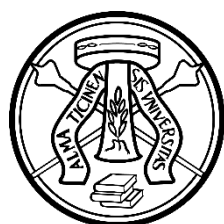


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THESIS TITLE

Making Sense of Infidelity: The Role of Attachment and Empathy in
Romantic Relationships

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Abstract

This study explored how attachment-related patterns and empathy shape how people make sense of infidelity in romantic relationships. Ten semi-structured interviews with Russian-speaking adults in committed romantic relationships were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

Three superordinate themes were identified. The first showed that early caregiving experiences continued to shape adult relationships, though similar experiences led to different relational patterns, and some people were willing to change these patterns. The second revealed that empathy could become either overwhelming or difficult to express. The third demonstrated that infidelity was interpreted either as an irreparable violation or as a context-dependent situation.

The findings suggest that attachment patterns shaped both responses to infidelity and the meanings assigned to betrayal. Anxious participants often experienced infidelity as a threat to self and relationship; avoidant participants interpreted it as a clear boundary; and secure participants showed greater emotional regulation and willingness to consider context around infidelity. Empathy alone did not facilitate understanding and did not serve as a deterrent to infidelity: even highly empathic participants admitted they could imagine being unfaithful when dissatisfied. These findings highlight the importance of emotion regulation, alongside attachment patterns, in shaping how individuals interpret and respond to infidelity.

Key words: infidelity, attachment, empathy, emotion regulation, romantic relationship

1. Introduction

Infidelity is defined as any secret emotional, sexual, or romantic behavior that violates the exclusivity inherent in romantic relationships (Rokach & Chan, 2023). This type of betrayal can disrupt trust in a relationship and may trigger strong emotional reactions, including anger, guilt, jealousy, shame, and depressive symptoms. Research across 160 cultures demonstrates that infidelity is the most common reason for breakups (Grøntvedt et al., 2020). However, relatively little is known about how people in Russia understand and interpret infidelity.

Infidelity is generally divided into two categories: emotional and physical, although there is an emerging category of digital infidelity. Emotional infidelity involves developing a close emotional connection with a third party that crosses relationship boundaries without necessarily involving sexual behavior. It may include sharing intimate thoughts, emotional vulnerability, or romantic commitment. Physical infidelity, in contrast, involves sexual behaviors such as kissing or sexual intercourse (Rokach & Chan, 2023). Although research suggests that men and women may respond to emotional and physical infidelity differently, it also finds that the core psychological processes are similar for both genders (Fisher et al., 2008).

Attachment theory provides an important framework for understanding relational behavior and infidelity (Cassidy et al., 1999). Attachment style refers to relatively stable patterns of emotional regulation, closeness, and dependency formed in early relationships and carried into adulthood (Papalia, 2002). Individuals with a secure attachment style generally have low attachment anxiety and avoidance. This means that, in a relationship, they are supportive, stable, trusting, and emotionally open. People with an anxious attachment style often experience stronger fears of abandonment, negative self-views, and heightened relationship anxiety. Avoidantly attached individuals tend to suppress emotional vulnerability

and devalue closeness (Bogaerts et al., 2008). Insecure attachment styles have been repeatedly linked to increased susceptibility to infidelity (Hatamy et al., 2011; Johnson et al., 2001).

Some research has proposed empathy as a potential mediator between attachment style and infidelity (Gorniewicz, 2011). Empathy plays an important role in emotional connection and relationship stability and involves the capacity to share another person's feelings (de Vignemont & Singer, 2006; Zaki, 2014). While lower empathy may lead to emotional detachment and more conflicts in the relationship, higher empathy is linked to stable attachment and greater relational satisfaction (Gorniewicz, 2011). However, little empirical research has examined the relationship between attachment patterns, empathy, and experiences of infidelity.

The current study examines how a person's attachment style and empathy may shape their experience and understanding of infidelity. The study uses qualitative interviews to explore how attachment and empathy are experienced within romantic relationships.

1.1 Infidelity in Romantic Relationships

1.1.1 Infidelity in Cultural Perspective

Romantic relationships are a fundamental aspect of human life (Mattingly, McIntyre, & Selterman, 2018). Beyond their potential evolutionary functions, romantic relationships also meet important psychological and social needs. They are a primary source of security, emotional support, intimacy, and personal growth (Mattingly, McIntyre, & Selterman, 2018). However, these relationships can also be disrupted by infidelity, which has been identified as a major reason for relationship dissolution (Grøntvedt et al., 2020). Infidelity is also a multicultural act. Betzig (1989), for example, identified infidelity as a major cause of divorce across more than 160 societies. It is also a significant predictor of divorce in Western society

(Amato & Previti, 2003). These findings suggest that infidelity occurs across a wide range of cultural contexts.

Although infidelity occurs across cultures, its meaning and subjective experience may differ considerably. Cultural norms and values influence how infidelity is perceived and evaluated worldwide. For example, in more socially permissive or sexually liberal contexts, such as Denmark, infidelity occurs more frequently compared to conservative cultures and is viewed more tolerantly (Roed et al., 2024). People in liberal settings usually forgive more readily, which can lead the perpetrator to feel less guilt. (resource). In contrast, in restrictive or culturally traditional societies, people see infidelity as a negative and judgmental act. In some contexts, the consequences of infidelity in these regions can be life-threatening. The victim of infidelity may die from the perceived emotional pain or experience physical abuse from the unfaithful partner (Xin & Hassan, 2020). Together, these studies suggest that cultural context influences how infidelity is interpreted and experienced.

The present study focuses on experiences and perceptions of infidelity in Russia. A 2025 survey conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM) included a nationally representative sample of 1,600 Russian adults aged 18 and older. Results showed that thirty-seven percent of participants admitted to cheating, while forty-two percent reported being cheated on. Seventy-four percent believe infidelity is common within their social circles, a notable rise from fifty-five percent in 2007 and sixty percent in 2023 (VCIOM, 2025).

Among participants younger than 34, women reported higher rates of infidelity than men and reported engaging in infidelity at a younger age. After the age of 35, however, men were more likely to report infidelity (VCIOM, 2025). Despite the reported prevalence of infidelity, attitudes toward it remain predominantly negative in Russia. A VCIOM (2025) survey found that ninety-two percent of Russians think female infidelity is unacceptable, and only nine

percent think male infidelity is acceptable. Only eight percent believe it is normal for a married individual to have a relationship with someone single, whereas fifty-five percent believe it is wrong. Although existing surveys provide demographic information about attitudes toward infidelity in Russia, they tell little about how individuals themselves understand and experience infidelity in their relationships.

1.1.2 Types of Infidelity

As defined in the introduction, infidelity refers to secret emotional, sexual, or romantic behavior that violates relational exclusivity (Rokach & Chan, 2023). In addition to this broad description, there are three main categories of infidelity: physical, emotional, and digital. Overt sexual acts with a third person that go against the couple's set boundaries, such as kissing or sexual contact, are considered physical infidelity. Emotional infidelity involves developing a strong emotional connection with someone outside the partnership without necessarily engaging in physical intimacy. It may involve sharing private thoughts, emotional vulnerabilities, or romantic commitment (Leeker & Carlozzi, 2012). Digital infidelity has become a separate category due to the growth of digital communication. This includes actions like persistent, intimate online chatting, exchanging explicit photographs, maintaining online sexual connections, and cybersex (Vossler, 2016). Digital infidelity is particularly complex because it can overlap with both emotional and physical forms of infidelity. This overlap makes it more difficult to define relationship boundaries in online contexts.

An important question in research on digital infidelity is whether it is perceived as equally damaging as physical or emotional types. Even without physical contact, actions or messaging online can break sexual exclusivity and create deep emotional bonds with another person. Furthermore, having an intimate connection online often makes it hard to tell the difference between emotional and physical infidelity (Whitty, 2005). For example, an intense emotional connection online may constitute emotional infidelity, while cybersex is more

closely associated with physical infidelity even without physical intercourse. The overlap between digital, emotional, and physical infidelity makes digital infidelity difficult to research and understand, because each couple has its own boundaries about what is acceptable online.

1.1.3 Infidelity in the Dating Population

Early research on infidelity focused primarily on married couples, whereas more recent studies have also examined dating and cohabiting relationships (Drigotas et al., 1999). A comparison of dating partners to married couples revealed that extradyadic involvement was more common among unmarried individuals (Drigotas et al., 1999; Treas & Giesen, 2000). Forste and Tanfer (1996), in a large-scale study of American women, reported that dating women were more likely to have engaged in extradyadic sex than married women. Cohabiting women demonstrated the highest likelihood of infidelity among all types of relationships. This pattern suggests that rates of extradyadic involvement may differ depending on the type and level of commitment within a relationship. Studying dating relationships may also provide insight into patterns that later emerge in marriage. As Roscoe, Cavanaugh, and Kennedy (1988) note, extradyadic engagement and other behavioral patterns in dating relationships frequently transfer to and influence later marriages.

In recent decades, people tend to marry later and spend more time in cohabiting or dating relationships (Sassler & Lichter, 2020). This makes it important to study infidelity in all types of romantic partnerships, not just marriages. In both Western and non-Western civilizations, the prevalence of non-marital cohabitation has increased while the number of people getting married has decreased simultaneously (Sassler & Lichter, 2020). In contrast to the traditional path of marriage, research shows that more people in recent decades have either short-lived cohabiting relationships or long periods outside of any partnership (Jalovaara & Fasang, 2017). Therefore, research on infidelity in the 21st century should include individuals in

long-term dating relationships and cohabiting unions, rather than focusing exclusively on married couples.

1.1.4 Sex differences in infidelity

Research has also examined sex differences in responses to infidelity. There is empirical evidence that men find it more difficult to process physical infidelity, while women experience greater distress upon learning of their partner's emotional infidelity. However, these sex differences may be less vivid when people report on their actual experiences of infidelity (Harris, 2005). Nevertheless, when measured through hypothetical scenarios in controlled studies, the pattern of men being more distressed by sexual infidelity and women by emotional infidelity remains one of the most consistently replicated findings (Edlund et al., 2006).

One explanation comes from evolutionary psychology. This theory implies that these differences are rooted in distinct adaptive challenges faced by men and women throughout human history (Buss, 2018). Paternal uncertainty, or the risk of investing resources in children who are not genetically their own, is the primary danger that males face when a partner engages in physical infidelity. Emotional infidelity has historically posed a greater threat to women as it suggests that resources, commitment, and long-term involvement may be diverted to another partner or future children. (resource) However, evolutionary hypotheses do not account for individual traits, relationship-specific factors, or sociocultural norms.

The double shot hypothesis, proposed by DeStano and Salovey (1996) and Harris and Christenfeld (1996), offers an alternative explanation for these sex differences. This theory suggests that the likelihood of other forms of infidelity increases when emotional or sexual infidelity is present. Consequently, a man may react with greater distress to the perceived presence of sexual infidelity associated with emotional infidelity. Similarly, a woman's

anxiety about sexual infidelity may reflect the belief that it also involves emotional betrayal. This theory suggests that, besides any genetic predisposition, our perceptions of the opposite sex are influenced by years of social learning.

1.1.5 Infidelity in Clinical Settings

Regardless of differences in how men and women perceive infidelity, betrayal can result in substantial emotional and relational distress. Research (Gossner et al., 2022; Fisher et al., 2008) documents strong emotional reactions to betrayal, including anger, hatred, profound sadness, jealousy, shame, remorse, and a generalized sense of insecurity. In addition to acute reactions, infidelity is a significant risk factor for clinical levels of psychological distress. Many individuals report depressive symptoms which are typically intensified by recurring intrusive thoughts, and compulsive rumination over the affair's specifics and the partner's betrayal (Lonergan et al., 2020). In more severe cases, symptoms such as hypervigilance, flashbacks, and emotional numbness may resemble those associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (resource). These symptoms may also intensify conflict and contribute to aggressive behavior toward the unfaithful partner (Warach & Josephs, 2019). Although research has primarily focused on the psychological impact of infidelity on betrayed partners, less is known about the experiences of unfaithful partners. Clinical observations suggest that unfaithful partners generally struggle to «build a bridge back» to their spouse and report strong feelings of humiliation, guilt, regret and uncertainty, particularly after disclosure (Gossner et al., 2022).

