

2013

# Adult children's discovery of their parents' infidelity

Allison Thorson

*University of San Francisco*, [athorson@usfca.edu](mailto:athorson@usfca.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.usfca.edu/coms>

 Part of the [Interpersonal and Small Group Communication Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Thorson, A. (2013). Adult Children's Discovery of Their Parents' Infidelity. *Qualitative Communication Research*, 2(1), 61-80.  
doi:10.1525/qcr.2013.2.1.61

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts and Sciences at USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in Communication Studies by an authorized administrator of USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. For more information, please contact [repository@usfca.edu](mailto:repository@usfca.edu).

# Adult Children's Discovery of Their Parents' Infidelity

Allison R. Thorson



Infidelity affects the relationships for all individuals connected to an affair. This study represents a first step in understanding the ripple effect of this phenomenon by examining how adult children recalled becoming aware of their parents' infidelity. Participants included 125 individuals, reporting on 149 parental infidelities (24 participants indicated that both their mother and father engaged in infidelity). After sharing the story of how they learned about the infidelities that occurred in their parents' relationship, discovery stories were coded and analyzed, resulting in a five category typology of methods by which children discovered their parents' infidelity: family member, explicit, offending parent, incremental, and third party discovery. These findings are compared and contrasted to previous research, and the implications of this study for future research on parental infidelity and theorizing on privacy, shared family identity, and uncertainty are discussed.

*Keywords:* infidelity; family communication; children; discovery; disclosure; family secrets; privacy; shared family identity; uncertainty

Researchers have suggested that most people regard infidelity more negatively than other forms of betrayal in romantic relationships and categorize it as a violation to a relational and societal norm (e.g., Allen,

---

*Qualitative Communication Research*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Spring 2013, pp. 61–80. ISSN 2161-9107, eISSN 2161-9115. © 2013 The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Request permission to photocopy or reproduce article content at the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions website at <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo.asp>. DOI: 10.1525/qcr.2013.2.1.61.

---

Atkins, Baucom, Snyder, Gordon, & Glass, 2005; Cano & O'Leary, 2000; Feeny, 2004; Sweeney & Horwitz, 2001). Most research on infidelity has focused on the dyad; little research has examined the effects of infidelity on those connected to the couple (i.e., their children; Blow & Hartnett, 2005a, 2005b).

Of the literature focused on children, researchers have reported that children often experience stress upon becoming aware of their parents' infidelity (Saffer, Sansone, & Gentry, 1979). Similarly, Duncombe and Mardsen (2004) have argued that children's reactions after learning of their parents' affairs appear similar to those following parental divorce. Still, there is a general lack of research on how these potentially hurtful events are unveiled to children, young or old. Thus, the goal of this study was to examine how adult children recalled learning of their parents' infidelity and to make connections between these findings and theorizing on privacy, shared family identity, and uncertainty.

### **Children's Experiences with Parental Infidelity**

Although it is unknown exactly how often children become aware of the infidelities that occur in their parents' relationship, the number of children potentially aware of it is large enough to warrant an inquiry. For instance, Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels (1994) have found that as many as 24.5% of men and 15% of women report having had sex with someone other than their husband or wife while married. Moreover, researchers have argued that roughly half of first marriages end in divorce; that slightly more than half of all divorces involve children under the age of 18 (Cherlin, 1992); that prior to no-fault divorce being allowed in the U.S., infidelity was cited between 25% and 50% of the time as the primary cause for divorce (Kelly & Conley, 1987); and that not all couples who experience infidelity divorce (Tulane, Skogrand, & DeFrain, 2011).

Among those studies that have asked children directly about their experiences, Thorson (2009) has reported that adult children form and enact protection and access rules to guide how they talk about their parents' infidelity with family and non-family members. Furthermore, Thorson (2012) has concluded that adult children make accounts for their parents' infidelity that are representative of five broad themes: dysfunction and deficiency, justifications and excuses, restoring credibility and character, blameworthiness, and denial of person

involvement. Overall, these accounts and their corresponding attributions shed light on the ways children talk about their parents' infidelity in their attempt to make sense of these events (Thorson, 2012).

Although these studies add to the current body of literature on children's experiences with parental infidelity, they do not assess how children discover this information in the first place. Thus, the following paragraphs outline an important question regarding the discovery of infidelity.

