss opportunities for fun or exploration, which is part of how he made sense of his affairs.

In contrast, Sarah describes how getting older influences her affairs with her current partner:

'…and then there's the other thing, you know, well I think "56" the egg timer has turned way, it's really turned now so the sand is running out. Time is running out, it's an actual fact. You know I'm looking towards death now and god knows what else […] so I'm thinking "get the most out of it. Get the most out of your body and the most out of fun…' (Sarah, page 80, line 1504-1506)

For Sarah there is a stark realisation that "time is running out" and so she has to live life to the full while she still has chance. There is a sense that realising her mortality encourages her to embrace pleasure and fun in life. She perceives her body as a great tool for this, which she wants to get the most of while she still can. Sarah further interprets her affairs as occurring *"because I was just enjoying my life and it was fun" (page 23, line 430),* and because *"I like to take opportunities in life and explore them, rather than regret"* and it was *"an exploration and living life rather than living life in a little box where you ticked all the right boxes, you know you got a house, you got married, you had children, you did this, you did that, you had a career, you know" (page 430, line 1568).* Sarah seems to interpret her affairs as opportunities to enjoy her life and have fun, without restraint or regret. It seems she felt entitled to do this, as perceives this as more authentic and reflective of life than following societal scripts. Indeed "living in a little box" suggests she perceives societal scripts to be confining, restrictive, and lacking variety, rather than freeing and varied. These scripts may relate to mononormative and heteronormative expectations of how individuals should live their lives, which Sarah and Michael are actively resisting, possibly influencing their engagement in affairs.

3.2.4.A Different Self

This subtheme refers to how participants were able to explore and connect to another part of themselves during their affairs. For some, this was a side of themselves that had been forgotten over time, whilst others discovered and explored new parts of themselves. It appears their affairs made space for participants' relationships with themselves.

Rosie indicated she enjoyed the attention from her affair partner, which reawakened feelings she experienced on nights out in her younger years:

'…when you start quite liking the attention, erm that you get on like a night out […] I'd kind of encourage the attention and like flirting […] it made me feel

better about myself. […] I think I'd probably always been attracted to him, but I think I just quite liked the attention… (Rosie, page 8-19, line 95-225)

Rosie appeared to gain a sense of validation from the attention she received from men on nights out when she was single. It could be interpreted that this allowed her to connect with her sexuality, feeling attractive, desirable and increasing her self-confidence. Her affair may have reawakened these feelings, and allowed her to reconnect with her past identity as a single woman and an individual person, rather than somebody's partner, which had been dormant whilst in her relationship. That Rosie gained attention from somebody she was attracted to seems to have particularly activated these feelings, reminiscent of her unattached single days that drew her to her affair partner and allowed her to further engage with this side of herself.

Similarly, Steve indicated how his affair reconnected him to his youthful side, which he described as:

'…Much more like being young and unattached, yeah…' (Steve, Page 16, line 736).

Steve's affair was reminiscent of his younger years, where he had a freedom and did not need to consider others. There is a carefree and vibrant quality about this, as though he was able to go back in time, to reconnect to a part of himself that he may have lost along the way due to his responsibilities and ageing. It appears the affair reawakened this side of himself, recreating these feelings, allowing him to re-engage with himself.

Steve also indicated his affair partner allowed him to try on a different persona that he had not experienced before:

'…She's very feisty, different to Catherine […] she's a lot more cut and dry about stuff […] so it made me feel that I could be that way…' (Steve, page 17, line 813)

Contrasting to his primary partner, Steve's affair partner appeared to have a fiery character, which allowed him to adopt this identity during his affair, giving him an opportunity to explore a different identity he had not experienced before. There is a

sense of freedom, and perhaps an escape with his affair partner, allowing him to temporarily be somebody different. The description of being "cut and dry about stuff" indicates an impulsivity and simplicity, which were perhaps easier ways of approaching life and responsibilities. There is a sense Steve did not have to overthink with this different identity and allowed him to feel different for a while.

Maya's affair, on the other hand, allowed her to connect with her femininity, something that had been absent before:

> *'…whereas Paul was quite big and tall and made me feel—I suppose I'd never quite felt feminine, especially working in the manual trade and having all these brothers, whereas Paul came and did that for me. That he made me feel very feminine and very womanly…' (Maya, page 37, line 686)*

Maya's sense of femininity appeared to emerge from the physicality of her affair partner, which was novel for her. It seems her background in typically masculine environments had contributed to Maya's previous difficulty with accessing or identifying her femininity, and being able to connect with this seemed to feel special for her. It appears her affair partner helped her to discover another part of her identity as a woman. Maya's understanding of this version of femininity may relate to discourses promoting the ideal feminine women as petite and delicate, which contributed to this sense of self in her affair.

3.3.Master Theme Two: Coming To Life

This master theme examines how participants experienced their affairs, which seemed to be exhilarating, as though they were coming to life. Participants described their irresistible desire with their affair partners and their affairs seemed to transcend the monotony of everyday life. Alongside the risk and secrecy of engaging in their affairs, this seemed to heighten their senses, contributing to their sense of feeling alive. Three subthemes reflected this.

3.3.1.All-consuming Desire

Participant accounts revealed their strong desire towards their affair partners, which seemed irresistible and uncontrollable, contributing to a sense of feeling alive. Some participants discussed their instant attraction to their affair partners:

> *'…when I first saw Trisha I thought she was gorgeous […] I just wanted to jump in you know, you know start doing it there…' (Ehsun, page 31, line 419-421)*

Ehsun emphasises his immediate attraction and sexual desire towards his affair partner. His double use of "you know" may suggest he is trying to convey just how exciting this felt for him in the moment. Indeed, he further describes how he wanted to *"feel her body"* and *"start licking her there and then" (page 32, line 433).* There is a sense of urgency to his desire, as he experienced a burning sexual arousal, and he could not wait to have sex with her.

In contrast to Ehsun's excitement, Rachel described her surprise at her sudden and intense attraction towards her affair partner:

> *'…I just remember walking in and looking at him and I hadn't seen him in a couple of years I think, and I just remember having really really strong feelings like of attraction towards him […] I can't even really describe what it was, there was just this sort of "ohh" kind of feeling of "oh that's Chris but it's not Chris" kind of thing and I was sort of thinking "oh what's that about?" you know inside, because I hadn't felt like that about anybody else since we'd been together…' (Rachel, page 6-8, line 136-142)*

Rachel's use of "ohh" to describe her attraction to her affair partner suggests it had an ineffable quality, as though it was more of an instinctive feeling that she noticed. She seems perplexed that she experienced this feeling when she had not previously felt this about him or anybody else during her marriage, and seems to have come out of the blue for her. There is a sense that there was an instant spark. Rachel went on to describe how, although she *"shrugged it off" (page 8, line 145)* at first, her attraction to her affair partner *"wasn't going away, it was only getting stronger" (page 8, line 149).*

Rosie also described how *"it did feel like it had been building up to something" (page 15, line 200)* before her affair started and how she had *"always had that quite like flirtatious friendship before that point" (page 15, line 206)* with her affair partner. She described how this began at work:

'…I found him hilarious at like work […] if the person was working late as well, I'd go sit by their desk…' (Rosie, page 19, line 255-256)

It seems work provided Rosie with an opportunity to get to know her affair partner, whereby a flirtatious relationship and attraction grew and she actively sought to spend more time with him. It is interesting Rosie did not interpret her developing relationship and attraction as an affair; it was only when this crossed over into a physical relationship she defined this as infidelity. It appears she drew on sexual definitions of infidelity to understand her experience.

Rosie described how an opportunity arose to physically act on her building attraction and desire for her affair partner:

'…on the night I thought "oh I really like him" I didn't really think about Lewis or what I'd do about the situation, but I knew that if I didn't stay out that night […] I kind of thought that would be it […] I thought this was the opportunity to see what happens because I wasn't—although I thought he liked me, I still wasn't 100% sure…' (Rosie, page 30, line 409-416)

Rosie describes how she realised how much she was attracted to her affair partner on the night her sexual relationship with him began. It seems her attraction to him was all-consuming, overriding thoughts of her partner or what this would mean, as she sought to act on her desire. It is as though the attraction and desire for him that had been building finally erupted, and she wanted to seize the opportunity to take their relationship further and confirm whether their attraction was mutual. She further reflects on how her desire seemed to be uncontrollable on the night:

'…we were in this place and he just kind of reached in to kiss me. And I didn't—couldn't stop it…' (Rosie, page 27, line 359)

Here Rosie corrects herself as she explains how her relationship became physical with her affair partner. It seems she felt she "couldn't" stop the kiss, indicating she felt powerless to resist her desire towards him.

Other participants also described experiencing their desire as uncontrollable, evident by their attempts to fight it:

'…But there was just this absolutely irresistible pull between us. Like I couldn't fight it, I honestly couldn't fight it […] like there were times when I could like a day or a week and I'd be fine. But I would always fail. It would always fail…' (Rachel, page 58, line 1077)

Rachel highlights how uncontrollable the connection and desire between her and her affair partner was. Although attempts were made to fight this, it seems that desire overrode logic. There is a sense that this desire heightened all her emotions and senses, giving rise to an intensity that was difficult to resist. Indeed, she goes on to describe *"the high, you know, if we'd kissed or whatever" (page 68, line 1262),* indicating a drug-like quality and exhilaration of acting on her desire. The physical desire and heightened emotions appeared to be an embodied experience for participants, bring a vitality and energy to participants' accounts, reflecting how they experienced and made sense of their affairs.

3.3.2.A Fantasy World

This subtheme refers to how some participants' affairs seemed to transcend their everyday lives, as though they were living in a different world when they were with their affair partners, which almost felt unreal. This seemed to fill participants with life and energy. Steve reflects this below:

'…These two worlds where one was the drudgery and the thing that I was connected to doing cause I had to do it and one was this wonderful, special time that didn't have any of that […] I think it was a bit of a fantasy world…It was like I'd constructed this…world that was…built out of air and I was living in it and I didn't really think about it, going back to the practicalities…' (Steve, page 16, line 730-780)

The contrast between the two worlds highlights the difference in quality. Steve's description of his home life as the "drudgery" seems lifeless and obligatory, whilst his affair world appears to represent a sanctuary to escape the drudgery. It seems he felt he had freedom and choice in his affair world, which is a place he chose to be, rather than a place full of obligations as in reality. There seems to be a lightness in his affair world, contrasting with the heaviness of expectation and responsibility in his home life. It appears the affair world provided space for Steve, perhaps injecting life and energy back into him, after feeling so lost and despairing before it began. His description "built out of air" suggests his affair had no foundations or stability, yet it

provided him with an escape for himself. Steve pauses as he describes his affair as a "fantasy world", which could suggest a sense of disbelief now that he is no longer in it, as though he feels it was all a dream.

Similarly, Rachel's affair seemed to feel like a different world at times:

> *'…You know there were little moments like that when you realised you're, you're in la la land here, do you know what I mean, you're pretending like you're together and you're having—but it felt lovely…' (Rachel, page 67, line 1252)*

Rachel highlights the moments in which she could forget the reality of her situation and enjoy the company of her affair partner, pretending they were a normal couple. The use of the words "la la land" indicates a dream-like quality to her affair world, which does not quite feel grounded in reality. It seems she was able to escape the everyday reality and they were caught up in the excitement of each other.

In contrast, Maya described how the world with her affair partner felt as though all her "*dreams had come true" (page 13, line 242),* rather than feeling unreal, though her description of her romance with her affair partner also seemed to transcend the everyday, which left her feeling *"on top of the world" (page 14, line 254)*. Indeed, she described how special and unique experiences became with her affair partner:

> *'…I can remember going for a walk in [location], I'd been to [location] loads of times, walked [location] loads of times, I'd get to the top of the hill and cross over the road, and it was nothing like it felt when I was—did it with him…' (Maya, page 41, line 759)*

Although Maya had been to the location many times before, it seemed to be a completely different and transformative experience when she went with her affair partner. She goes on to explain:

> *'…Cause he was stood next to me, this very sort of strong protection of we're together in this relationship and look how beautiful the world is…' (Maya, page 41, line 762)*

It seems the protection Maya experienced with her affair partner gave her a new sense of safety and security, in which she could see beyond any worries of the moment to appreciate the beauty of the world. There seems to be a fairy-tale quality to this experience, as though she has found her prince to protect her. This also seems to relate to heteronormative femininity discourses of the passive and infantilised female role, protected by men, which may have influenced how she made sense of this.

Steve's description of his affair also seemed to have a flavour of a fairy-tale romance, which he described as *"a Disney love' (page 13, line 610);* dreamlike and magical. This is reflected below:

> *'…Magic, just like a fairy-tale […] I went round to see her […] snow was falling, we went for a walk along the road and were throwing snowballs […] I just had that […] magic feeling, you know that magic feeling?...' (Steve, Page 12, line 556).*

Steve's description provides a powerful image of his relationship with his affair partner and the magic shines through. It is as though no words do justice to his experience, as he seeks clarification I understand. There seems to be a purity and innocence to this description, which elicits an image of two youths playing around on a snow-lit road, indicating a vitality to the magical experience.

Steve goes on to describe his magical feeling:

> *'…And it was just like being in a film, it was just like being in a film. And everything felt really sparkling and perfect...' (Steve, Page 12, line 568).*

Steve emphasises the film-like quality to his affair. He conveys the specialness of the moments he shared with his affair partner and how much it meant to him. The words "sparkling and perfect" indicate his complete contentment and happiness and he goes on to say how he "*felt very alive" (page 13, line 594).* It is striking that Steve emphasised the romantic side of his affair, which seems to contrast to discourses of masculinity and he and other participants perhaps drew on mononormative discourses of romance and romantic love to understand their experiences.

3.3.3.A Thrilling Secret

This subtheme refers to the risk and secrecy of participants' affairs, which elicited a sense of excitement for some. It seems that doing something they perceived they were not supposed to do contributed to heightened emotions that made them feel alive. Ehsun described the thrill and risk of engaging in a secret affair:

> *'…I mean going behind her back, I like the danger of it, you know […] the biggest trip for me is keeping it a secret […] So for me it's a buzz and being on a high you know…' (Ehsun, page 7-60, line 83-819)*

Ehsun describes his excitement at doing something behind his wife's back, due to the risk he could be discovered. His use of the word "danger" suggests his affair is not safe, with the potential to uproot the security of his marriage, which is perhaps what makes the affair so exciting. There is a sense he feels powerful for having a secret from his wife, which seems to have a drug-like effect on him. Indeed his use of the words "trip" and "being on a high" indicates a sense of intoxication, leaving him buzzing and energised.

Sarah similarly appears to gain a sense of power from holding the secret, which she experiences as exciting:

> *'…They both know about my partner, but my partner doesn't know about them and they don't know about each other [laughs]…' (Sarah, page 33, line 620)*

Sarah highlights how she is the only one who knows about all her partners, which she seems to find amusing. There is a sense of delight that she holds the knowledge and power in her relationships, indicated by her laughter, and juggling three secret relationships seems to be a thrill for Sarah.

Rachel reflects on whether the fact it was an affair intensified her experience:

> *'…If I'm being honest, was part of kind of how passionate it was and frantic it was because it was an affair? Would it have been that passionate and frantic and emotion laden and electric if it hadn't been an affair? I don't know…' (Rachel, page 61, line 1136*)

Rachel considers whether the emotions she felt towards her affair partner would have been as heightened and intense if they were not having an affair. There is a sense that the riskiness and secrecy of doing something she perceived she should not be doing brought an urgency and exhilaration to her experience. Indeed, her use of the words “passionate”, “frantic”, “emotion laden” and “electric” highlight the intensity of her experience, as though her whole body is charged and alive.

Other participants discussed how their affairs were nearly discovered by their partners, heightening their emotions:

> *‘…sometimes the wife would ring up as well while we were doing it […] Trisha was just smiling and laughing and I’d try to keep it quiet so the wife didn’t hear….’ (Ehsun, page 15, line 199).*

It is striking that Ehsun answered the phone to his wife whilst he was having sex with his affair partner, which indicates he enjoyed the risk of discovery and possible power of being in on a secret that this brought. He goes on to describe how he experienced this as *“exciting” (page16, line 209).*

Other participants described how they had to find stolen moments to be together because of their secret affairs, which seemed to heighten their desire:

> *‘…so whenever I could I would arrange to meet her or go round hers, often for just short periods of time […] we did have sex and we would lie in bed […] but I would always go back to Catherine […] And it didn’t affect my sex with Catherine at all. Just—in fact it probably made it more of a thing […] everything was very heightened and intense for about two years…’ (Steve, page 12-13, line 579-590)*

Steve highlights his time was short and limited with his affair partner, as they had to try and find time to see each other alongside their lives and without arousing suspicion. Steve’s time with his affair partner appears to have been cut short as he had to return to his partner. It seems the secrecy of his affair contributed to his ‘heightened and intense’ feelings, which appeared to enhance the sex with his partner.

3.4.Master Theme Three: Negotiating Tensions

This master theme referred to the stressful side of participants' affairs, and how they had to negotiate multiple pressures and inner conflicts during their affairs. These tensions show another angle of how participants experienced their affairs and were an important part of understanding their experience. Three subthemes emerged, reflecting their grapple with the pressures of their affairs when describing their experience.

3.4.1.Struggling with Secrets

Whilst some participants previously described the excitement of the secrecy and risk of their affairs, others described how this could be stressful. This subtheme highlights the tension participants experienced between their wish to conceal their affair to avoid detection, with their discomfort at what this entailed, such as nearly being discovered and lying. Some participants described how they wanted to keep their affairs a secret to avoid negative consequences:

> *'…There were other people involved and I…thought the only way to do this is to do it in secret, to always keep it secret…' (Steve, page 12, line 535)*

> *'…I'm just avoiding any drama, avoiding hurting anyone, yeah…' (Michael, page 48, line 889)*

Steve and Michael appear to worry about hurting others, particularly if their affairs were discovered. Consequently, they perceived it was imperative to keep their affairs concealed from their partners, allowing them to continue without hurting them.

Ehsun, on the other hand, described his fear of separation if his wife discovered his affair:

> *'…so I just don't want her to find out about this you know. I don't want her to end it with me […] If she did find out I think she'd throw me out, but I don't want to lose her or anything…' (Ehsun, page 41-45, line 560-618)*

Ehsun worries he would lose his wife if his affair was discovered, and further indicated this fear was partly due to his wish to have children, as he does not *"want it to work out like the first marriage" (page 47, line 639)* and if he does "*have kids then I'll stop seeing other women" (page 47, line 634).* It appears Ehsun has a desire to have a family, and does not want to jeopardise this by continuing to engage in affairs,

as he did in his first marriage and with his existing children. Ehsun's account here contradicts his previous account in which he found the secrecy of his affair and risk of being discovered exciting. Secrecy seems important to Ehsun to maintain his excitement, whilst also maintaining his marriage and family plans.

Sarah also described her fear of being discovered by her partner:

> *'…So anyway, then he, I, this wee guy kept taking photos of us and stuff […] And I thought I'm absolutely petrified […] he had taken so many videos and pictures and I thought 'I'm petrified if I get home I know he'll look in this […] I'd be petrified if I hadn't deleted one…' (Sarah, page 31, line 575-581)*

Sarah highlights her concerns about the photographic evidence of one of her affairs, and her fear that her partner would see this. It appears she did not trust herself to erase the evidence, eliciting anxiety about the potential consequences of discovery. There is a sense she has to be careful to conceal her affair, and cannot live freely with the chance the secret could be exposed. This contrasts to her previous description of the excitement and freedom of her affairs in which she indulged her desires. It may be her fear of being discovered is informed by mononormative discourses that discovery of infidelity can be catastrophic which intensified this fear.

Some participants described their efforts to avoid detection, which could be stressful, particularly if their partner became suspicious. Michael described how although *"I plan it, I normally cover my tracks" (page 17, line 313)* and has *"kept a phone outside the house just so I don't get caught" (page 48, line 890),* there are times when his affairs have nearly been discovered:

> *'… there's been a few times where I don't clear my history or my browsing history or whatever and I've been very close to being caught out or I have been caught out and I had to just bullshit my way out of it. But—that can be stressful…' (Michael, page 48, line 887)*

Michael highlights how careful he needs to be to maintain the secrecy of his affair, and how a small slip up can arouse suspicions from his partner. The phrase "cover my tracks" suggests he attempts to leave no trace of his affairs, as though they never happened. At times when he has nearly been caught, he had to lie and find excuses

to convince his partner and reduce her suspicions. This seems to be a tense situation for him as he grapples to avoid discovery and maintain his secret.

