

PERSON-CENTERED MESSAGES, ATTRIBUTIONS OF RESPONSIBILITY, AND THE
WILLINGNESS TO FORGIVE PARENTAL INFIDELITY

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Person-Centered Messages, Attributions of Responsibility, and the Willingness to Forgive
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Using the dual process theory of supportive communication (Burleson, 2009) and attribution theory (Fincham, Beach, & Bradbury, 1989), this study tested the degree to which person-centered disclosures about parental infidelity are associated with young adult children's attributions of responsibility for infidelity and willingness to forgive the offending parent. Additionally, this study used a socio-cultural perspective to investigate the degree to which the biological sex of the offending parent moderated the associations among person-centeredness, attributions of responsibility, and willingness to forgive. Participants included 299 young adults who were randomly assigned to hypothetical scenarios manipulating the person-centeredness of the nonoffending parent's account of infidelity and the biological sex of the offending parent. Overall, the results provided minimal support for the theoretical line of reasoning advanced in this report. Although the person-centeredness of a nonoffending parent's account did not predict young adult children's willingness to forgive, the children's attributions of responsibility for the offense did inversely predict their willingness to forgive. Likewise, the biological sex of the offending parent failed to moderate the combined associations between person-centeredness, attributions of responsibility, and willingness to forgive, although meaningful differences in attributions of responsibility and willingness to forgive did emerge based on the sex of the offending parent.

The results of this study provide intriguing directions for both the dual process theory of supportive communication and attribution theory. The findings enhance our understanding of how person-centered messages function in contexts outside of social support. Moreover, the results lend further support to attribution theory by demonstrating that part of understanding and making sense of third-party relational transgressions involves assessments of blame for the individuals they believe are responsible.

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Person-Centered Messages, Attributions of Responsibility, and the Willingness to Forgive
Parental Infidelity

Infidelity is commonly viewed as one of the most severe relational transgressions a romantic partner can commit due to the irreparable damage it can often have on the individuals involved. *Infidelity* is defined as any act that violates the commitment norms or rules of a relationship (Hall & Fincham, 2006; Weiser & Weigel, 2014). Infidelity research within the field of communication has focused primarily on the antecedents, discovery, and outcomes of infidelity, as well as responses to this transgression within romantic relationships (W. A. Afifi, Falato, & Weiner, 2001; Allen et al., 2005; Amato & Previti, 2003; Amato & Rogers, 1997; Cano & O’Leary, 2000; Hall & Fincham, 2006; Treas & Giesen, 2000; Weiser & Weigel, 2014; Whisman & Snyder, 2007). The ongoing effort of scholars to understand infidelity over the last decade stems from the severe effects that infidelity can have on a nonoffending partner due to the brazen violation of relational rules or norms (both explicit and implicit) that are apparent when a partner chooses to seek another romantic partner (Metts & Cupach, 2007). Specifically, nonoffending partners of infidelity often experience extreme negative emotions, decreased personal well-being, lowered self-esteem, extreme disappointment, self-doubt, depression, and anxiety (Cano & O’Leary, 2000; Hall & Fincham, 2006; Weiser & Weigel, 2014; Whisman & Snyder, 2007). Given the psychological and physiological health outcomes associated with the discovery of infidelity, researchers should examine how romantic partners and members of their familial and social networks respond to infidelity and make sense of the transgression.

Despite the value of infidelity research within romantic relationships, much less is known about how infidelity affects members of the romantic couple’s social network, including family members such as children (T. D. Afifi, Afifi, & Coho, 2009; Lusteran, 2005; Norona et al.,

2015; Thorson, 2008, 2009, 2014). Indeed, with a few notable exceptions (e.g., Thorson, 2008, 2009, 2014), the bulk of infidelity research thus far has focused primarily on voluntary relationships (such as romantic relationships), yet the implications of infidelity are likely to impact those beyond the immediate relationship experiencing the transgression, particularly in families. For many individuals, family relationships are considered to be nonvoluntary relationships. Nonvoluntary relationships are relationships that individuals do not consciously enter into and that individuals feel as though they have no option but to maintain (Hess, 2000). Given that parent-child relationships are typically viewed as nonvoluntary relationships, it stands to reason that the discovery of infidelity within the marital (or interparental) relationship has the potential to affect children in deleterious, but unique ways. For example, Lusterman (2005) found that children feel discomfort, confusion, and a sense of family dissolution upon learning about a parent's act of infidelity. Consequently, how children learn of their parent's infidelity and the effects that such knowledge may have on their own relationship with each parent merits further investigation.

Unlike the processes through which romantic partners discover infidelity (cf. W. A. Afifi et al., 2001), young adult children typically discover parental infidelity through the nonoffending parent's disclosures and/or accounts (Thorson, 2008). Specifically, Thorson (2008) advanced a typology of parental infidelity discovery methods that identifies five distinct categories about whom the child learned about the infidelity from: discovery from a family member (other than the parent who cheated), explicit discovery (i.e., the child overheard specific details about parental infidelity despite not being the intended target), discovery from a parent who cheated, incremental discovery (i.e., the child overheard vague information numerous times about parental infidelity despite not being the intended target), and third party discovery. Thorson

found that the most common type of discovery method was discovery from a family member (37.6%), specifically, an unsolicited account that came from the nonoffending parent. Although Thorson's findings identified different methods through which children discover parental infidelity, what remains unanswered from this line of work is how different message features of parental infidelity accounts influence the sense-making processes of children and the relational implications of infidelity for the parent-child relationship. Indeed, the way in which the nonoffending parent discloses an act of infidelity to a young adult child may play an important role in how the child begins the sense-making process and experiences the emotional and relational fallout of infidelity within the parent-child relationship (T. D. Afifi et al., 2009; Thorson, 2009, 2014).