### **Discovery of Infidelity**

Olsen, Russell, Higgins-Kessler, and Miller (2002) have reported that, among married couples, the discovery and disclosure of infidelity is often characterized as an emotionally charged interaction. In their clinical analysis, Butler, Harper, and Seedall (2009) have argued that therapists' facilitation of a client's voluntary disclosure of infidelity, although difficult, was the most ethical action for clinicians to take when treating couples in therapy. Outside of couples' therapy, Afifi, Falato, and Weiner (2001) have argued that four general methods of discovery—unsolicited third party, red handed, solicited partner, and unsolicited partner discovery—“essentially capture the population of possible discovery methods” among dating couples (p. 295). Unsolicited third party discovery includes those instances in which a person is told about a partner's infidelity from anyone other than the offender. “Red handed” discovery includes those situations in which a partner accidentally walks in on the offender during the act. Solicited partner discovery includes those interactions in which a partner discovers an infidelity only after asking the transgressor whether it occurred. Finally, unsolicited partner discovery includes those instances in which a partner discovers the infidelity via the transgressor's unsolicited disclosure. Although these findings add to the body of literature on the disclosure of infidelity, they focus solely on the disclosure of infidelity among couples. Thus, it is unknown whether the disclosure and discovery of infidelity among family members, other than the couple, is emotionally charged and whether the methods by which dating couples learn of dyadic infidelity are applicable to the discovery of family or parental infidelity.

Vangelisti and Gerstenberger (2004) have suggested that infidelity affects the relationships for all individuals connected to an affair. Moreover, Vangelisti (1994) has stated that, in families, “people expect

a certain amount of secrecy” (p. 131) and infidelity, whether it occurs in the parents’ or the child’s romantic relationship, is one of the most frequent types of whole family secrets. Thorson (2009) has found that adult children actively participate in protecting the information of their parents’ infidelity from both non-family members and select family members in order to maintain harmony within the family system. Missing from this body of literature is how the information of a parent’s infidelity is acquired in the first place and how, if at all, other family members may be involved in facilitating this disclosure. As such, the following research question was developed to clarify the methods by which adult children learn of their parents’ infidelity:

RQ: How do adult children recall discovering their parents’ infidelity?

## **Method**

All individuals who participated in the current study were volunteers. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to solicit research participants from a large Midwest university, social networks, online groups, and discussion boards. Data analyzed for this study were a subset of a larger data set. Specifically, participants for this study needed to be at least 19 years old, willing to share information about a hurtful event that took place in their parents’ relationship, and respond “yes” to the question “To your knowledge, did your parents’ relationship ever involve cheating and/or an extramarital affair?”

### *Participants*

Of the 438 individuals who completed the online questionnaire, only data from the 125 (28.5%) participants indicating that their parents’ relationship involved infidelity were analyzed in this study. Of these, 24 (19.2%) indicated that their mother, 77 (61.6%) indicated that their father, and 24 (19.2%) indicated that both their mother and father engaged in infidelity, resulting in a total of 149 parent infidelities.

Participants ranged in age from 19 to 64 ( $M = 29.1$ ,  $SD = 10.5$ ) and included 35 (28%) men and 90 (72%) women. Most (98, 78.4%) identified themselves as European American (white), followed by 10 (8%) African American (black), 5 (4%) Asian American, 5 (4%) Latin American (Hispanic), and 7 (5.6%) who identified their race/ethnicity as other. Slightly more than half of the respondents (74, or 59.2%) who

reported that their parents' relationship involved infidelity also indicated that their parents were currently divorced. The age at which participants indicated learning of their parents' infidelity ranged from 3 to 31 ( $M = 15.3$ ,  $SD = 5.7$ ) for a mother's infidelity and from 0 to 40 ( $M = 14.0$ ,  $SD = 5.9$ ) for a father's infidelity.

### *Data Collection*

Once recruited, participants were directed to an online questionnaire that included an informed consent form approved by the Institutional Review Board, an open-ended question requiring a written response, and questions regarding demographic information. Although online questionnaires are not a common tool used for collecting qualitative data, this was appropriate for the current study considering that Blow and Hartnett (2005a) have found that anonymity is often compromised in infidelity research "as one moves toward human-to-human interactions (as opposed to written surveys)," even when reassurances are expressed by interviewers (p. 187). As such, participants were asked to respond to the following open-ended statement:

Tell me the story of how you learned about your parent's infidelity (where were you, what types of things were said, what did you hear, what did you ask, who was present, etc. . . .). If both of your parents had an extramarital affair, please write a summary for each time you discovered this information. If your parent(s) engaged in multiple infidelities, please respond with the extramarital you know about the most.