Clinical approaches to infidelity have changed over time. Infidelity is increasingly viewed as an interpersonal crisis that couples may, under some circumstances, work through rather than an event that necessarily ends the relationship (Gordon & Baucom, 1999; Atkins, Baucom, & Christensen, 2005). Recent models, such as the 7 A's framework (Williams, 2025) and the integration of Emotionally Focused Therapy with motivational typologies

(Woolley & Koren, 2025), provide clinicians with structured approaches to facilitate healing after the infidelity. This perspective is also reflected in more recent qualitative research. A dual process model of rehabilitation was proposed by Walravens and Rober (2024) based on interviews with wounded spouses. They focus on the transition between connection and detachment after infidelity occurred. This suggests that healing is an ongoing process rather than a single outcome.

Additionally, Mitchell and colleagues' (2025) recent qualitative study explored the perspectives of wounded spouses who decided to stay together after an affair. Participants provided specific justifications for their decision, including love, commitment, a shared past, and faith in the potential for trust to be restored. Rebuilding trust, expectations for sexual intimacy, social support, therapy, and an apology were all identified as crucial elements of the healing process. These findings suggest that, for some couples, infidelity does not necessarily mark the end of the relationship.

Importantly, viewing infidelity as potentially manageable does not mean normalizing or minimizing it. Instead, it represents a more complex, clinically informed understanding that individuals and couples can undertake deep meaning-making work after betrayal. Whether a couple eventually repairs the relationship or separates may depend on individual characteristics, relationship dynamics, and the broader context in which the betrayal occurred. This includes attachment dynamics and empathic capacities, which are the focus of the present study.

Infidelity is therefore a complex phenomenon whose meaning and emotional impact vary across individuals, relationships, and cultural contexts. However, little is known about why people respond to infidelity in such different ways. Attachment theory helps explain these differences. It shows how people's early relationships shape the way they may handle emotions, expect closeness, and react to threats in relationships.

1.2 Attachment Theory in Adult Romantic Relationships

1.2.1 Core Concepts of Attachment Theory

One of the most influential frameworks for understanding relational dynamics including vulnerability to and interpretations of infidelity is attachment theory. Attachment style refers to relatively stable patterns of emotional regulation, closeness, and dependency formed in early relationships and carried into adulthood (Paplia, 2002). Introduced to the scientific discussion by John Bowlby in 1969, it posits that the attachment system protects an individual from danger by ensuring proximity to caring and supportive figures who provide security, support and comfort. This proximity serves as a source of comfort and a secure base from which to explore the environment. The emotional availability and responsiveness of parents to their infant's needs in stressful situations, particularly before and after separation, provides a safe haven and becomes the standard by which infants learn to perceive the world.

The attachment system is most evident during infancy and early childhood but continues to play a vital role in relationships throughout the lifespan. It monitors for the physical proximity and psychological availability of an attachment figure and activates and regulates attachment behaviours directed towards that individual. Activation occurs automatically during times of physical or psychological distress caused by a real or perceived threat. Bowlby (1969/1982) proposed that three types of threats which activate the attachment system in early childhood: internal discomfort resulting from emotional distress, physical distress or hunger; external threats to safety; and threats to an attachment figure's availability.

During stressful events, individuals activate enduring cognitive-affective schemas about the self and others, known as internal working models. These models guide expectations and appraisal of self and the environment. The internal working model of self concerns ideas relating to one's self as being worthy of love and care. They originate from early interactions with an attachment figure. If an attachment figure is sensitive and responsive to a child's

needs, the child will come to view themselves as lovable and worthy of care. Conversely, if the attachment figure is insensitive, unavailable or fear-provoking, the child will likely come to view themselves as unworthy of love and care. The internal working model of others concerns expectations regarding the availability and trustworthiness of attachment figures. If an attachment figure is warm, sensitive and responsive to a child's attachment needs, the child will likely come to view the attachment figure (and more generally others in the social realm) as able to meet their attachment needs during times of distress. If the attachment figure fails to meet a child's attachment needs, the child will likely come to view the attachment figure (and more generally others in the social realm) as unable to meet their needs for safety, support and comfort. While these working models are initially very simple, they develop into highly sophisticated structures capable of growth and adaptation throughout the lifespan. As a person's relationships and life experiences become more complex, their working models also grow in a similar way. (Bowlby, 1979/1994; Bretherton & Munholland, 2008).

Ainsworth and colleagues (1978) identified three primary attachment styles: secure, avoidant and anxious/ambivalent (later renamed anxious/resistant). Secure attachment is characterised by infants using the caregiver as a secure base successfully when distressed. This level of success is not evident in the two insecure styles. An avoidant attachment style, originating from a lack of warmth or neglectful caregiving, is characterized by infants displaying signs of detachment when distressed. The anxious/resistant style is marked by overt displays of protest and anger and is postulated to result from inconsistent caregiving. Another style of childhood attachment was later reported (Main et al., 1985) and characterized as the most insecure. This style, termed disorganised/disoriented, is thought to lead children to display a range of confused and apprehensive behaviors which are associated with various forms of neglect or abuse. The efforts of these infants to attach to the caregiver persist despite repeated punishment from the attachment figure (Bowlby 1979) and are not

satisfied resulting in confusion. Only about five per cent of the children sampled displayed this style and it is not often referred to in studies using attachment theory. Although initial empirical work by Ainsworth et al. (1978) identified primary infant attachment patterns, subsequent research has demonstrated that these models are not static. Rather, they are carried forward shaping social and emotional functioning across the lifespan, most notably in adult romantic partnerships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Simpson, 1990).

Following this pioneering work, the consistency of these attachment styles has been observed in longitudinal studies through to the initial school years (Main et al., 1985) and into the adolescent years (Kobak & Sceery, 1988). Secondary attachment figures can influence working models, particularly during adolescence when a sense of identity is being formed. Bosnjak and Winkelman (2003) found that attachment, along with self-esteem, contributed to identity formation during adolescence. This is a period when attachment functions tend to shift from parents to peers. The first attachment behavior thought to transfer to peers is proximity seeking. Seeking comfort and support, a 'safe haven', follows this. The same process has been evidenced in adult romantic relationships. As a person demonstrates support for their partner in times of stress and responds generally to their partner's needs on a daily basis, a safe haven is provided and a secure base is established (Feeney et al, 2003).

In adulthood, attachment is most commonly conceptualized within a dimensional framework rather than rigid categories (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Contemporary models typically conceptualizes adult attachment along two continuous, orthogonal axes: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. Attachment Anxiety reflects the degree of fear of rejection and abandonment, rooted in a negative model of the self. Second, Attachment Avoidance reflects discomfort with intimacy and dependence, rooted in a negative model of others. The intersection of these dimensions gives rise to commonly described attachment orientations: secure, anxious-preoccupied, dismissive-avoidant, and fearful-avoidant.

1.2.2 Attachment Styles and Romantic Relationship Functioning

Individuals with a secure attachment style (low anxiety and avoidance) tend to have longer, more stable and more satisfying relationships than those with an insecure attachment style (Feeney et al., 1993). Securely attached adults are also more likely to have relationships characterised by trust, friendship and emotional investment (Collins & Read, 1990; Simpson, 1990). Hazan and colleagues (1994) reported that secure adults described their style of love as selfless, devoid of manipulation, affectionate and open to sexual exploration with a long-term partner. They also reported significantly less involvement in one-night stands and romantic infidelity. Attachment security has also been associated with higher self-efficacy and global self-worth (Collins & Read, 1990; Mikulincer, 1995).

Individuals with insecurely attached styles exhibit distinct patterns of preferences and behaviours in romantic relationships. Preoccupied individuals (high anxiety, low avoidance) tend to experience low relationship satisfaction, high rates of relationship failure and a style of love characterised by obsession with their romantic partners. They are also more likely than secure or avoidant individuals to fall in love easily and often demonstrate maladaptive dependence on their intimate partners. In general, individuals scoring high on attachment anxiety favour the affectionate and cuddly aspects of romance over the more overtly sexual aspects of intimate relationships.

Individuals with insecure attachment styles characterised by high avoidance (dismissing attachment) and fearful attachment also exhibit distinct patterns of romantic preferences and behaviours. Compared to secure and preoccupied individuals, those with a dismissing or fearful style tend to show significantly less interest in romantic relationships, particularly those requiring long-term commitment (Shaver & Brennan, 1992). They report low levels of relationship satisfaction and a high frequency of break-ups (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994) and low levels of emotional intimacy (Levy & Davis, 1988).

These individuals are also less likely to fall in love and most often describe their style of love as involving manipulation and game playing (Shaver & Hazan, 1987). While dismissing and fearful individuals tend to express dislike for the affectionate and cuddly aspects of romantic relationships (Hazan et al., 1994), they demonstrate more open-minded views regarding casual sex and frequently report having more one-night stands than either secure or preoccupied individuals (Brennan & Shaver, 1987; Feeney, Noller, & Patty, 1993; Fraley, Davis & Shaver, 1998).

Attachment styles play an important role in romantic relationships, from choosing partners to resolving conflicts. As Simpson (1990) notes, attachment patterns often function as self-fulfilling prophecies. For example, an anxiously attached person's increased desire for reassurance might unintentionally cause their partner to withdraw, while an avoidantly attached person's emotional distancing could strengthen their view that others are intrusive or unreliable. Furthermore, according to Collins and Read (1990), individuals are likely to select social partners who conform to their established working models of others' behavior. For example, studies have found that stable relationships (of at least a three-year period) between people exhibiting insecure attachment styles are often those of avoidant men with anxious women (Collins & Read 1990; Kirkpatrick & Davis 1994; Simpson 1990). Anxious women confirm expectations of the avoidant individual that partners are too demanding and clingy. Similarly, the distant and rejecting tendencies of avoidant partners are congruent with the mental models of anxious individuals (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994). This suggests that attachment experiences are consistent, offering a framework for understanding social outcomes.

1.2.3 Stability and Change in Attachment Across the Lifespan

There is also debate regarding the stability of adult attachment over the lifespan. A longitudinal study by Scharfe and Bartholomew (1994) found that adult attachment

demonstrates high stability over short periods. A sample of 177 couples participated in a study exploring the stability and change of adult attachment representations. Various methodologies were used, such as self-report, partner-report, and interviews, using both categorical and continuous scales. Adult attachment remained moderately stable over an eight-month period. Multi-item continuous measures were considered most suitable for attachment research because their reliability is easier to assess than that of categorical measures.

The stability of attachment has also been demonstrated over a four-year period (Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994). Data were gathered from 172 couples, of which 70% reported the same attachment style at the beginning and end of the study. This data appears to support the validity and reliability of self-reported attachment styles over time. Notably respondents in this study tended to rely on current relationship feelings when providing retrospective accounts of attachment. The authors argue that attachment styles reflect both relationship functioning and some trait-like aspects as more changes were recorded in relationships over the four-year period than in attachment style.

Attachment style instability might be due to measurement errors, but some of the observed changes probably represent shifts in attachment patterns over time. (Feeney, 2003). Significant emotional experiences inconsistent with working models have the potential to alter attachment. For example, major life changes such as leaving home, marriage, childbirth or the loss of an attachment figure can threaten existing models. Feeney et al. (2003) conducted a longitudinal study on the transition to parenthood and discovered that during this period, attachment aspects like anxiety and avoidance were especially adaptable.