The present study seeks to extend these lines of research on parental infidelity by examining message features of nonoffending parent's accounts and young adult children's willingness to forgive. The message characteristics of a nonoffending parent's disclosure of a severe transgression may affect the likelihood that a young adult child will forgive the offending parent. Specifically, the person-centeredness of a nonoffending parent's account (or lack thereof) may elicit feelings in the young adult child that affect the child's willingness to forgive. The *person-centeredness* of a message is the degree to which a support provider acknowledges, validates, and contextualizes the known feelings or inferred feelings of a support-seeker (High & Solomon, 2016; Jones, 2004). When nonoffending parents' accounts of parental infidelity are sensitive to the needs and emotional reactions of their young adult children, such messages may soften the emotional hurt and indignation that children feel towards the offending parent, which in turn could lead to a greater willingness to forgive the offending parent. Thus, this study will investigate the degree to which the person-centeredness of a nonoffending parent's disclosure

regarding infidelity predicts the young adult child's willingness to forgive the offending parent. Given the prominent role that attributions of blame and responsibility are likely to play when interpreting what parental infidelity means for the family members involved, this study will also test children's attributions of responsibility as potential mediators of the association between person-centered accounts and children's willingness to forgive. Finally, there is evidence to suggest that men and women differ in their interpretations of infidelity (Shakelford, Buss, & Bennett, 2002) and that a double standard exists between men and women in terms of how sexual infidelity is viewed by society at large (Crawford & Popp, 2003). Hence, this study will investigate the degree to which the effects of person-centered messages and attributions of responsibility (i.e., blame) on a child's willingness to forgive depend on the biological sex of the offending parent.

Theoretical Perspective

Infidelity and Forgiveness

Although relational transgressions represent a common topic of inquiry within communication research, what constitutes a relational transgression in the minds of relational partners varies widely. To date, Metts and Cupach (2007) identified three distinct categories of how researchers typically conceptualize relational transgressions: rule violations, hurtful events, and infidelity. *Rule violations* focus on events, actions, and behaviors that violate the implicit and explicit rules that partners hold for their relationship (Boon & Sulsky, 1997; Metts & Cupach, 2007). *Hurtful events* focus on the actions and behaviors of one partner that hurt the other partner's feelings (Metts & Cupach, 2007; Vangelisti et al., 2005). *Infidelity* focuses on the introduction of a competitor into the relationship via an emotional and/or sexual attachment. In essence, infidelity occurs when one partner's actions are perceived as violating the other

partner's expectations and standards of relational exclusivity (Tafoya & Spitzberg, 2007). What makes infidelity distinct from the other two categories of relational transgressions, despite the encompassing of both rule violations and a hurtful event, is the unique problem infidelity imposes on the relationship (Metts & Cupach, 2007). Among a myriad of transgressions that partners might commit, infidelity is often considered to be the most severe given its deleterious effects on the partners involved in the relationship (e.g., W. A. Afifi et al., 2001; Cano & O'Leary, 2000; Cano, O'Leary, & Heinz, 2004; Sweeney & Horwitz, 2001).

Across the social sciences, researchers investigating infidelity have looked primarily at the psychological effects of infidelity on romantic partners (Cano & O'Leary, 2000; Cano et al., 2004; Hall & Fincham, 2006) and subsequent rates of divorce (Amato & Previti, 2003; Amato & Rogers, 1997; Sweeney & Horwitz, 2001). In the field of communication, however, scholars have investigated communicative responses to infidelity (e.g., Guerrero & Bachman, 2008; Weiser & Weigel, 2014) and the discovery of infidelity (e.g., W. A. Afifi et al., 2001). For instance, W. A. Afifi et al. (2001) found four discovery categories within romantic relationships: *unsolicited third party discovery* (i.e., being told by others about the infidelity), *unsolicited partner discovery* (i.e., the transgressor's unsolicited disclosure about the infidelity), *solicited discovery* (i.e., confronting the transgressor about his/her infidelity), and *red handed discovery* (i.e., the nonoffending partner sees the transgressor's infidelity).

Although W. A. Afifi et al.'s (2001) work advanced an understanding of discovery methods in romantic relationships, to date, there has been limited investigation on how infidelity affects third party members such as children. One notable exception is Thorson's (2008, 2009) research, which focused on children's discovery methods of parental infidelity but surprisingly found no connection between the type of discovery method reported and relational satisfaction or

social support within the parent-child relationship. In a follow-up investigation, Thorson (2014) focused on different types of messages from parents about parental infidelity and the effect such messages have on feelings of being caught. She found that messages that urged the child to uncover information, to serve as a mediator of their parents' disputes, and/or to field other family members' opinions exacerbated feelings of being caught. Although Thorson's (2014) study further explains a child's feelings following disclosures of parental infidelity, it does not go beyond the individual identification of feelings of being caught to the relational implications that could occur due to this feeling. Specifically, when a parent discloses parental infidelity in a way that perpetuates feelings of being caught, the process of forgiveness by the child may be jeopardized due to the division of loyalties between the offending parent and the nonoffending parent.

Forgiveness following infidelity is complex due to the emotions that are felt initially and how those emotions change over time (Metts & Cupach, 2007). Boon and Sulsky (1997) stated that "forgiveness is a decision to forgo retribution and claims for restitution" (p. 20). The most essential component of forgiveness is the change from negative emotions about the transgression and the offending individual to more positive motivations toward the offending individual (Metts & Cupach, 2007). The act of forgiveness has been most commonly studied as an individual process (e.g., Kelley & Waldron, 2005; Morse & Metts, 2011), but Brown (2011) proposed that forgiveness is better conceived of as a co-constructed process between relational partners than as an individual act by the nonoffending partner of a transgression. Communication scholars have taken this approach and most recently studied how forgiveness is communicated. For example, Carr and Wang (2012) examined the ways in which individuals communicatively negotiate the process of forgiveness in family relationships. They discovered that the dialectical tensions

involved in familial forgiveness complicated the process and resulted in forgiveness being negotiated over time.

Despite the tensions associated with communicating forgiveness in family relationships, some scholars have identified prescriptive techniques that can be used to elicit forgiveness. Specifically, researchers have shown that the communicative aspects that are most likely to make a difference in the post-transgression forgiveness of romantic partners are apologies (Morse & Metts, 2011), explicit acknowledgement, nonverbal assurances, and compensation (Waldron & Kelley, 2005). Although this body of work has advanced an understanding of communication behaviors that elicit forgiveness within romantic relationships, to date, researchers have yet to consider how similar communication behaviors enacted within parent-child relationships might (or might not) enhance the forgiveness process. Thus, further research on how parents communicate about infidelity to their children is needed, given that infidelity affects not only the romantic partners involved in the transgression, but third party members of their social and familial network, such as children (Carr & Wang, 2012; Thorson, 2008, 2009, 2014). Given that apologies and nonverbal assurances enhance the likelihood that post-transgression forgiveness will occur (Morse & Metts, 2011), it stands to reason that nonoffending parent accounts about an act of infidelity that rely on person-centered messages may convey a sense of assurance and support that encourages young adult children to be more forgiving of the offending parent.