### *Coding*

Data from participants' parental infidelity stories resulted in over 32 pages of double-spaced text. After organizing these data, the primary researcher read each story a minimum of three times and used analytic induction (Bulmer, 1979) and the constant comparative method (Baxter & Babbie, 2004) to develop a coding scheme based on participants' responses and the related literature (Afifi et al., 2001). Specifically, within the constant comparative method, each discovery category was compared with all others to determine whether they represented different or similar meanings. This process of comparing was continued until each discovery story method had been compared to one another and no overlap was present. After unitizing, naming, and organizing each

discovery theme, the primary researcher developed a code book from which reliability of these discovery categories could be tested (contact author for a copy of the code book).

To establish consistency, two coders—individuals trained at the doctoral level in qualitative and quantitative research methods—took part in a preliminary training session using the coding scheme developed by the primary researcher. Initially, 9 (6%) discovery stories were used for training. After coding these 9 stories as a group, the two coders were each given 22 (14.7%) stories to categorize independently. Intercoder reliability was consistent and good ( $k = .75$ ). Any discrepancies identified throughout this check of Cohen's kappa were discussed by both coders and the primary researcher to come to a final agreement, and definitions of each category were reiterated. Next, coders were given 15 (10%) subsequent discovery stories to categorize outside of the training session. Intercoder reliability among this set of stories improved and yielded a very good consistency ( $k = .91$ ). Confident in the coding scheme, the next 88 (59%) discovery stories were divided between the two coders and categorized accordingly. Last, reliability was checked on the final 15 (10%) discovery stories to control for drift. Intercoder reliability for these stories remained very good ( $k = .82$ ). Again, any discrepancies identified throughout all checks of Cohen's kappa were discussed by both coders and the primary researcher to come to a final agreement. Throughout the coding process, 32 discovery stories were eliminated from the final analysis, as 22 (14.8%) participants did not discuss the actual discovery of their parents' infidelity and 12 (8.1%) were categorized as "other" but not indicative of a new category. Thus, no evidence of a theme, other than those originally identified by the primary researcher in her qualitative data analysis, was recognized by coders throughout all subsequent analyses.

## Results

The analysis and coding of parental infidelity stories resulted in five distinct discovery methods, listed in order from most to least frequent: (a) family member, (b) explicit, (c) offending parent, (d) incremental, and (e) third party discovery. Three of these discovery methods were intentional—family member, offending parent, and third party discovery—meaning that the discloser intended to share this information with the participant, and two were unintentional—explicit and incremental

discovery—meaning that the adult child discovered this information even though neither parent intended for them to learn it. Each discovery method is described below.

### *Family Member Discovery*

The most frequent way participants described learning about a parent's infidelity was from a family member. Specifically, 56 (37.6%) individuals indicated that they discovered the information of their parents' infidelity in this way. However, the family member who shared this information with them was not their parent who engaged in infidelity; rather, they learned it from a sibling, grandparent, or the parent who was not involved in the extramarital affair. Some participants indicated that they solicited this information (i.e., they sensed something was going on so they asked a family member specifically about infidelity, and this family member confirmed that it had occurred,  $n = 7$ , 4.7%), whereas others stated that this information was told to them even though they did not solicit it ( $n = 49$ , 32.9%).

One example of solicited discovery from a family member was explained by Josh, a 20-year-old student, who learned at age 18 that his mother had engaged in infidelity:

I was in my father's office and we were talking about the divorce, and he never really gave me a straight answer before that moment. . . . I asked him what the reason was for the divorce, and he told me a Bible verse about being faithful and [how this is] the only good reason for divorce. Unfaithfulness was what he talked about. [He said] the first time he moved on and forgave, [but] the second [time it happened he] ended up in a divorce.

Thus, it was only after Josh asked his father specifically about why his parents' marriage ended that he knew his mother had engaged in infidelity.

In addition to soliciting this information from family members, many participants indicated that they learned about their parents' infidelity even when they did not ask other family members for information or confirmation. For instance, Alana, a 21-year-old, described the night, at age 9, when she learned about her father's affair: "I was in an argument with my brother who was not talking to my dad at this point. I was sticking up for my dad when my brother kind of let it slip." Thus, even

though Alana did not solicit this information from anyone, she still learned about it from her brother.

As illustrated by Josh and Alana, many adult children learn of their parents' infidelity through direct discussions with family members other than the parent who engaged in infidelity.

### *Explicit Discovery*

The second most frequent way participants described learning about a parent's infidelity was through explicit discovery ( $n = 24$ , 16.1%). Explicit discovery is defined as a one-time event in which participants found or overheard something that led them to know, in a single moment, that their parent had engaged in infidelity. Participants, however, were not the intended target of the message. Rather they were inadvertently exposed to it. To illustrate, for example, Tina described how she learned three years earlier at age 17 about her father's infidelity:

I was in [the] hospital with my dad [when] we went to visit my grandpa. My phone [was] out of battery so I borrowed his to call my friend, but when I got that phone [his phone] I received a new message, it was an unusual message. So [you could say] I found it.