Furthermore, relationship dynamics can also influence attachment processes. Davila and colleagues (1999) investigated the process of attachment change in the early years of marriage and found that their sample of 172 couples generally showed positive change in

attachment beliefs across the first few years of marriage. They proposed that important interpersonal factors are linked to shifts in how individuals perceive their attachment security. Feeney (2003) also found that a partner's attitudes and behaviors influence an individual's sense of security, so attachment representations may vary across relationships.

There is a correlation between attachment styles and their susceptibility to change. For instance, multiple research studies suggest that secure attachment tends to be more stable than insecure attachment over time (e.g. Hollist & Miller, 2005; Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994). They also propose that impactful experiences in close relationships might reduce the effect of working models for certain individuals, as indicated in previous research. (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikilincer & Nachshon, 1991). People with insecure attachment can develop trust in others through enough positive experiences that challenge their current relational patterns.

1.2.4 Attachment and Infidelity: Emotion Regulation Strategies

Attachment orientations are driven by different emotion regulation strategies that activate when facing relational stress or perceived threats. (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Their activation plays a crucial role in romantic relationships as it influences individuals' responses to stressful events, including infidelity. According to the model, responses to threatening events involve the appraisal of the threat during the availability of the attachment figure. The evaluation of proximity-seeking leads to the use of either hyperactivating or deactivating strategies.

According to Mikulincer and Shaver (2007), individuals with an anxiously attached style often use hyperactivating strategies that intensify their emotional distress. These include exaggerated danger appraisals such as catastrophizing, increased alertness to potential threats, and a ruminative focus on both past and future relationship risks. This often results in chronic attachment-system activation even in the absence of objective danger. In contrast, avoidantly attached individuals typically use deactivating strategies to increase emotional distance from

partners by repressing attachment-related thoughts and feelings. These tactics reduce dependence on close people by focusing attention on dangers and suppressing attachment-related demands. Fearful-avoidant individuals tend to switch between hyperactivating and deactivating strategies in an irregular and less structured way. They distance themselves to avoid expected rejection but also face ambivalence, anxiety, and a repeated desire for support and closeness.

Importantly, attachment-system activation is dependent on the subjective appraisal of threat rather than the objective presence of a stressor (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Even though events of relational violations are impactful, an individual's perception and interpretation of either internal or external events as threatening provokes an emotional or physical response. As a result, experiences like real or suspected infidelity can trigger various psychological responses in people, largely influenced by their attachment styles and working models.

1.2.5 Attachment, Caregiving, and Sexuality: Pathways to Infidelity

In addition to emotion regulation strategies, attachment theory may provide a comprehensive framework for understanding romantic relationships by conceptualising them as an integration of three core behavioural systems: attachment, caregiving and sexual mating (Shaver & Hazan, 1988). The majority of romantic relationships involve varying mixtures of all three elements; however, one or more components may be absent in some instances. It is proposed that the attachment style is the first of the three behavioural systems to develop and, as such, significantly impacts the onset and development of caregiving and sexuality, making it central to the maintenance of romantic relationships (Shaver & Hazan, 1988).

Secure attachment fosters a healthy integration where caregiving is responsive rather than compulsive (Feeney, 1996) and sexuality is oriented towards mutual intimacy and pleasure rather than anxiety reduction or distancing (Hazan et al., 1999). Consequently, securely

attached individuals report lower likelihoods of engaging in extradyadic sexual behaviour as their needs for closeness and security are largely met within the primary relationship. In contrast, insecure attachment disrupts this integrative balance, giving rise to distinct pathways towards relational dysfunction including infidelity (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007). These pathways are closely related to the core emotion regulation strategies outlined earlier: deactivating strategies associated with attachment avoidance and hyperactivating strategies associated with attachment anxiety.

For avoidantly attached individuals, early experiences of emotional rejection or unavailability foster a defensive orientation towards premature self-reliance and discomfort with intimacy. Their use of deactivating techniques manifests in their sexuality as a low-intimacy, emotionally distant approach, and in their caring as a reluctance to provide or receive care (Shaver & Hazan, 1988). Avoidantly attached individuals report more permissive sexual attitudes (Feeney, Noller & Patty, 1993), more casual sexual encounters and one-night stands (Brennan & Shaver, 1995) and sexual behaviour characterised by less emotional involvement. Infidelity may serve as a distance-regulation tactic in this context. Avoidant individuals may reduce their emotional reliance on any one partner by having romantic or sexual relationships outside of their primary relationship which reduces their perceived vulnerability (Feldman & Cauffman, 1999). Therefore, infidelity for avoidantly attached individuals is frequently more about maintaining autonomy and strengthening defensive self-reliance than it is about seeking alternative attachment ties (Allen & Baucom, 2004).

Inconsistent caregiving histories can cause hyperactivating behaviours in anxiously attached individuals. These are marked by an intense need for reassurance and increased sensitivity to signs of abandonment. This tendency is frequently evident in adult romantic relationships as demanding but resentful caregiving and a sexual orientation characterised by a strong need for intimacy accompanied by feelings of frustration and insecurity (Hazan &

Shaver, 1988). Infidelity could be a maladaptive reassurance-seeking tactic in this context. As a symbolic ‘backup’ against anticipated rejection and a means to validate one’s own value and desirability, having multiple partners can provide a short-term, false sense of security (Bogaert & Sadava, 2002; Allen & Baucom, 2004). Feeling appreciated, cared for or emotionally noticed are frequently cited as reasons for adultery. Furthermore, empirical research has shown a substantial but minor correlation between attachment anxiety and higher rates of infidelity, particularly among women (Bogaert & Sadava, 2002).

These studies collectively show that insecure attachment is a major risk factor for infidelity. (Feldman & Cauffman, 1999; Allen & Baucom, 2004). However, the need for further research is highlighted by two key shortcomings in the current literature. Firstly, the correlations between attachment styles and infidelity that have been identified are typically small yet statistically significant. Bogaert and Sadava (2002) propose that attachment-related processes tend to become evident during relationship threats or stress. Therefore, the activation of attachment mechanisms that occur before or during infidelity might be underestimated when using standardized self-report measures. Secondly, previous research has primarily examined why people engage in infidelity or how attachment is associated with infidelity-related behaviors. Much less is known about how individuals interpret infidelity once it is imagined or experienced. In particular, qualitative research remains limited in exploring how people understand infidelity and how attachment patterns shape these interpretations.

1.3 Empathy in Romantic Relationships

1.3.1 Defining Empathy: A Narrow Approach

Modern research defines empathy as the ability to share another person’s emotional state. Simply put, it means experiencing what someone else feels (de Vignemont & Singer, 2006; Zaki, 2014). This is different from related but distinct concepts like sympathy, personal

distress or compassion. Sympathy involves feeling sorry for someone without sharing their emotions. Personal distress, on the other hand, is a self-focused reaction to another person's suffering, such as feeling anxious or overwhelmed by their story. Compassion, however, is the motivation to alleviate someone's distress. While these concepts often overlap, this study focuses on empathy as the shared emotional state between individuals (Zaki, 2014).

Empathy is a multidimensional construct that plays a central role in interpersonal and relational functioning, particularly within romantic relationships. Early theoretical debates focused on whether empathy should be conceptualized as a stable personality trait or a situation-dependent state. The first perspective relies on the idea that empathy is an ability that develops largely through the interpretation of social experiences (Book, 1988). Conversely, some scholars believe that empathic experience varies by situation. These researchers believe that, regardless of a person's general empathic ability, it can change from one life experience to another, influenced by many factors. (Hoffman, 1984). For example, an individual who is normally highly empathic and caring may not empathize with a depressed romantic partner who has recently participated in an affair. Difficulty empathizing in one situation but not in another may mean that context can significantly influence empathic functioning. Nevertheless, scholars now agree that people have relatively stable empathic dispositions. These responses are contingent on situations, relationships, or emotional context and may change in dynamics (Davis, 1983). Although empathy has been conceptualized as a multidimensional construct, the present study adopts a narrower definition focused on the capacity to share another person's emotional state.

To support a multidimensional conceptualization of empathy, Davis (1983) presented the IRI ("Interpersonal Reactivity Index") as a measurement instrument to assess empathy across four separate but related constructs. These are referred to as perspective taking, empathic concern, personal distress and fantasy. Perspective taking is the ability to take

another person's psychological point of view. Empathic concern is the tendency to feel sympathy and concern for others. Personal distress refers to feelings of distress caused by experiencing the negative emotions of another. The fantasy component comprises the ability to become emotionally involved in the feelings and actions of characters in books, films and plays. This measurement is commonly used worldwide to measure empathic level of the person.

1.3.2 A Constructionist Framework for Understanding Empathy

A particularly relevant contemporary framework for understanding empathy, especially in the context of infidelity, is Barrett's (2017) Theory of Constructed Emotion. Barrett argues that emotions are not automatic responses but are actively constructed by the brain using prior experiences, interoceptive predictions (internal bodily sensations), and culturally learned emotion concepts. From this perspective, the brain functions as a prediction system, continuously interpreting rather than simply reacting to emotional information. Consequently, understanding another person's emotions is based not only on the situation itself but also on the observer's previous experiences and existing knowledge. This perspective is particularly relevant for the present study because it suggests that people may interpret the same act of infidelity in different ways depending on their previous relational experiences and the meanings they attach to them.

This idea might also help explain why empathy can be challenging when someone has been cheated on. First, understanding someone else's feelings is impossible because each person's brain interprets emotions based on their unique past experiences. For example, after betrayal, what someone perceives as «remorse» or «regret» in their partner might not be genuine (Barrett, 2017). Instead, they might be interpreting their partner's behavior through their own hopes and fears. An anxiously attached person who is constantly worried about abandonment might see «remorse» even when it is absent. This may be because they need to

believe that their partner regrets what happened and that the relationship can be saved. Their brain might construct remorse to protect the relationship even if their partner does not actually feel it.

Continuing the discussion, the Theory of Constructed Emotion emphasizes the importance of emotional granularity – the ability to differentiate between various emotional states (Lindquist & Barrett, 2008). Those with high emotional granularity can distinguish between «disappointed», «hurt», «betrayed» and «devastated» while those with low granularity might simply experience a generalised «bad feeling». This granularity is influenced by attachment experiences. Secure attachment, which fosters rich emotional dialogue with caregivers, can lead to greater emotional granularity (Mikulincer & Orbach, 1995). In contrast, insecure attachment may be linked to more generalised and nonspecific emotional experiences (Mikulincer et al., 2003). Low emotional granularity could explain difficulties in resolving conflicts within a relationship due to poor communication and misunderstanding.

This theory further suggests that people learn about emotions through their culture and relationships (Barrett, 2017). For example, the concept of «infidelity» or what constitutes cheating varies worldwide. Feelings like jealousy shame and guilt associated with betrayal and the appropriate response, such as forgiveness or leaving, also differ across cultures. Studies show that people rely on emotions to help them figure out what infidelity means in their daily lives (Schneider, 2025). Therefore, what people learn about relationships and betrayal varies across cultures. This is crucial for the current study, which focuses on Russian culture. Linguistic analysis of Russian proverbs reveals that in the Russian cultural worldview, male infidelity is sometimes justified ("честный муж одну только жену обманывает" — "an honest man cheats only on his wife") (Saveleva, 2012). Therefore,

Russian perceptions of betrayal, emotions, and responses might differ from those in Western countries like the US or the UK.