The Dual-Process Theory of Supportive Communication and Person-Centered Messages

Interpersonal communication scholars have devoted more than two decades of research on supportive communication due to the psychological benefits it can provide for individuals during times of distress. Specifically, the dual-process theory of supportive communication seeks to explain and predict how, when, and why certain variables in supportive interactions produce

the effects that they do (Burlson, 2009). Although numerous factors affect how support recipients respond to supportive messages, Burlson (2009) grouped them into four broad categories: message features (e.g., the specific communicative behaviors), source features (e.g., relationship with the recipient), context features (e.g., setting, medium, and situation at hand), and recipient features (e.g., demographic characteristics, personality, and cognitive abilities). Of particular importance is the amount of scrutiny or issue-relevant thinking about the message that the recipient gives. Specifically, the theory proposes that the message, source, and context have the strongest effects on the perceived helpfulness of the message if the support-seeker is thinking deeply about each factor. Issue-relevant thinking is dependent on the support-seekers motivation and ability to process the message.

Although issue-relevant thinking is one major component of the dual-process theory of supportive communication, the message content also can significantly affect the likelihood of achieving desired outcomes. Burlson (2009) described message content as “what is explicitly said by a helper in the effort to render assistance” (p. 23), and one of the primary features of message content is quality. The quality of the message content refers to how sophisticated the support is; in other words, it refers to whether or not the message can be considered helpful, sensitive, and effective in the given situation. One of the most common types of sophisticated, emotionally supportive messages is highly person-centered messages. Person-centered messages are messages that recognize and adapt to the emotional, subjective, and relational characteristics of a given situation (High & Solomon, 2016). Highly person-centered (HPC) messages occur when a support provider acknowledges, validates, and contextualizes the support-seeker’s feelings, whereas low person-centered (LPC) messages occur when the support provider ignores or denies the support seeker’s emotions (High & Solomon, 2016).

Numerous studies have combined the message characteristic of person-centeredness with a variety of other message qualities to determine the degree of emotional change that occurs as a result of supportive communication. For instance, researchers have examined attachment styles (Jones, 2005) and the support provider's sex (High & Solomon, 2016) in combination with person-centered messages to examine the overall effectiveness of supportive message efforts. One of the more common investigations of person-centeredness involves the use of nonverbal immediacy cues (Bodie & Jones, 2012; Jones, 2004; Jones & Guerrero, 2001; Jones & Wirtz, 2006). For instance, Jones and Guerrero (2001) found that participants rated HPC messages that included nonverbal immediacy cues as more comforting than LPC messages that excluded nonverbal immediacy cues. Despite the importance of these findings, however, some scholars have questioned the tendency to rely on the combination of nonverbal immediacy cues and person-centeredness when examining the helpfulness of person-centered messages, to the general neglect of considering each factor separately. This reliance is problematic because it implicitly assumes that both factors are equally important for the desired effects of social support to occur. However, a few scholars have tested person-centeredness as distinct from nonverbal immediacy cues and found that immediacy cues were less impactful, and person-centeredness was more impactful, on emotional improvement (High & Solomon, 2016; Jones & Burleson, 1997).

In general, then, researchers have demonstrated that people evaluate HPC messages as more appropriate, sensitive, effective, supportive, and helpful than LPC messages (e.g., Jones, 2004; Jones & Burleson, 1997). These positive evaluations of HPC messages lead to emotional improvement by helping recipients assess and make sense of the severity of the problem, and by communicating warmth, care, and compassion to the support-seeker (High & Dillard, 2012; High & Solomon, 2016; Jones & Burleson, 1997). When appropriated to parent-child relationships and

to the context of learning about a parent's act of infidelity, the emotional improvement felt from a highly person-centered account about the infidelity could lead to feelings of support and helpfulness that encourage a willingness on behalf of the child to forgive the offending parent. That is, it stands to reason that there may be a positive relationship between the level of person-centeredness that a nonoffending parent's message possesses and the likelihood that the young adult child will forgive the offending parent. To test this line of reasoning, the following hypothesis was advanced for consideration:

H1: Accounts by the nonoffending parent that elicit perceptions of person-centeredness in the young adult child will elicit a greater willingness from the young adult child to forgive the offending parent than accounts that do not.

Attributions of Responsibility and Willingness to Forgive

A second, but equally important goal of this study was to examine how children's attributions of responsibility influence their willingness to forgive an offending parent. Not only are the accounts of nonoffending parents likely to be associated with children's willingness to forgive, but the degree to which children themselves hold the offending parent responsible for the infidelity may also influence the forgiveness process. That is, central to a child's sense-making about the infidelity are assessments of responsibility (i.e., blame). One theory that informs our understanding of how individuals assign responsibility for relational behavior is attribution theory. Attributions are defined as the way in which humans construct understandings of their own and other's actions (Rickard, 2014). According to the theory, attributions consist of four dimensions: locus, stability, specificity, and responsibility. The present study focused on the attribution of responsibility, or specifically, the degree to which the young adult child blames the cheating parent for the situation that occurred (Spitzberg & Manusov, 2015).

Attribution theory proposes that people naturally behave as naïve scientists as a way to make sense of the world. Therefore, when an event occurs, people seek to make judgments about the causes of the event and who is to be held responsible. The two different judgements than can be made concerning blame are causal attributions and responsibility attributions. Causal attributions are the determination of who or what caused the event and responsibility attributions concern who is to be held responsible for the event (Fincham, Beach, & Bradbury, 1989). Of particular interest to this study is the attribution of responsibility due to the third party assessment of the parents' handling of the transgression. The extent to which children hold an offending parent entirely responsible (as opposed to only partly to blame) for the infidelity may affect the likelihood that forgiveness will occur (Boon & Sulsky, 1997; Fincham, Paleari & Regalia, 2002; Hall & Fincham, 2006;).