Thus, Tina knew the moment she read this text message that her father had engaged in infidelity, even though no one intended for her to discover this information.

### *Offending Parent Discovery*

In addition to learning about parental infidelity from a family member or explicitly, some participants indicated that they learned this information from the parent who actually engaged in the affair ( $n = 19$ , 12.8%). Similar to family member discovery, some participants indicated that they solicited this information from their parent, whereas others stated that this information was given to them by their parent, even though they did not ask.

Participants who solicited information from their parent either to confirm or deny that infidelity had occurred sensed that something was going on and, thus, felt a need to bring up the topic ( $n = 4$ , 2.7%). For example, Irene, a 20-year-old, recalled how she learned this information at age 10: "I came right out and asked my dad to his face if it had happened. He denied any sexual relations but admitted to an affair."

By asking her father directly whether he was seeing anyone other than her mom, Irene was able to learn the truth behind her suspicions.

More often than not, however, participants who were told this information directly by the parent who engaged in infidelity did not solicit it ( $n = 15$ , 10.1%). As Jennifer, a 51-year-old woman, described:

[I was] in my thirties, [and] my mother was out of town caring for a sick relative. I went over to their house to have dinner with my dad [and] after dinner (and a little too much wine) my father said he “had to call his lady friend. But don’t tell your mother—she wouldn’t like it.”

Thus, without prompting, Jennifer was aware of her father’s affair. Similarly, Natalie, a 46-year-old mother, explained: “My father was trying to have a ‘heart to heart’ talk with me about an unrelated matter when I was 14 and told me he had an affair when I was 3 or 4.” Although his affair had taken place over 10 years prior to their conversation, Natalie’s father felt that this was the right time to reveal to her that he had engaged in infidelity.

Hence, Irene’s, Jennifer’s, and Natalie’s discovery stories illustrate that, in addition to discovery from a family member or explicit discovery, a great number of adult children learn about parental infidelity directly from the parent who engaged in it.

### *Incremental Discovery*

Another way participants recalled learning about a parent’s infidelity was through incremental discovery ( $n = 13$ , 8.7%). Similar to explicit discovery, incremental discovery occurred when participants heard or saw things that they were not intended to hear or see, ultimately leading them to discover their parent had engaged in infidelity. Incremental discovery, however, is distinct from explicit discovery because adult children’s knowledge of their parents’ infidelity did not occur in a single moment. Rather, it occurred after participants put things together over a period of time. These participants did not have proof in the same way as those who discovered this information explicitly, but they became confident that an infidelity had, in fact, taken place. Mallory, a 22 year-old-student, explained her incremental discovery of her father’s infidelity:

[Around 8] I knew something major had happened between my parents, but [I] wasn’t old enough to understand at the time. I asked, but

of course no one told me. . . . Eventually, about five years later, I pieced it all together from comments my parents would make to each other.

Hence, even though Mallory did not have an explicit conversation with anyone about this, she still knew that her father had engaged in infidelity.

### *Third Party Discovery*

The final discovery method described by participants was third party discovery ( $n = 3$ , 2%). Third party discovery involved instances when participants learned of their parents' infidelity, directly and intentionally, from someone who was not a member of their family. Although this discovery method was not as common as the other discovery types mentioned above, both solicited ( $n = 1$ , 0.07%) and unsolicited ( $n = 2$ , 1.3%) discovery occurred among the three participants who reported learning of their parents' infidelity in this way.

Specifically, Mayely, a 20-year-old, described how she discovered the information of her father's infidelity at age 13:

When I called him [my dad] just to talk and say hi, his little girlfriend was talking in the background, so I started asking questions. . . . When I started asking questions, my dad let her get on the phone and say things to me that a child should never have to hear. . . . She said that my [dad] didn't want to have anything to do with me anyways.

Thus, Mayely learned that her father was having an affair after her father had his girlfriend get on the phone to answer her questions. Even though Mayely might have preferred that her father answer her questions directly, they were ultimately answered by a third party.

In addition to Mayely's example in which she solicited information from the woman who was having an affair with her father, other participants indicated that they discovered the information of their parents' infidelity from a non-family member without solicitation. Susan, a 22-year-old student, described learning about her mother's infidelity at age 16:

I learned about my mom's cheating through one of my friends. . . . [my friend] saw her hanging out [with] the guy, and my mom told me she was spending the night with some of her friends out of town, but I knew this to be a lie because my friend saw her that night with the man.