1.3.3 The Motivational Regulation of Empathy

Although empathy can happen automatically, people do not experience it in every situation. Researchers proposed that empathy is actively controlled by the context, our thoughts, and the immediate needs or desires of the person involved (de Vignemont & Singer, 2006). Zaki (2014) further explains that empathy depends on our motivation – whether we genuinely want to feel it or not. The crucial point is that empathy is a costly process. Experiencing someone else's pain is difficult and can drain energy, leaving people feeling emotionally hurt. Given its cost, people do not feel empathy for everyone all the time. More likely, empathy arises when there are good reasons for it. For example, someone might empathise with their partner when they want to help them through a difficult situation. Conversely, they might avoid empathy if the cost feels too high. For instance, someone might not empathize with another person if they are trying to protect themselves from pain.

This motivational framework can offer insights into understanding empathy in the context of infidelity (Zaki, 2014). The partner who cheated may want to avoid feeling their partner's pain. Recognizing the full impact of their actions would trigger guilt, shame, and moral discomfort. These are unpleasant emotions that they likely want to escape. As a result, they could use different regulatory strategies. One approach is attentional avoidance, where an unfaithful partner might avoid looking at their partner's distress or change the subject. Another strategy is cognitive reappraisal, such as minimizing the harm by saying «It wasn't that serious» or «Everyone does it». Emotional suppression involves numbing their own feelings to avoid getting involved in the conversation. Finally, blame attribution focuses on perceived flaws, like «If they were more attentive this wouldn't have happened».

The partner who was betrayed also goes through various emotions. On one hand, they want to understand what their partner was thinking and why they did it. This is called cognitive empathy—trying to see things from the other person's point of view (Zaki, 2014). But on the other hand, trying to understand can be very painful. Imagining their partner with someone else can be overwhelming and lead to great emotional distress. According to Zaki's (2014) motivated model of empathy, people may avoid affective sharing of pain because anticipated suffering is costly. As Josephs (2018) explains, after infidelity, people often lose the ability to see things from their partner's perspective. This mix of wanting to understand but being in too much pain is what makes infidelity challenging. Therefore, in this context, empathy is not just something the person has or does not have. It depends on how much pain the person is willing to feel.

1.3.4 Empathy and Attachment: Why They Are Connected

In romantic relationships, empathy is closely connected to partners' attachment patterns. Attachment theory suggests that secure attachment fosters more positive expectations of others, which facilitates empathic responding (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2015). This connection begins in early caregiving experiences. When caregivers are sensitive and responsive, children learn that emotions are manageable, that seeking support is effective, and that other people can be trusted. As a result, they become better able to recognise, understand, and respond to both their own emotions and the emotions of others. Consequently, securely attached children consistently demonstrate greater social competence, emotion understanding, and empathy towards peers than insecurely attached children (Sroufe et al., 2005; Thompson, 2016). In contrast, children who experience rejecting, inconsistent, or emotionally unavailable caregiving may learn to suppress emotions, avoid emotional closeness, or become uncertain about other people's emotional availability. These early attachment experiences therefore provide the foundation for later empathic functioning.

Adult romantic attachment has been associated with specific components of empathy. A study by Joireman and colleagues (2001) found that attachment-related anxiety was negatively correlated with the empathy dimension of perspective taking but positively associated with personal distress and empathic concern. It may mean that anxiously attached people care deeply about their partner and easily catch their partner's emotions. However, they struggle to step back and see things from the partner's perspective because they are too caught up in their own feelings.

Attachment-related avoidance, on the other hand, was negatively associated with perspective taking and empathic concern (Joireman et al., 2001). It implies that avoidantly attached individuals tend to deactivate their empathic responses. They are neither motivated to understand their partner's perspective nor concerned with their partner's emotional state. Secure individuals (low anxiety, low avoidance) exhibited higher levels of perspective taking and empathic concern. Individuals with low attachment avoidance and low to moderate attachment anxiety tended to demonstrate the highest levels of empathy. It may mean that the highest levels of empathy are found in people who do not avoid closeness and are not overly anxious, that is, those who are secure or slightly anxious, but not avoidant.

However, there is some evidence (Searle & Meara, 1999) that individuals with low attachment avoidance and high attachment anxiety (preoccupied attachment style) demonstrate greater empathic concern than those with less anxiety. Trusty et al. (2005) have suggested that these preoccupied individuals have of a greater fixation on emotions, both within themselves and others, thus a higher attunement to the affective/feeling component of empathy. Even though they may easily share another person's feelings, they are so overwhelmed by their own emotions that they struggle to see their partner's perspective.

In line with previous research, Britton and Fuendeling (2005) demonstrated that attachment anxiety predicted personal distress and empathic concern. It implies that such

individuals catch up easily on the emotions of others and feel distressed when the partner is suffering. Attachment avoidance was found to be negatively associated with the fantasy dimension of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI)—a measure of emotional involvement in fantasy. Therefore, individuals with high attachment avoidance experience difficulty with emotional engagement not only in intimate relationships but also in safe contexts such as reading a book or watching a film. Notably, individuals with high attachment avoidance also tend to express difficulty establishing and maintaining emotional involvement within their intimate relationships (Levy & Davis, 1988). In general, individuals with low attachment avoidance and low to moderate attachment anxiety tend to score highest on socially beneficial aspects of empathy such as perspective taking and empathic concern. This shows that attachment and empathy are connected since attachment experiences may shape how people manage their emotions, which in turn shapes their ability to recognize, understand and respond to the emotions of others.

1.3.5 Empathy as a Moral Deterrent

Research shows that both the ability to understand another's perspective and the ability to share their feelings influence how people behave towards others. Feeling empathy makes people more likely to help — whether they are children or adults (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). Understanding others and sharing their emotions are also linked to more prosocial behavior and a general tendency to be kind and supportive (Eisenberg, Zhou & Koller, 2001).

Research has consistently found that empathy is associated with greater competence in a wide range of social contexts (Zhou et al., 2002). In a meta-analysis of the literature relating to empathy and aggressive behaviour, Miller and Eisenberg (1988) reported that males and females who were low in empathy were more likely to demonstrate aggressive and antisocial behaviours in relation to others. Regular child abuse is associated with diminished levels of empathy in parents and their children (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988). A study of 4-5

year olds found that those who demonstrated greater empathic concern for others exhibited decreased externalizing behaviors such as aggression and hostility by the age of 6-7 (Hastings et al., 2000). A recent meta-analysis of empathy and criminal offenders (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2003) revealed that low levels of cognitive empathy were strongly predictive of violent offending while affective empathy was only weakly correlated. Thus, individuals who are capable of understanding another's perspective and sharing their emotional experience are less likely to engage in harmful behaviors toward others, including infidelity.

Therefore, empathy may act as a moral deterrent to infidelity in romantic relationships (Lisman et al., 2022). When people try to see things from their partner's perspective, they become more aware of how much they could hurt them. This makes them feel guilty in advance and less likely to justify cheating. On the other hand, people who lack empathy may distance themselves emotionally and downplay the harm of infidelity. Therefore, empathy extends beyond a relationship skill, as it also influences whether people cross boundaries.

1.3.6 Empathy and Forgiveness Following Infidelity

Forgiveness is one of the consequences of betrayal and is essential for rebuilding the relationship. Forgiveness in a romantic setting is a multifaceted interpersonal process necessary to overcome betrayal rather than a single act. Research consistently highlights empathy and secure attachment as the key psychological foundations for forgiveness. (Burnette et al., 2007).

The Interpersonal Model for Facilitating Forgiveness After Infidelity (Gordon & Baucom, 1999) demonstrates the clinical significance of this relationship. This three-stage therapy model (Dealing with Impact, Finding Meaning, Moving On) suggests that for forgiveness to happen, the partner who cheated must show empathy for the pain they caused, while the betrayed partner needs to develop a deeper and more compassionate understanding of why the affair happened.

The three stages are as follows. The Impact stage involves helping the betrayed partner process the initial shock, betrayal, and overwhelming emotions that follow discovery. The Finding Meaning stage focuses on exploring the context and reasons behind the affair, allowing both partners to develop a shared understanding of what happened and why. The Moving On stage involves making decisions about the future of the relationship, rebuilding trust, and working toward forgiveness and healing (Gordon & Baucom, 1999).

This therapeutic framework is also consistent with attachment theory. According to Mikulincer and Shaver (2007), secure attachment provides a "secure base" from which individuals are better able to regulate distress and engage in emotionally challenging situations. This may help explain why securely attached individuals are more likely to progress through the stages proposed by Gordon and Baucom (1999). During the Impact stage, attachment security may facilitate emotion regulation, allowing individuals to tolerate the emotional consequences of betrayal. During the Meaning stage, secure attachment may support perspective-taking and empathy, enabling the betrayed partner to consider the circumstances surrounding the infidelity without becoming overwhelmed. Finally, in the Moving On stage, empathy may facilitate openness and vulnerability, helping partners rebuild emotional connection and negotiate the future of the relationship.

This model also helps explain why couples with insecure attachment styles struggle (Burnette et al., 2007). For the avoidantly attached partner, empathy is 'turned off' (deactivation), which makes the Finding Meaning stage challenging (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). They may prefer to mentally check out or end the relationship rather than explore the situation or try to understand their partner's perspective. For the anxiously attached partner, the opposite happens: their empathy is too active (hyperactivation), which makes it difficult to move from the emotional chaos of the Impact stage to the calmer reflection needed for

Finding Meaning (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). They become trapped in their pain, preventing them from doing the mental effort needed to forgive.

Therefore, integrating this therapeutic framework with attachment theory highlights an important point: forgiveness after infidelity may be understood as a process shaped by both attachment and empathy. Previous research demonstrates that attachment patterns are closely connected to empathic responding, while empathy is closely connected to the way people make sense of betrayal. In addition, insecure attachment has been associated with a greater likelihood of infidelity. Taken together, these findings raise the possibility that empathy may represent a key mechanism through which attachment shapes individuals' interpretations of infidelity (Gorniewicz, 2011).

1.4 The Present Study

Studying how individuals interpret infidelity within their romantic relationships is crucial as it provides valuable insight into their experience of betrayal and the consequences of this action. Most studies on infidelity have used quantitative methods, focusing mainly on how attachment styles relate to infidelity. However, there is limited attention to investigating how empathy may shape the interpretation of infidelity when it occurs. Empathy is crucial for how relationships work. It helps partners connect emotionally and guides moral choices in romantic relationships. However, there is little evidence on how empathy may be related to infidelity. Although a model links empathy and attachment style to understanding infidelity there is no practical exploration of this relationship in real-life contexts (Gorniewicz, 2011).

Additionally, attitudes towards infidelity are shaped by cultural context. Previous research suggests that the meaning attached to infidelity may differ across societies with different cultural values and relationship norms. This idea is consistent with Barrett's (2017) Theory of Constructed Emotion, which proposes that emotions and the meanings attached to social experiences are constructed through prior experiences, cultural norms, and

interpersonal interactions. From this perspective, what is understood as infidelity, the emotions associated with it, and the ways people believe they should respond to it are likely to vary across cultural contexts. Consequently, interpretations of infidelity among Russian adults may differ from those reported in Western populations. Although demographic surveys have examined attitudes towards infidelity in Russia, there is limited qualitative research exploring how Russian adults make sense of infidelity and describe these experiences in their own words.

Therefore, a qualitative approach is essential to investigate this topic. Standard questionnaires cannot fully capture the emotional meanings and personal stories behind infidelity. Semi-structured interviews offer a more thorough examination. This study will use a qualitative approach to explore how attachment-related empathy shapes infidelity experiences and fill this gap. The guiding research question is:

How do people's attachment patterns and empathy shape the way they interpret and make sense of infidelity in their romantic relationships?

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

Participants were adults aged 18 years and older. Participants were in a committed romantic relationship for at least six months and resided in Russia. They were not required to have experienced infidelity since the study uses the hypothetical scenario of infidelity. However, some of the participants reflected on their previous experience of infidelity. Ten participants were recruited for the interview using purposive sampling on online social media platforms such as Telegram and VK.