Although only a handful of studies have investigated the connection between attributions of responsibility and forgiveness, researchers have found an association between attributions of responsibility and forgiveness in the context of romantic relationships (Boon & Sulsky, 1997). Boon and Sulsky (1997) investigated the consistency between the cues of intent, severity, avoidability, and attributions of blame in a hypothetical relational transgression. They found no significant correlation between varying cues of severity and the attribution of responsibility made by the participant, suggesting that the severity of the transgression has little to do with the attribution of blame that is given to the offender. Despite the non-significant association between the severity of the offense and attributions of responsibility, however, Boon and Sulky did find a meaningful association between attributions of blame and forgiveness after participants read the hypothetical transgression. Specifically, their results showed that people's evaluations of

blameworthiness and their decisions to forgive are fairly stable across hypothetical situations of a partner's betrayal of trust.

Boon and Sulksy's (1997) findings demonstrated that attributions of blame (i.e., responsibility) are associated with individuals' willingness to forgiveness, yet their findings did not consider blameworthiness and forgiveness in the context of infidelity, nor as a function of specific message qualities in parental accounts of infidelity (e.g., person-centeredness). Most researchers examining forgiveness and attributions of responsibility have examined within-dyad processes of forgiveness, not third-party forgiveness. Although researchers have yet to consider how children may or may not forgive an offending parent, there is little reason to suspect that the association between attributions of responsibility and forgiveness within the parent-child relationship would necessarily be different. Thus, the attributions of responsibility that young adults have for the offending parent's actions may affect the likelihood that they will forgive the offending parent. In order to test this possibility, a second hypothesis was advanced for consideration:

H2: Young adult children's attributions of responsibility (i.e., blame) for an offending parent's infidelity are inversely associated with their willingness to forgive the parent.

Person-Centered Accounts and Attributions of Responsibility

Not only are attributions of responsibility likely to predict an individual's willingness to forgiveness, but in the context of parental infidelity, the quality of the nonoffending parent's account may indirectly predict the child's willingness to forgive by reducing the degree of blame that children assign to the offending parent. Despite limited research on the effects of person-centered messages on attributions of responsibility, Jones and Burleson (1997) found that the degree of person-centeredness that a support provider believes is appropriate to employ is

affected by the attribution of blame that they give for the situation to the support-seeker. That is, when a support provider perceives that a support seeker bears little responsibility for a distressful situation, the support provider will rate a HPC message as more appropriate for the situation.

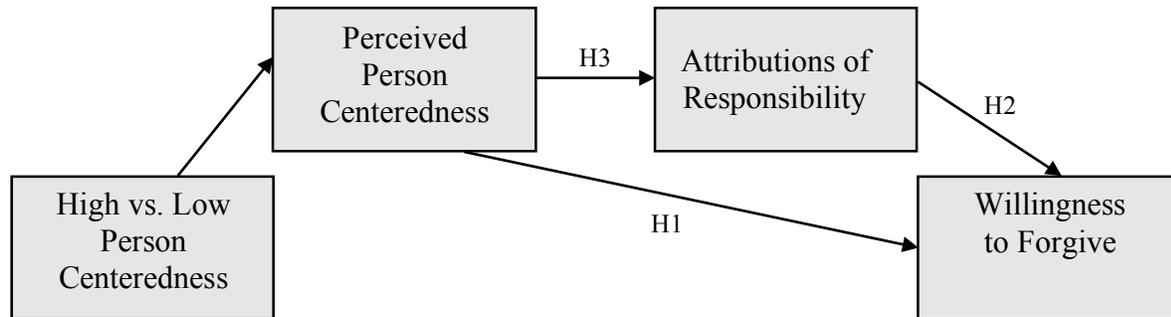
With the exception of this one finding from the perspective of the support provider (not from the recipient of a supportive account), researchers have not yet considered the degree to which attributions of responsibility for an act of infidelity vary as a function of person-centered accounts. In the context of one parent's account to a child of the other parent's transgression, one might suspect that an account that displays support and care and considers the child's needs and interests in what promises to be a difficult situation may soften the intensity of negative emotions and blame associated with the discovery of the infidelity. To test this possibility, a third hypothesis was advanced for consideration:

H3: The perceived person-centeredness of the nonoffending parent's account is inversely associated with the degree of blame in young adult children's attributions of responsibility for an offending parent's infidelity.

Furthermore, one might reason that if person-centered messages help reduce attributions of blame and responsibility for a relational transgression, and if less intense feelings of blame lead to a greater willingness to forgive, then attributions of responsibility may mediate the positive association between person-centered messages and the willingness to forgive. In other words, an nonoffending parent's ability to use person-centered communication when disclosing an offending parent's actions to their child may help the child to one day forgive the offending parent by reducing the degree of blame the child feels toward the parent. To test this line of reasoning, the following hypothesis was advanced and depicted in Figure 1:

H4: Young adult children's attributions of responsibility (i.e., blame) for an offending parent's infidelity will mediate the positive association between the nonoffending parent's person-centered account and the children's willingness to forgive the offending parent.

Figure 1. Hypothesized Model of Attributions of Responsibility and Perceived Person-Centeredness as Mediators of Person-Centered Messages and Willingness to Forgive



Sex Differences within Infidelity

Finally, this study tested the degree to which person-centered accounts of parental infidelity, attributions of responsibility, and children's willingness to forgive varied as a function of the biological sex of the offending parent, as extant research suggests that men and women respond differently to the discovery of infidelity in romantic relationships. Sex differences in response to infidelity have been studied through both an evolutionary lens and a socio-cultural lens, with both perspectives revealing relatively consistent differences in the ways in which men and women make sense of, and respond to, infidelity (Atwood & Seifer, 1997; Buss et al., 1992; Drigotas & Barta, 2001; Gangestad & Thornhill, 1997; Green, 2006; Penn, Hernandez, & Bermudez, 1997; Shackelford, Buss, & Bennett, 2002). Of interest to this study is the response of the transgressed individual (i.e., the child), and therefore, a socio-cultural perspective may illuminate how culture influences responses to infidelity depending on the sex of the transgressor. From this perspective, women are expected to refuse sex or set the sexual limits within a relationship and men are taught to be more aggressive in both a physical and sexual way (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Hackathorn & Harvey, 2010). Women are expected to conform to these gender stereotypes and are judged more harshly than men when they do not. In fact, some scholars contend that the act of adultery is more socially punishable for women than it is for men (Hackathorn & Harvey, 2010).