Similarly, Sarah described how her efforts to maintain her secret could be stressful, as she "*can't think quickly enough to lie*" and has "*quite an animated face so you can kind of read my emotions" (page 17, line 332).* Indeed, she described how, to avoid the chance of her partner discovering the pictures on her phone and having to lie, she gave it to her affair partner, which backfired:

> *'…and when I got back he said "where's your phone?" […] He got on the phone to him […] he said "yes she gave it to me!" And I'd lied and said something else […] And I thought "oh god, oh god I don't want this, I don't like this". And er oh it was awful, we went through a terrible time with him, he was broken hearted and "I know you're lying to me" and I was like "I'm not lying to you" And I thought "oh I hate lying blatantly in front of his face, this is really awful"…' (Sarah, page 31, line 582-590)*

Sarah was caught in a lie, despite her attempts to avoid this. Her repetition of "oh god" indicates her stress, as though she felt panicked on how to handle the situation and was searching for solutions or help from a higher source. It seems her lies affected their relationship, as her partner was hurt and confused that she was concealing something, and she appears to feel a sense of guilt for this. However, concealing her affair remained her priority, which she had to negotiate with her discomfort lying to her partner.

Maya also described her stress of lying to conceal the secret affair:

> *'…So it gets really complicated. I'd have to say "oh I'm just going away with Paul but I've been with you to [location]". In case she went in town and met anybody. It's horrible. […] and you trip up anyway "did you go to [landmark]?" "No we just went round the market". "Oh is the market on on Sunday?" […] I was like "oh I wish I'd have gone to [location]!"…' (Maya, page 69, line 1293-1304).*

Maya described how she involved her friend in a cover story so that she could go away with her affair partner. This appeared to require a lot of consideration and planning, to ensure the lie did not get found out and to maintain the secrecy of her

affair. However, there is a sense she found herself tangled in a web of lies, which were difficult to keep track of. This seemed stressful for Maya and she describes her discomfort with this. One could also wonder whether participants' discomfort at lying and keeping secrets is influenced by mononormative discourses on morality that promote full disclosure in relationships, which influenced their tension between wanting to avoid discovery and their discomfort with lying to ensure their secrets were safe.

3.4.2.A Conflicted Self

This subtheme referred to how participants struggled to integrate their behaviour and experience of their affairs with their expectations and beliefs about relationships and infidelity, as well as their struggle with their conflicting needs. This seemed to create an inner tension and conflict within participants, and was often influenced by societal expectations.

Some participants discussed how societal scripts about infidelity influenced their experience, as they feared the judgement from others for their behaviours:

> *'…I almost thought to myself that I would never be somebody who has an affair […] And I thought "that's it" you know other people are going to think I'm tainted, "like oh she's had an affair, she's one of those people"…' (Rachel, page 24-26, line 450-477)*

> *'…being some sleazy, dirty cheater that just goes around sleeping with whoever or whatever, cause I'm not like that, but that's how it could be interpretated [sic].' (Michael, page 40, line 737).*

Rachel and Michael seem to indicate there is a certain "type" of person who engages in infidelity, and their fears of being negatively judged by others because of their affairs. In particular, both seem to fear they will be perceived as corrupt or immoral and not to be trusted because of their affairs, indicated by their words "tainted" and "sleazy, dirty cheater". Their accounts seem to relate to mononormative scripts that those who engage in infidelity are "bad" people, which seems to contrast with their experiences of their affairs they have previously described. There is a sense the label and associations of infidelity contaminate their experience and perhaps how they view themselves, as they grapple with their conflict between their own and mononormative perceptions of infidelity and their experience.

Rosie's account indicates she negatively judges herself for her affair:

> *'…But then I felt quite weak in the fact that I had to have an affair to break up with him. So I suppose that doesn't make me feel that good about myself…' (Rosie, page 58, line 791)*

Rosie appears to negatively judge herself for her affair, as she could not break up with her partner before this despite being unhappy. There is a sense she feels disappointed in herself, and perhaps guilty, as though there was a "right" way to handle her situation with her partner, which perhaps relate to mononormative scripts that individuals should leave their partner before having an affair, and she perhaps experiences conflicting feelings about this.

In contrast, Sarah acknowledged how mononormative expectations influenced her sense making in the interview, as she realised *"the only reason I said it was bad is because I'm talking to you about it" (page 27, line 504).* This suggests she felt the need to act in a way expected of her and to show remorse for her infidelity, even when this contradicted her experience. This shows the grapple between societal pressure and personal experience, which can raise inner conflicts, and this may have also influenced other participants.

Participants discussed their inner conflict with the pleasure of their affairs with the reality of their situation:

> *'…cause on the one hand it was great because it was incredibly passionate and we loved each other and loved spending time together, but it was never—you could never fully enjoy it because it was always tainted with the shame and the embarrassment and the guilt and sadness of knowing that I was supposed to be with somebody else and that we were doing it behind his back…' (Rachel, page 30, line 545)*

Rachel describes being unable to fully enjoy her affair as reality crashed in. It seems because their love was at the expense of deceiving another, she perceived it as contaminated, which elicited feelings of shame and guilt. Rachel describes having to balance the personal gratification and the excitement of being in love with the consequences of this on her husband, creating an inner turmoil as she struggled with her shame. Indeed, she further described how she experienced an *"awful identity*

shift" (page 25, line 455) for engaging in an affair, and her harsh self-criticism including such thoughts as *"you're a horrible person and you don't deserve to be alive" (page 25, line 460).* It seems mononormative discourses around infidelity influenced this apparent self-concept discrepancy, which was difficult to reconcile.

Other participants also discussed their conflict over their affair and their expectations for how they should behave in a relationship, which raised feelings of guilt:

> *'…sometimes it did pop into my mind, you know "this is not right, this is so wrong, you know the wife she hasn't done anything, we're married you know, we've sworn to keep everything you know faithful"…' (Ehsun, page 61, line 827)*

When Ehsun thinks about his infidelity, he appears to feel guilty for breaking his marital vows and feels his wife did not deserve this. He seems to struggle to balance his personal gratification with his responsibilities and promise to his wife, creating an inner tension and feeling of guilt when he reflects on this. The use of the word 'sometimes' may indicate Ehsun feels as though he should experience guilt in the context of the interview. Indeed, it may be participants' reported guilt and shame were linked to mononormative discourses that present infidelity as immoral, and they feared judgement in the interview. Highlighting their remorse for their perceived socially unacceptable behaviour may have been intended to indicate they are good people.

At the same time, participants described how they found it difficult to regret their affairs:

> *'…I'm glad it happened and I think if it hadn't I'd always have been like "what if?" […] I think I'd have been quite annoyed at myself if I didn't…' (Rosie, page 71, line 965)*

> *'…I've enjoyed every minute of it to be honest. I don't regret any of it…' (Michael, page 58, line 1077)*

> *'…It was the best thing that ever happened to me. Cause how could I not experience that love? […] for all the bad that I may have caused to his wife,*

after all the upset I may have caused to my family, it was worth it, it's very selfish but it was…' (Maya, page 71-72, line 1339-1343)

It seems participants could not regret their affairs, as they gained something for themselves. Whilst Rosie highlights she did not want to live with future regrets of not taking the opportunity when it arose, Michael emphasises how much he has enjoyed his relationships, which he cannot regret. Maya describes how her affair was worth the hurt to her family, as she experienced a love she had not thought possible, which is one of the best experiences of her life. It is interesting that she perceived this to be "selfish" and one may wonder whether she is drawing on a socially constructed notion that women ought to prioritise the needs of others over their own.

Participant accounts also revealed their conflicting needs within their relationships, which is part of how they made sense of their affairs. Sarah described her conflict between wanting to be with her ex-partner who she was in love with, and maintaining her external persona:

'…I was so in love that I had no need or desire to have affairs […] I also had this erm ambition that I would have a business and I would have my own place, I would be totally independent and I'd have lots of sex with men, different men. That was an ambition of mine [laughs] […]. And then he came along. So I couldn't let him get in the way of this idea that I had […] (Sarah, page 12-13, line 223-232).

Here Sarah emphasises how she did not want to have an affair in her previous relationship, as she was completely happy and satisfied. Simultaneously, she had worked hard to achieve her ambition of being independent and desired sexual freedom, which her relationship threatened. Consequently, she appears conflicted between wanting to be with her partner but also not giving up on her ambition. She further explains how *"every fibre in your body doesn't wanna do it" (page 13, line 238)* in regard to her affairs, but it was important for her to *"maintain that sort of persona that I had to the world"* because "*underneath I was nothing. Worthless" (page 60, line 1118).* This highlights Sarah's inner conflict, which seemed to give rise to inner turmoil and anguish. Her use of the word "persona" indicates this was a mask and did not match up to her real feelings. It could be interpreted that she felt if she could portray to the world that she did not need anybody, she would not risk getting hurt or having her sense of worthlessness confirmed. Her ambition to be

independent and have sexual freedom may also be influenced by feminist discourses promoting female liberation and possibly encouraged her resistance to heteronormative expectations of relationships.

Ehsun struggled to balance his need for stability with his need for sexual variety:

> *'…She looks after me does the wife, she always looks after me […] she's younger so […] more likely to have kids with the wife…' (Ehsun, page 41, line 558)*

> *'…there's lots of women out there to try, it's like a new car or something, cars, houses, you know, like clothes […] you want to hear something different, a different voice, a different person er you know, getting high on sex you know…' (Ehsun, page 19-38, line 249-509)*

Ehsun seems to value the stability of his home life, in which his wife "looks after him" and his desire to start a family with her. Yet it appears his wish for stability conflicted with his desire for variety. His comparison of women to cars, houses and clothes suggests he may feel sexually entitled, and may view women and sex as material objects, where he is spoilt for choice and does not seem to want to restrict himself to one person. There is a sense he gets bored quickly, and is looking for a new stimulus. Indeed, his description of "getting high on sex" indicates his affair was like a drug, addictive, and it is as though he is constantly searching for the next fix, even if this risks the stability of his marriage. Ehsun's view of women seems to reflect both traditional gender roles and consumerist principles of sex.

3.4.3.Reconciling Conflicts

This subtheme refers to how participants attempted to reconcile their inner conflicts, which could led to a self-concept discrepancy, guilt and shame, using a variety of strategies. Some participants placed the responsibility of their affairs onto their partners:

> *'…I can personally stay in a faithful relationship, I've done it for a long time. […] I think for me to go out and cheat or be unfaithful, it's always been triggered by someone else...' (Michael, page 35, line 642)*

Michael highlights that he is capable of refraining from engaging in infidelity in relationships, but others lead him to it. It seems Michael wants to reduce his responsibility for his affairs and one may wonder whether this connects to his previous account where he fears he will be perceived as a "sleazy, dirty cheater" to demonstrate he is not. Similarly Steve described how he *"could not have an affair unless I felt like those promises had been broken by the other person",* which was his *"moral justification"* and he did not have *"a guilty side" (page 27, line 1302-1323)*.

Michael also appeared to rationalise his affair to reconcile his potential self-concept discrepancy:

> *'…I thought "you know what, I've crossed a boundary, like I cheated on her, on my girlfriend, I might as well again." If you've done it once, you might as well do it ten times more, it's not going to make a difference...' (Michael, page 29, line 529)*

It seems Michael believes the number of times one engages in infidelity does not change its impact and therefore he should make the most of it if he has already "crossed the boundary" and done what he perceives he is not supposed to do. This seems to provide a justification for him to remove the stress of what affairs mean to him, which allows him to continue his affairs.

Similarly, Ehsun seems to rationalise his affair to perhaps help with his guilt:

> *'…that's what I'm there to do isn't it to women so—the guy you know to service them both, that's the way the woman you know reaches climax, that's what she likes so at the end of the day I think there's nothing wrong with that, as long as both women were both happy and getting sex and they're happy. Trisha got her kicks out of it, the wife didn't know about it so there's no harm in that anyway…' (Ehsun, page 60, line 815)*

Ehsun seems to believe that as long as nobody is getting hurt, he is not doing anything wrong. His use of the word "service" suggests he believes it is his duty to have sex with his wife and affair partner to keep them happy and there is a sense this gives him a licence or permission to engage in affairs. This contrasts to the guilt he alluded to previously, and suggests this may be a way for him to rationalise his affairs to reduce this. It is striking Ehsun believes it is his responsibility to help

women to “reach climax” which may relate to heteronormative discourses where men “give” orgasms to women and which he may have drawn on to make sense of this.

Rachel attempted to gain permission from her husband to sleep with her affair partner:

> *‘…So I ended up, erm, trying to arrange a threesome between me and Jon and Chris. This was before I’d slept with Chris because I wanted to sleep with him without feeling guilty... (Rachel, page 62, line 1161)*

Rachel’s longing to become sexually intimate with her affair partner led her to find a way to do this in a guilt and conflict-free way. It seemed the only way to do this was to attempt to gain her husband’s permission to sleep with her affair partner by inviting him to be a part of it.

In contrast, Sarah described how because *“I was kind of forcing myself to do something I really didn’t want to do”* (*page 14, line 257)* in the relationship she did not want to have affairs in, and Rachel described how because of *“feeling a huge amount of guilt and shame” (Rachel, page 12, line 207),* they *“started to drink a lot” (Sarah, page 14, line 256).* Rachel and Sarah describe turning to alcohol to numb their pain when they could not reconcile their feelings.

4.Discussion

4.1.Overview

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience and personal meanings of men and women who have engaged in infidelity, specifically an affair. The analysis revealed three master themes, which elucidated this. This section will provide an overview of these findings, evaluate the current study, and discuss the findings in relation to the existing empirical and theoretical literature. The implications for Counselling Psychology practice and research will then be considered, followed by ideas for future research.

4.2.Overview of the Findings

Whilst participants differed in terms of age, gender, ethnicity/race and socioeconomic status, there were common themes across participants' accounts in relation to their shared experience of having an affair. Participants understood their affairs as personally gratifying, which offered something entirely for themselves, fulfilling their needs. All participants discussed their sense something was missing in their primary relationship, such as an emotional connection, romance, compatibility and sexual frequency or variety, which could elicit a sense of neglect, frustration, and sadness. They understood their affairs as a way for them to meet these needs. Some participants also described how their affairs offered an outlet or escape from their emotions following their relationship and personal issues or life events. Other participants indicated their affairs were an opportunity for fun and pleasure, which they actively sought or did not limit themselves from, whilst some were able to re-connect or explore other parts of themselves with their affair partners.

Participants also described the experience of their affairs, which were exhilarating and rejuvenating, bringing a renewed vitality and energy that they were not expecting. Some participants described their irresistible desire for their affair partners, which seemed to be an embodied experience, and their affairs seemed to transcend the every day routine and monotony, as though only they and their affair partners existed. These experiences, alongside the risk and secrecy of their affairs seemed to heighten their senses, contributing to their sense of feeling alive.

Alongside the positive experiences of focusing on themselves and the excitement and specialness of their affairs, participants described the stressful side, and their inner conflicts as they negotiated personal and societal expectations with their experience, their conflicting needs, and maintaining the secrecy of their affairs. Such conflicts could elicit feelings of guilt and shame, and participants utilised strategies to try and overcome this. Despite this, participants described how they could not regret their affairs, as the positive experiences outweighed the stressful side.

Participants' experiences and sense-making appeared to be influenced by mononormative and heteronormative expectations of relationships, as well as gender, age, and culture, which seemed to contribute to how they experienced their relationships and perceived issues.

4.3.Evaluation of the Research

This section evaluates this study by reviewing the methodological, procedural, personal and epistemological issues that arose during the research process, to examine the quality of this research.

4.3.1.Methodological Reflexivity

The subjective, interpretative nature of qualitative research and its tendency to use small sample sizes has been criticised as unscientific due to the difficulty replicating, generalising and evaluating the validity of knowledge (Sarma, 2015). The absence of specific, fixed protocols has been interpreted as though "anything goes" (Sarma, 2015, p.182) in qualitative research. Consequently, qualitative research is often perceived as lacking in quality compared to quantitative research (Groth, 2010). However, those defending qualitative research have argued that it is impossible to be fully objective in any kind of research, as an element of subjectivity exists in all research decisions (Flick, 2009; Sarma, 2015), and it is therefore better to acknowledge and embrace the role of the researcher throughout the research process in attempts to be transparent about this (Sarma, 2015). Furthermore, Denzin (2009) argued such critiques are rooted in quantitative measures of evaluating research, which is unreasonable because this overlooks the contrasting theoretical paradigms central to each approach. Indeed, the positivist epistemologies adopted in quantitative research assume objective, value-free measurements of variables to produce one "truth", whereas qualitative methods embrace a range of epistemologies that assume multiple realities exist, and so empirical findings are a reflection of

participants' understandings and experiences in that context (Sarma, 2015). Consequently, criteria of generalisability, objectivity, and internal validity used to evaluate quantitative research are not appropriate for qualitative research, which will inevitably fall short and be perceived as lacking quality when measured against these criteria (Denzin, 2009).

Whilst there are variations between qualitative research, which make it difficult to have standardised quality controls, numerous guidelines have been proposed to assess quality, including Yardley's (2000) four criteria discussed in the methodology section. Whilst I followed this criteria to enhance the transferability, credibility and confirmability of this research, I also acknowledge this research only reflects one interpretation of the data, influenced by my own experiences and knowledge within this time and context, and that other interpretations of the data may be elicited from other researchers, other individuals, or if conducted in another time period or cultural context. Thus the findings in this study reflect the personal meanings and experiences of participants in the context of the interviews and British society, and refer to experiences of one definition of infidelity; affairs. Nevertheless, these findings are important and may be transferrable to other individuals who have experienced affairs in this time and context.

IPA has been criticised for overlooking the use of language and the role this plays in understanding experiences due to participants' ability to articulate this (Willig, 2013). Indeed, this ability may have come more naturally to some participants. Furthermore, a number of participants had received psychological therapy, either in relation to their romantic relationships and affair, or for other issues. This may reflect differences in how much time participants have spent reflecting on their experiences, which may have given rise to different levels of understanding and meaning available from participants' accounts. Whilst differences in language and reflective ability are inevitable, I attended to participants' use of language and the possible discourses influencing participants' meaning-making throughout the analysis.

IPA and interviews have been criticised for capturing participants' opinions or retrospective accounts of their past, influenced by memory, rather than capturing current experiences (Dickinson, Knussen & Flowers, 2007; Tuffour, 2017). This may have particularly been the case for participants whose affairs occurred many years ago, and perhaps impacted their accounts differently to others, particularly as life experiences could have contributed to how they understand their affairs now

compared to at the time. However, the phenomenological nature of this study incorporates the notion of temporality and acknowledges that sense-making happens in the present and changes at different points in time (Brough & Brattner, 2006). Indeed, existential phenomenology acknowledges participants always understand their experiences in relation to the past and future (Farrell Krell, 1982). Participants' accounts thus differ from memories, which actively recall the past, whereas sense-making is a process of holding past experiences in the present to make sense of the current experience (Brough & Brattner, 2006). The findings thus represent how participants made sense of their past experience in the context of the interview, time period and culture.

4.3.2.Procedural Reflexivity

As previously discussed in the methodology chapter, recruiting participants proved challenging due to the personal nature of the topic. Participants were slow to respond or made requests I was unable to fulfil, including financial and sexual compensation. It is interesting that respondents who requested sexual compensation were male and one could wonder whether this represented an element of sexual entitlement, and indicates there were potential participants that were excluded from the research who may have brought a different angle to the experience and meaning-making of infidelity, possibly impacting on the findings. Simultaneously, respondents asked for sexual compensation before the screening process took place, so it is unclear whether they met the criteria for this study.

As a result of this experience, I noticed that I felt uneasy when meeting participants who were complete strangers, which may also have impacted on the interview process. This was particularly the case for the male participants, as they had all responded to the recruitment advertisement and were complete strangers, whilst the female participants had been recruited through a chance encounter (and so I had met the participant) and word of mouth whereby we shared a mutual acquaintance. Whilst I relaxed once the interviews began, it is possible that the uneasiness influenced the questions I felt safe to ask on some level, and thus the data generated. It is also interesting to note the gender differences in how participants were recruited. Whilst there could have been many reasons for this, one could wonder whether this may have been influenced by the sexual double standard, where women can be perceived as worse for similar sexual behaviours as men (Duncombe & Marsden, 2004), and whether this inhibited women from volunteering to participate.