Susan discovered that her mother had engaged in infidelity during a conversation with her friend.

Overall, these descriptions and excerpts provided by participants illustrate the different ways adult children discover their parents' infidelity.

## **Discussion**

The goal of this study was to identify how adult children recalled discovering the information of their parents' infidelity. In achieving this goal, the findings add to the existing body of literature on the communication surrounding this topic in many ways. First, many studies on infidelity examine it from the perspective of the romantic, dyadic, or marital couple. In fact, in Blow and Hartnett's (2005a, 2005b) methodological and substantive review of all of the major research studies on infidelity from 1980 to 2005, their only mention of family members (i.e., children, siblings, etc.) occurred when highlighting the inconclusive findings on whether the presence of children and rates of marital infidelity were related. Thus, by examining this topic from an adult child's perspective, this study begins to fill a gap in the literature on infidelity. Second, prior to this study, the only empirical, communication-based study on the discovery of infidelity stemmed from research on dating couples (Afifi et al., 2001). Although the typology provided within Afifi et al.'s (2001) study added insight into the overall understanding of how individuals communicate surrounding infidelity, it did not provide a complete understanding of how this disclosure occurred to those outside the primary relationship. The findings offered by the current study are useful to future researchers examining parental infidelity and provide a starting point from which future studies can take place.

The remainder of this section discusses the ways that adult children recalled discovering the information of their parents' infidelity, compares and contrasts these findings with previous literature on dyadic infidelity, explains the potential connection between these findings and theorizing on family communication, highlights new directions for future research, and outlines the limitations of this examination.

Despite being considered a taboo topic (e.g., Baxter & Wilmot, 1985), the findings from this study illustrate that adult children often become aware of the infidelities that occur in their parents' relationship.

Specifically, of the over 430 individuals surveyed, approximately 28% indicated that they were aware that one or both of their parents engaged in infidelity at some point in time. Thus, this finding further supports Thorson's (2009) claims that children know much more about their parents' relationship than they are given credit.

The greatest contribution this study offers to the literature on family communication regarding infidelity, however, is a more comprehensive typology of infidelity discovery methods. Whereas some of the discovery types identified in this study are consistent with those mentioned by Afifi et al.'s (2001), findings from the current study indicate that the discovery of a parent's infidelity occurs in one of five ways: family member, explicit, offending parent, incremental, and third party discovery. In addition to clarifying and expanding the existing typology of infidelity discovery methods, this study adds to the literature on intentional and unintentional disclosure of private information, given that it took into account the extent to which a parent's infidelity was deliberately kept secret or willingly shared with the participants in the study. As such, three of the discovery methods identified (family member, offending parent, and third party discovery) involved situations in which someone directly shared this information with the respondent, whereas explicit and incremental discovery methods involved situations in which the respondents in the study discovered this information even though they were not the intended target of a message.

The most common way adult children discovered the information of their parents' infidelity was from a family member (e.g., a sibling or the parent who did not engage in infidelity). Among participants who learned this information from a family member, some recalled provoking their family member to provide the information, whereas others did not. This category is new in the literature and highlights the distinction that participants made as they described learning of their parents' infidelity from a family member in contrast to a non-family member. This distinction is not surprising considering that theorizing on privacy management (e.g., Petronio, 1991, 2002, 2004) and family identity (e.g., Soliz & Harwood, 2006) suggest that internal and external privacy boundaries can be shaped and influenced by those who are viewed as being in one's in- or out-group. Thus, future studies on the discovery of parental infidelity should include the category of family member discovery and should consider using communication privacy management theory or theorizing on shared family identity as a lens

through which to examine the influence of family members' disclosing of this information.

The second most frequent type of discovery, explicit discovery, occurred when individuals described accidentally finding evidence, overhearing a conversation, or seeing their parent romantically involved with someone other than their mother or father, which confirmed to them in that single moment that infidelity had occurred. Despite the adult child now knowing this information, often the parent who engaged in infidelity was not aware of their child's discovery, as they did not intend for them to be a recipient of this message. Explicit discovery, as defined in this study, is similar to Afifi et al.'s (2001) red handed discovery type. These categories vary somewhat in that red handed discovery is defined as "catching a partner in the act," whereas explicit discovery allows for those instances in which a parent's infidelity could be discovered without seeing the parent kiss or have sex with an extramarital partner. However, these categories are similar in that the discovery of infidelity occurs instantaneously. Hence, future researchers examining the discovery of infidelity should carefully choose which term to use, as they may not be interchangeable given the nuances associated with each.