To date, only one study has examined how sex differences affect perceptions of infidelity and an individual's willingness to forgive (Shackelford et al., 2002). According to Shackelford et al. (2002), men found it more difficult to forgive a partner's sexual infidelity than a partner's emotional infidelity, whereas women found it more difficult to forgive emotional infidelity than did men. Although their findings do not speak directly to a young adult child's willingness to

forgive an offending parent, when coupled with research from the socio-cultural perspective on infidelity, their results suggest that the person-centeredness of the nonoffending parent's account, the degree of responsibility attributed by the child to the offending parent, and the willingness of a young adult child to forgive the offending parent may depend on the biological sex of the offending parent. To test this possibility, a final hypothesis was advanced for consideration:

H5: The unique and combined contributions of person-centered messages and attributions of responsibility to young adult children's willingness to forgive depend on the biological sex of the offending parent.

Method

Experimental Design

In a 2 x 2 factorial design, participants were randomly exposed to one of four hypothetical scenarios (see Appendix A). The degree of person-centeredness displayed in a nonoffending parent's account of an offending parent's infidelity was manipulated across two conditions (high vs. low person-centeredness; or HPC vs. LPC) and across the biological sex of the offending parent (mother vs. father). Using previous research on parental infidelity (e.g., Thorson, 2009, 2014) and examples of person-centered messages from MacGeorge (2001) and Jones and Guerrero (2001), two different accounts of a parent's act of infidelity were created so as to be realistic and equivalent. The biological sex of the offending parent was then altered to create four possible conditions (i.e., HPC with offending father, LPC with offending father, HPC with offending mother, LPC with offending mother). After reading an assigned scenario, participants completed a series of survey measures assessing the degree of person-centeredness in the nonoffending parent's account, attributions of responsibility for the infidelity, and willingness to forgive (see Appendix B).

Participants and Procedures

Participants included 299 young adults currently enrolled in basic communication courses at a private university in the United States. Upon securing human subjects approval, students who provided informed consent completed an online questionnaire using Qualtrics software. Surveys were completed anonymously and instructors granted students minimal class credit upon completion (less than 2%). All participation took place outside of regular class time. Upon completion of the survey, students were thanked for their participation.

A pilot study was conducted with the hypothetical scenarios prior to conducting the present study. The scenarios were carefully created to be realistic, to depict high vs. low levels of person-centeredness, and to be equivalent across manipulations. In an effort to enhance the generalizability of the scenarios, the situation depicted a nonoffending parent calling to find out how school was going for his or her young adult child. The parent then begins to give an account of the other parent's act of infidelity using messages that varied in person-centeredness. The manipulations of person-centeredness needed to differ significantly but also needed to not be deemed as unimaginable by the participant. Therefore, person-centered messages were adapted from Jones (2005), Jones and Burleson (1997), and Jones and Guerrero's (2001) research. Lastly, despite the differences in person-centeredness between the scenarios, the scenarios needed to be almost equivalent in wording, and thus, the two manipulations were revised numerous times to ensure equivalence. Although the sex of the nonoffending parent (and by extension the offending parent) was alternated in both high and low person-centered messages in the present study, the pilot study was conducted to test only the manipulation of person-centeredness. Thus, the nonoffending parent in the pilot study was male and the offending parent was female. In the pilot study, an independent samples t-test was conducted to compare high vs. low person-centered

messages in the two conditions ($n = 38$). The results of this test revealed a significant difference in perceived person-centeredness across the two conditions, $t(36) = 7.00$ $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .58$, as participants rated the HPC account ($M = 5.50$, $SD = .94$) as more person-centered than the LPC account ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.00$). Consequently, the hypothetical scenarios functioned as intended and were utilized in the main study to manipulate person-centeredness.

Measures

Perceived person-centeredness. Jones and Guerrero's (2001) person-centeredness scale was adapted to measure participants' perceptions of person-centeredness in the assigned scenario. The original scale consists of 14 semantic differential items assessing a partner's behavior during a conversation about a highly emotional, distressing situation. In this study, the scale was altered to reflect the unique relationship of a parent-child dyad and the relational transgression of infidelity. Participants were asked to rate the degree to which they believed the nonoffending parent's account was person-centered (i.e., "sensitive-insensitive," "not understanding-understanding," "helpful-unhelpful," "uncaring-caring," "warm-cold," and "unsupportive-supportive"). In this study, the six-item scale produced an alpha coefficient of .93.

Attributions of responsibility. In the absence of an established measure, young adult children's attributions of responsibility were assessed using three items that were created for this study. Participants were asked to indicate the degree to which they would hold their mother or father responsible if the situation described in the scenario happened to them. Responses were solicited using a seven-point semantic differential scale (e.g., "Entirely responsible - Not responsible at all," "Not at fault - Completely at fault", "Entirely blameworthy - Not blameworthy at all"). The three-item scale produced an alpha coefficient of .96.

Willingness to forgive. Young adult children's willingness to forgive the offending parent described in the scenario was assessed using items adapted from McCullough et al.'s (1998) Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations (TRIM) Inventory. The original 18-item scale assesses the extent to which someone forgives their offender after a recent hurtful situation with a romantic partner. In this study, the TRIM inventory was adapted to specify the forgiveness of the offending parent described in the hypothetical scenario. Example items included: "If this scenario were to happen to you, how likely would you hold a grudge against your mom (dad) for a long time?" "If this scenario were to happen to you, how likely would you find it difficult to act warmly toward your mom (dad)?" and "If this scenario were to happen to you, how likely would you be to cut off the relationship with your mom (dad)?" Responses were solicited using a seven-point, Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 (*Very unlikely*) to 7 (*Very likely*). In previous research (i.e., McCullough, Root, & Cohen, 2006), the measure produced an alpha coefficient of .85. In this study, the 18-item scale produced an alpha coefficient of .92.