2.2 Data Collection Method

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather information. Depending on participants' preferences and location, interviews took place either in person or online using video conferencing systems (such as Zoom or Telegram). The duration of interviews was between 60 and 90 minutes. They took place in Russian, which is the participants' native language. Following each interview, field notes were taken right away to document reflexive impressions, emotional tone, and observations.

2.3 Interview Procedure

Participants were informed via messaging platforms about the study, ethical issues and their rights as participants prior to the interview. Informed consent was completed before the interview started. Interviews were conducted via a video conferencing platform (for online interviews) or in a quiet private setting (for in-person interviews). To ensure participants' emotional safety and openness, interviews were conducted in a compassionate and non-judgmental manner. The participant could choose to pause or end the interview if they continued to display signs of psychological distress. The interview was followed by the debriefing process.

2.4 Interview Guide

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) concepts guided the conduct of the interview. This approach employs open-ended, non-directive questions to gain a comprehensive understanding of the individual.

Domain 1: Past Relationship with Caregivers

The current domain focused on the past relationship with caregivers. It was important to understand the family environment to get the insight into the attachment patterns that people acquired. It emphasized participants' experiences related to support, control, personal boundaries, and independence. The domain also considered the dynamics of separation and

closeness with caregivers. Additionally, it examined how participants perceived links between their past caregiver relationships and their current romantic partnerships.

Domain 2: Present Romantic Relationships

This domain investigated how participants characterize their current relationship, focusing on their reactions to emotional closeness, empathy, and support. The domain was also crucial in understanding whether the attachment style acquired in the past remained stable or altered in the relationship.

Domain 3: Hypothetical Scenario of Infidelity

This domain investigated how participants respond to a hypothetical infidelity scenario. The questions focused on their initial emotional reactions and the reasons for their concerns. It also investigated their capacity to consider other viewpoints, understand their partner's motives, and evaluate possibilities for forgiveness or ending the relationship. Additionally, the domain examined participants' thoughts on themselves as the unfaithful partner, including possible reasons for their cheating and the emotional impact they expected afterward.

2.5 Data Analysis

Each interview was transcribed verbatim and analyzed separately using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2022). The transcripts were read multiple times to deepen engagement with the data. Initial notes focused on descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual insights. These notes were then developed into Personal Experiential Themes (PETs), illustrating how each participant understood their experiences. Once each case was analyzed individually, a cross-case comparison was performed to find Group Experiential Themes (GETs) representing patterns of convergence and divergence across participants.

3. Results

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results of an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) conducted on ten semi-structured interviews. The analysis explored how participants made sense of their attachment experiences, empathy, and attitudes towards infidelity in romantic relationships. Rather than categorising participants into specific attachment types, the analysis explored how participants understood their caregiving experiences and how these experiences continued to shape their adult romantic relationships.

Three superordinate themes emerged from the analysis, which can be seen in Table 1. The first theme focuses on participants' childhood relationships with their parents and how these experiences influenced their adult relationships. The second theme explores empathy as an important part of close relationships, showing that it could both strengthen emotional connection and become emotionally overwhelming. The third theme examines the different meanings participants attached to infidelity. It includes whether betrayal represented an absolute relational boundary, the circumstances under which it could be understood or forgiven, and how participants imagined themselves as the unfaithful partner.

Table 1

Depiction of Superordinate and Subordinate themes with the Participants' Prevalence

Superordinate Theme	Subordinate Theme	Participants
Early Caregiving Relationships	Mother's Hyper-Care	P1, P2, P3, P5, P8, P10
	The Absent or Emotionally Unavailable Father	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P8
	Childhood Attachment Patterns	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P8, P9, P10

Differences in Expressing Empathy	Hyper-Empathy	P3, P4, P6
	Emotional Overload	P1, P2, P3, P6, P8, P9, P10
	Deficit of Empathy	P5, P7, P8
Infidelity as a Boundary	Infidelity as an Irreparable Violation	P1, P5, P6, P7, P10
	Willingness to Understand Before Making a Decision	P2, P3, P4, P8, P9
	Imagining Oneself as the Unfaithful Partner	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10

3.2 Participants

Ten participants took part in the study, including three romantic couples. Consistent with the IPA approach, each interview was analyzed separately. However, when relevant, comparisons between partners are presented to demonstrate how people within the same relationship may understand similar or different childhood experiences in different ways. The following summaries are intended to provide background information about each of participants. Table 2 provides demographic information for 10 participants.

Table 2

Participant Demographic Information

Participant	Gender	Age	Relationship duration	Relationship status
P1	Male	23	6 years	Married
P2	Female	24	6 years	Married

P3	Female	25	3 years	Married
P4	Female	25	1 year	In a relationship
P5	Male	22	2 years	Married
P6	Female	19	2 years	Married
P7	Male	24	2 years	In a relationship
P8	Female	24	2 years	In a relationship
P9	Female	24	4 years	In a relationship
P10	Female	27	6 years	Married

Although this study did not use a standardized measure of attachment, participants' narratives revealed recurring patterns that were broadly consistent with the attachment styles described by Mikulincer and Shaver (2007). These patterns were identified through participants' accounts of their childhood relationships with caregivers, their ways of managing emotions, and their experiences within romantic relationships. Rather than assigning participants to fixed attachment categories, these patterns are presented as an interpretative framework that helps to understand the findings presented in the following themes.

Three broad attachment patterns were identified across the sample: anxious attachment, avoidant attachment, and secure attachment.

Anxious Attachment

Five participants (P3, P1, P6, P8, and P4) described childhood experiences that were broadly consistent with attachment anxiety. They often spoke about controlling mothers, inconsistent emotional support, difficulties with personal boundaries, and fears of

abandonment that later appeared in their romantic relationships. P4's account was more mixed. While she remembered her grandmother as a stable and supportive figure, she also described being abandoned by her parents and later fearing abandonment in close relationships. Her interview therefore reflected both secure and anxious attachment-related characteristics.

Avoidant Attachment

Two participants (P5 and P7) described experiences that were broadly consistent with avoidant attachment. Both reflected on emotionally distant or unavailable caregiving during childhood and explained that they had learned to rely on themselves from an early age. This pattern also appeared in their romantic relationships. They often found it difficult to express emotions or provide emotional support and tended to withdraw or focus on practical solutions when relationships became emotionally demanding.

Secure Attachment

Three participants (P9, P10, and P2) described experiences that were broadly consistent with secure attachment. Although their childhood experiences differed, each described having at least one reliable and emotionally supportive attachment figure that contributed to a sense of safety and stability. In their current relationships, they spoke about trust, open communication, and emotional security. P2's account was particularly interesting. Although she described a family pattern that shared similarities with several other participants, including a controlling mother and a more emotionally distant father, she did not present these experiences as defining her current relationships. Instead, she reflected on them without dwelling on the past and focused more on the trust and communication she had built within her current relationship.

Overall, these attachment patterns are intended to provide context for understanding participants' experiences rather than to classify them into fixed categories. The following

themes explore how these attachment-related patterns shaped the ways participants understood their childhood experiences, empathy, and infidelity within their romantic relationships.

3.3 Common themes

Theme 1: Early Caregiving Relationships

Many participants noted a common pattern in their family dynamics during the interviews. They often spoke about mothers who were highly involved in their lives and fathers who were emotionally or physically absent. Although these experiences were similar across participants, they did not affect everyone in the same way. Some participants described difficulties with personal boundaries and a strong need for control, while others reflected on becoming independent from an early age or finding it difficult to trust other people and build close relationships.

Theme 1.1 Mother's Hyper-Care

Many participants described their mothers as loving and caring during the interview. However, they also explained that this care sometimes turned into control. Rather than helping them feel safe, maternal hyper-care often limited people's independence and personal boundaries. Even though participants described their experiences in different ways, many later reflected how this control impacted the way they build relationships now.

To start with, P1 described hyper-care mainly through repeated violations of his personal space. He remembered becoming angry because his mother frequently crossed the boundaries that he considered important:

"I got very angry when she disrespected my personal space. She read my messages. She always came into my room without knocking."

For P1, the problem was not that his mother cared too much but the way she expressed this care. Interestingly, while sharing his experience, he never criticised his

mother's actions. Instead, he explained that she wanted to protect him and prevent him from repeating her own mistakes:

"My mother wanted to strictly control everything because she wanted me not to repeat her mistakes."

This suggests that P1 understands both sides of the relationship with his mother. As an adult, he reflects on his mother's behavior and recognizes that this control came from care rather than hostility. Nevertheless, he believes that such care reduced his sense of independence and created a strong desire to cope with problems on his own.

P8 described a similar experience of blurred boundaries. Unlike P1, she did not realise during childhood that her mother's behavior was unusual:

"Our boundaries were completely blurred."

"She could come in while I was showering... until I was seventeen, I didn't even think it was something bad."

One possible explanation is that these behaviors became normal because they were present throughout her childhood. Only after the beginning of a romantic relationship does P8 realize that she needs to have privacy and personal space. Looking back, she understands that the lack of boundaries continues to influence her adult life, and she admitted that she still feels under pressure when communicating with her mother.

A similar pattern appeared in P2's interview. Like P8, she described herself as "mummy's girl" and remembered a warm relationship with her mother. However, as she became older, care gradually turned into control:

"We had blurred boundaries...there was hyper-care from her side"

Interestingly, unlike P8, P2 emphasized the feeling of relief after moving away from home:

"I felt very relieved because I understood that this control was over."

Although both P8 and P2 experienced maternal hyper-care, they had different consequences of it. For P8 mother is still a controlling figure even after moving out to a different place, but for P2, moving out was the act of freedom from such control. It shows that similar childhood experiences may have different meanings in adulthood and shape personal characteristics differently.

P3 also described her mother's care as overwhelming. However, unlike P1 and P8, she focused less on physical boundaries and more on expectations her mother wanted to put on her. She believed that she had to accomplish many achievements not because she wanted it but because her mother wanted to achieve her unrealized ambitions:

"I had to finish music school because she didn't finish it herself."

"She tried to give me her love, but it was some kind of hyper-love, hyper-care."

Throughout the interview, P3 repeatedly uses the words hyper-love and hyper-care. Rather than saying her mother did not love her, she distinguished between love and control. She also tries to understand why her mother behaved this way:

"She pushed all this onto me out of unlovedness."

This may suggest that P3 does not interpret her mother's controlling behaviour simply as control. Instead, she also understands it as an attempt to provide the love and care that her mother herself may not have experienced during childhood.

P5 also described a highly controlling mother. His childhood was organized around rules, supervision, and constant monitoring:

"If I went out, I had to call and say where I was, who I was with... and be home by five."

Unlike P1, however, P5 rarely showed anger towards his mother. Instead, he explained that he gradually stopped turning to his parents for emotional support and preferred to cope with difficulties by himself:

"I talked to my toys instead."

His account suggests that such frequent parental involvement was more about physical presence and control rather than emotional comfort. As a result, rather than resisting control directly, P5 appeared to withdraw emotionally.

However, not all participants described maternal care as controlling. P10 remembered her mother as consistently supportive while respecting her independence:

“I had a wonderful relationship with my mother. She always supported me in everything.”

Similarly, P4, who was raised by her grandmother, described a relationship based on trust, encouragement, and freedom to make her own decisions:

“She never discouraged us from doing anything. She always gave us a choice of who we wanted to become.”

Unlike participants who experienced hyper-care, neither P10 nor P4 associated emotional closeness with control. Instead, they described their caregivers as people who were available when support was needed while allowing them to develop independently.