Although not as frequent as family member or explicit discoveries, many adult children learned the information of their parents' infidelity from the parent who engaged in the extramarital relationship—offending parent discovery. Whether children sensed that something was going on, which prompted them to ask (solicited), or were told this information without questioning (unsolicited), these discoveries represented instances in which an offending parent intentionally and directly shared the information of their infidelity with their adult child. In relation to past research on the discovery of infidelity, the category of offending parent discovery combines, but was consistent with, Afifi et al.'s (2001) categories of unsolicited and solicited partner discovery in that the information was learned directly from the person who engaged in infidelity. The collapsing of these categories into one was appropriate for the current study, considering that offending parent discovery accounted for less than 13% of all parental discovery stories and that only 4 of the 19 individuals citing an offending parent discovery also indicated that they initiated the inquiry about the situation. Thus, eliminating the specification of solicited or unsolicited from offending parent discovery added parsimony to the overall typology of discovery

methods. Researchers conducting future studies on the discovery of infidelity should consider whether accounting for the solicited or unsolicited nature of offending partner or parent infidelity is central to their research questions or prevalent among participants' experiences.

The fourth most common type of discovery, incremental discovery, occurred as children passively observed multiple events, conversations, or other occurrences that led them to conclude over a period of time that their parent had engaged in infidelity. Moreover, children deduced this information even though no one intended for them to figure it out. This discovery method is similar to explicit discovery in that both categories involve instances in which children's discovery occurred separate from a conversation in which they were the target of the message. Incremental discovery, however, is distinct from explicit because the information of a parent's infidelity was not learned in a single moment. Rather, discovery occurred as an ongoing process. In relation to the existing research on the discovery of infidelity, this category is new. Incremental discovery, however, is consistent with theorizing on uncertainty reduction (e.g., Berger & Calabrese, 1975) and the theory of motivated information management (e.g., Afifi & Afifi, 2009; Afifi & Weiner, 2004) in that individuals regularly use passive strategies to make sense of their surroundings and events that occur in their personal relationships and in new situations. Further, although it is likely that incremental discovery may be a precursor to children soliciting this information from others—because the participants were able to conclude on their own that their parent engaged in infidelity without seeking confirmation from others—incremental discovery must be acknowledged as legitimate and distinct method of discovery in future research.

Finally, third party discoveries, discoveries that occurred after a non-family member disclosed the information of a parental infidelity with the child, were also identified throughout this analysis. Although third party discovery accounted for only 2% of all parental infidelity discovery stories, this category was prevalent among dating couples (Afifi et al., 2001), which suggests that this is a valid discovery method and should be retained in future studies.

In sum, three of the five discovery methods—offending parent (labeled separately as unsolicited partner and solicited partner by Afifi et al., 2001), explicit (similar to red handed discovery in Afifi et al.), and third party discovery (also labeled as third party discovery in Afifi et al.)—were consistent with discovery methods mentioned in previous

research. Two of the five discovery methods identified in the current study—family member and incremental discovery—expand upon what is already known about the discovery of infidelity and should be used in future research on this phenomenon.

The findings from this study provide a foundation for future studies of parental infidelity. First, researchers have argued that infidelity has more detrimental effects than benefits on the romantic relationships of those individuals who discover it (Cano & O'Leary, 2000; Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2005; Tafoya & Spitzberg, 2007). Atkins, Eldridge, Baucom, and Christensen (2005) have argued that the disclosure of infidelity is important for couple's therapy treatment success, and knowing how family members learn about a parents' infidelity may be of similar importance to fostering family relationships post-disclosure. Furthermore, Afifi et al. (2001) found that the way an individual learns of a partner's infidelity influences relational outcomes. Thus, in order to better understand the ripple effect of this event on family relationships, scholars must determine what, if any, influence the way an adult child discovers the information of their parents' infidelity has on the parent-child relationship using this new typology. Second, researchers might explore whether the disclosure of infidelity has an impact on the relationship between the sender and receiver of this information—for example, a research question such as "Are these disclosures detrimental to relationships or do they bring individuals closer?" might be worth exploring. Third, Afifi, McManus, Hutchinson, and Baker (2007) found that inappropriate parental disclosures negatively influence children's well-being. Thus, future studies might pursue how, if at all, discovering the information of a parent's infidelity might influence a child's well-being and determine whether the method of learning about a parent's infidelity influences the impact on the child. Finally, findings from the current study suggest communication privacy management (Petronio, 1991, 2002, 2004), shared family identity (Soliz & Harwood, 2006), uncertainty reduction (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), and the theory of motivated information management (Afifi & Afifi, 2009; Afifi & Weiner, 2004) may contribute to our understanding of how children learn about their parents' infidelity. Hence, researchers conducting future studies on infidelity should consider using these theoretical frameworks to guide their inquiries on this topic.