Data Analysis

The first hypothesis was tested using an independent samples t-test. H2 and H3 were tested using Pearson's product-moment correlations. H4 was tested using a serial mediation model and bias-corrected and accelerated estimates of the indirect effect in Hayes's (2013) PROCESS macro for SPSS. Likewise, H5 was tested using a moderated mediation model in PROCESS.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and Pearson's product-moment correlations, are reported in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Pearson's Product-Moment Correlations for All Variables (N = 299)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Perceived person-centeredness	4.27	1.67	--		
2. Attributions of responsibility	6.07	1.14	.05	--	
3. Willingness to forgive	4.27	.99	.05	-.25**	--

****** $p < .01$.

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to provide a preliminary manipulation check of the perceived person-centeredness of the nonoffending parent's account. The results confirmed the manipulation of person-centeredness, $F(1, 297) = 302.89, p < .001, \eta^2 = .51$, as participants who had been randomly assigned to the LPC group ($M = 3.05, SD = 1.26$) perceived that the nonoffending parent's account was less person-centered than participants assigned to the HPC group ($M = 5.43, SD = 1.10$). Consequently, the hypotheses were tested using perceived person-centeredness of the account rather than the manipulation.

Primary Analysis

H1 predicted that accounts by the nonoffending parent that elicit perceptions of person-centeredness in the young adult child will elicit a greater willingness from the child to forgive the offending parent than accounts that do not. As displayed in Table 1, perceived person-centeredness was not associated with the willingness to forgive. Thus, H1 was not supported.

H2 predicted that a young adult child's attributions of responsibility for an offending parent's act of infidelity would be inversely associated with their willingness to forgive. The results revealed a statistically significant, inverse association between young adults' attributions of responsibility for the offending parent and their willingness to forgive (see Table 1). Thus, H2 was supported.

H3 predicted that the perceived person-centeredness of the nonoffending parent's account would be inversely associated with the degree of blame in young adult children's attributions of responsibility for the offending parent's infidelity. The results indicate that perceived person-centeredness is not significantly associated with attributions of responsibility given to the offending parent's infidelity (see Table 1). Thus, H3 was not supported.

H4 predicted that young adults' attributions of responsibility for the offending parent's infidelity would mediate the positive association between the nonoffending parent's person-centered account and the children's willingness to forgive the offending parent. A serial mediation model produced a multiple correlation coefficient that was significant, $R = .26$, $F(2, 296) = 10.79$, $p < .001$, accounting for 6.8% of the shared variance in willingness to forgive. Although attributions of responsibility was a significant predictor in the model ($b = -.22$, $t = -4.55$, $p < .001$), the indirect effect ($b = -.007$, $SE = .009$, $CI: -.027, .009$) of perceived person-centeredness through attributions of responsibility was not statistically significant. Thus, H4 was not supported.

H5 predicted that the unique and combined contributions of person-centered messages and attributions of responsibility to young adult children's willingness to forgive would depend on the biological sex of the offending parent. Prior to testing a moderated mediation model in PROCESS, a series of factorial ANOVAs were conducted to determine if there were significant differences in perceived person-centeredness, attributions of responsibility, and willingness to forgive based on the sex of the offending parent described in the scenarios. There was no significant difference in all three outcomes based on the manipulation of person-centeredness. Likewise, there was no significant difference in perceived person-centeredness based on the sex of the offending parent, $F(1, 295) = .28$, $p = .66$. There were, however, significant differences in attributions of responsibility, $F(1, 295) = 18.53$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$, and in willingness to forgive, $F(1, 295) = 18.53$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$, as participants were more likely to blame an offending father ($M = 6.35$, $SD = 1.02$) than an offending mother ($M = 6.35$, $SD = 1.02$), and were more likely to forgive an offending mother ($M = 4.50$, $SD = .94$) than an offending father ($M = 4.02$, $SD = .98$).

A moderated mediation model produced a multiple correlation coefficient that was significant, $R = .33$, $F(5, 293) = 7.07$, $p < .001$, accounting for 10.8% of the shared variance in willingness to forgive. An examination of the individual paths in the model revealed, however, that attributions of responsibility for the infidelity was the only predictor that approached statistical significance, $b = -.13$, $t = -1.95$, $p = .053$. The results provided no evidence to suggest that this effect or any other path in the model was dependent upon the biological sex of the offending parent. Thus, H5 was not supported.

Post Hoc Analysis

The non-significant findings in this study may be the result of using hypothetical scenarios with a sample that is largely comprised of young adult children who have never experienced parental infidelity (73.6%, $n = 220$). To test this idea, a factorial analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted using only those participants who reported (a) that parental infidelity had occurred in their family of origin (13.4%, $n = 40$), or (b) that they were unsure of whether or not it had occurred (13.4%, $n = 39$). A 2 x 2 factorial ANCOVA using person-centeredness and sex of the offending parent as fixed factors and attributions of responsibility as the covariate produced a statistically significant model, $F(4, 73) = 5.26$, $p < .01$, accounting for 22.4% of the shared variance in willingness to forgive. No significant interaction effect emerged in the model. There were, however, significant main effects for person-centeredness, $F(1, 73) = 3.90$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .06$, sex of the offending parent, $F(1, 73) = 5.07$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .06$, and attributions of responsibility, $F(1, 73) = 4.39$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .05$. Specifically, after controlling for attributions of responsibility, participants were more willing to forgive offending mothers ($M = 4.55$, $SD = .87$) than offending fathers ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.12$), but were *less likely* to forgive an offending parent when the nonoffending parent's account was highly

person-centered ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.10$) than when the account was low person-centered ($M = 4.48$, $SD = .92$).

Discussion

The principal goal of this study was to examine the associations among perceived person-centeredness, attributions of responsibility, and willingness to forgive in the context of parental infidelity. Overall, the results provided minimal support for the theoretical line of reasoning advanced in this report. Although the person-centeredness of a nonoffending parent's account did not predict young adult children's willingness to forgive, the children's attributions of responsibility for the offense did inversely predict their willingness to forgive. Likewise, the biological sex of the offending parent failed to moderate the combined associations between person-centeredness, attributions of responsibility, and willingness to forgive, although meaningful differences in attributions of responsibility and willingness to forgive did emerge based on the sex of the offending parent. Despite largely non-significant findings, the post hoc analyses did provide some evidence to suggest that person-centered accounts may be associated with children's willingness to forgive, albeit in a direction opposite of what was hypothesized. Consequently, the results of this study provide at least three implications worth noting.