As discussed in the methodology, some participants responded from other parts of the UK. As I did not want to exclude those interested in participating on account of geographical location, I amended my ethics to include Video Skype interviews. This was far from ideal, as they introduced more differences to participant interviews, which potentially impacted upon the analysis. For example, I could only see a headshot and upper body of participants and their non-verbal communication was less clear than in the face-to-face interviews. However, I was still able to read participants' facial expressions and tone of voice during the Video Skype interviews, which allowed me to monitor the emotional impact of the interview. The connection remained relatively stable during the interviews and, whilst there were lags at times, calls were not dropped. I was also able to establish rapport with participants, and research has suggested that participants may feel more comfortable speaking in interviews conducted in a location of their choice over Skype (Janghorban et al., 2014). Furthermore, it is acknowledged that recruitment can be difficult when researching personal or sensitive topics (MacDougall & Fudge, 2001), and Video Skype provides flexibility to work around this, as well as avoiding exclusion of participants based on geographical location (Redlich-Amirav & Higginbottom, 2014). Thus, whilst such interviews may have affected the quality criteria of commitment to rigour and coherence in the data collection process (Yardley, 2000), being transparent about this and some of the benefits of Skype interviews may somewhat mitigate these limitations. Nevertheless, future research should strive for consistency during data collection.

As discussed in the methodology chapter, homogeneity was a source of tension in this research. Whilst participants had all engaged in an on-going romantic relationship of at least one month at the same time as their primary relationship, which was not agreed with their partner, indicating homogeneity of their experience, there was more diversity in the sample than anticipated. Participants differed in terms of age, gender, race/ethnicity, relationship status, and socioeconomic status. Indeed, it was previously discussed in the introduction chapter how these characteristics might influence experiences. Participants also differed in terms of the length of time they had been in their primary relationship, the duration of their affair, and the outcome of their affair. Whilst some were still with their primary partner, others had left their relationship for their affair partner. Three participants had engaged in multiple affairs whilst with their current partner, and one had engaged in affairs across her relationships. Two participants had young children at the times of their affairs, whilst one had older children at the time of her affair, and three were married

at the time of their affairs. This diversity risked complicating the homogeneity of the sample.

Whilst in hindsight it may have been better to have further narrowed the inclusion criteria, this diversity was somewhat unavoidable given the complexity of the topic. Whilst I recognise these differences influenced participants' experiences, the participants were in relationships that subscribed to the heterosexual institutionalised Western norms of monogamy and had all been socialised and were embedded in Western society. Consequently, it was considered their experience of a monogamous relationship in which they engaged in infidelity would be homogenous enough that commonalities could be found, unlike with the SIGM participant, as discussed in the methodology section 2.6.3. Furthermore, Smith et al., (2009) acknowledge that participants' experiences will not be exactly the same and emphasise participants' experience of the phenomenon under investigation in a homogenous sample, whilst also allowing space to consider the influence of contexts and demographics on participants' experiences and sense making in their accounts. Indeed, whilst commonalities were found across participants' accounts, differences and contexts were considered in the analysis and the remainder of this chapter.

Furthermore, the diversity within the sample may enhance the transferability of the findings to individuals with similar features to the participants, including those from lower and middle socioeconomic backgrounds, Asian British males, young and middle-aged men and women, those with children, and those married and cohabiting. Indeed, the tendency of previous research in Western countries to focus on white, middle-class individuals has been criticised (Sheff & Hammers, 2011), and the inclusion of participants who were not white and middle-class may reduce chances of perpetuating white privilege in research.

During the interview process, I was aware of my power as a researcher and how this interacted with participants, particularly as I was a stranger asking about participants' personal experiences of a phenomenon that mononormative discourses position as wrong or immoral (Fahs & McClelland, 2016). Accordingly, I aimed to convey to participants the interview was a non-judgemental space and to convey interest and curiosity about their experiences, giving them a space to discuss these. However, I sometimes found it difficult to balance giving participants space to discuss their experiences and staying focused on further questions, which could be hard to hold onto and may have impacted the direction of the interviews. Indeed, the earlier

interviews were the shortest, which reflects this difficulty and how with experience it became easier to focus the interviews and questions. I also found it difficult at first to adopt the researcher role, rather than the therapist role, and I noticed myself making links and interpretations in my head at times, which would not have been appropriate to share in a research context. Whilst this did get easier with practice, I continued to note down my thoughts in my research journal (appendix G).

Furthermore, given mononormative discourses, which tend to position infidelity as wrong, participants may also have held back, or attempted to justify their infidelity during the interviews. This demonstrates the influence of researchers on the accounts, and I considered this influence during the analysis. Indeed, Smith et al., (2009) acknowledge participant accounts reflect their understanding of experiences in the moment, including the influence of the researcher, therefore findings reflect the context of the interview in this particular time and culture. Future research may consider using multiple forms of data collection in attempts to improve trustworthiness, including diaries.

Finally, due to the idiographic nature of IPA, the analysis was difficult and time consuming, particularly balancing the descriptive and interpretative elements of initial coding and emergent themes. I felt a pressure to show interpretation from the very beginning in the initial coding, whilst also attempting to stay close to the text to fairly represent participants' experiences. Accordingly, there may have been times when I perhaps over-interpreted the text in the early stages. However, through engaging in the hermeneutic circle, I began to understand that I could start with descriptive comments, which could become more interpretative as I moved through the steps of analysis. This helped me to keep grounded in participants' accounts.

4.3.3.Personal and Epistemological Reflexivity

My personal experiences both before and during the research process potentially influenced the research. As previously mentioned, I was judgemental to those who engaged in infidelity before the research began due to experiences in my family, as well as, I now realise, being embedded in Western culture and mononormative and heteronormative scripts about relationships. However, as I read more about infidelity and other relationship styles, I began to realise how complex the topic is, and how differently it can be experienced. Speaking to participants and learning more about the topic began to radically change not only how I viewed infidelity, but also how I viewed romantic relationships in general. I realised how pervasive mononormativity

and heteronormativity are in individuals' everyday lives. I believe this helped me to exercise an open mind during the data collection and analysis phases of the study.

Furthermore, reading around the different angles of infidelity and relationships really brought home to me my own privilege, particularly when considering non-white, non-heterosexual and non-conventional relationships. I realised how my worldview had been limited by my own context and background, potentially making assumptions based on my white, heterosexual privilege and taken-for-granted norms. This really highlighted to me the importance of unpacking such privilege for myself, and across the profession more generally. Accordingly, during the research process I paid attention to how my personal characteristics, privilege and context interacted with participants' and how this may have impacted upon the data. Indeed, as a white, British, heterosexual female trainee Counselling Psychologist in my twenties, this inevitably influenced my relationship with participants and their responses in different ways. For example, one male participant appeared apologetic when speaking about his experience of women, perhaps afraid of insulting me and holding back from saying more about this. Furthermore, whilst non-white participants were raised in the UK, they may also be influenced by their cultural heritage, and may have wondered whether I would understand, perhaps influencing what or how they expressed themselves. This highlights how the findings have been co-constructed in the relationship between the participants and myself.

My journey through the research process also gave rise to some epistemological tensions. One such tension was between my desire to challenge mononormative and heteronormative assumptions about relationships and infidelity by producing some kind of "truth" in the findings, whilst also being consistent with my epistemological position, recognising that my research, whilst contributing knowledge to the field, is contextual and cannot provide a complete picture or final conclusion of infidelity. This was important for me to stay mindful of during the write-up phase, and to note this in my research journal.

Furthermore, I was conscious of not reinforcing mononormativity and heteronormativity in the research, and I struggled with the language used to describe the phenomenon of infidelity and participants' experiences, as many terms are emotionally loaded and judgemental, or are associated with specific behaviours. In particular, I experienced a tension using the term "infidelity" throughout the write up phase of this study, as I did not want to insinuate this term has one fixed definition,

conflicting with my epistemological position in which I assert there is no fixed meaning. I also needed to convey exactly what I was exploring in this research and to make it clear to participants so that they understood, and infidelity seemed to best reflect dominant Western understandings, with the inclusion criteria further clarifying which aspect of infidelity I was referring to.

Finally, I experienced a tension during the analysis phase between wanting to represent participants' voices, as well as interrogating the data in a way that was consistent with my epistemological position, as discussed in the methodology. Consequently, I found it difficult to make decisions on how to organise the data and label the themes at times, and to strike a balance between the hermeneutics of empathy, with considering prevalent cultural understandings that shaped participants' accounts. I noted this struggle in my research journal and discussed theme names and how best to present the findings with my supervisor.

4.3.4.Conclusion

This study thus has limitations and the findings are contextual to the seven participants' experiences and sense-making in the interviews with me and my analysis of this. Consequently, this research shed light on one understanding of infidelity in this particular time and context. Despite the limitations, the research has shown good transparency throughout, indicating quality, trustworthiness and credibility. Furthermore, the findings are transferrable to individuals in a comparable situation to participants, and have theoretical transferability, which will be discussed in the next section. The research thus provides an important contribution to the wider field, and when combined with this, can provide important information to inform practice.

4.4.Findings and the Literature

This section situates the findings within the existing empirical and theoretical literature. Throughout the study, I have attended to dominant discourses that I believe are intertwined with lived experiences, and need to be taken into account in any interpretations of infidelity experiences. Consequently, a social-constructionist framework was considered useful to understand the findings, particularly the influence of mononormative and heteronormative influences. Furthermore, whilst this study did not aim to compare male and female accounts, the influences of gender did seem to emerge during the analysis. Accordingly, a feminist approach was

considered useful for understanding the influences of gender on participants' accounts. Application of these approaches is interwoven throughout the discussion of the findings.

Due to the breadth and depth of the findings, this section addresses each theme at a time in relation to the literature; considered the most cohesive way of discussing the findings.

4.4.1.Something for Me

This theme highlighted how participants understood their affairs as a place to focus on their needs, which they perceived to be unmet in their primary relationship, due to their interpretation that something was missing with their partner. Some indicated this gave rise to experiences of sadness, longing, insecurity and frustration, and they interpreted their affairs as a way of coping with these feelings, as well as other life and personal stressors. Some participants also understood their affairs as actively pursuing sexual pleasure to fulfil their needs, which could also be validating, whilst others interpreted their affairs as giving them a space to explore different parts of themselves. These experiences were also influenced by a myriad of factors, including participants' gender, age, mononormative and heteronormative discourses.

4.4.1.1.Something Missing

Participants described experiencing unmet needs with their partners, which they interpreted as arising from their sense that something was missing in their primary relationship, and contributed to their understanding of their affairs as a way for them to focus on their needs. What participants perceived to be missing appeared to be in relation to a number of factors, including an emotional connection, romantic love, personality compatibility, a sense of security, trust and freedom, and sexual frequency and variation. Participants described their experience of loss, yearning, sadness and loneliness as a result. These findings support notions that infidelity may be a symptom of relationship difficulties, which is often discussed in the literature, as well as how therapists often understand affairs when working with couples (Apostu, 2016; Vossler & Moller, 2014). However, the literature and participants' accounts appear to be based on assumptions reflective of dominant discourses that infidelity is a symptom of relationship difficulties, which participants may have drawn on when making sense of their affairs as arising from their sense something was missing in their relationship.

The experience of a missing emotional connection described by participants seemed to elicit, and exacerbate, a sense of incompatibility, insecurity and lack of trust in their primary relationships, which appeared to elicit experiences of unhappiness, loneliness and longing. These findings support the suggestion that compatibility can be important for a sense of connection between a couple (Houston & Houts, 1998), as well as Sailor's (2013) research that found a reduced sense of trust, security and intimacy distanced a couple. Similarly, some participants described that whilst they had good practical relationships with their partner and experienced affection towards them, this differed from romantic love and lacked a sense of specialness, which some found with their affair partner. The distinction between different types of love is reflected in the literature, which distinguishes romantic love (characterised by increased energy, focus, longing for and intrusive thoughts about the desired individual) from compassionate love (characterised by mutual respect, affection and commitment) (Berscheid, 2010).

This distinction reflects discourses on romantic love, promoting the notion that romantic love is an emotional and physical experience, which is special fulfils all needs and provides happiness, constructed as necessary in monogamous relationships (Richards & Barker, 2013). However, that participants had been in their relationships for a long time despite missing romantic love indicates that one missing element is not always an issue; it may be at certain points in time when this becomes an issue, perhaps if combined with other difficulties. This highlights the complexity of relationship experiences (Gabb & Fink, 2018) and how needs and priorities change over time, as well as how these experiences are permeated by wider dominant discourses and assumptions about romantic relationships and romantic love.

Some participants grappled with issues of freedom and togetherness in their relationships, supporting Barker and Langdridge's (2010) observation that contemporary Western relationships emphasise conflicting themes of interdependence and independence. It also highlights one of the claims made by existential theory, positing individuals experience a dilemma between their desire for freedom in their relationships with their desire to belong (Barker, 2011). This seems to reflect Michael's experience who felt his partner was controlling and did not have enough freedom in his relationship, whilst Maya seemed to feel she had too much freedom and desired more security in her relationship. They interpreted their affairs as a way to balance this battle between independence and togetherness. This highlights the importance of helping individuals to find this balance to maintain their

sense of self as well as their sense of belonging. Gabb and Fink (2018) found participants in long-term relationships balanced this by making an effort to spend quality time with their partner, as well as carving out time for themselves, separate from their partners.

Findings highlighted that some participants did not have the sexual relationship they wanted, as it lacked variety, reduced, or stopped completely. This echoes the literature suggesting sexual frequency in long-term relationships declines over time as it becomes familiar (Conley et al., 2017; Elliot & Umberson, 2008; Rubin et al., 2014). However, some research also found that familiarity and *deep knowing* in long-term relationships can enrich the sexual relationship (Gabb & Fink, 2018). This may have been the case for Steve who described how his sexual relationship with his partner improved over time. Furthermore, Maya discussed how children and her husband's diagnosis of cancer ended their sexual relationship, as she no longer saw him as a sexual partner. This chimes with previous research highlighting how the demands of children and life events can negatively affect sex life (Gabb & Fink, 2018). This is also consistent with research conducted by Hawkins et al., (2009) examining changes to sexual relationships following diagnoses of cancer. They found 59% of women and 79% of men whose partners had received cancer diagnoses reported a reduction in sexual activity, partly due to "repositioning their partner as a patient rather than a sexual partner" (p.273).

However, the literature and findings in this study indicate the presence of assumptions that sexual relationships are important to validate primary relationships, as participants appeared to interpret their reduced sexual frequency as meaning something was amiss or wrong in their relationship and was how they made sense of their affairs. This seems to reflect discourses that sexual frequency is central to affirm romantic relationships in Western society (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Farvid & Braun, 2006), and indicates how these discourses shaped participants' sense-making and experiences. Additionally, the finding that Ehsun appeared to be preoccupied with pornography could be understood as influenced by the commercialisation of sex and women, which shaped his sexual desire (Brown-Bowers et al., 2015; Fahs, 2014).

This subtheme demonstrates how participants understood their affairs as arising from unmet needs in their relationships. That participants perceived something to be missing in their relationships also appears to reflect wider mononormative and

heteronormative expectations for romantic relationships and organising their lives. Indeed, participants seemed to grapple with their expectations for how relationships 'should' be, such as reaching the milestones of being a couple, having a family and career. Along with a monogamous relationship, discourses position these milestones as the key to happiness and that all of one's needs should be met in their relationships (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Conley et al., 2012; Ferrer, 2018; Gabb & Fink, 2008; Jackson, 2006; Reibstein, 2013; Richards & Barker, 2013). That participants did not feel happy despite meeting these standards appeared to elicit a sense of confusion, sadness and a sense of failure and demonstrates how these discourses appeared to permeate their experiences in their relationships and how they made sense of this.

4.4.1.2.A Way of Coping

Participants also understood their affairs as a way of helping them to deal with their feelings, as well as how they experienced themselves in relation to their partners, particularly their sense of powerlessness. Some participants interpreted their affairs as an outlet for their frustration, unhappiness, and loss of expectation for their relationships, which they saw as arising from their experiences of what they perceived to be missing in their relationships, as well as personal issues and life stressors, including personal sacrifice, financial responsibilities and pressures, illness and bereavement. This supports Hall & Fincham's (2009) study which found psychological distress could be a precursor to infidelity, as well as the literature arguing infidelity can be a response to life and relationship stressors, which can impact upon mental health (Apostu, 2016; Coleman & Glenn, 2009; Walker et al., 2010). However, this literature seems based on mononormative discourses that infidelity is rooted in relationship and life difficulties. Furthermore, participants' emphasis of their difficult feelings indicates they may be drawing on these discourses, attempting to justify their infidelity in the context of the interview. This demonstrates the importance of taking the wider contexts of individuals' lives and societal norms into account.

Some participants interpreted that their distress in their relationships was exacerbated by communication difficulties with their partners, whereby they described feeling unheard. This chimes with previous research that has found communication enhances a couples' sense of acceptance, intimacy, trust and relationship satisfaction (Pietromonaco, Greenwood & Barrett, 2003). Furthermore, research into non-conventional and non-heterosexual relationships have emphasised

the importance of clear communication and expressing feelings and needs to prevent hurt in the relationship (Bonello & Cross, 2015; Conley et al., 2017; de Visser & McDonald, 2007; McLean, 2004; Wosick-Correa, 2010). One could also wonder whether this research and participants' understanding of their communication difficulties is reflective of 'therapeutic' and reflexivity discourses which promote talking and communication as important in society and relationships (Gabb & Fink, 2018), which informed their sense-making and experience of their relationships.

Personal issues were also understood as influencing participants' affairs, such as for Sarah who described her complete happiness in a past relationship, yet her need to have affairs to deal with and escape from the strength of her feelings towards her partner, fear of rejection and sense of powerlessness, which she perceived as arising from her past experiences. This echoes Apostu's (2016) suggestion that affairs can be a way of avoiding intimacy. It is interesting Sarah discussed the power of her sexuality, which alongside sex allowed her to gain a sense of control and power over the men she engaged in affairs with, as though they would do whatever she asked of them. A feminist lens may conceptualise this as reflective of an interplay between female sexual liberation discourses that women can have sex on their own terms, and heterosex discourses around the male sex-drive whereby men are positioned as having strong biological sexual desire, and therefore struggle to resist sex when offered (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Gavey, McPhillips & Braun, 1999; Hollway, 1984). That Sarah understood she was in control of sex with her affair partners indicates the influence of these discourses on her sense of power and identity. This also chimes with research by Brown-Bowers et al., (2015); in interviews with 40 Canadian women, they found sex with men could be a way to gain material possessions or gifts. This differs from the have/hold discourse posited by Hollway (1984), whereby women desire love with men and therefore exchange sex for men's love in heterosexual relationships. It may be this discourse is out-dated, or simply not relevant to Sarah.

Participants' affairs were also understood as a way of seeking revenge, particularly following a sense of feeling smothered, controlled and unheard in the primary relationship, and perhaps giving rise to a sense of powerlessness and a power struggle within the relationship. This is congruent with Fishbane's (2011) suggestion that power struggles are common in Western relationships, shaped by dominant cultural norms that "emphasise hierarchy, competition and individualism, as well as those that promote male privilege and female accommodation" (p.338). She

suggests that when individuals do not experience the connection and acceptance they long for, they may react in ways to gain power over the other. Michael's affair therefore could be understood as a way to reclaim power in his relationship, influenced by his socialisation as a man in Western society whereby hegemonic masculinity scripts promote male entitlement and dominance (Fishbane, 2011). It is interesting that revenge did not emerge in other participants' accounts, and one could wonder whether other contexts played a part, such as Michael's previous life experiences.

The impact of gender and power also seemed to emerge in other aspects of this subtheme. Some participants appeared to sacrifice their needs for their partners, including Rachel who described how she prioritised her husband's needs and emotions whilst neglecting her own. A feminist lens may conceptualise this as reflective of traditional gender norms in which women have been socialised to provide the emotional work in relationships, and to prioritise others', particularly men's, needs over their own (Fahs, 2014; Fahs & Gonzalez, 2014; Fahs, Swank & Clevenger, 2015; Gavey, 2012; Sheff, 2005). It seems these gender inequalities contributed to a sense of unhappiness and inequality in Rachel's relationship, influencing how she made sense of her affair as a way of coping with these feelings.

This subtheme thus demonstrates how affairs can be understood as a way of regulating emotions arising from life, relationship and personal responses to perceived power imbalances in their relationships, which were influenced by gender, as well as mononormative and heteronormative scripts.

4.4.1.3.Pursuit of Pleasure

Findings in this study indicated some participants understood their affairs as a way of seeking sexual pleasure and fun, which they did not want to restrict themselves from. This also seemed to be influenced by age; perceived as a marker for how they should be living their lives. Michael appeared to believe youth was about exploration and having fun, which a monogamous relationship restricted, and corresponds to Feldman & Cauffman's (1999) suggestion that younger adults have competing developmental demands; they want to develop intimate relationships whilst also exploring new partners. Sarah's age, on the other hand, seemed to highlight her ageing and mortality, which she understood as encouraging her to embrace life's pleasures. This parallels Fosses (2010) research that found mortality salience in a sample of African American men encouraged them to engage in affairs for pleasure.