Although the results of this examination provide an enhanced understanding of the ways in which adult children discover the

information of their parents' infidelity, specific limitations should be taken into account when interpreting these findings. First, data from this study included responses from individuals who reflected upon the discovery of their parents' infidelity, often many years after learning this information. Although the nature of infidelity research is regularly limited to collecting information based on retrospective accounts, researchers conducting similar examinations may want to limit the number of years that have passed since learning about a parent's infidelity. Second, individuals participating in this study were solicited using snowball sampling from a large Midwest university, social networks, online groups, and discussion boards. Consequently, researchers must be cautious in interpreting the rates at which children discover the information of their parents' infidelity. Third, participants involved in the current study were relatively homogenous in that most were European American (white) females reporting upon a father's infidelity. Although it makes sense that most would report on a father's infidelity given that the rates of infidelity are higher among husbands than wives (Laumann et al., 1994), the lack of diversity among participants' gender and ethnicity should be considered in future examinations of parental infidelity. Finally, this study used an online questionnaire to collect data. Although this method yielded a moderately large sample and allowed the researcher to develop a comprehensive typology of the way adult children discover their parents' infidelity, it did not allow for in-depth, follow-up questions about the conversations surrounding this discovery to be asked. Despite the concerns surrounding anonymity that are connected with infidelity research (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a), researchers conducting future examinations of children's experiences with their parents' infidelity should consider conducting face-to-face interviews with willing participants regarding this topic. Doing so will allow researchers to understand more about the family relationships among participants before and after this disclosure takes place as well as to uncover the ways in which conversations about this topic may have unfolded over time.

Overall, this study is one of only a handful that has examined infidelity at the family level. In light of its limitations, the findings from the current study provide insight into the ways in which infidelity is disclosed to those connected to the couple and offers a more complex understanding of how infidelity is communicatively managed within families.

## References

- Affi, T. D., McManus, T., Hutchinson, S., & Baker, B. (2007). Inappropriate parental divorce disclosures, the factors that prompt them, and their impact on parents' and adolescents' well-being. *Communication Monographs, 74*, 78–102. doi:10.1080/03637750701196870
- Affi, W. A., & Afifi, T. D. (2009). Avoidance among adolescents in conversations about their parents' relationship: Applying the theory of motivated information management. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 26*, 488–511. doi:10.1177/0265407509350869
- Affi, W. A., Falato, W. L., & Weiner, J. L. (2001). Identity concerns following a severe relational transgression: The role of discovery method for the relational outcomes of infidelity. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 18*, 291–308. doi:10.1177/0265407501182007
- Affi, W. A., & Weiner, J. L. (2004). Toward a theory of motivated information management. *Communication Theory, 14*, 167–190. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/ct/14.2.167>
- Allen, E. S., Atkins, D. C., Baucom, D. H., Snyder, D. K., Gordon, K. C., & Glass, S. P. (2005). Intrapersonal, interpersonal, and contextual factors in engaging and responding to extramarital involvement. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice, 12*, 101–130. doi:10.1093/clipsy.bpi014
- Atkins, D. C., Eldridge, K., Baucom, D. H., & Christensen, A. (2005). Infidelity and behavioral couple therapy: Optimism in the face of betrayal. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 73*, 144–150. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-006X.73.1.144>
- Baxter, L. A., & Babbie, E. (2004). *The basics of communication research*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Baxter, L. A., & Wilmot, W. W. (1985). Taboo topics in close relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 2*, 253–269. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0265407585023002>
- Berger, C. R. & Calabrese, R. J. (1975). Some explorations in initial interaction and beyond: Toward a developmental theory of interpersonal communication. *Human Communication Research, 1*, 99–112. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.1975.tb00258.x>
- Blow, A. J., & Hartnett, K. (2005a). Infidelity in committed relationships I: A methodological review. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 31*, 183–216. doi:10.1111/j.1752-0606.2005.tb01555.x
- Blow, A. J., & Hartnett, K. (2005b). Infidelity in committed relationships II: A substantive review. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 31*, 217–233. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.2005.tb01556.x>