First, the results raise interesting questions about the role of person-centered messages within the context of parental accounts of infidelity. Although no significant association emerged between perceived person-centeredness and participants' willingness to forgive, the findings for person-centeredness may be due to the research design and/or the nature of the communication context (i.e., parental infidelity). Specifically, researchers have successfully used hypothetical scenarios involving person-centered messages to examine attachment styles and individuals'

evaluations of comforting messages (Jones, 2005), as well as sex differences in the evaluation of comforting messages (Kunkel & Burlison, 1999). What these investigations and others within the supportive communication literature have in common is a context of providing and *seeking* social support. In the present study, however, the hypothetical scenarios relied on the use of parental accounts of infidelity to inform children of a relational transgression. Not only were the participants placed in a hypothetical situation that they may or may not have been able to imagine, but their evaluation of the parent's account likely occurred independent of any desire on their part to seek social support. Within parent-child interactions about parental infidelity, the nonoffending parent's account may function more so as a sense-making device than as a provision of social support. Thorson (2009) differentiated between disclosures of parental infidelity and social support, such that disclosures of infidelity often precede potential requests for social support. Thus, one might reason that a parent's initial account of infidelity functions more so as an informational and sense-making device for children than as a provision of social support, which in turn may change how person-centeredness is evaluated within this context.

In addition to questions of how parental accounts may function within the parent-child relationship, the post-hoc analyses for children who either knew that parental infidelity had occurred in their family or were unsure of whether or not it had occurred suggested that the person-centeredness of the nonoffending parent's account is *inversely* associated with their willingness to forgive. It may stand to reason that person-centered messages might be perceived differently depending on whether the disclosure about the transgression is to a third party member (i.e., a child) or to a partner (i.e., a spouse). Specifically, it may be that the child is not looking for the nonoffending parent to soften the news or be overly sensitive to the transgression, but that instead, the child may want the nonoffending parent to be transparent with the anger

and/or hurt caused by the transgressor. Furthermore, this lack of transparency may lead children to feel as though they must “stand up” for the nonoffending parent, resulting in a reduced likelihood to forgive the offending parent. Although this finding should be interpreted with caution given the reduced sample of participants in the post hoc analyses, it does reveal an unexamined side to person-centered messages. Extant literature on person-centered messages generally assumes that HPC messages are more desirable and more effective than LPC messages, but when the person-centered messages are intertwined within an initial disclosure of a severe relational transgression (i.e., parental infidelity), the use of a HPC message may in fact communicate a lack of accountability for the situation and/or a lack of awareness regarding the severity of the transgression. One reason for divergent assumptions about HPC messages could be that person-centered messages are most commonly studied within the context of seeking social support *post* transgression, not within the context of first disclosing news of a transgression to a third-party. In essence, children who are unaware of their parent’s infidelity and have not yet begun the sense-making process may be far less likely to reap the emotional and psychological benefits of a highly person-centered account that could encourage forgiveness of the offending parent.

Second, the findings of this study suggest that the attribution of responsibility that a young adult child gives to the offending parent’s act of infidelity is negatively associated with the child’s willingness to forgive the offending parent. This is meaningful because it is a third party attribution of responsibility; the offending parent did not cheat on the child, yet the child may nevertheless view the infidelity as a betrayal of the parent-child relationship and of the family system as a whole. Although the effect size was modest in size, this result may be critical to understanding how children makes sense of their parent’s transgression when they feel as

though the betrayal occurred not only to the other parent, but to themselves and to their family. For instance, researchers might position attributions of responsibility as a moderator of other message characteristics that influence a child's willingness to forgive the offending parent, including (but certainly not limited to) how the offending parent communicates about the transgression, the specific emotional reactions that children have to receiving such news, and the collective sense-making and coping processes of other family members (e.g., siblings). Clearly, the results for attributions of responsibility underscore the emotional spillover that occurs when children discover that one of their parents has been unfaithful to the other. Consequently, continued research is needed to more carefully distinguish the emotional and psychological reactions of children from those of their parents when an act of infidelity has occurred within the family.

The third and final set of implications revolve around the biological sex of the offending parent. Specifically, participants were more likely to blame an offending father than an offending mother and were more likely to forgive an offending mother than an offending father. In one sense, these results could be explained by an expectancy violations framework. When fathers are depicted as the offending parent, it may represent a situation that is much more consistent with young adult children's pre-existing schemas for parental infidelity, schemas that may have been cultivated through film and television portrayals, as well as anecdotal experiences. For instance, media portrayals of paternal infidelity often depict men (and fathers) who lack self-control and engage in acts of infidelity because of unchecked sexual desires, independent of anything their spouses have said and done (or not done) that motivated such betrayals in the first place. When mothers are depicted as the offending parent, however, it may violate the "typical" case of parental infidelity that children have come to expect. That is, some media portrayals of maternal

infidelity contextualize women's (or mothers') unfaithfulness as a more reasonable or understandable reaction to some failure on the part of their partner. Hence, young adult children may be somewhat more forgiving of an offending mother than an offending father because they are more willing to entertain plausible explanations for the infidelity.

Another explanation for this particular set of findings may reside in the differing needs that are commonly met by mothers and fathers. For instance, Russell and Russell (1987) found that mothers' interactions with their children occur more frequently in the context of caregiving and attending to their children's needs (e.g., school work), whereas fathers' interactions with their children are more frequently centered around physical play and attending to the upkeep of the household. Consequently, many of the basic needs and relational needs that children have are commonly met by mothers, so it may stand to reason that young adult children are evaluating the relational costs they may incur by blaming and refusing to forgive a mother who has committed infidelity. Given the tendencies of some fathers to be less relational, however, it may be somewhat easier for young adult children to hold an offending father accountable for his infidelity because less is at stake in the children's relationship to the father.