Overall, participants described maternal hyper-care as more than just excessive love. While many acknowledged that their mothers had good intentions, they also noted that this care often became controlling, restricted their autonomy, and blurred personal boundaries. At the same time, their interpretations of these experiences varied: some focused on understanding their mother’s motives, whereas others prioritized separation and independence. These differences suggest that similar childhood experiences may lead to different meanings and different ways of building relationships into adulthood.

Theme 1.2 The Absent or Emotionally Unavailable Father

Compared to controlling mothers, participants usually described their fathers as emotionally distant, physically absent, or unavailable during difficult situations. Even though participants shared different reasons for the distance with their fathers, the common theme was the fact that they rarely approached their fathers for emotional support. As a result, they

often learned to seek support from other people or cope with emotional difficulties on their own.

To begin with, P8 associated her father with fear. Although she explained that he had never physically abused her, she still remembers how she was afraid of him:

“I was afraid of him. Every time he came, I started crying and ran away.”

Furthermore, P8 found it difficult to explain why she felt this way. Instead of describing particular situations, she said he was “not a good person”. One possible explanation is that the emotional experience itself became more important for her than the specific events. P8 also connected this relationship with her later difficulties trusting men:

“I was afraid of men because of him.”

It suggests that her relationship with her father influenced not only her childhood but also the way she later approached men in romantic relationships.

P5 also described how he was afraid of his father. However, unlike P8, he remembered specific situations in which he tried to seek support from him:

“I rarely went to my father because I was afraid of him.”

“He would say, ‘It’s your own fault.’”

Rather than receiving comfort and support, P5 remembered being expected to solve problems by himself. Throughout the interview, he repeatedly described how he used to rely on himself instead of asking people for emotional support.

P3 described a different experience. Unlike P8 and P5, she was not afraid of her father. Instead, she explained that he was emotionally unavailable when she needed him the most:

“I could go to my dad. I could cry. He would just stay silent and say, ‘Make peace with your mum, then everything will be fine.’”

Even though P3's father did not reject her, he also did not provide the emotional comfort she was looking for. Instead, he encouraged her to resolve conflicts with her mother. This suggests that, despite being physically present, he did not become a reliable source of emotional support during difficult moments.

P6 and P4 both grew up without their fathers, but they understood these experiences differently.

When speaking about her childhood, P6 stated:

"I didn't have a father."

Rather than focusing on this absence, she repeatedly returned to the idea of becoming independent. Throughout the interview, she explained that she learned from an early age to rely on herself and make her own decisions. One possible explanation is that independence became her way of adapting to the absence of emotional support.

P4 did not have a father as well:

"I don't have a mum or a dad. They abandoned me."

However, compared to P6, she approached the topic differently and shifted the theme towards her main caregiver – her grandmother:

"She replaced both my mum and my dad."

Throughout the interview, P4 described her grandmother as someone who always supported her, encouraged her, and allowed her to make her own choices. This suggests that although her biological parents were absent, she still experienced a stable attachment relationship through another caregiver.

Nevertheless, not all participants described their fathers as emotionally unavailable. P1 remembered his father as the person who held the family together:

"He was always the support our family stood on."

Although P1 explained that his father rarely interfered in conflicts between him and his mother, he still described him as reliable and emotionally stable. Rather than providing support through long conversations, P1 believed that his father's presence and responsibility made him someone the family could depend on.

Overall, participants described fathers in different ways, including fear, emotional distance, silence, or physical absence. However, many participants shared their experience of growing up without seeing emotional support from their fathers. At the same time, the interviews showed that the same experience can be interpreted in different ways. Some participants focused on emotional loss, whereas others viewed these experiences as an important reason why they became independent in adulthood.

Theme 1.3 Childhood Attachment Patterns

Although participants described different childhood experiences, many also reflected on how these experiences continued to influence their romantic relationships. Several participants recognised similarities between the relationships they had with their caregivers and the ways they behaved with their partners. However, these similarities were expressed differently. Some participants noticed controlling behaviours, others described emotional withdrawal, while some recognised that they had developed high expectations of themselves and their partners.

P1 was one of the participants who most openly reflected on this connection. During the interview, he explained that some of his current behaviours reminded him of his mother's hyper-care:

"It's the emotional part in me that wants to hyper-care, which I most likely inherited from my mother."

He admitted that he sometimes feels the need to know where his wife is, who she is spending time with, and when she will return home. At the same time, P1 recognised that

these feelings were not always connected to the situation itself but were influenced by his earlier experiences.

“I understand that if a person wants to cheat, they will do it anyway... but this emotional part in me still wants to control.”

Rather than describing this behaviour as something he wanted to continue, P1 reflected on it critically and tried to understand where it came from. This suggests that he recognised the influence of his childhood experiences while also trying to change this pattern. It shows that even though he was raised in a controlling way, he wants to break this dynamic and build a relationship in a healthier way.

P8 also reflected on similarities between her childhood and her current relationship. However, unlike P1, she focused less on controlling behaviour and more on the expectations she places on herself and her partner.

“I inherited all the habits she had... high standards.”

She explained that these expectations sometimes create difficulties in her relationship and make it harder for her to feel satisfied.

“Because of my high standards, I destroy myself.”

While reflecting, P8 recognised that many of these expectations were similar to those she experienced while growing up. This suggests that some childhood patterns continued to influence the way she understands herself and her romantic relationship. For her, it is hard to change the dynamic in which she grew up even though she is aware of it.

P3 described another way in which childhood experiences continued to influence her relationships. Rather than talking about control, she focused on her reactions during conflict.

“When I hear someone shouting, my body goes into shock. I want to hide in a cave so no one touches me.”

She believed that this reaction was connected to her childhood experiences.

"I think this comes from childhood — I know how to hide and take cover."

This suggests that P3 understood emotional withdrawal as something she had learned while growing up. Although she recognised this pattern, she also explained that changing it was not always easy.

P5 reflected on his childhood in a different way. He mentioned that it is better for him to provide the solutions for the problem rather than showing emotional support. He admits that his partner does not appreciate such an approach, and he tries to work on it:

Well, now I've already understood this point, and I'm trying to just provide emotional support."

This approach to support mirrors the way his parents, particularly his mother, responded to him — offering advice rather than emotional comfort. Interestingly, P5 now finds himself using a similar strategy, even though he had disliked it as a child. Nevertheless, trying to change such a pattern shows he can work on the relationship dynamic and provide the comfort his partner needs in the moment.

P4's account is particularly important because the controlling pattern she described did not originate from her childhood caregiver but from a previous romantic relationship. Despite describing her grandmother as supportive and allowing her independence, P4 later learned to report her actions to a controlling partner because she feared abandonment. In her current relationship, however, this pattern is gradually being challenged because her partner usually tells her:

"You don't need to give me such detailed reports. Just tell me you're home, and that's enough."

Her narrative suggests that despite having unhealthy relationship patterns before, she still has a chance to build a healthy dynamic with another partner.

Nevertheless, not all participants described carrying destructive patterns from their childhood into their adult relationships. P10, P2, and P9 each described their current relationships as supportive and emotionally secure. P10 reflected on her marriage as a source of stability: *'We love each other very much. Madly in love.'* P9 described her partner as *'a safe place'* and her *'pillow of safety.'* P2, despite her mother's control, found security in her relationship with P1, describing it as *'calm, strong, trusting, loving, and supportive.'* Their accounts suggest that supportive childhood relationships and desire to change unhealthy patterns can provide a foundation for trust and security in adulthood.

Overall, participants' narratives suggest that childhood experiences continued to influence the way they understood and experienced romantic relationships. However, these patterns were not identical across participants. Importantly, many participants were aware of these patterns and tried to understand how their childhood experiences continued to shape their adult relationships. Rather than describing these influences as fixed, participants often reflected on them as something they were beginning to recognise and change.

Theme 2: Differences in expressing empathy

While the first theme explored participants' childhood relationships with caregivers, this theme focuses on how participants experienced empathy in their romantic relationships. Although empathy was often described as something positive, many participants explained that it could also become emotionally difficult. Some participants described how they were feeling their partner's emotions so strongly that they became overwhelmed by them, while others found it difficult to recognize or express empathy. As a result, empathy did not always help participants feel closer to their partners. In some situations, feeling too much or struggling to respond emotionally made emotional closeness more difficult.

Theme 2.1 Hyper-Empathy

While discussing the topic of empathy, some participants (Sona, P10, P2) shared that when their partners feel bad, they feel their emotions as well and desire to help them. However, several participants described empathy as an intense emotional experience and put more emphasis on describing how they feel when their partners feel bad. Additionally to feeling the same emotions as their partner, they noticed that sometimes feeling the same emotions exhausted them when they tried to support their partners.

P6 was one of the participants who described herself as highly empathetic:

“I am maximally an empath. Right down to the bone.”

Throughout the interview, P6 repeatedly explained that she finds it difficult to separate her own emotions from those of people who are close to her. For example, when her partner experiences emotional pain, she also begins to experience these feelings, and she cannot calm down until his problem is solved.

P4 described a similar experience while talking about her partner’s grief after the death of his stepfather:

“I was crying because I couldn’t bear that someone close to me was in so much pain. I took all his pain upon myself. I was shaken myself.”

Rather than describing only her partner’s emotions as P6 did, P4 focused on how strongly she experienced them herself. She explained that seeing someone close to her suffer was emotionally overwhelming. P4’s account suggests that seeing someone close to her in pain made it difficult for her to remain emotionally separate from his experience.

P3 also described becoming deeply affected by her partner’s emotional state:

“I import his state when he’s irritated, upset... I feel his state, even just by intonation.”

She explained that even small changes in her partner’s voice immediately affected her own emotions. P3 also described what happened when both partners were emotionally overwhelmed at the same time:

“When we are both not in resource, a catastrophe can happen.”

Interestingly, P3 did not describe empathy only as something positive. Instead, she explained that feeling her partner’s emotions so strongly sometimes made difficult situations even harder to manage. This suggests that empathy could become emotionally exhausting rather than supportive.

Even though they focused on different things while describing how they empathize with their partner, they came to a similar conclusion. Sometimes feeling another person’s pain may be exhausting and can lead to emotional imbalance.

Theme 2.2 Emotional Overload

While some participants described experiencing their partner’s emotions very intensely, they also explained that sometimes it made it difficult for them to provide support. Instead of responding immediately to the partner, they often withdrew from the situation until they felt emotionally calmer. They did not describe it as a lack of care, but as if they were trying to protect themselves from becoming even more emotionally overwhelmed.

P3 described this experience most clearly. When conflicts became emotionally intense, her first reaction was not to comfort the other person but to distance herself from the situation:

“When I hear someone shouting or something happening, my body goes into shock. I get scared, I don’t want to go there. I want to hide in a cave so no one touches me.”

Throughout the interview, P3 explained that this reaction was familiar to her and she connected it with her childhood experiences:

“I think this comes from childhood — I know how to hide and take cover.”

At the same time, she recognised that her partner often needed emotional support during these situations.

“I understand that I am needed by that person... but if I get into some other conflict, I will make it worse. So I just wait.”

P3 felt mixed feelings when a difficult situation happens. On one hand, she wants to help, but on the other, she was afraid of making the situation worse. One possible explanation is that withdrawing from conflict became a coping mechanism she learned from the conflicts in her childhood.

P6 described a similar experience. Although she considered herself a highly empathetic person, she explained that it became difficult to respond to her partner when both of them were emotionally overwhelmed.

“When we are both on edge... it’s difficult to respond, because we are more focused on our own feelings.”

P6 did not describe this as a lack of empathy. Instead, she explained that strong emotions made it difficult to focus on another person’s emotional needs. This suggests that empathy became harder to express during emotionally stressful situations.

P1 also reflected on moments when his own emotions prevented him from responding to his partner.

“When I was in very strong, negative emotions and thought more about my own state than about my partner’s state... I didn’t feel anything except my own negative emotions.”