This indicates the impact of discourses, which provide expectations for how life should be lived, such as those promoting 'life as pleasurable', and what is appropriate at different stages of life (Richards & Barker, 2013).

Participants also understood the sexual pleasure they pursued as providing them with a sense of validation for attracting the individual they desired, particularly for two of the male participants, which perhaps increased their self-esteem. This would support previous research, which found affairs were validating and increased self-esteem (Allan, 2004; Jeanfreu et al., 2014a; Jeanfreu et al., 2014b), which may be because it signified acceptance from another (Mikulinier et al., 2003).

It could also be understood that the male participants were drawing on masculinity discourses that promote sexual prowess and hypersexuality in men (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Sheff, 2006). A feminist perspective may conceptualise men's emphasis on sex as reflective of their sexual entitlement, which may also be more accessible to them than their vulnerability or emotional needs in their relationships (Williams & Knudson-Martin, 2013). However, this was not the case for Steve, as he emphasised the emotional side of his affair over the sexual side. From this framework, it could be understood that he was more able to access and understand his emotional needs in his relationship. Alternatively, it could be understood that Steve was benefitting from his white, British, middle-class, heterosexual status, whereby his masculinity was not threatened by discussing the emotional sides of his affairs. Indeed, Ehsun appeared to have a lower socioeconomic status than Steve, where masculinity is often prized and based on sexual prowess rather than emotional vulnerability (Fosse, 2010).

It is interesting that, unlike other female participants, Sarah emphasised the physical side of her affairs, which she understood as fulfilling her sexual needs, for fun and for pleasure, whereby she did not experience masturbation as pleasurable as a sexual relationship. Sarah thus seemed connected to her body and sexual desire, which parallels Hayfield and Clarke's (2012) findings that women in their study emphasised their active sexual desire. Furthermore, surveys in Britain have found sexual trends indicate women experiment and have more sex than ten years ago (Mercer et al., 2013). These findings appear more aligned to masculine heterosex discourses constructing physical desire as active, rather than feminine heterosex discourses presenting women as sexually passive (Muise, 2011).

Whilst the other female participants mentioned their desire for their affair partners and reduced sex with their primary partners, they were less forthcoming than Sarah. A feminist perspective could understand this as reflecting a tension between female sexual liberation discourses, which promote female sexual desire, pleasure and sexual freedom, with traditional gender norms of women as passive sexual agents, characterising women engaging in casual sex as 'slags', possibly making it difficult for women to attend to their sexual desire (Fahs, 2014; Farvid & Braun, 2006; Kitzinger & Powell, 1995; Thomas et al., 2017). This may explain why other female participants focused on the emotional sides of their affairs, such as finding love and romance, as they perhaps struggled with the conflicting discourses and how to present themselves. It could also be interpreted that they were drawing on discourses of heterosex and romance, whereby women are positioned as wanting love over sex (Hollway, 1984). Such experiences are also likely to be influenced by other factors, including age and socioeconomic status, which may account for these possible differences between Sarah and the other female participants. These findings highlight the difficulty conceptualising women's sexual desire; it is framed as either sexually passive and relational, or sexually active focusing on only the physical aspects, whereby women can be condemned as 'slags', and ignores other elements of women's experiences (Muise, 2011).

As mononormative and heteronormative discourses promote monogamy and 'the couple' as a priority throughout life, as well as constructing infidelity as wrong (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Moors et al., 2013; Reibstein, 2013; Rubin & Conley, 2013), a social-constructionist lens may conceptualise participants' affairs as a way of resisting these discourses. Indeed, Sarah and Michael discussed their active resistance to these discourses, and is congruent with research that suggests individuals can resist discourses and normative expectations when making sense of their experiences (Allen, 2003; Brown-Bowers et al., 2015).

These findings reinforce the importance of considering different aspects of culture, such as gender, socioeconomic-status and age to understand infidelity, and the gendered nature of romantic heterosexual relationships.

4.4.1.4.A Different Self

Findings in this study highlighted how participants understood their affairs as providing them with space to explore their relationship with themselves. Some participants understood their affairs as a way to reconnect with parts of themselves

from their younger years and single days, before they were in a couple relationship. This highlights the temporal and relational nature of identity, whereby individuals continue to learn about themselves in relation to others, which can change through time (Fuchs, 2007). That participants perceived these parts of themselves had been lost along the way indicates how it may be important therapeutically to think about ways for individuals to keep different parts of themselves alive and finding ways to express these (Barker & Gabb, 2016).

Findings indicated that participants discovered new parts of themselves in their affairs, such as Maya who was able to experience another side of womanhood, outside of being a wife, mother and sister and working in a perceived masculine trade. However, accessing her femininity also seemed to be influenced by her partner's physicality and feeling protected by him. A feminist perspective may understand this as reflective of heteronormative femininity discourses, which position femininity in relation to masculinity, whereby men are the physically strong protection for infantilised and petite women, who wish to be both desired and childlike (Barker, 2013). This appeared to influence Maya's understanding of her affair.

This master theme highlights how affairs in this study were understood as offering individual's a place to fulfil their needs and regulate their emotions when they felt they could not get this from their relationships, as well as a place to pursue pleasure, fun and explore their relationship with themselves. These understandings appeared to be heavily influenced by mononormative and heteronormative discourses of relationship expectations and infidelity, as well as gender, age and culture.

4.4.2.Coming to Life

This theme highlighted how participants understood their affairs as bringing them to life, which they did not seem to be expecting, as they appeared surprised by the intensity and excitement. Participants interpreted this sense of vitality as arising from an intense and all-consuming desire, an intense romantic connection and the excitement of the secret relationship.

4.4.2.1.All-Consuming Desire

Some participants described their instant attraction to their affair partners, and how this continued to build, facilitated by subtle signs and flirtations, and spending time together. They described how this culminated in the experience of an all-consuming desire, which appeared to be a visceral and embodied experience, and which they

understood as irresistible or difficult to control. This aligns with previous research into experiences of those who engaged in sexual infidelity, describing an irresistible sexual desire (Anderson, 2012; Feldman & Cauffman, 1998). These experiences seem to reflect assumptions that physical desire is irresistible and perhaps biological, which is why it was difficult to control. It is interesting that both female and male participants drew on these assumptions and one could wonder whether this reflects wider mononormative discourses that infidelity is wrong, which participants drew on to understand their affairs, possibly intending to reduce their responsibility or potential judgement.

4.4.2.2.A Fantasy World

Some participants described how they found romantic love with their affair partners, which they experienced as transcending their everyday lives, as though they were in a different world where only the two of them existed. They understood this world as not quite grounded in reality, as they experienced an escape from the responsibilities of life, as though they were in a "film" or "fairy-tale", eliciting feelings of euphoria and elation. These experiences appear to relate to discourses on romantic love, and the *honeymoon period* where connection and love are intoxicating (Jacobs Bao & Lyubomirsky, 2013). Participants seem to have drawn on these discourses to understand their experience. Such discourses are often gendered, whereby women are seen to search for and value love and value over sex (Hollway, 1984; Fahs, 2006). However, this theme also related to Steve, as well as Maya and Rachel. This is interesting, as Steve described his sense of emotional death and loss of hope in his relationship, whilst Maya and Rachel were confronted with illness and death in their families. It may be their experience of romantic love, desire and euphoria in their affairs validated their existence, and provided an escape, when they were confronted with the fragility of life and lack of hope or happiness.

4.4.2.3.A Thrilling Secret

The findings highlighted how participants understood the risk and secrecy of their affairs as intensifying their desire and sense of being alive. This seems to parallel literature on secret relationships, which suggests the suspense and uncertainty inherent in secrets may be experienced as thrilling, enhancing attraction. Furthermore, it has been suggested that attempts to maintain secrets can lead to preoccupation and obsession, strengthening the connection between those who share the secret, which can be absorbing (Lane & Wegner, 1994). This may be why stealing moments together could seem exciting for participants, and why Steve's

experience of heightened emotions enhanced his sexual relationship with his primary partner. This is congruent with the literature, which describes the tantalising nature of transgressions and how risking relationship security can intensify physical desire, eliciting a sense that one is alive (VanderVoot & Duck, 2004; Perel, 2007). However, this literature and the findings seem to be based on Western sexual discourses that constructs strong physical desire as synonymous with life and vitality (Stoler, 1995), which may have shaped participants' understanding of feeling alive in their affairs.

Previous literature has argued uncertainty can fuel passion and eroticism (Berscheid, 2010; Perel, 2007), which may also explain why participants experienced the risk and secrecy of the affairs as exciting, as it threatened the security and familiarity of their relationships, creating uncertainty. The affairs therefore seemed to offer a solution to the paradox of the need for stability and adventure (Berscheid, 2010; Perel, 2007), as it provided the risk and excitement, whilst maintaining the stability of their primary relationship. However, this could also be based on assumptions of 'the couple', and how passion and sex are important for all couples and individuals, which does not acknowledge that not all individuals desire sexual relationships.

This theme demonstrates the allure of participants' affairs, which seemed irresistible, particularly in certain contexts such as life events, relationship monotony and frustration, whereby uncertainty, desire, escaping from the monotony of the everyday and the secret relationship elicited a sense of feeling alive. This adds to the literature by specifically highlighting the texture of the positive experience and allure of affairs. It is important to note that whilst the intoxicating feeling of their affair relationships may not be exclusive to infidelity, these participants experienced this alongside their primary relationship.

4.4.3.Negotiating Tensions

The findings highlighted how participants experienced internal conflicts during their affairs, which they understood as arising from their struggle with how to maintain the secrecy of their affairs and societal expectations about monogamy and infidelity, eliciting experiences of shame, guilt, and distress. Consequently, they attempted to reconcile these feelings with various strategies.

4.4.3.1.Struggling with Secrets

Whilst some participants described the thrill of the risk and secrecy of their affairs, they also described how this could be stressful, particularly the tension between wanting to keep it a secret as they did not want to hurt or lose their partners, with the discomfort at what it entailed to conceal their affairs and avoid discovery, such as lying. This is congruent with Anderson's (2010) research with adolescent males who reported anxiety that their sexual infidelity would be exposed. This is also congruent with research into secret relationships, highlighting the stressful nature of maintaining a secret, which can be experienced as a physical burden (Slepian, Masicampo, Toosi & Ambady, 2012). It has been suggested this stress may be the result of multi-tasking involved in maintaining a secret, including thought suppression of the secret, whilst also having to maintain an awareness to monitor the secret. This also includes monitoring non-verbal communication, which can add extra pressure (Lane & Wegner, 1994). Secrets have also been found to negatively affect psychological wellbeing and health, particularly if prolonged (Lehmiller, 2009). This demonstrates how affairs are difficult to sustain, and can create anxiety alongside the positive experiences.

However, this literature is based on positivist assumptions and appears reflective of mononormative discourses that full disclosure is morally correct in relationships and life, whilst withholding information or lying to one's partner are wrong (Anderson, 2012; Reibstein, 2013). That participants feared discovery as they did not want to hurt or lose their partners may be reflective of common beliefs that the discovery of infidelity is catastrophic, which perhaps influenced their decision to keep their affair a secret, as well as their experience of stress because of this. Gabb & Fink (2018) found some individuals in long-term monogamous relationships withheld information from their partners to protect their feelings, which highlights that whilst discourses of morality position secrecy and lying as wrong, they can also be experienced as the best option in some situations.

4.4.3.2.A Conflicted Self

Findings demonstrated inner conflicts participants grappled with, usually in relation to societal and personal expectations and their behaviour. Some participants indicated how their affairs resulted in a self-concept discrepancy and self-criticism, eliciting feelings of guilt and shame. This is congruent with previous research indicating those who engaged in infidelity can feel guilt, shame and anxiety (Abbassi & Alghamdi, 2017).

From a social-constructionist lens, these experiences can also be understood as influenced by mononormative discourses that infidelity is wrong, which seemed to influence participant's apparent fear of negative judgement from others, as well as judgement from themselves, giving rise to self-criticism and experiences of shame, guilt and anxiety for some participants. It is possible participants reacted in a way they believed they were supposed to, according to dominant discourses whereby they both experienced and wanted to show remorse and morality for a socially unacceptable phenomenon, which they perhaps viewed as a redeeming quality for themselves and also in the context of the interview. This seemed to be the case for Sarah who spoke about how she was only showing remorse due to her fear of being negatively perceived by me, and demonstrates how mononormativity permeates individuals' experiences and how they discuss these.

Some participants clearly described how they did not experience guilt or shame in relation to their affairs. Additionally, all participants reported that they could not regret their affairs, as they gained a great deal out of their experience. Indeed, despite the guilt and shame some participants reported, they also continued their affairs, highlighting the strength of their desire to do something for themselves. This is consistent with previous research, which found whilst participants felt guilt, they did not regret the personal fulfilment they gained from their sexual infidelity (Walters & Burger, 2013), and reflects a possible rejection of dominant relationship discourses.

It is interesting that the female participants, except Sarah, seemed to express more self-criticism for their affairs, including descriptions of themselves as weak, selfish and not deserving to live, which did not seem to emerge in male participants' accounts. From a feminist perspective, it could be understood that Sarah actively resisted traditional norms and may have felt less conflicted than the other women, or that she simply did not mention this. As feminist scholars have argued males are socialised to be entitled (Fahs et al., 2015; Sheff, 2005), it may be that male participants felt more entitled or comfortable prioritising their needs during their affairs than women, whilst the female participants may have experienced conflict from not adhering to a socially constructed notion that women ought to prioritise the needs of others over their own. This indicates that, despite discourses of female empowerment and liberation, in reality gender inequalities and power relations still permeate heterosexual relationships, which influence their experiences and sense-making.

Some participants discussed their conflicting needs, such as Ehsun who indicated his need for stability and security in his relationship, as well as his need for sexual variety and excitement. This seems to represent the suggested paradox between familiarity that is needed for individuals to feel secure, and the need for uncertainty for eroticism and passion (Berscheid, 2010; Elliot & Umberson, 2008; Perel, 2007). Furthermore, Sarah described how she wanted to resist particular restrictions on how to live her life, partly due to personal issues, which she appeared to perceive as important to give her a sense of power, but this conflicted with her experience of falling in love with her ex-partner, threatening this. It is interesting she appeared to interpret engaging in a relationship would undermine her desire for an independent lifestyle. This demonstrates the difficulty resisting these discourses in practice, and the possible impact of gender power relations.

4.4.3.3.Reconciling Conflicts

Some participants appeared to use strategies in attempts to reconcile their experience of inner turmoil, especially around expectations of relationships and their experiences, which could elicit feelings of guilt. This parallels Foster & Misra's (2013) research, where participants used strategies in an attempt to reduce their cognitive dissonance following sexual infidelity, including trivialisation.

Whilst some participants attempted to trivialise their infidelity, participants also appeared to use other techniques, such as rationalisation and blaming their partners. Furthermore, Rachel attempted to gain permission from her husband to have a sexual relationship with her affair partner to reconcile her desire and guilt, by organising a threesome and Sarah and Rachel used alcohol to numb the stress and guilt experienced in their affairs. These differences in strategies may be because this study examined individuals who engaged in an affair in a sample outside of undergraduates, which may have given rise to a larger repertoire of strategies. Indeed, rationalisation and placing blame on husbands were also identified as strategies in a sample of married women to reduce guilt and give themselves permission to have an affair (Jeanfreu et al., 2016). However, Jeanfreu et al., (2016) also found participants reported their partner was evil. Although participants in this study made reference to their unhappiness in their primary relationship, most participants acknowledged their affection towards their partners, with the exception of Michael and Rosie. These differences may be due to different research questions; whilst this study examined how participants made sense of their affair, Jeanfreu et al., (2016) examined how participants gave themselves permission to have an affair.

It is interesting Ehsun discussed his perceived duty to give his wife and affair partner orgasms, which may indicate he is drawing on heteronormative scripts that men give females orgasms (Fahs, 2014). It is also interesting that Rachel discussed how she organised a threesome with her husband and affair partner to gain her husband's permission to engage in a sexual relationship with her affair partner, when she had also discussed how her health condition made it painful to have a sexual relationship with her husband. As sexual pain contradicts discourses that promote sex as pleasurable, a feminist perspective may hypothesise that Rachel felt conflicted that her pain perhaps did not constitute normative, healthy heterosex and sought to reconcile this perhaps to herself by indicating she was capable of having normal, even adventurous sex with her affair partner (Fahs & McClelland, 2016).

This theme and the literature highlight how understandings of infidelity are constructed in western society, which influences how it is experienced; discourses construct infidelity as undesirable, influencing individuals' experiences of guilt or perception that this is how they should feel, attempting to find ways to overcome this, ignoring the possibility infidelity can also be experienced positively.

These findings thus demonstrate the multiple dimensions of how participants experienced and made sense of their infidelity. It seems their experiences were heavily influenced by mononormative and heteronormative discourses, as well as gender, socioeconomic status and age. The findings also demonstrate how gender inequalities and power relations appear to be prevalent in heterosexual relationships, which contributed to participants' sense-making of their affairs. This also highlights the gendered nature of relationship and infidelity experiences, which chimes with Allen's (2004) research and highlights differences in socialisation (where men are socialised to be entitled to pleasure and power, and have difficulty accessing their emotional needs and women are socialised to promote others' needs, proving the emotion work). However, the findings also demonstrate there were challenges to these traditional gender norms, such as Steve who focused on the emotional side of his relationship and affair, whilst Sarah focused on the sexual side, which also intersected with age, sexuality and socioeconomic status privileges.

Social-constructionist and feminist frameworks helped to understand how deeply integrated and pervasive such discourses are in individuals' lived experience and sense-making, and how dominant ideals in British society are intertwined in these experiences; difficult to untangle. These findings also show how individuals can

experience distress and confusion if they subscribe to mononormative and heteronormative discourses, but are unable to meet these expectations, as well as how difficult it is to resist these discourses in practice.

4.5.Implications for Counselling Psychology

The findings in this research highlight important implications for training and practice of health care professionals working with individuals or couples presenting with relationship issues, specifically relating to affairs, including Counselling Psychologists. This is particularly important given previous research has highlighted infidelity is a difficult issue to work with in clinical practice (Hall & Fincham, 2006; Vossler & Moller, 2014).

The findings highlight the complexity of affairs; there are multiple factors involved in experiences and sense-making, and understandings of infidelity appear to extend beyond relationship issues suggested in the literature, as they also related to individuals' relationships with themselves. This demonstrates that whilst it is important to consider issues in the primary relationship, it is also important to consider other aspects to infidelity beyond this to help individuals to understand a fuller picture of their experience, helping them move forwards. This could also be useful to teach in training institutions for counsellors, psychotherapists, psychologists, family therapists and professionals working in this field.

The influence of gender, age, and socioeconomic status on participants' accounts and their diverse experiences highlights the importance of not assuming everybody experiences infidelity and monogamous relationships in the same way. Furthermore, the influence of mononormativity and heteronormativity on participant accounts in this research demonstrates the importance for practitioners to reflect on these norms as well as their own assumptions, biases and understandings of romantic relationships and infidelity so they do not unwittingly perpetuate or impose normative practices onto clients. Indeed, Gabb and Singh (2015) cautioned researchers and practitioners against conflating these norms with all relationships, particularly the emphasis on the couple dyad as central to relationships, as this is not the case for relationships in all cultures, or indeed within cultures. Indeed, there are different ways romantic relationships are structured in the UK, and individuals actively resist such norms, including those in non-conventional relationships. This highlights the importance of remaining curious when working with relationships in practice. The

influences of gender on participants' accounts indicates the importance of examining gender power relations and inequalities more closely when working with individuals in heterosexual relationships to understand how these impact on relationships (Williams, 2011; Williams & Knudson-Martin, 2013).

Feminist and multi-cultural approaches to therapeutic practice may help to address these points. Feminist approaches aim to help clients understand the gendered nature of experiences, beliefs and power relations, which may negatively impact upon their lives, and to generate alternative beliefs and understandings which could provide them with more agency (Lyddon, 1998). Similarly, multi-cultural approaches to therapeutic practice examine "how different social and cultural groups construct different ways of organising the world" (Lyddon, 1998, p. 218). This would involve challenging that person dimensions, such as race, are objective categories, instead positing them as a "socially negotiated distinction that takes on different meanings in different historical, economical and political contexts" (Lyddon, 1998 p. 218). When working with minority clients, therefore, therapists could help them to examine how their presenting problems may arise from a conflict between their cultural heritage and the culture they live in, aiming to provide clients with more choices and agency (Lyddon, 1998).