- Bulmer, M. (1979). Concepts in the analysis of qualitative data. *Sociological Review*, 27, 651–677. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.1979.tb00354.x>
- Butler, M. H., Harper, J. M., & Seedall, R. B. (2009). Facilitated disclosure versus clinical accommodation of infidelity secrets: An early pivot point in couple therapy. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 35, 125–143. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.2008.00106.x>
- Cano, A., & O'Leary, D. (2000). Infidelity and separations precipitate major depressive episodes and symptoms of nonspecific depression and anxiety. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 68, 774–781. doi:10.1037//0022-006X.68.5.774
- Cherlin, A. J. (1992). *Marriage, divorce, remarriage*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Duncombe, J., & Marsden, D. (2004). Affairs and children. In J. Duncombe, K. Harrison, G. Allen, & D. Marsden (Eds.), *The state of affairs: Explorations in infidelity and commitment* (pp. 187–201). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Feeney, J. A. (2004). Hurt feelings in couple relationships: Towards integrative models of the negative effects of hurtful events. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 21, 487–508. doi:10.1177/0265407504044844
- Gordon, K. C., Baucom, D. H., & Snyder, D. K. (2004). An integrative intervention for promoting recovery from extramarital affairs. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 30, 213–231. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.2004.tb01235.x>
- Kelly, E. L., & Conley, J. J. (1987). Personality and compatibility: A prospective analysis of marital stability and marital satisfaction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52, 27–40. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.52.1.27>
- Laumann, E. O., Gagnon, J. H., Michael, R. T., & Michaels, S. (1994). *The social organization of sexuality: Sexual practices in the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Olson, M. M., Russell, C. S., Higgins-Kessler, M., & Miller, R. B. (2002). Emotional processes following disclosure of an extramarital affair. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 28, 423–434. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.2002.tb00367.x>
- Petronio, S. (1991). Communication boundary management: A theoretical model of managing disclosure of private information between marital couples. *Communication Theory*, 1, 311–335. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.1991.tb00023.x>

- Petronio, S. (2002). *Boundaries of privacy: Dialectics of disclosure*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Petronio, S. (2004). Road to developing communication privacy management theory: Narrative in progress, please stand by. *Journal of Family Communication, 4*, 193–207. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s15327698jfc0403&4\\_6](http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s15327698jfc0403&4_6)
- Saffer, J. B., Sansone, P., & Gentry, J. (1979). The awesome burden upon the child who must keep a family secret. *Child Psychiatry and Human Development, 10*, 35–40. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF01433635>
- Soliz, J., & Harwood, J. (2006). Shared family identity, age salience, and intergroup contact: Investigation of the grandparent–grandchild relationship. *Communication Monographs, 73*, 87–107. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03637750500534388>
- Sweeney, M. M., & Horwitz, A. V. (2001). Infidelity, initiation, and the emotional climate of divorce: Are there implications for mental health? *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 42*, 295–309. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3090216>
- Tafoya, M. A. & Spitzberg, B. H. (2007). The dark side of infidelity: Its nature, prevalence, and communicative functions. In B. H. Spitzberg & W. R. Cupach (Eds.), *The dark side of interpersonal communication* (2nd ed., pp. 201–242). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Thorson, A. R. (2009). Adult children's experiences with their parent's infidelity: Communicative protection and access rules in the absence of divorce. *Communication Studies, 60*, 32–48. doi: 10.1080/10510970802623591
- Thorson, A. R. (2012). Parental infidelity: Adult children's attributions for parents' extramarital relationships. In L. M. Webb & F. C. Dickson (Eds.), *Communication for families in crisis: Theories, methods, strategies* (pp. 55–75). New York: Peter Lang.
- Tulane, S., Skogrand, L., & DeFrain, J. (2011). Couples in great marriages who considered divorcing. *Marriage and Family Review, 47*(5), 289–310. doi:10.1080/01494929.2011.594215
- Vangelisti, A. L. (1994). Family secrets: Forms, functions and correlates. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 11*, 113–135. doi:10.1177/0265407594111007
- Vangelisti, A. L., & Gerstenberger, M. (2004). Communication and marital infidelity. In J. Duncombe, K. Harrison, G. Allen, & D. Marsden (Eds.), *The state of affairs: Explorations in infidelity and commitment* (pp. 59–78). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Allison R. Thorson, Department of Communication Studies, University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Allison R. Thorson is now at the Communication Studies Department, University of San Francisco. Special thanks to Jordan Soliz, Christine E. Rittenour, and Cassandra LeClair-Underberg for their contributions to this manuscript. In addition, the author wishes to thank participants for sharing their personal experiences with parental infidelity. Correspondence to Allison R. Thorson, Communication Studies Department, University of San Francisco, 2130 Fulton Street, San Francisco, CA 94117-1080. E-mail: athorson@usfca.edu.