P1 recognised that during these moments his attention was directed mainly towards his own emotional experience. As a result, it became difficult for him to notice or respond to his partner’s emotions until he had calmed down. P1’s account suggests that his ability to respond to his partner depended partly on his own emotional state. When his negative emotions became too intense, there appeared to be little emotional space left for attending to his partner’s experience.

P2 described a similar experience:

“When we are both on edge... it’s difficult to respond, because we are more focused on our own feelings.”

Like P6, she explained that empathy became more difficult to express when both partners were experiencing strong emotions at the same time. Rather than seeing it as a relational problem, P2 suggested that it would be better for both partners to have time before they were able to understand each other’s feelings.

Interestingly, P1 and P2, who are partners, described a similar limitation in their ability to respond empathetically during emotionally intense situations. However, P1 framed this experience mainly through his own internal state, explaining that his negative emotions left little space for his partner’s feelings. P2, in contrast, described emotional overload as a shared state in which both partners needed time before they could respond to each other. Their accounts therefore show different understandings of a similar relational experience: P1 focused on his individual emotional reaction, whereas P2 understood temporary withdrawal as something occurring between both partners.

Overall, participants described emotional withdrawal not as an absence of empathy but as a response to emotional overload. Although they wanted to support their partners, they often explained that strong emotions made it difficult. Rather than responding immediately, many participants preferred to wait until they felt calmer before returning to the conversation. These findings suggest that empathy was sometimes experienced as emotionally overwhelming, which could lead to temporary withdrawal from emotionally difficult situations instead of giving immediate support.

Theme 2.3 Deficit of Empathy

While some participants described feeling overwhelmed by their partner’s emotions, others explained that they found it difficult to recognize or express empathy. Rather than

experiencing another person's emotions too strongly, they described difficulties understanding, sharing, or responding to them.

P5 spoke openly about these difficulties.

"I might have some problems with empathy... I just sit and listen. I don't feel sadness on that level."

Throughout the interview, P5 reflected on his difficulty sharing other people's feelings. Looking back at his previous relationships, he also recognized that his attention was often focused on his own emotions.

"I was afraid of losing the person because I thought that losing her meant losing myself. So I was worried about myself."

This suggests that P5 found it difficult to shift his attention away from his own emotional experience during emotionally difficult situations.

P7 described similar difficulties, although he experienced them differently.

"I've forgotten how to support people... emotional support is difficult for me."

P7 connected this difficulty with his adolescence, when his mother became emotionally unstable during cancer treatment. He explained that during this period he learned to distance himself from emotionally intense situations:

"I learned to detach... you don't have to respond all the time, you don't have to get into conflicts."

His account suggests that such emotional detachment appeared as a coping mechanism from childhood. Nowadays, this pattern continues to affect how he responds to emotionally difficult situations.

P8 described another experience. She explained that although she often felt empathy for other people, she did not always feel motivated to respond.

"I feel empathy, I just don't see the point in solving it."

She also admitted that she sometimes found it difficult to understand her partner's emotions.

"I cannot always understand what he feels, especially when it comes to frustration."

P8 distinguished between recognizing another person's emotions and knowing how to respond to them. This suggests that understanding another person's feelings did not always lead to emotional or practical support.

Overall, these accounts indicate that empathy were expressed in different ways. Some had trouble identifying their partner's emotions, while others wanted to help but struggled to respond appropriately. Rather than a lack of care, these experiences seemed related to the emotional regulation strategies they had developed in close relationships.

Theme 3: Infidelity as a Boundary

The third superordinate theme examines how participants interpret infidelity in their romantic relationships. Although all participants described infidelity as a painful experience, they interpreted its meaning differently. For some, infidelity represented a boundary after which the relationship could not continue. For others, understanding the context surrounding the betrayal was an important step before deciding how to respond to it.

Theme 3.1 Infidelity as an Irreparable Violation

For several participants, infidelity represented much more than a single act of betrayal. Instead, it was viewed as a violation from which there was no return. Although participants explained their views in different ways, they shared the belief that once a partner had cheated, trust could not be fully restored and the relationship could no longer continue.

P1 was one of the participants who expressed the strongest rejection of infidelity. Throughout the interview, he repeatedly returned to the idea that once infidelity occurred, the relationship was immediately over:

"Trust will be gone. Either a breakup, or the chance is close to zero."

Instead of trying to understand why the betrayal had happened, P1 focused on his own emotional reaction. Even when he imagined asking his partner about the reasons, he explained that this would not reflect a genuine desire to understand her perspective:

“In the heat of the moment, I will ask, but that doesn’t mean I have a sincere desire to find out what and why.”

For P1, the reasons behind the betrayal were irrelevant because they could not change what had already happened. His account suggests that the loss of trust itself became more important than the circumstances that led to the infidelity.

P10 was equally categorical in her rejection of infidelity. For her, betrayal represented something that completely destroyed the relationship:

“For me, it’s unforgivable. It’s betrayal. And that’s it. Period.”

She rejected any possible justification, including alcohol, arguments, or other circumstances:

“Even if it happened while drunk, in any state... if a person goes to someone else, why do you need a wife, a family, children?”

P6 also viewed infidelity as a clear boundary, but her account placed greater emphasis on honesty following the betrayal rather than on the act itself:

“The only taboo in a relationship is infidelity. If a person cheats once, they will cheat again.”

She explained that she would end the relationship if her partner cheated. However, she distinguished between hearing about the betrayal directly from her partner and discovering it herself. If he admitted the infidelity immediately, she believed she would remain calmer and could forgive him as a person, although the relationship would still end. In contrast, hiding the truth was experienced as an additional betrayal and could even lead to feelings of revenge. For P6, honesty became an important factor in how she evaluated both her partner and the relationship.

Unlike participants who imagined how they might respond, P5 reflected on his own experience of being betrayed in a previous relationship. Reflecting on it, he explained that the infidelity instantly destroyed any desire to mend the relationship.

“Last time it happened... I immediately lost any desire to discuss anything or try to fix anything.”

Similar to P1, P5 showed limited interest in understanding his partner’s viewpoint. Instead, he focused on how the betrayal impacted him. Like P6, he differentiated between being told about the infidelity and finding out about it himself. While he believed he would end the relationship calmly if his partner admitted it immediately, hiding the betrayal would provoke anger because he interpreted it as a lack of care for his emotional wellbeing:

“If she hides it, it means she doesn’t care about my state or my feelings.”

P7 also reflected on a personal experience of infidelity. He explained that he had forgiven his partner in a previous relationship, but this decision did not lead to rebuilding trust. Looking back, he realised that the relationship could not recover despite his attempts to continue it. At the same time, unlike P1 or P5, P7 still expressed a desire to understand why the betrayal had happened:

“I would try to understand why it happened. I wouldn’t be angry. I would try to understand.”

However, he also explained that he would not want to know the details because imagining them would be too painful. His account therefore reflected two parallel processes. On the one hand, he wanted to understand the reasons behind the betrayal. On the other hand, he tried to protect himself from the emotional consequences of knowing too much. Although understanding remained important for him, it did not change his conclusion that the relationship could not continue.

Overall, participants agreed that infidelity would most likely end the relationship, but they differed in what made it unforgivable. For some, the main issue was the loss of trust.

Others focused on honesty after the betrayal, while some rejected the idea that any circumstances could justify cheating. P7 also showed that understanding why the infidelity had happened did not necessarily mean that the relationship could continue. These accounts suggest that participants were responding not only to the act of infidelity itself, but also to what it represented to them.

Theme 3.2 Willingness to Understand Before Making a Decision

In contrast to participants who viewed infidelity as an immediate and irreversible boundary, others described how they would pause before making a decision. Although they also expected infidelity to be painful, they explained that understanding why it had happened was an important part of deciding how to respond.

P9 described this perspective most clearly. Although she expected infidelity to bring *“the whole spectrum of negative emotions,”* she repeatedly returned to the importance of understanding the situation before deciding what to do.

“I would try to understand why it happened. What would bother me most is the context. Why? How? Is there a way to fix this?”

She also distinguished between different forms of physical intimacy:

“A touch, a kiss — it’s not so bad. It could be a random story. Or maybe a joke.”

Rather than treating all acts of infidelity as equally meaningful, P9 evaluated them within the wider context of the relationship. She explained that she would try to understand the situation from her partner’s perspective because the relationship itself remained important to her. Her account suggests that understanding was not about minimising the betrayal but about deciding whether the relationship could still be preserved.

Unlike the other participants, P8 interpreted the possibility of infidelity through herself rather than through her partner’s behaviour. While most participants assumed that responsibility would lie with the partner who had cheated, P8 anticipated blaming herself:

"It's as if I would be faced with the fact of my own inadequacy."

Her account reflected a strong tendency towards self-blame. Rather than questioning her partner's behaviour, she imagined that infidelity would confirm her own inadequacy. Because she believed that she would be responsible for what had happened, she explained that she would be more willing to forgive him and change her own behaviour. She also described her emotional attachment to the relationship and her fear of being alone as important reasons for staying:

"Mostly, I would stay with him because I still feel attached and I don't want to be alone."

Whereas P8 focused on her own role within the relationship, P3 and P4 paid greater attention to their partner's intentions. Both participants distinguished between intentional and unintentional infidelity. If the betrayal happened while the partner was drunk or not fully aware of their actions, they believed forgiveness might still be possible. P3 said:

"If it happened while drunk, and it was unconscious, the person repents. I would think about it. But if he was in his right mind, in sound judgment — never."

P4, like P3, distinguished between intentional and unintentional infidelity. She explained that if the betrayal happened while her partner was drunk or not fully aware of his actions, she might consider forgiveness. However, she also reflected on the importance of his response after the betrayal:

"I suppose the only thing is if he apologises and says something concrete — like, for example, something has faded between us, but please forgive me, I want to stay in this relationship — then maybe I would consider it."

For P4, the partner's willingness to take responsibility and express a genuine desire to repair the relationship could influence her decision. However, she also explained that even if she forgave him, trust would not fully return:

"I would be wary."

P2 described perhaps the most flexible understanding of infidelity among all participants. Instead of giving a single answer, she explained that her response would depend on the circumstances in which the betrayal occurred.

“If it happens at a distance... I wouldn’t want to know about it. If he just fulfills a physical need without feelings, that’s okay.”

However, she described a different response if they were already living together.

“If we are already living together, and it happens, it would be a different situation... I would be ready to forgive once, if he repents and says it was a mistake. But if it happens a second time — I would not forgive.”

Unlike the other participants, P2 clearly separated the physical and emotional meanings of infidelity. Rather than evaluating the behaviour alone, she reflected on whether emotional involvement was present, whether her partner accepted responsibility for what had happened, and whether the behaviour became a repeated pattern. These factors shaped her understanding of whether forgiveness remained possible.

Overall, these participants described understanding as an important part of responding to infidelity. Their narratives show that context matters in which infidelity occurs and the process of forgiveness after the act. Together, these accounts suggest that understanding was not simply about forgiveness but about deciding whether the relationship remained worth preserving.

Theme 3.3 Imagining Oneself as the Unfaithful Partner

It was harder for participants to discuss their own potential infidelity rather than thinking about their partner’s cheating. Even though they shared different factors that could disturb them, they all shared how they would feel guilt, personal responsibility, and difficulty continuing the relationship after the act of infidelity.

For those who could imagine themselves cheating, infidelity was rarely described as a spontaneous or impulsive act. Instead, participants explained that it could happen when they experienced emotional disconnection, loneliness, or the feeling that something important within the relationship had already been lost.

Several participants described emotional disconnection or feeling no longer valued by their partner as possible circumstances that could lead to their own infidelity. P3 described this particularly clearly:

“I would explain it to myself that I’m not getting enough attention. I feel cold, hunger in the relationship. I want to feel wanted again.”