The finding that mononormative and heteronormative expectations often elicited distress, confusion, a sense of failure, anxiety, guilt and shame for participants in their relationships and engaging in infidelity also highlights the importance of unpacking dominant understandings of relationships and infidelity with clients, to untangle their personal feelings from how they should feel or react, to highlight the influence of these on their experiences, rather than perceiving their difficulties to be rooted within the client. This could involve the exploration of clients' own assumptions of relationships and infidelity and where these originate, their own reasons and feelings around monogamy, as well as generating other understandings to highlight there is no one truth or right way to experience or engage in relationships. This may help them to examine what they find important in their relationships, outside of taken-for-granted norms, and could help them to process their pain and distress.

The finding that life events, children, and gender inequalities influenced participants' affairs, and how their affairs helped them to fulfil their needs, regulate their emotions and engage in self-exploration and fun demonstrates how infidelity is not always

catastrophic, and the importance of exploring the impact of life events in therapy. It also demonstrates the importance of helping clients to understand their needs do change according to different contexts, and how they can attend to these and negotiate them in their relationships. This may involve introducing the possibility that relationship rules or boundaries can be re-negotiated according to what works for them and their specific situation. That some participants were able to explore other parts of themselves in their affairs, demonstrates the importance of helping clients to keep these sides alive. This may include making time for the self, separate from their partner(s), which could be another way for individuals to attend to their own needs.

The different experiences of participants' sexual relationships, including the influence of children, illness, pornography, and meanings of sexual frequency demonstrates the diversity of sexual lives and how there are no "natural" or healthy sexual practices. As mononormative and heteronormative discourses promote ideas of frequent sex to affirm romantic relationships, it would be important for therapists to help clients unpack their understandings of what constitutes healthy and satisfying sex and desire, and of acknowledging the influence of normative and cultural expectations and circumstances that impact this.

A further important finding was the communication difficulties participants experienced with their primary partner, which seemed to exacerbate their relationship difficulties and could lead to power struggles. This highlights the need for therapists to help individuals to express their feelings and needs to their partner(s). That some participants did not seem to know how to communicate indicates that focusing on communication skills, such as how to own and express feelings, as well as how to listen and be heard, could be helpful. It seems emotion-focused therapy and narrative approaches may be useful in helping couples communicate with each other, which focus on how to foster understanding and reduce blaming cycles (Fishbane, 2011; Parker et al., 2010).

Finally, it is also worth considering how to challenge normative understandings of relationships and infidelity outside of therapeutic practice, to reach wider audiences. It seems this needs to start at the micro level to develop a new dialogue that challenges the "right" way to engage in relationships, and to help individuals negotiate what works for them, rather than what they are supposed to do. It also highlights the need to foster more understanding and compassionate approaches to infidelity and departures from monogamy, to explore how cultural discourses and

assumptions impact upon personal experiences and meanings of infidelity. As well as disseminating findings from this research to open a new dialogue, this may involve holding workshops or creating leaflets to distribute in different settings, including health care settings, as well as other industries and schools.

4.6.Future Research

Given the diversity of participants' experiences, it would be important for future research to examine experiences of infidelity across different age groups, ethnicity/race and socioeconomic status, offering more holistic understandings of infidelity and relationships. Whilst this study observed gender influences, research specifically examining the role of gender on experiences of infidelity in both heterosexual and non-heterosexual monogamous relationships would be useful.

Whilst the findings in this study may overlap with other definitions of infidelity, they can only be transferred to the phenomenon of affairs in particular. Future research may consider qualitative research on other definitions of infidelity, such as one-night stands or online infidelity.

Given previous research has demonstrated differences in LGBTQ+ communities and sexual practices, as well as the different historical context and specific challenges, such as stigma and hate crimes LGBTQ+ groups still face (Adam, 2006; Mendos, 2019; Richards & Barker, 2013), it would be important for future research to further examine experiences of monogamy and infidelity in non-heterosexual samples, especially due to the tendency for Western research to focus on White, heterosexual, middle-class samples, perpetuating heteronormativity (Sheff & Hammers, 2011) and because monogamy may be experienced differently. This could provide a fuller understanding of infidelity.

Some participants discussed the impact of children on their experiences, including a wish to have more children, which would be a consideration to stop engaging in affairs, and the impact of children on sex life. Alongside previous research, which highlights the impact children have on relationships, particularly sex life (Gabb & Fink, 2018), future research could examine the impact of parenthood on experiences of infidelity in more depth.

Finally, given how pervasive mononormativity and heteronormativity are in heterosexual relationships, and how these are embedded in sense-making of experiences, future research could consider interventions that challenge normative understandings of relationships and infidelity, in training settings and wider society. This may involve the impact of workshops to disseminate and open a new dialogue of the different types of romantic relationships.

4.7.Conclusion

This research has illuminated personal meanings and experiences of men and women who engaged in affairs, as well as the influence of normative relationship expectations on these experiences, congruent with the aims. In so doing, this study has important implications for training, therapeutic practice, research and wider society.

This research highlights there are multiple dimensions to understandings and sense-making of infidelity, specifically affairs, and the complex tapestry and diversity of romantic relationships. It demonstrates how this particular understanding of infidelity can be a positive experience, allowing individuals to have a respite from the demands of life, relationships and represent their yearning for something more, as they found space to focus on themselves. This demonstrates the importance of attending to individual needs for wellbeing, and that infidelity does not always have solely negative consequences.

This research also emphasises how damaging normative expectations for relationships and infidelity are on individuals' wellbeing, which can elicit inner turmoil, anxiety, guilt, shame and confusion, as well as a sense of failure when one cannot live up to these standards. I hope this research highlights the need to approach infidelity with compassion and understanding, rather than judgement, and that it can help the reader to reflect on his or her own assumptions about infidelity and relationships. Ultimately, I hope this research can open a dialogue that challenges normative assumptions that there are "right" ways to engage in romantic relationships in Western society and to challenge the stigma towards alternatives to monogamy, including those who remain single, engage in consensually non-monogamous relationships as well as infidelity. I hope to continue to disseminate these findings so that individuals are more able to seek help for the negative consequences of normative assumptions and the pain that can result from this.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Flier

Department of Psychology
City University of London

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR
RESEARCH IN INFIDELITY

We are looking for volunteers to take part in a study interested in how individuals who have engaged in a romantic relationship outside of their committed relationship make sense of their experience.

Participants must:

- Be over 25 years old
- Be curious about their experience
- Have engaged in a romantic relationship, of at least one month, outside of their primary committed relationship, in which they were cohabiting
- At least one of these relationships has been over for at least 6 months.

You would be asked to participate in a one-to-one interview to share your experience. The interview will be a non-judgemental, confidential space and will take place in a mutually convenient location, or on Skype.

Your participation would involve *one* interview,
which is approximately *1-1.5 hours.*

For more information about this study, or to take part,
please contact:

Katy Lord

Psychology Department

Email: [redacted]

Supervisor:

[redacted]

[redacted]

Ethics Approval Code: PSYETH (P/L) 16/17 60

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through the Department of Psychology Research Ethics Committee, City University London.

If you would like to complain about any aspect of the study, please contact the Secretary to the University's Senate Research Ethics Committee on [redacted] or via email: [redacted]

Appendix B: Screening Questions

- Have you experience of engaging in a romantic relationship outside of your cohabiting relationship (excluding one night stands)?
- Are you over 25 years old?
- Are you still curious about this experience?
- Are you still involved in either of these relationships?
- If not, how long have they been over for?
- Were you in an open relationship at the time?

Appendix C: Information Sheet

Title of study *How individuals who have been unfaithful in their committed relationship make sense of their experience*

We would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether you would like to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of individuals who have engaged in a romantic relationship outside of their primary committed relationship and how they make sense of this. The study is for a Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology (DPsych) and will last for approximately two years. The aim of the study is to gain a deeper understanding of infidelity to potentially inform interventions for individuals dealing with issues related to infidelity in therapy.

Why have I been invited?

You have been chosen as you are over 25 years old, have previously engaged in a romantic relationship outside of your agreed exclusive primary relationship, in which you were cohabiting (excluding one-night stands), and it has been at least six months or more since the one of these relationships has ended. Approximately eight-twelve other participants will take part in this research, including males and females.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in this study is voluntary and you can choose not to participate in part or all of the project. You have the right to withdraw from the project, until the stage of analysis in December 2017, without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way. You do not have to answer any question that you do not feel comfortable with, or which feel too personal or intrusive.

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason until December 2017.

What will happen if I take part?

- *The interview will take approximately 1-1.5 hours*
- *The research study will last approximately two years*

- *We can initially meet for a discussion about the research if requested, and again to go through the interview.*
- *You will be asked to take part in an interview, in which I will ask some questions relating to your experience. You do not have to answer anything that you do not feel comfortable with. Afterwards, you will be asked to complete a questionnaire collecting background information, such as your name, age, ethnicity, occupation and relationship status.*
- *The research will take place in a private room, either in City University, or a booked room in a library or leisure centre in London and the surrounding areas, or on Video Skype.*
- *If the interview takes place on Video Skype, it will be in a private room and nobody else would be able to overhear the conversation to ensure confidentiality. In addition, Skype uses Advanced Standard Encryption Software to prevent online eavesdropping by malicious users. However, although unlikely, Skype is able to monitor the conversation and access user accounts. The internet connection will be checked beforehand, but if this fails or the quality is poor, we would proceed with Audio Skype or on the telephone. You would be asked to sign the consent form and demographic questionnaire electronically over my university email. This email address is secure, although the university has the right to monitor emails if they have reason to believe users are misusing the email address, such as breaches of university confidentiality, and sending inappropriate emails of harassment, in line with their Email Acceptable Use Policy. However, it is unlikely this will happen.*
- *An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is being used for this study, which involves the researcher interpreting how participants make sense of their experiences.*

What do I have to do?

- Agree to be interviewed about and share your experiences of engaging in a romantic relationship outside of your committed relationship. The interview will take about 1 – 1.5 hours.
- Allow your interview to be audio taped.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

Potential disadvantages and risks of taking part are that speaking about your experiences could potentially bring up painful memories or emotional distress. For this reason, it is asked that you only speak about what you find comfortable and tell the researcher if you become upset during any stage of the study. In the event that you do become upset during the interview, you will have the option of terminating the interview or reconvening at a later date and discussing any issues with the researcher.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There are no direct benefits from taking part in the study, other than the opportunity to share your experience in a safe and confidential space. Indirect benefits of participation are that you will help provide new information on infidelity, which can be used for education and treatment purposes. This will potentially help other couples or individuals in therapy work through any issues related to infidelity.

What will happen when the research study stops?

All data will be audio recorded and transcribed and stored on a password-protected computer. The data will be anonymised; pseudonyms will be used and any identifying information will be altered before the data is analysed. Once the research has been completed, any hard copy data needs to be kept for five years following publication, in order to adhere to the British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

- *Only the researcher will have access to the data before it is anonymised.*
- *All audio files will be stored on a password-protected computer until the study is completed. After this all audio files will be deleted five years after publication.*
- *There will be no future use of personal information.*
- *All data will be confidential, unless you report any violence, abuse, self-inflicted harm, harm to others or criminal activity, which will need to be reported.*

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The research is for a Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology dissertation and will be disseminated in City University Library, accessible to students. The results may also be published in the future, or presented at a Conference, which will be available to the general public. Anonymity of the data will be maintained throughout the research process, including publication. If you would like to receive a copy of the publication, or a summary of the results, you are able to contact me, or my supervisor, by email at any time.

What will happen if I don't want to carry on with the study?

If you don't want to carry on with the study, you are free to leave without explanation or penalty at any time during the study. You may request to withdraw your data any time up until December 2017, by emailing the researcher.

What if there is a problem?

If you have any problems, concerns or questions about this study, you should ask to speak to a member of the research team. If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally, you can do this through the University complaints procedure. To complain about the study, you need to phone [redacted]. You can then ask to speak to the Secretary to Senate

Research Ethics Committee and inform them that the name of the project is: How individuals who engage in infidelity make sense of their experience.

You could also write to the Secretary at:

[redacted]

Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee
Research Office, E214
City University London
Northampton Square
London
EC1V 0HB

[redacted]

City University London holds insurance policies which apply to this study. If you feel you have been harmed or injured by taking part in this study you may be eligible to claim compensation. This does not affect your legal rights to seek compensation. If you are harmed due to someone's negligence, then you may have grounds for legal action.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been approved by City University London Psychology Department Research Ethics Committee.

Further information and contact details

Researcher:
Katy Lord

[redacted]

Supervisor:

[redacted]

Ethics Approval Code: PSYETH (P/L) 16/17 60

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Appendix D: Ethics Amendment Acceptance for Video Skype Interviews

Psychology Department Research Ethics Committee

Project Amendments/Modifications
Request for Extension

For use in the case of all research previously approved by City University London Psychology Department Research Ethics Committee.

Was the original application reviewed by light touch?
If yes, please send this form to the individual who reviewed the original application. Once they have approved the amendment and signed the form, it should be emailed to psychology.ethics@city.ac.uk

Was the original application reviewed at a full committee meeting?
If yes, please email this form to psychology.ethics@city.ac.uk. It will be reviewed by the committee chair.

Note that you only have to respond to the sections relevant to you.

Details of Principal Investigator and Study

Name	Katy Lord
Email	[redacted]
Title of study	How individuals who have been unfaithful in a committed relationship make sense of their experience
REC reference number	PSYETH (P/L) 16/17 60

Study Duration

Start Date	September 2016
End Date	September 2018

Project Amendments / Modifications

Type of modification/s (tick as appropriate)

Research procedure/protocol (including research instruments)	x
Participation group	
Information Sheet/s	
Consent form/s	
Other recruitment documents	
Sponsorship/collaborations	
Principal investigator/supervisor	
Extension to approval needed (extensions are given for one year)	
Other	

Details of modification (give details of each of the amendments requested, state where the changes have been made and attach all amended and new documentation)

I would like to extend my data collection to include Video Skype interviews. The research advert will be amended to include the option of Skype, and the information sheet and consent form will be amended to specify that confidentiality will be ensured. I will emphasise that nobody will be listening to the conversation in my location and that Skype uses Advanced Standard Encryption Software to prevent online eavesdropping by malicious users, and that, although unlikely, Skype is able to monitor the conversation and access user accounts.

Participants will be advised that the interview will be on Video Skype, but if the internet is poor quality then the interview would continue via Audio Skype or telephone. However, the quality of the internet connection will be checked in advance.

All participants would sign their consent forms and demographic questionnaire electronically, and the debrief form would be sent to them via my university email. Participants would be told that this email address is secure, although the university has the right to monitor emails if they have reason to believe users are misusing the email address, such as breaches of university confidentiality, and sending inappropriate emails of harassment, in line with their Email Acceptable Use Policy. However, it is unlikely this will happen.

Justify why the amendment/extension is needed (including the period of extension being requested)

I have had some responses to my research advert from individuals living outside of London and would like to offer the option of conducting the interview over Skype. In addition, in the case of interviewing strangers, Skype is a good option to ensure safety.

Period of extension requested

Other information (provide any other information which you believe should be taken into account during ethical review of the proposed changes)

Change in the study team

Staff member

Title, Name & Staff Number	*Post*	*Dept & School*	*Phone*	*Email*	*Date and type of CRB disclosure**

Student

Name & Student Number	*Course / Year*	*Dept & School*	*Date and type of CRB disclosure**

External co-investigator/s

Title & Name	*Post*	*Institution*	*Phone*	*Email*	*Date and type of CRB disclosure**

Declaration (to be signed by the Principal Investigator)

- I certify that to the best of my knowledge the information given above, together with any accompanying information, is complete and correct and I take full responsibility for it.

Principal Investigator(s) (student and supervisor if student project)	K. Lord [redacted]	
Date	21/07/2017	

Reviewer signature To be completed upon FINAL approval of the amendment.		
	Signature (Please type name)	**Date**
Reviewer	[redacted]	**02.08.2017**

Appendix E: Demographic Questions

Demographic Questionnaire

Please complete the following questions. Your personal information and answers to these questions will be kept confidential.

Name:…….

Age:……..

Ethnicity……

Occupation:……..

Relationship Status:……..

Appendix F: Interview Schedule

1. What are your thoughts on infidelity?
Prompts: What does infidelity mean to you?
What words would you choose to describe it?

2. Would you like to share your experience of it?

3. Could you describe the dynamic of your relationship with your primary partner?
Prompts: What was your relationship like?
At what point in your relationship did the affair start?
How would you describe the reason that you looked for another relationship?

4. Can you tell me your thoughts and feelings of your experience at the time?

5. Can you tell me about the person you had the romantic relationship with?
Prompts: Can you tell me about the relationship, how it started, how long it lasted.

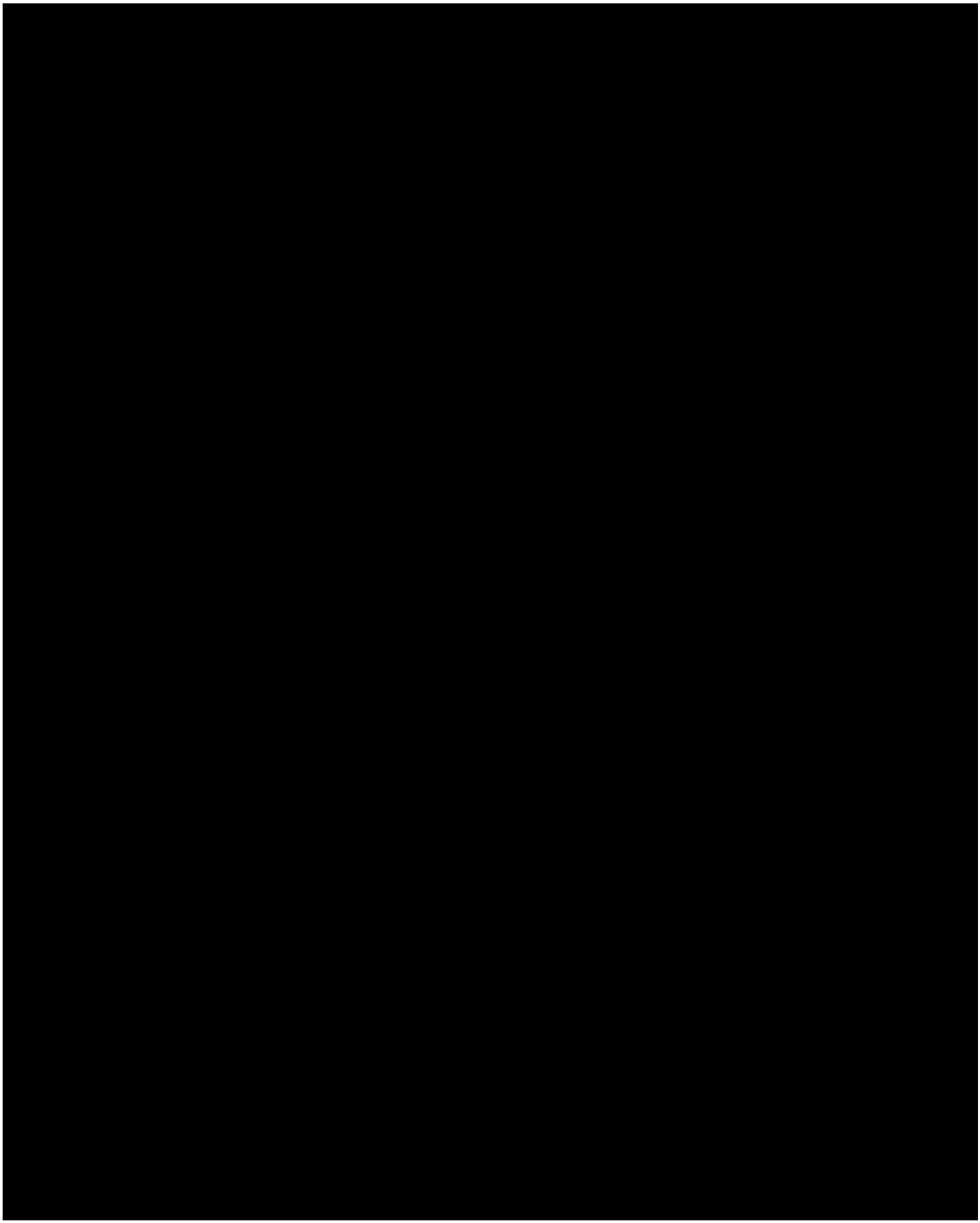
6. Is there anything you would like to say about your family growing up?