Theoretically, the results of this study provide intriguing directions for the dual process theory of supportive communication and for attribution theory. First, previous researchers who have used the dual process theory of supportive communication have investigated the theory within the contexts of romantic relationships, friendships, and acquaintances (e.g., Bodie et al., 2011; Holmstrom et al., 2013; Priem, Solomon, & Steuber, 2009). When the theory is applied to parent-child interactions about infidelity, however, scholars may find meaningful differences in the effects that person-centered messages have on relational outcomes. For instance, HPC messages within the context of informing children about a parent's infidelity may heighten,

rather than reduce, the children's feelings of anger, hurt, and betrayal over the act of infidelity. In this sense, the results illuminate a potential flip-side of person-centeredness whereby such helpful, caring, and supportive messages ring hollow in the ears of children who feel betrayed by news of an offending parent. Although preliminary, the results obtained here suggest that an alternative theoretical explanation of person-centeredness may be needed in this specific communication context so as to more fully explain how the *meaning* of person-centeredness changes within the context of relational and familial betrayals. Second, the findings of this study lend further support to attribution theory by providing evidence that individuals seek to understand and make sense of relational transgressions by placing blame on the individuals they believe are responsible. In fact, the findings extend attribution theory by incorporating the perspectives of family members outside of the romantic relationship within which the transgression of infidelity occurred. By and large, the results of this study suggest that children's attributions of responsibility for parental infidelity occur independently of how the nonoffending parent discloses the transgression. Although children's attributions for infidelity do not explain the association between the perceived person-centeredness of the nonoffending parent's account and their willingness to forgive the offending parent, their attributions may serve as boundary conditions that specify the interactional conditions within which forgiveness is likely to occur. For instance, researchers may find that attributions of responsibility moderate the effectiveness of parental apologies on children's willingness to forgive.

Despite these implications, the results of this study should be interpreted with caution due to the inherent limitations of the research design. Relying upon hypothetical scenarios that required participants to envision themselves in a situation of parental infidelity may have been difficult to imagine and respond to by participants who had not experienced parental infidelity

within their own families. Although such scenarios have been used successfully in other lines of research on person-centeredness (e.g., Jones, 2005), and although they afford an opportunity to manipulate specific message features of parental accounts, such designs may not accurately assess highly sensitive disclosures about experiences that participants consider to be improbable in their real lives. In addition, the homogenous nature of the sample limits the generalizability of the findings to predominantly white, college-educated young adult children. Clearly, the non-significant findings raise serious questions about whether or not children who have never experienced parental infidelity in their family of origin can adequately respond to hypothetical accounts of infidelity.

These limitations aside, future researchers should more closely examine how other message features of parental infidelity disclosures affect children's sense-making processes. For instance, Thorson's (2014) research found that parental accounts of infidelity may induce children's feelings of being caught between their parents. Likewise, Schrodtt and Ledbetter (2012) reported that parental confirmation can mitigate the negative effect that feeling caught between parents has on children's family satisfaction. By extension, then, future researchers may find that parental confirmation functions as one characteristic of parental accounts that influences how children interpret and cope with the news of a parent's infidelity. Researchers might also examine how person-centeredness functions within third-party disclosures, as the findings of this study could help extend our understanding of how HPC messages about sensitive topics may, in fact, produce less helpful outcomes in relationships when they are communicated to third-party members. Likewise, research is needed to examine how third-party attributions of responsibility differ from within dyad attributions of responsibility, particularly when severe relational transgressions have taken place. Of course, one meaningful extension of the present study would

be to examine how person-centeredness and nonverbal assurances predict the likelihood to forgive with participants who have experienced parental infidelity. Through these types of investigations, researchers can expand our understanding of how parental infidelity affects not only the partners involved in the romantic relationship, but children and other extended family members as well.

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Appendix A

Hypothetical Scenarios

High Person-Centered and Dad Nonoffending parent Scenario

Your dad calls you to see how things are going at school. After telling him about your classes, he tells you that he found out last week that your mom has cheated. He explains that although he recently found out, your mom confessed that the cheating has been going on for a while. He tells you that he knows this is upsetting and that you may have feelings of anger toward your mother due to her cheating and those feelings are warranted. He tells you he can only imagine the hurt you must feel and that he understands that this is going to be hard but that you will get through this. He assures you that it is okay to be mad or sad about it. He ends the conversation by telling you that he is here to talk about the situation whenever you need to because he knows that sometimes you just need to talk it out.

Low Person-Centered and Dad Nonoffending parent Scenario

Your dad calls you to see how things are going at school. After telling him about your classes, he tells you that he found out last week that your mom has cheated. He explains that although he recently found out, your mom confessed that the cheating has been going on for a while. He tells you that this shouldn't be upsetting and that you shouldn't have feelings of anger towards your mother due to her cheating because those feelings would be unwarranted. He tells you not to dwell on it and that it shouldn't be that hard to get through. He also tells you that it isn't worth being mad or sad about it. He ends the conversation by telling you that he doesn't care to talk about the situation any further, because there really is nothing else to talk about.

High Person-Centered and Mom Nonoffending parent Scenario

Your mom calls you to see how things are going at school. After telling her about your classes, she tells you that she found out last week that your dad has cheated. She explains that although she recently found out, your dad confessed that the cheating has been going on for a while. She tells you that she knows this is upsetting and that you may have feelings of anger toward your father due to him cheating but those feelings are warranted. She tells you she can only imagine the hurt you must feel and that she understands that this is going to be hard, but that you will get through this. She assures you that it is okay to be mad or sad about it. She ends the conversation by telling you that she is here to talk about the situation whenever you need to because she knows that sometimes you just need to talk it out.

Low Person-Centered and Mom Nonoffending parent Scenario

Your mom calls you to see how things are going at school. After telling her about your classes, she tells you that she found out last week that your dad has cheated. She explains that although she recently found out, your dad confessed that the cheating has been going on for a while. She tells you that this shouldn't be upsetting and that you shouldn't have feelings of anger towards your father due to him cheating, because those feelings would be unwarranted. She tells you not to dwell on it and that it shouldn't be that hard to get through. She also tells you that it isn't worth being mad or sad about it. She ends the conversation by telling you that she doesn't care to talk about the situation any further, because there really is nothing else to talk about.

	Very likely	Likely	Somewhat likely	Neither likely nor unlikely	Somewhat unlikely	Unlikely	Very unlikely
Cut off the relationship with your mom	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Try to release your anger so that you could work on restoring your relationship with her	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Want to see your mom hurt and miserable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Be to withdraw from your mom	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

6. Do you have a parent that has ever cheated or ever been cheated on?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- I'd prefer not to say

7. How old are you? _____

8. What is your sex

- Male
- Female

9. What is your ethnicity?

- White
- Hispanic or Latino
- Black or African American
- Native American or Indian American
- Asian
- Other