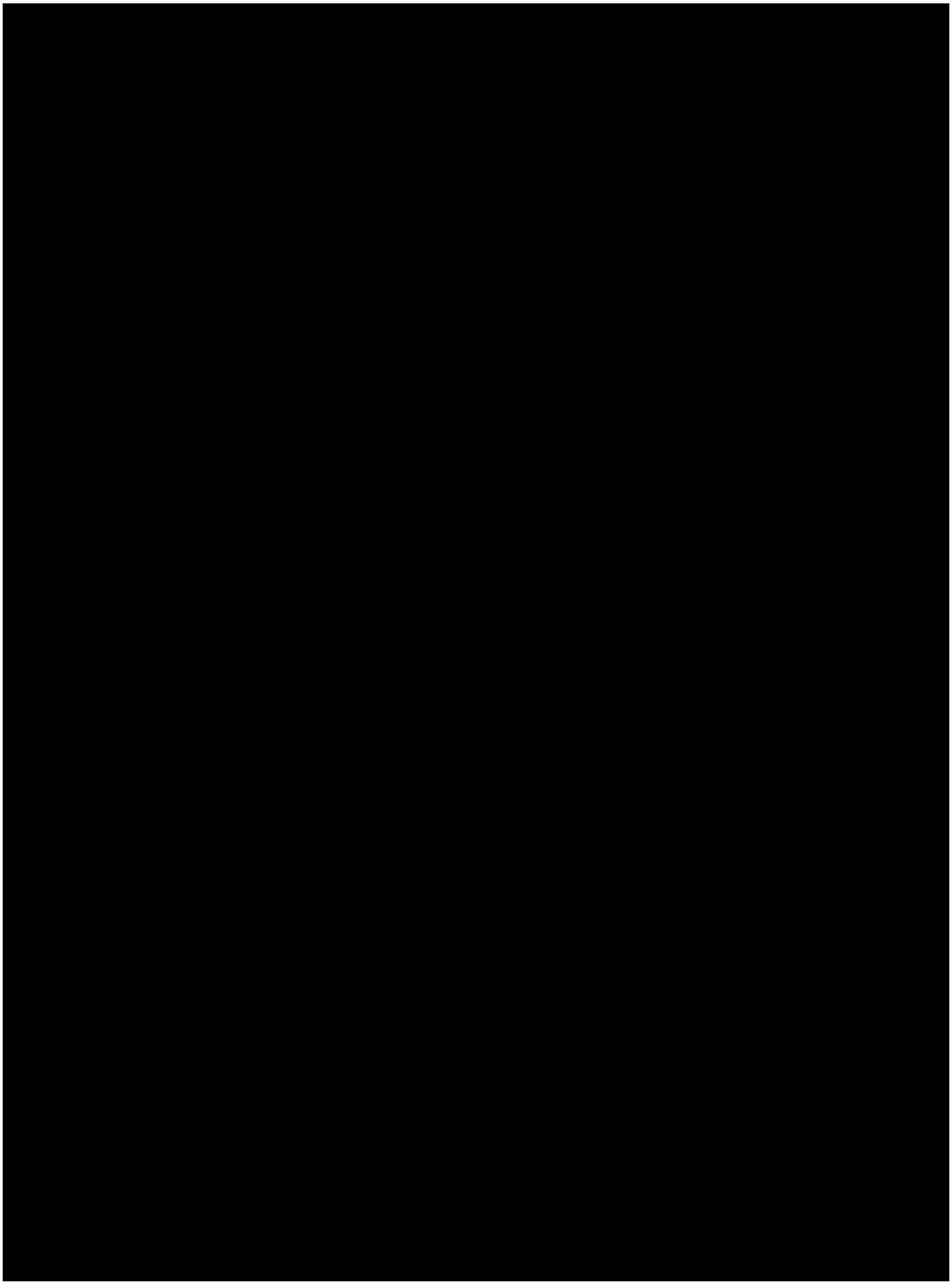
7. How do you see this emotional experience today?
Prompts: How does it affect you now? What did you learn about yourself?

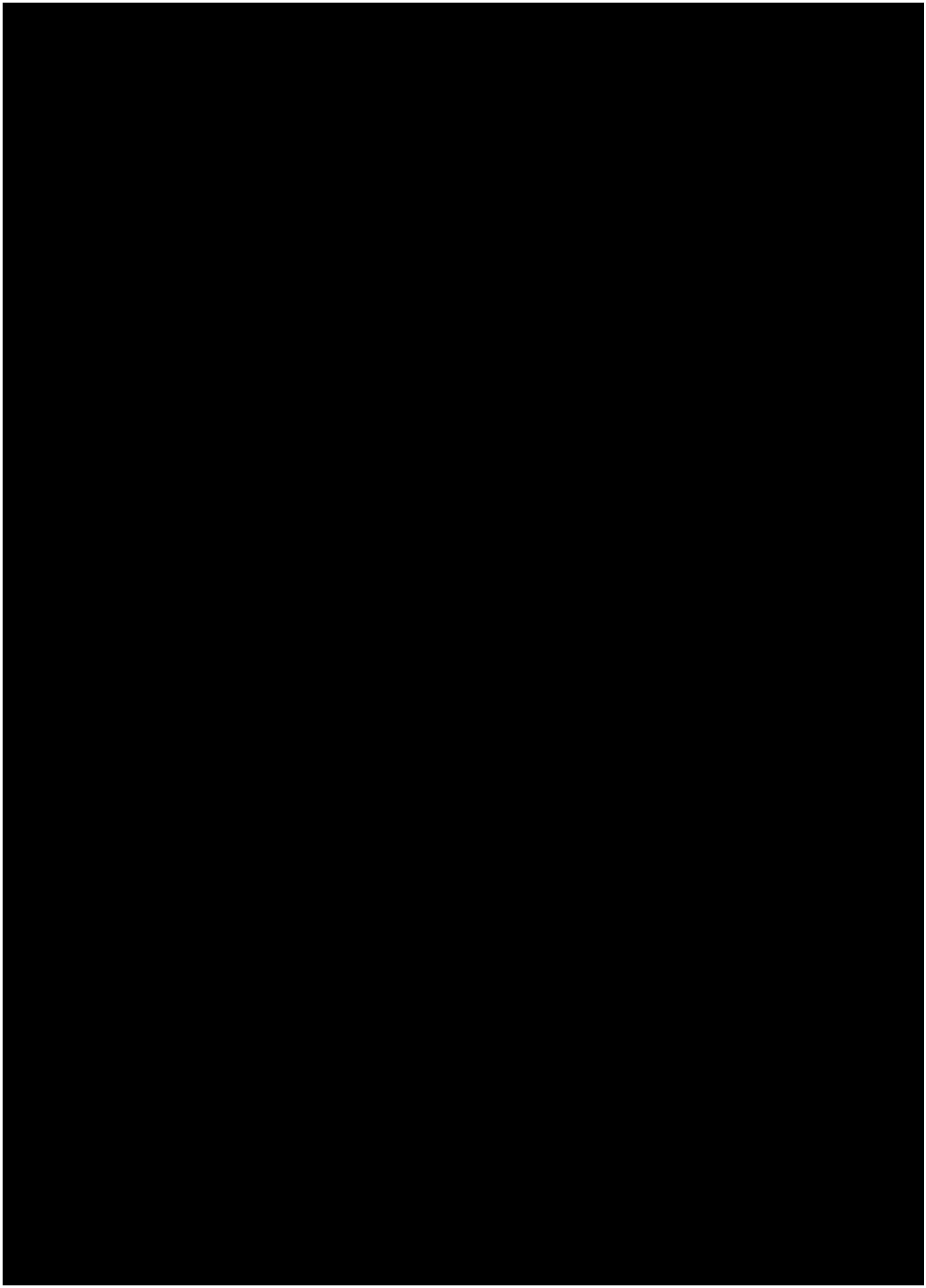
8. What does your experience mean to you now?

9. Is there anything you would like to add before I end the interview?

Appendix G: Extracts from Research Journal







A**ppendix H: Informed Consent Form**

Title of Study: *How individuals who have been unfaithful in their committed relationship make sense of their experience*

Ethics approval code: PSYETH (P/L) 16/17 60

Please initial box

1.	I agree to take part in the above City University London research project. I have had the project explained to me, and I have read the participant information sheet, which I may keep for my records. I understand this will involve: • being interviewed by the researcher • allowing the interview to be videotaped/audiotaped • providing some background information, including my name, age, ethnicity, occupation, and relationship status. If the interview takes place on Video Skype, I understand: • The interview will take place in a private room and nobody else will be able to overhear the conversation to ensure confidentiality. • If the internet connection fails or is of poor quality, we would proceed with Audio Skype or on the telephone. • You would be asked to sign this consent form and demographic questionnaire electronically over my university email address. This email address is secure, although the university has the right to monitor emails if they have reason to believe users are misusing the email address, such as breaches of university confidentiality, and sending inappropriate emails of harassment, in line with their Email Acceptable User Policy. However, it is unlikely this will happen.	
2.	This information will be held and processed for the following purpose(s): to answer the research question 'How do individuals who have been unfaithful in a committed relationship make sense of their experience? It is anticipated that this will provide deeper insights into the phenomenon of infidelity, which can inform therapeutic techniques when working with such issues. I understand that any information I provide is confidential, and that no information that could lead to the identification of any individual will be disclosed in any reports on the project, or to any other party. No identifiable personal data will be published. The identifiable data will not be shared with any other organisation. If the interview takes place on Skype, confidentiality will be ensured by the Advanced Standard Encryption Software used by Skype to prevent online eavesdropping by malicious users. However, although unlikely, Skype is able to monitor the conversation and access user accounts.	

3.	I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I can choose not to participate in part or all of the project, and that I can withdraw up to the point of analysis in December 2017 without being penalized or disadvantaged in any way.	
4.	I agree to City University London recording and processing this information about me. I understand that this information will be used only for the purpose(s) set out in this statement and my consent is conditional on the University complying with its duties and obligations under the Data Protection Act 1998.	
5.	I agree to take part in the above study.	

_____ _____ _____

Name of Participant Signature Date

_____ _____ _____

Name of Researcher Signature Date

When completed, 1 copy for participant; 1 copy for researcher file.

Note to researcher: to ensure anonymity, consent forms should NOT include participant numbers and should be stored separately

Appendix I: Debrief Form

How individuals who have been unfaithful in committed relationships make sense of their experience

DEBRIEF INFORMATION

Thank you for taking part in this study. Now that it's finished we'd like to tell you a bit more about it.

The research aimed to investigate what infidelity means to individuals who have engaged in a romantic relationship outside of their committed relationship. The interview was aimed at exploring this with you. This research will potentially provide more insights into the phenomenon of infidelity, which can inform therapeutic interventions of individuals or couples seeking treatment for issues related to infidelity.

There are not expected to be any adverse effects as a result of taking part in this study, but if you do experience negative effects of any kind, or any concerns arising from the interview, you may wish to contact the following organisations:

Samaritans
116 123 (free phone)
Email: jo@samaritans.org
Relate
0300 100 1234
https://www.relate.org.uk

We hope you found the study interesting. If you have any other questions please do not hesitate to contact us at the following:

Katy Lord
[redacted]

Supervisor:
[redacted]

Ethics approval code: **PSYETH (P/L) 16/17 60**

Appendix J: Initial Comments

Initial Thoughts
Theme of looking after others in relationships, possibly steming from upbringing in which he may unconsciously have looked after his mother's feelings and so all his life he has done things for others. Needing to do something for him, needing a relationship where someone else looked after him, adored him, like this lady seemed to do when she wanted him to leave his partner.

Looking for someone to love him, to fill a gap. Looking for a home – never felt at home/or loved?

Dominant idea of monogamy plays into his cognitive dissonance – affair didn't feel like that for him. If this was seen as a choice rather than the 'done thing' would he feel so conflicted? Feels he has to justify it by saying he didn't make those promises, just a commitment which is different. Maybe if more people knew monogamy was a choice then they could think about this more and it may be less frowned upon if people did stray. Indeed most people aren't regretful. In therapy people are being encouraged to be more 'selfish' to avoid resentment, but in society people are criticised for this. Needs are important, but so is respect. Affairs often to satisfy needs.

R: Well thanks very much Michael.

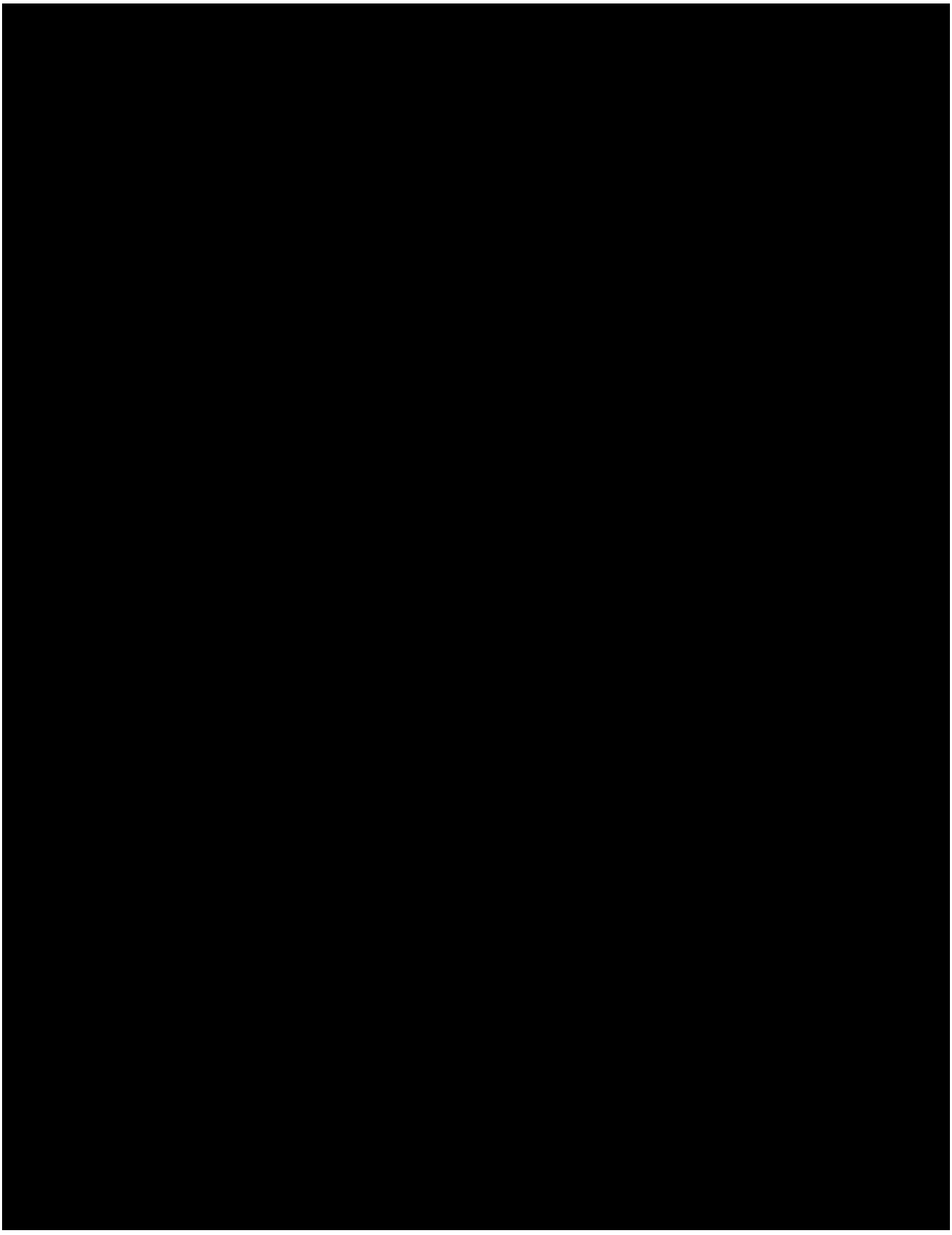
M: No worries

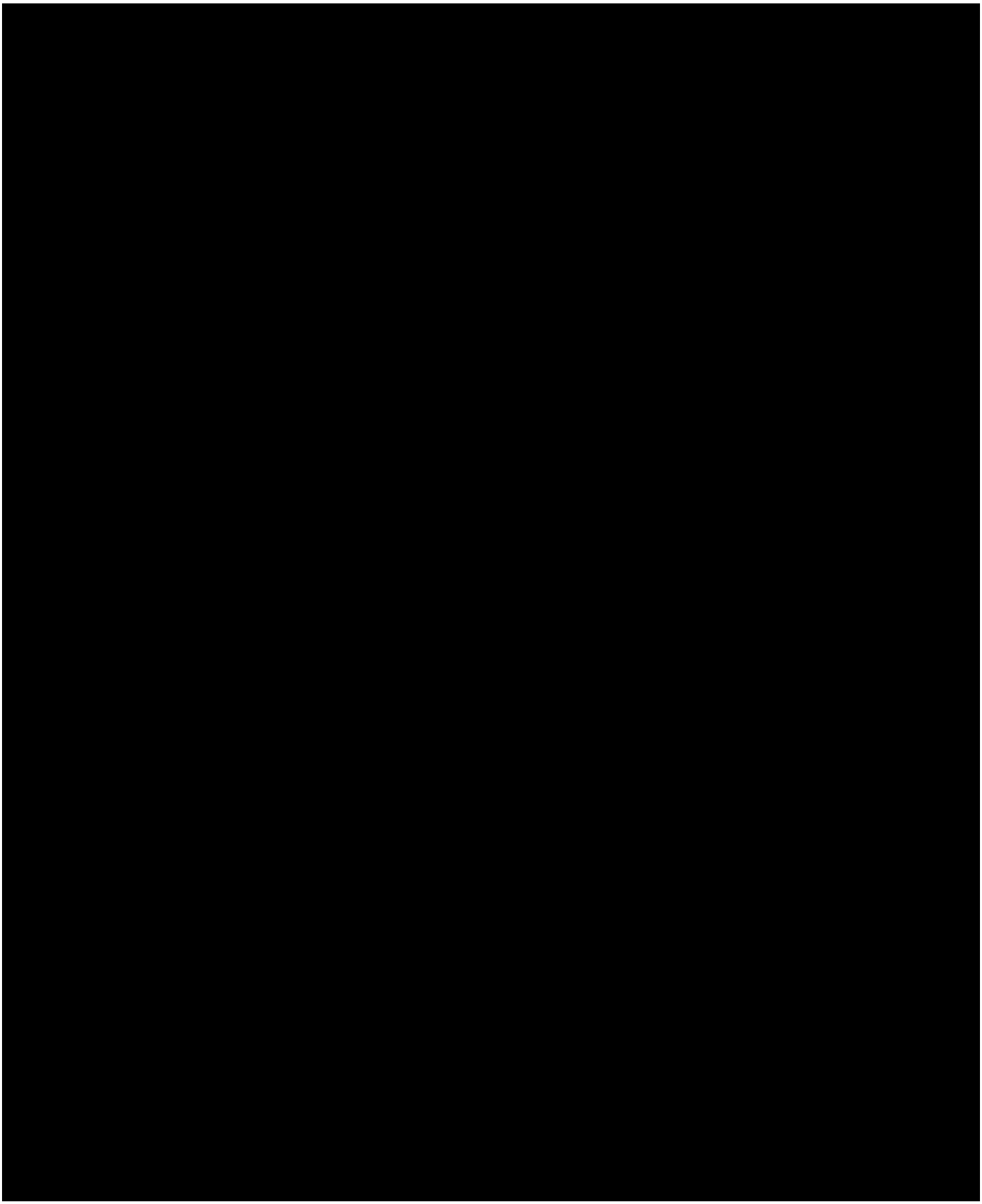
End of interview

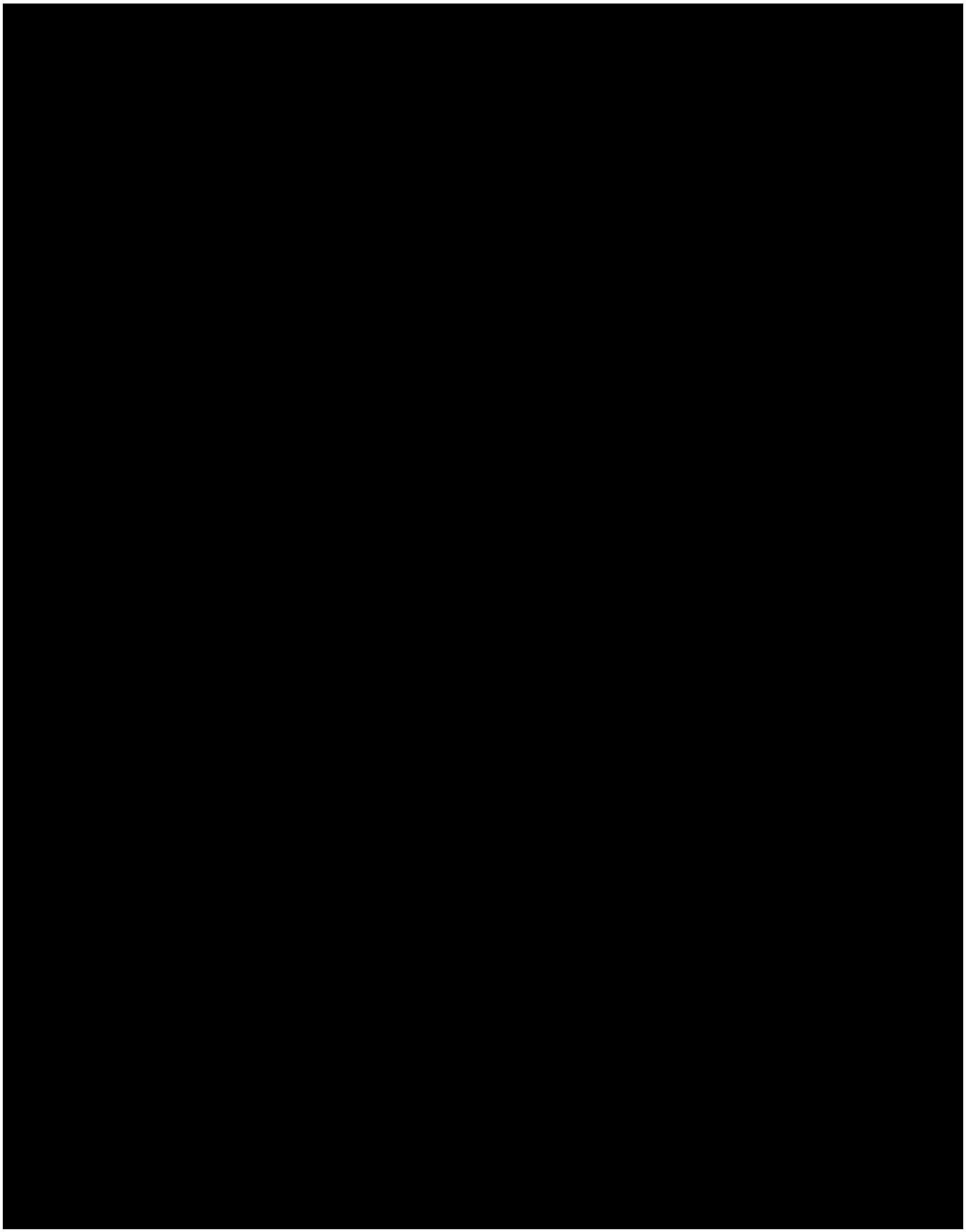
Initial comments

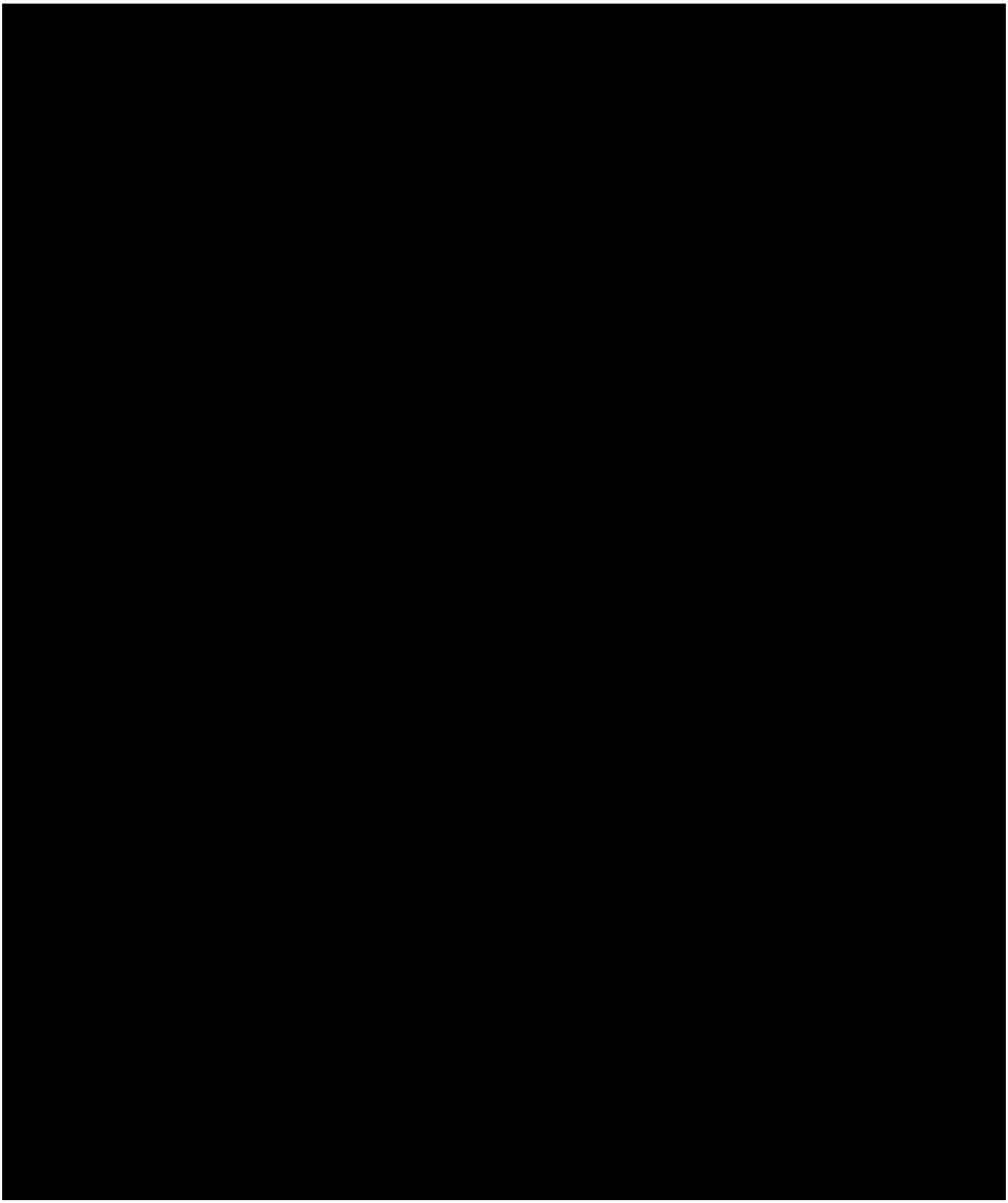
- Underlying hurt that he's not good enough for partner, despite what he provides. Underappreciated, not acknowledged
- - Conflict with monogamy and not wanting to miss out on opportunities
- difficulty with communication theme

Appendix K: Example of Initial Coding (Right) and Emergent Themes (Left)









Appendix L: Example of Emergent Themes and Supporting Extracts

Emergent Theme	Quotation	Location
Sharing life but not connection Justifying affair – unhappy?	And er my emotions relating to my partner are very tied up with our shared life…but…I've got to a stage where I feel so unhappy about the way I feel emotionally with this person	Steve, page 3, line
A false love/feeling unseen/inauthentic	She doesn't love the person who I perceive as being the true me	Steve, page 3, line 143
Feeling unloved Justifying affair?	I became pretty convinced that that's because she didn't love me	Steve, page 3, line 138
Feeling rejected, losing something Showing how bad it is to justify?	At that point, basically whatever romantic feelings there died because I felt totally rejected	Steve, page 4, line 151
Emotional needs not met – needing love and reassurance not met	I said to her…'you have to tell me that you love me' and she was like unable to do that	Steve, page 4, line 148
Separates practical and romantic side of relationship Practical relationship	So I can't sign my texts off with a kiss…we have a very good practical relationship	Steve, page 4, line 156-162
Confusion about tension Practical relationship	Things have gone to quite a low point…At the same time, we have a good practical relationship still…I don't understand it	Steve, page 4, line 158…163
Sense of loneliness	I often felt very lonely at home	Steve, page 4, line 179
Disconnect between expectation and experience	So I don't feel the person I'm supposed to be sharing my life with is the person I can share my life with	Steve, page 4, line 180

Drawing on hetero norms of how relationships should be – sharing a life		
Lacking authenticity	I can't share certain aspects of myself which feel truer to me	Steve, page 4, line 181
Something building Interesting she didn't class it as affair before sex sealed it	So we were out and other people went home. And then I suppose it just kind of did happen, but I think it did feel like it had been building up to something at that point as well, like I'd probably say like over, like-yeah maybe January/February of that year onwards.	Rosie, page 15, line 200
Work drinks and alone opportunity for affair to start	So we were out and other people went home.	Rosie, page 15, line 200
Flirtation and tension building Emotional and non-sexual behaviours not classed as affair	But I suppose we'd always had that quite like flirtatious friendship before that point as well.	Rosie, page 16, line 206
Opportunity for affair arose	we were ready to go home, we were like oh we'll go out for a few drinks, obviously got really really drunk, erm. And then I went back to his	Rosie, page 16, line 208
Alcohol fuelled affair	we were ready to go home, we were like oh we'll go out for a few drinks, obviously got really really drunk, erm. And then I went back to his	Rosie, page 16, line 208
Feeling ignored/neglected from partner Partner gave her space for affair – blaming? Justifying?	But I suppose like at the start, like Lewis didn't even like text me that night	Rosie, page 16, line 209

Appendix M: Example of Superordinate Themes and Supporting Extracts

Superordinate Theme: A Way of Coping (Seeking revenge, seeking an escape)

Subtheme: Seeking revenge/power

Emergent Theme	Extract	Location
Affairs as revenge and punishment/power Influenced by masculinity scripts that men should be dominant?	There are times where she has just laid it on thick to me and I've just been like 'oh right, cool' and then yeah I've just gone to see someone else and then I sit back and think 'ohh I've cheated on her, I feel better now'	Michael, page 37, line 687
Power of a secret – getting revenge	if something's going on or an argument, it's my little secret	Michael, page 32, line 600
Affairs not in isolation	I mean I wouldn't just go out my way and just think 'oh you know what, I'm gonna have a good time tonight'	Michael, page 36, line 669

Subtheme: Seeking an escape/release/outlet

Emergent Theme	Extract	Location
Affair as an escape/release Partner too much Justifying affair with relationship unhappiness. Blaming partner/reducing his responsibility. Trying to come off in a better	yeah I think that's ultimately pushed me into it because I wouldn't—I was happy in the start. I mean when I get all this it becomes stress and I'll be like 'right I'm going out just for a release or just, you know, get away from everything'. And then that's what'll end up happening and then I'll end up doing something to chill out	Michael, page 5, line 91

light?		
Need for release/escape	So when someone else says 'oh do you wanna do that', I'm like 'yeah let's go and do that!' Or, or, then I can escape from the day or whatever, still have my fun…But I think being in a committed relationship is tiring at the moment	Michael, page 18, line 337
Affairs an outlet for difficulties	I was just trying to get it out of my system.	Michael, page 29, line 529
For revenge/release	Erm it's a little release, a little—if something's going on or an argument, it's my little secret	Michael, page 32, line 599
Affair a way of coping	But it is what it is, so I didn't have a choice. But I did have a choice, but for me I think I had to do it, otherwise I would have just been stewing over it […]Yeah, I did it cause I thought it's the only way I'm gonna get over this.	Michael, page 38, line 704
Affairs for a reason	No it happened for a reason. No it was, er, it happened for a reason	Michael, page 42, line 774
Affairs way of coping with relationship/an outlet	Just being bored of the way I was treated in the relationship	Michael, page 42, line 778
Need to escape and meet needs	Too much drama, too much drama for me. That's why I can just switch off and do my own thing, it just works.	Michael, page 36, line 661
Need to escape Had enough	And yeah I think ultimately it drove me to just—more than that like—occasionally yeah she'll, she'll accuse me of so much, I'll turn my phone off, go clubbing for two, three days you know on a bender and then it'll just go back in the same circle 'what did you do, who were you with, where've you been?' I said to her 'you know what, no	Michael, page 56, line 1040

	more’	

Superordinate Theme: Negotiating Tensions (*A Conflicted Self, Attempts to Reconcile Tension)*

Subtheme: A Conflicted Self

Reality sunk in immediately Kiss made affair and emotional affair real – turned it from fantasy to reality / kiss took it across the line Mononormativity that infidelity wrong influenced experience	Erm and I remember kissing him and then I immediately burst into tears. Because like what I’d done kind of hit me. You know, what had actually just happened. Erm and what was kind of going on hit me. And I just couldn’t stop crying and I was just sat on the floor in absolute tears	Rachel, page 10, line 186
Confused about what to do Shock of a kiss/ crossing the line	and he was obviously really shocked as well and we were trying to kind of figure out what to do.	Rachel, page 11, line 192
Conflicting emotions	I remember every time that we slept together for a while, Chris and I, I would cry, erm, afterwards cause I just couldn’t handle it. Erm but our relationship was also very very passionate and strong right from the start	Rachel, page 22, line 405
Affair awful experience	we talk about how awful it was to have an affair	Rachel, page 30, line 545
Conflicted feelings – love and passion tainted by guilt, shame and sadness	cause on the one hand it was great because it was incredibly passionate and we loved each other and loved	Rachel, page 30, line 545

Guilt showing good person – mononormative scripts infidelity is 'wrong'?	spending time together, but it was never—you could never fully enjoy it because it was always tainted with the shame and the embarrassment and the guilt and sadness of knowing that I was supposed to be with somebody else and that we were doing it behind his back.	
Negative feelings/anxiety resurfaced rapidly after moment passed Shame always set in – can't talk about positives and excitement for too long or will be judged as horrible person? Needs to balance this with the terrible feelings she experienced to show good person and elicit sympathy?	but that would all come back immediately after we'd done something like if we'd kissed or we'd gone somewhere or we'd hung out together […] It was like it would go away for a really short period of time and I'd get released and then it would come back again.	Rachel, page 59, line 1088
Tainted love Tension between excitement and love with guilt and shame	And I remember that I told him that I loved him before I split up with Jon so I was still with Jon. Erm which…which was again so horrible at the same time as being so wonderful	Rachel, page 60, line 1111
Conflict between special moment of love and consequences	Like I loved this person and I wanted to tell them, but how awful that I was in love with someone else when I was still in my marriage, when I was still in my relationship.	Rachel, page 60, line 1112
Willing to reduce intensity to avoid heartbreak, shame and guilt	But I would rather it had been that way cause then you wouldn't have had the guilt, the shame, the crying, the heartbreak all with it, you know?	Rachel, page 61, line 1139

Affair a double-edged sword Drug-like affair – highs and come downs	So it was such a double-edged sword, cause the minute I get real pleasure, a real high, you're gonna come crashing down again.	Rachel, page 62, line 1144
Irresistible connection interrupted by reality All consuming connection Tension of affair between desire and shame	But we literally couldn't keep away from each other because there was that pull and that passion and that connection on every level and then would always be followed by sadness and anger and guilt and shame and heartbreak and, you know, having these awful conversations about will we, won't we?	Rachel, page 62, line 1146
2 worlds – contrast between high and guilt and shame Powerless to stop affair and connection – too strong. Justifying? Liveliness to affair – excitement	But we literally couldn't keep away from each other because there was that pull and that passion and that connection on every level and then would always be followed by sadness and anger and guilt and shame and heartbreak and, you know, having these awful conversations about will we, won't we?	Rachel, page 62, line 1146
Relationship stop and start Negotiating affair and secrecy Passion overrode boundaries Attempts to put in boundaries/stop affair	Chris would come round again and then the next day 'I want to see you, are you coming around and I can't not come round cause Jon's gonna get suspicious, Jon's invited me round tomorrow, like okay fine, we'll just not see each other' and then we'd pass each other in the hallway and that would be it, you know. It would kick off again, yeah.	Rachel, page 62, line 1149
Reality set in/ reality check	We were like 'oh my god, that's lovely but I'm actually married to	Rachel, page 67, line 1248

	someone else' [laughs]	
Stolen moments Affair a high High disrupted by reality	It would be—I think it would be stuff like that, but also just the high, you know if we'd kissed or whatever and that kind of after moment of 'well I've got to go home now' or somebody came in.	Rachel, page 68, line 1262
Reality check when time interrupted	Or, you know there would always need to be a kind of ending to the night or to the moment and erm, that's usually what brought it back down to earth I think.	Rachel, page 68, line 1266
Inner turmoil between love and guilt	It's just sad that unfortunately, you know, given that those feelings were also bound up with feelings of love and lust and all the rest of it, that that then would make me feel bad as well.	Rachel, page 74, line 1375
Confusion how affairs can be sustained Separating self as good person for not being able to sustain relationship – not as bad as those who can. Hetero and mono norms influencing account	Like I don't understand how anybody could live in that situation for a moment longer than I did. I don't honestly understand how people can sustain that, unless they're like completely emotionally partition themselves. But I don't know how people do that. I knew that it like had to stop, either way something had to give.	Rachel, page 74, line 1377
Needed to escape affair	Erm and then it was horrific. And, and then I just couldn't carry on with it.	Rachel, page 74, line 1384
Reality came crashing in/ruined the mood Mononormative discourses infidelity is 'wrong' influenced	it was great for a few seconds and then immediately the reality of what we were doing kicked in and I just burst into tears	Rachel, pge 78, line 1448

experience		
Affair and feelings hardest conflicts Never wants to go through that again – showing how bad it was, learnt from it – eliciting sympathy/showing good person	It's honestly one of the hardest things I think and it's not something that I would ever want to put myself in the position of feeling again	Rachel, page 78, line 1459
Affair awful experience	You know I wouldn't wish it upon anybody. Erm but, yeah it just would not do that to myself again actually, put myself in that position again	Rachel, page 79, line 1464

Category of people who have affairs Influenced by mononormative scripts 'certain types of people' engage in infidelity	I almost thought to myself that I would never be somebody who has an affair	Rachel, page 24, line 450
Identity and self-esteem crisis Eliciting sympathy? Highlighting the negatives, how bad it got. Influenced by mononormative and societal scripts about infidelity as wrong Contrast between own disapproval and behaviour – expectation vs experience/ self-concept discrepancy	And when you find that you are that person, it's such a kind of awful identity shift, erm and you question everything […] I had to go into counselling, erm because I felt I was being so self-critical and just evil to myself. Like the things I'd call myself, the things I'd say about myself, you know. And I felt like 'you're one of those people now' do you know what I mean 'you're one of them, those people that have affairs and cheat and you're a horrible person and you don't deserve to be alive' and and things like that.	Rachel, page 25, line 455

Fear of being judged Discomfort belonging to category	my kind of fears were what other people would think of me. And I thought 'that's it' you know other people are going to think I'm tainted, 'like oh she's had an affair, she's one of those people'	Rachel, page 26, line 477
Hid from self/separating marriage issues and affair Wanted to separate affair and marriage – to feel better about self	I thought, for a long time I thought 'I don't want to get with him straight away and be in another relationship because I don't want it to feel like I left Jon for Chris'	Rachel, page 27, line 489
Societal judgement on infidelity and disapproval Mono norms and judgement	Yeah and I think I told a couple of people at work you know like 'oh I'm really attracted to my husband's friend' and stuff and they were like 'oh my god that's so bad, you can't say that, you can't do that' you know? Just the typical reaction which anybody would do I think. Erm like nobody's going to be like 'great, go for it!' [laughs].	Rachel, page 58, line 1071
Expectation vs reality/experience Goes against mono norms and hetero norms of relationships and the institution of marriage and vows made	Erm but yeah like obviously I knew it was wrong from the start, in the sense that that's not the way—that's not what you do in a marriage, you know, you don't just get with somebody else, you don't just have an affair, it's not the done thing in society, it's not—it's very frowned upon	Rachel, page 58, line 1074
Affair equated with bad people – mono norms construct infidelity in this way Punishing Self	I think it just meant that I was an awful person. I genuinely was like 'this does mean that I'm just a horrible, horrible person' and I remember saying that 'oh I'm an	Rachel, page 80, line 1493

	awful person, I'm a bad person, I don't deserve anybody, I don't deserve a relationship, I don't deserve to be married, I don't deserve any thing or anyone, erm I'm a bad person'.	
High self-critic for affair Self critical – part of being a woman and not allowed to break the rules or entitled to do something for her?	Erm yeah it was all my fault, I'd ruined Chris' life, I'd ruined Jon's life, you know, I'd ruined my own life, I'd brought shame upon my family which is ridiculous because my family never said that, would never think that, it was all me	Rachel, page 80, line 1497
Fear of letting others down	Erm and I almost felt like I needed to give back all the wedding gifts to everybody because I felt so awful to all these people, I'd let all these people down	Rachel, page 80, line 1499
Felt like a failure in relationship and bad person from affair Hetero norms and mono norms influenced sense of failing and being bad for departing from monogamy and because marriage 'failed'. Not living up to expectations.	And a failure, I remember using the word failure a lot, I'd failed at marriage, I'd failed at being married, I'd failed at my relationship. Erm so yeah I would say just being an awful person and a failure was the way I framed it at the time.	Rachel, page 81, line 1509
Constant self-criticism Punishing self for affair – hetero and mono norms that it is bad influenced experience	I remember my therapist saying to me 'how many times—it would be really interesting to know how many times a day you're kind of criticising yourself, like when you get those thoughts.' And he said 'if you were to	Rachel, page 81, line 1515

Also showing how bad it got to show good person?	take a guess' and I was like 'I dunno, maybe like three times a day' and he said 'okay let's try and monitor it' erm and it was about every 30 seconds.	
Intrusive critical thoughts	I'd be thinking about something but I'd be driving and it would come in time and time and time again 'you're a failure, you're shit, you're awful, you're horrible, like you've ruined everything'.	Rachel, page 82, line 1522
Societal judgement/contempt unhelpful – influenced experience	the judgement around it is so unhelpful and yes it's not an inherently pleasant thing but people need to be able to get support and help when they're going through this	Rachel, page 83, line 1541
Lack of compassion for self/high standards/internalised societal judgements Mono and hetero norms of relationships and infidelity as bad	Did I think Chris was inherently bad because he had an affair? No. Did I think my mum was inherently bad for having an affair? No. But for me for some reason, I was the scum of the earth	Rachel, page 83, line 1555
Fear of disappointing others - part of being a woman and expectation to look after others and be good for them?	I had that kind of social stigma I think of not wanting to disappoint my family	Rachel, page 84, line 1575

Subtheme: Attempts to reconcile tension

Emergent Theme	**Extract**	**Location**
Conflicting feelings/unbearable/overwhel	because of trying to deal with such difficult feelings, obviously feeling a	Rachel, page 12, line 207

ming/ Turning to alcohol to cope influenced by how mononormativity positions infidelity and showing how bad it got, showing moral person?	huge amount of guilt and shame, but also being really really attracted to this guy and not being happy in my relationship, I started to drink quite heavily	
Alcohol fuelled affair Alcohol to numb feelings and cope, and aided affair	So I was working, but I would come home every night and drink half a bottle to a bottle of wine myself each night, erm to kind of numb what was happening I suppose. But also it gave me—it made me more kind of confident and flirty.	Rachel, page 12, line 213
Attempts to cope with feelings Feeling depressed Showing how bad it got and was? Focusing on negatives to highlight knows its wrong? Influenced by societal scripts and fear of judgement? Which also affected her experience at the time	But I got myself into a bit of a mess with that, you know, I, I was feeling quite depressed and I was drinking and erm not really sleeping very well either and I did all sorts of bizarre things like I suddenly decided that we needed to get another dog	Rachel, page 12, line 221
Attempts to feel better/cope made worse	And so we adopted this dog from a shelter, but it didn't work out because he was scared of men and the house always had men around and so I ended up having to give the dog back and that broke my heart, and I found that really really difficult and felt really kind of annoyed with	Rachel, page 13, line 228

	myself, erm, for getting the dog	
Justifying affair with marital unhappiness	I was like on the look out then for problems and was maybe magnifying those problems because then I had something to grasp onto, like I always thought 'it's not working anyway'	Rachel, page 37, line 687
Gaining husband's permission for sexual relationship with affair partner	So I ended up, erm, trying to arrange a threesome between me and Jon and Chris.	Rachel, page 62, line 1161
Desire for guilt-free sex with affair partner – resolve tension and attraction – relieve desire	This was before I'd slept with Chris because I wanted to sleep with him without feeling guilty.	Rachel, page 63, line 1165
Seeking husband's permission	So this was like drunk me was like 'this is a really good idea. We'll have a threesome and then we'll all be together'	Rachel, page 63, line 1169
Attempt to find a way to have both to reconcile guilt and desire	And there were times when I genuinely thought 'I wish we could all be in a relationship together' […] Or I thought Chris could just come and live with us and Jon was fine with it and I could have Chris and Jon.	Rachel, page 63, line 1170
Threesome as attempt to reconcile feelings	I was coming up with all these ways to try and reconcile my feelings and to try and reconcile what was happening.	Rachel, page 63, line 1181
Behaviour changed with husband Disconnecting with husband – concentrating on negatives to justify behaviour	I really withdrew I would say from the relationship and you know I would say to him 'oh…' I would just talk more and more about the things that weren't working between us	Rachel, page 69, line 1277

Split relationships – couldn't tolerate guilt of sleeping with two people	But I only ever slept with Jon once in the entire time that Chris and I were having the affair. Because I couldn't bear like physical contact with him, like a physical relationship because I felt so guilty. I was like I can't have a physical relationship with two people, like I just can't do that. So like I partitioned it completely.	Rachel, page 69, line 1282
Attempts to reconcile conflicting feelings led to strange decisions	cause it's such a kind of—you can't reconcile it, you can't, you try in weird ways and that's why I acted so bizarrely I think, you know I acted in such stupid ways and made such stupid decisions that I would never normally make and drank a lot. Because it's, it's irreconcilable. Like I think that was it, there's just no way to kind of cope with that, you know.	Rachel, page 79, line 1465
Desire to have it all/both To reconcile expectations and experience	So yeah I did used to think things like 'oh I just wish I could just be with both of them'	Rachel, page 65, line 1211
Desire to escape situation/erase marriage/simpler life and avoid confrontation/taking responsibility	Or 'oh I wish, yeah, I wish I'd never got married and I wish that I could, you know, just erase it all, I wish we could just run away and not have to deal with it'. But actually none of that is realistic, you know, you got to face it, we had to face it.	Rachel, page 65, line 1216

Appendix N: Record of Master Themes Relevant To Participants

Master Theme	Subthemes	Participants applied to
1. Something For Me	*1.1 Something Missing*	Rosie, Steve, Michael, Ehsun, Rachel, Sarah, Maya
	1.2. A Way of Coping	Steve, Michael, Rachel, Sarah
	1.3. Pursuit of Please	Michael, Ehsun, Sarah
	1.4. A Different Self	Rosie, Steve, Rachel, Maya
2. Coming To Life	*2.1. All-Consuming Desire*	Rosie, Ehsun, Rachel, Maya
	2.2. A Fantasy World	Steve, Rachel, Maya
	2.3. A Thrilling Secret	Steve, Ehsun, Michael, Rachel, Sarah
3. Negotiating Tensions	*3.1 Struggling with Secrets*	Steve, Michael, Ehsun, Rachel, Sarah, Maya
	3.2. A Conflicted Self	Rosie, Michael, Ehsun, Rachel, Sarah, Maya
	3.3. Reconciling Conflicts	Steve, Michael, Ehsun, Rachel, Sarah, Maya

Appendix O: Example of Master Themes and Extracts

Master Theme: Something For Me	Rosie	Steve	Michael	Ehsun	Rachel	Sarah	Maya
Something Missing	'It was just kind of going through the motions, like we'd get up, we'd do like sight seeing and it was kind of very much going through like that' (page 8, line 107) 'And that kind of went on and on and I suppose I was settled and looking forward to things, like having a flat, doing things, like and all the things that come with having a boyfriend.' (page 10, line 129) 'I convinced myself that I was happy because what's not to be happy about like we were both earning quite good money, like we had a good lifestyle, we do what we want, we go on holidays, like why? Why am I not happy about it?' (page 11, line 143) '…I think I got on with him better than I ever had got on with Lewis like even before, Lewis and I didn't have—we weren't, erm, our personalities	'…Things have gone to quite a low point…At the same time, we have a good practical relationship still…I don't understand it…' (page 4, line 158-163) 'I don't think the romantic side was ever there with Catherine' (page 11, line 487) 'Massive burst of tempestuous love…love that is there has grown steadily…it's not like a very fiery beginning' (page 6, line 266) 'There is love, love of a mmm, different kind. Of a companionship kind, which is very strong actually' (page 9, line 433) 'in our relationship the sex has got better and better and better, which is probably the thing that has kept us very happy in it, in that, in the physical sense. (page 13, line 619) '…She doesn't love the person who I perceive as being the true me […] I can't share certain aspects of myself which feel truer to me' (page 3-4, line 113-181)	'It was an erm…yeah I don't know, the relationship started becoming a dictatorship where I was being told what to do, who I can and can't see and I'm not that kind of person' (page 3, line 52) 'it was good when we first got together but when things change, I still, I still feel the same, I still you know, but then she started becoming insecure, telling me I can't do this or 'who's this?' and questioning me, I don't like that' (page 3, line 54) 'The thing is she became more and more demanding (page 5, line 84) 'Erm, just different, just relaxed. Everything that I could want in a relationship, but it's just the encounter isn't a relationship in the same sense, there's no…no hassle, no drama. But it's, it's everything I want if that	'I mean at home it's just straightforward sex, there was nothing dirty you know. It's just straightforward, a quick ten minutes and then you're finished, you know…' (page 23, line 309) 'I mean my wife is younger than me or Trisha, younger, so I dunno but er Trisha showed me a trick or two, you know…' (page 29, line 392) '…I mean the wife she doesn't talk dirty that much you know, with Trisha she used to start talking dirty and all that and that's what turns me on…' (page 45, line 609) '…I liked being dominated by her you know, she used to say 'oh you better get a hard on in the next 5 minutes, we're gonna do it' you know 'take your pants off' […] I mean the wife she doesn't talk dirty that much…' (page 45, line 606)	'Erm and my ex by this point, Jon, didn't really have a similar taste in music to me anymore, I felt like we'd been drifting apart in a lot of ways' (page 9, line 155) 'Erm and so there was like music and film and activities that I was very interested in—I'd always watched the news and I was interested in current affairs and politics and, you know, things like that and I remember Jon would just say 'oh I don't care, turn it off, it's shit, it doesn't bother me, I'm not interested, all I care about is you and my job and that's it,' you know, so he was very insular in that sense' (page 9, line 161) 'there was never that really intense level of like physical and kind of mental connection.' (page 58, line 1081) 'Chris was […] into the things I was into and he's really	'I think especially when we broke up…and then started therapy, I think she started getting in right down into the core and for a long time I started feeling this intense need to be looked after. And I never want to go through that again [laughs]. Which is maybe why I chose the partner that I'm with because I love him and I care about him…very very much. Very deeply, if anything happened to him it would break my heart…but I'm not in love with him.' (page 62, line 1158) 'Erm but, you know, it wouldn't break my heart if we broke up' (page 63, line 1171) 'So the partner I'm with now, I always knew if we broke up it's not going to be the end of the world. Yeah. Yeah. I won't be broken hearted' (page 63, line 1183) 'And then erm,	'But it's a very fine line of giving people the freedom to do everything they want to do and then feeling that they don't really want you because they let you go and do what you want' (page 33, line 614) 'So it is, it's pros and cons isn't it. So you feel that it's wonderful being in a relationship that's like that as long as you can feel that they're giving you enough love and need the other way' (page 33, line 619) 'Because we couldn't sleep together because of his illness he had to sleep upright.' (page 7, line 120) 'Sonny had been ill for a long time and I'd become his nurse and nanny—we were more like brother and sister' (page 7, line 64) 'Erm it did put an end to the sexual relationship' (page 63, line 1191)

	weren't really matched, erm, in that kind of way…' (page 20, line 262) '…I just looked forward to seeing him. Like I looked forward to texting him erm and that side of it, it was just more "I'm genuinely happy to see this person and I want to see them"…' (page 32, line 432)	'…Yeah massive […] loneliness in that relationship, yeah. Really really lonely […] if you could be there on a Sunday lunchtime […] with those three people who should be the core of your life and you can feel as lonely as you have in your life […] that's really hard […] it's not the children [...] Like this thing that's meant to be the heart of my life has failed...' (Page 10, line 460). 'I think what I was looking for in the other relationship…was a romantic	makes sense' (page 8, line 144)		intelligent […] and I felt I could have those sort of deep conversations with him that I really couldn't have with Jon…' (page 9-10, line 161-175) 'And that kind of…that work ethic and that kind of value system that Chris has got is very much closer to mine.' (page 50, line 930) 'And when I say I still love Jon, I mean that in a very different way to the way that I love Chris.' (page 60, line	and so we haven't really got like, you know, he won't—doesn't watch films, erm, we haven't really got a lot in common, do you know what I mean, we don't really do that much. I mean the only thing I think we, to be honest, the only thing we've got in common is that he, he'll, we'll go on a long walk together.' (page 72, line 1340) 'we don't have so much sex anymore' (page 76, line 1420)	'And it was just expected. And I found it really difficult. Like I remember thinking this is just not nice, everybody needs a cuddle and some reassurance.' (page 64, line 1199) 'There was never any of er all this bubble love and fantasy love, but there was a strong love and a protection for our unit. More protection for our unit than what it was for me personally' (page 51, line 950) 'and thinking 'oh he must

		connection which I did get' (page 11, line 524) 'I felt like I was getting what you're meant to get from life and having that relationship that I always wanted to have, erm and being colossally happy and being with somebody I really liked' (page 24, line 1155)			1117) 'I mean if I hadn't have enjoyed it in some way and hadn't felt that—cause it was an incredible connection that, as I say, I hadn't felt before and I remember thinking 'wow this is amazing' (page 61, line 1130)	'Yeah. I think if we were really connected I—well I know if we were really connected I wouldn't want to. And I, yeah, I wouldn't want to. I'd think 'ohh that's nice and flattering, but yeah'. (page 80, line 1503)	think I'm really special. All this effort, he must think that I'm super.' You know. And he'd just walk round and obviously he tells you you're super all the time.' (page 41, line 757) 'And it was just sort of—and lots of time doing lovely things like fetching flowers or booking restaurants, whereas Sonny would book a restaurant which would be a hot food restaurant' (page 37, line 691)

							'I really did feel like he was the one that I fit into—you know physically and mentally it fit into. That's what I felt like. I felt like I'd literally found—you know when people say they've found a piece of the jigsaw, I thought I had' (page 73, line 1361)
A Way of Coping		'It was definitely a valve. A massive valve[…]I know that…I was dead anyway, I was already dead…erm with her I was dead. So yeah I died. I did, I died.' (page 17, line 792) 'I decided I	'Yeah, yeah. But I've tried, it's not like I, I, I, I've been there and I've tried, you know like take away and talked to her, I've asked her what's troubling her and tried to reassure her,		'he lost his job unfortunately, I think he was made redundant. And erm that's when the cracks started to show, in terms of both living together as a couple, we hadn't	'And then I met the one that I was really in love with and then…I did have affairs but…I was in a weird place cause I really didn't want to have them cause I didn't want anybody	

		needed to do something that was truly for me in a very selfish way' (page 2, line 84) 'it really helped to have something for me and not for anybody else. I felt like everything else in my life was doing stuff for other people. All my life was about earning money for other people, doing all the cooking and stuff, being there on weekends when Catherine had to go and do work. So all of her work…I always feel is at my expense…books in work with the assumption that on the weekend,	I've done all of that, but you know…it doesn't work. I still get the drama.' (page 35, line 651) 'I dunno but for me I just do it cause it's something different, yeah, it's something different from the norm. Erm it's a little release, a little—if something's going on or an argument, it's my little secret' (page 32, line 599) 'yeah I think that's ultimately pushed me into it because I wouldn't—I		really had the same—we'd been in a bit of a bubble with my—with living with my dad. […] Erm so we hadn't had all of the responsibilities that come with being, you know, on your own' (page 5, line 93) 'And I was getting more and more in debt because I couldn't afford the mortgage and the bills on my own, so my parents were like bailing me out constantly.' (page 17, line 315) 'Erm and a week after we	touching me, I didn't want to touch anybody else, I didn't want him to touch anybody else, erm…I was so in love that I had no need or desire to have affairs (page 12, line 221) 'I needed it for a lot of psychological reasons […] I needed it for reassurance […] my mother, you know, she never wanted me […] And she made that known to me every day of my life' (page 47, line 875-877)	

		which is my free time, I would be there to look after the children.' (page 18, line 828)	was happy in the start. I mean when I get all this it becomes stress and I'll be like 'right I'm going out just for a release or just, you know, get away from everything'. And then that's what'll end up happening and then I'll end up doing something to chill out' (page 5, line 91) 'But it is what it is, so I didn't have a choice. But I did have a choice, but for me I think I had to do it, otherwise I would have just been		got married we found out that my step-dad had cancer (page 6, line 104) 'And then a week after our first wedding anniversary, my ex-husband's brother died in a motorbike crash.' (Rachel, page 14, line 261) 'And I had a choice and I made my choice and I made the choice to have an affair, erm it was all I knew what to do at the time, the only way I knew how to act' (page 24,	'So there was this real fear here of rejection, so I needed them to chase me, it was confirmation that they really did want me.' (page 47, line 881)	

			stewing over it […]Yeah, I did it cause I thought it's the only way I'm gonna get over this. But I didn't at the time' (page 38, line 704) '…There are times where she has just laid it on thick to me and I've just been like "oh right, cool" and then yeah I've just gone to see someone else and then I sit back and think "ohh I've cheated on her, I feel better now" (Michael, page 37, line 687)		line 448) 'So I actually don't know what I would have done without Chris at that time, despite it being so awful at the same time.' (page 34, line 636) 'Because that was, that was my safety, that was my comfort, Chris actually felt incredibly comforting and supportive when my husband was totally absent.' (page 34, line 629)		
Pursuit of			'It was more of	'I mean I		'Erm…er…we,	

Pleasure			a, of a fantasy really. There was a girl that I'd wanted to see for a long time, so when I got to see her, it was a bit like 'mission accomplished' (page 38, line 715) 'It's a bit of a thrill, I think it can be exciting.' (page 17, line 313) '…I just feel like—that by holding back and being faithful in long-term relationships when you're young, you're missing out […] So I just think…I'd rather have	already have two women, the wife and another one, but I still you know try to get another date…' (page 11, line 148) '…It was just the excitement you know, I dunno how I kept it going, I mean having two women…' (page 17, line 221) 'For me it's a buzz thing, you know. I dunno, maybe sleep with as many women as I can…' (page 18, line 243) '…I started having dreams about them,		we don't have so much sex anymore' (page 76, line 1420) 'Erm anyway that was another little affair I had, while I'm still with this partner. And I did it because I was just enjoying my life and it was fun.' (page 23, line 430) 'having a little bit of physical relations when you feel like it' (page 41, line 763) 'and then there's the other thing, you know, well I think '56' the	
			fun…' (page 51, line 950)	dreams where I'd try other women as well…' (page 37, line 498)		egg timer has turned way, it's really turned now so the sand is running out. Time is running out, it's an actual fact. You know I'm looking towards death now and god knows what else.' (page 80, line 1504)	
A Different Self	'when you start quite liking the attention, erm that you get on like a night out […] I'd kind of encourage the attention and like flirting […] Because I suppose it made me feel better about myself. […] I think I'd probably always been attracted to him, but I think I just quite liked the attention…' (page 8-19, line 95-225	'…Much more like being young and unattached, yeah…'. (Page 16, line 736). '…She's very feisty, different to Catherine […] she's a lot more cut and dry about stuff […] so it made me feel that I could be that way…' (page 17, line 813)			'And in that relationship, I was much more free and mature' (page 27, line 506)		'…whereas Paul was quite big and tall and made me feel—I suppose I'd never quite felt feminine, especially working in the manual trade and having all these brothers, whereas Paul came and did that for me. That he made me feel very feminine and very womanly…' (page 37, line 686)

Appendix P: Ethics Approval Form

Psychology Research Ethics Committee
School of Arts and Social Sciences
City University London
London EC1R 0JD

1st December 2016

Dear Katy Lord and [redacted]

Reference: PSYETH (P/L) 16/17 60
Project title: How individuals who have been unfaithful in a committed relationship make sense of their experience

I am writing to confirm that the research proposal detailed above has been granted approval by the City University London Psychology Department Research Ethics Committee.

Period of approval

Approval is valid for a period of three years from the date of this letter. If data collection runs beyond this period you will need to apply for an extension using the Amendments Form.

Project amendments

You will also need to submit an Amendments Form if you want to make any of the following changes to your research:

(a) Recruit a new category of participants
(b) Change, or add to, the research method employed
(c) Collect additional types of data
(d) Change the researchers involved in the project

Adverse events

You will need to submit an Adverse Events Form, copied to the Secretary of the Senate Research Ethics Committee [redacted] in the event of any of the following:

(a) Adverse events

(b) Breaches of confidentiality

(c) Safeguarding issues relating to children and vulnerable adults

(d) Incidents that affect the personal safety of a participant or researcher

Issues (a) and (b) should be reported as soon as possible and no later than 5 days after the event. Issues (c) and (d) should be reported immediately. Where appropriate the researcher should also report adverse events to other relevant institutions such as the police or social services.

Should you have any further queries then please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Kind regards

[redacted] [redacted]

Course Officer Chair

[redacted]

This content has been removed for data protection reasons

Appendix Q: Analysis of Self-Identified Gay Male Participant