Rather than focusing on sexual desire for another person, P3 spoke about wanting to feel emotionally valued again. Her account suggests that potential infidelity would not necessarily begin with attraction to someone else but with the gradual experience of emotional distance within the existing relationship. Additionally, P3’s description of “hunger” within the relationship suggests that she understood potential infidelity through a sense of emotional deprivation.

P8 provided a different perspective on her own potential infidelity. She admitted that if she cheated on P7, she might initially experience a feeling of relief because she could only imagine cheating with someone towards whom she had already developed feelings.

“I think it would be a strong feeling of relief. I think if I felt something with someone that seemed to me... like there could be a future, something more ahead.”

For P8, infidelity can be a way out to find the emotional connection outside her current relationship. She shared about the difficulties in her current relationship and finding a person to whom she may have feelings can create a new romantic future for her. Interestingly, she also recognised that this feeling of relief might only be temporary and that she would still feel guilty about betraying her partner. This suggests that even when P8 could imagine

reasons for her own infidelity, these reasons did not remove the emotional consequences of the betrayal.

P7 also linked infidelity to emotional distance, but he saw it differently. For him, cheating could only happen if the relationship had already ended emotionally, even if they had not officially broken up. In that case, infidelity would not be the cause of the breakup, but it would be something that happened after he had already given up on the relationship.

Interestingly, P7 also explained that he would probably not tell P8 about the infidelity:

“I wouldn’t say anything to avoid making the person feel bad. I would just break up.”

Rather than seeing disclosure as necessary after betrayal, P7 focused on protecting his partner from additional pain. This is similar to the way he described emotional support in other parts of the interview, where he sometimes preferred not to tell P8 difficult things because he believed that knowing them would hurt her. His account suggests that hiding the infidelity could be understood by him as a form of protection, even though it would also mean making the decision about the relationship without involving his partner.

In contrast, P6 found it almost impossible to imagine any situation in which she could be unfaithful.

“I don’t know what could be a reason. I just know that I would not survive it.”

Rather than trying to identify circumstances that could lead to infidelity, P6 immediately focused on how difficult it would be for her to live with what she had done. The possibility of her own betrayal appeared more distressing than considering the reasons behind it. She described this reaction particularly strongly:

“I would not survive my own infidelity. I would rather sleep with a homeless person. I would rather get cancer and not treat it. But not this.”

She later explained that even if P5 were able to forgive her, his forgiveness would not change how she felt about herself:

“P5 could forgive me. Anyone could forgive me. But I would not forgive myself.”

For P6, the greatest consequence of infidelity therefore appeared to be not only the possibility of losing her relationship but also the inability to forgive herself for betraying someone she loved. Interestingly, the partner’s forgiveness would not be enough to restore the relationship because the main conflict would remain within P6 herself.

P5 described a similar difficulty when imagining his own infidelity:

“I can’t live with the feeling of guilt and dirtiness... it’s the most vile act.”

Like P6, P5 focused on the emotional consequences he would face afterwards. He believed that infidelity would change how he saw himself. He imagined that he would carry the guilt with him into the future. He also said he would feel obligated to tell future partners about it, suggesting that the act would become part of his identity in later relationships.

Overall, speaking about their own potential infidelity was a challenge. Still, there were some similarities in their responses. Some participants could imagine cheating after emotional distance or feeling unloved, while others could not imagine it at all. Yet, almost everyone returned to guilt and personal responsibility. Their accounts suggest that imagining their own infidelity raised not only the question of whether the relationship could survive, but also whether they could still see themselves the same way afterwards.

3.4 Summary of findings

To conclude, the results showed that participants interpreted their relationship in different ways even though some of them had similar childhood experiences. Across the three themes, people reflected on their childhood history with their caregivers, their ability to show empathy, and their perspective on infidelity. Some common patterns were seen across the three topics.

To start with, the first theme showed how childhood relationships with caregivers continued to influence romantic relationships in adulthood. Many participants commonly

described their mothers as highly involved and controlling and their fathers as emotionally distant or absent. Nevertheless, even though most of the participants experienced such relationships, they put different meanings into it. Some people described difficulties with boundaries and control, while some became more independent. Importantly, while discussing the influence of caregiving experience on the current relationship, some participants claimed that they recognize some unhealthy patterns and try to change them to build a healthy relationship. This suggests that childhood experience may influence adult relationships, but these patterns are not necessarily fixed.

The second theme explored how participants experience empathy in their romantic relationship. For some participants, empathy can lead to exhaustion and overwhelm when they take the partner's trouble too seriously. Furthermore, many participants claimed that in difficult situations they withdraw to first protect themselves emotionally, and only after they calm down are they ready to empathize. A few participants shared that they have trouble understanding and sharing their partner's emotions. Participants' accounts suggest that empathy depended not only on their willingness to support their partner but also on whether they had sufficient emotional resources to do so.

The third theme showed how participants reflected on infidelity. For one half, infidelity is a clear boundary, and it cannot be forgiven. Another half stated they wanted to understand the circumstances before making a decision. They considered the partner's intentions, honesty, remorse, and the wider context of the relationship in order to forgive. While talking about their own potential infidelity, they shifted attention to the possible reasons for it. The most likely reason for their infidelity would be loss of emotional connection. Still, they shared how they would feel enormous guilt afterwards. For some participants, forgiving themselves appeared to be more difficult than forgiving the partner.

4. Discussion

4.1 Discussion of Theme 1: Early Attachment Experiences and Their Role in Romantic Relationships

The first theme showed how relationships with caregivers shaped participants' later lives, including their romantic relationships. Many participants described growing up with a controlling mother and an emotionally distant father, noting how these childhood experiences influenced their lives. For example, P1 reflected that he now controls his wife the way his mother controlled him. P8, on the other hand, shared that she has high standards inherited from her mother. Because her mother was perfectionistic in everything, she now expects her boyfriend to be perfect too. P5 also described using the same strategy of supporting his girlfriend as his parents used to support him: offering practical advice instead of emotional comfort. These recurring patterns align with research indicating that early attachment experiences shape relationship expectations and interpersonal behavior into adulthood (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

However, it was important to note that similar childhood experiences were not associated with the same patterns in adulthood. This finding suggests that early caregiving experiences alone cannot explain later relationship functioning. Even though many people described similar family dynamics, they interpreted these experiences differently and adopted different coping strategies. For instance, both P1 and P5 described controlling mothers, but P1 acquired similar controlling patterns, while P5 decided to withdraw from that control and become more self-reliant. Similarly, both P6 and P4 grew up without their fathers, but this experience prompted P6 to become more independent, while P4 focused on the emotional security she received from her grandmother, who replaced her parents. This may suggest that not only childhood experiences themselves impact adult relationships, but also the interpretation of them.

The importance of interpretation is consistent with Bowlby's (1969) concept of internal working models. Bowlby suggested that children gradually develop expectations about themselves and people around them through experiences with caregivers. Later, Bretherton and Munholland (2008) proposed that these internal working models are not fixed and continue to develop throughout life. The present findings support this perspective, as participants reflected on their childhood experiences from their current position as adults, giving them new meaning.

Furthermore, while trying to understand the patterns of attachment among participants, it was difficult to place them into fixed categories. For example, P4 grew up without her parents because they abandoned her, but her grandmother was a secure figure for her. Even though she grew up with a secure caregiver, she still reflected anxiously on how difficult it is for her to process the abandonment. Additionally, she mentioned that in her past relationships she became more worried than before. This suggests that she has both secure and anxious patterns. These findings support Brennan et al.'s (1998) dimensional model of attachment. Instead of suggesting that participants belonged to fixed categories, the interviews reflected different levels of attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. In general, participants who described fear of abandonment, emotional sensitivity, or controlling behaviours were broadly consistent with attachment anxiety. In contrast, people who reflected more on emotional withdrawal, self-reliance, and difficulty expressing emotions were more consistent with attachment avoidance. Nevertheless, the present findings suggest that these attachment patterns should not be seen as rigid, as sometimes participants combined several attachment patterns, as in P4's example.

Another important finding was that many participants demonstrated awareness of their relational patterns and described their desire to change them. For example, P1 recognized that he is controlling towards his wife, but he tries to rely on trust more now and

control these reactions. P5 reflected that he is learning how to provide emotional support instead of offering practical solutions, because that is what his wife wants in difficult times. P4 also described how her current relationship makes her question the patterns she acquired in previous controlling relationships. These accounts suggest that participants do not simply repeat their childhood patterns but are also capable of reflecting on them and changing them. This finding supports research showing that contemporary individuals are more reflective about their relationship patterns, partly due to increased access to psychological knowledge and therapeutic culture. (Illouz, 2008; Lomas et al., 2019).

This finding is also consistent with previous research suggesting that attachment patterns are relatively stable but can change throughout adulthood. Studies by Scharfe and Bartholomew (1994) and Kirkpatrick and Hazan (1994) found that attachment styles show moderate stability across time, whereas Davila et al. (1999) and Feeney et al. (2003) suggested that significant romantic relationships may contribute to changes in attachment security. These findings suggest that supportive romantic relationships may provide opportunities for participants to question and gradually modify earlier relational expectations, as happened with P1 and P5. Additionally, P4's example shows that with a secure partner, another person may become more secure as well. She used to report every step to her ex-boyfriend and worried about abandonment, but currently her boyfriend shows a healthier way to build the relationship, and she adapts to it and feels more secure. This interpretation is also consistent with Hazan and Shaver (1987) and Mikulincer and Nachshon (1991), who argued that positive relationship experiences may gradually modify existing internal working models.

There was also an interesting observation that two of the three couples in the study consisted of one more anxious partner and another partner who was more avoidant. Although the sample is too small to make conclusions about it, such findings are consistent with

previous research suggesting that anxious and avoidant attachment patterns may often coexist within romantic relationships (Collins & Read, 1990; Simpson, 1990). According to Simpson (1990), these interaction patterns may become self-reinforcing, as anxious partners seek reassurance while avoidant partners respond by increasing emotional distance.

Overall, the findings suggest that early attachment experiences continue to shape the way people understand closeness, trust, and emotional support in romantic relationships. At the same time, participants' accounts indicate that these experiences are not simply carried unchanged into adulthood. Instead, individuals actively reflect on them, reinterpret them, and, in some cases, intentionally work towards developing different patterns within their current relationships. This highlights attachment as an ongoing and dynamic process rather than a fixed consequence of childhood experience.

4.2 Discussion of Theme 2: Empathy in Romantic Relationship

The second theme explored how participants experienced empathy within their romantic relationships. Although participants described empathy as something that strengthens understanding and emotional support in their relationship, their empathic experiences were more complex. For some, sharing their partner's emotions became emotionally overwhelming, whereas others found it difficult to recognize or express empathy at all. These findings are broadly consistent with previous research linking attachment to empathic functioning in close relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Joireman et al., 2001). However, the present findings also suggest that empathic responses were shaped not only by attachment-related patterns but also by participants' emotional resources and the immediate relational context.

These findings also support Mikulincer and Shaver's (2007) description of hyperactivating attachment strategies. While describing their relationships, participants with anxious attachment patterns reflected more on how they are highly emotionally involved with

their partners and how it is difficult for them to regulate negative emotions. Participants such as P6, P3, and P4 tended to describe a similar pattern. Their answers showed how they are deeply concerned about their partner's emotions, but at the same time it is emotionally overwhelming for them.

An interesting finding was that participants who described themselves as highly empathic spoke about moments of emotional withdrawal. At first glance, this may appear contradictory. However, participants did not describe withdrawal as a lack of care or unwillingness to support their partner. This phenomenon is consistent with the concept of empathic distress, where individuals become so overwhelmed by another's emotions that they temporarily disengage to protect their own emotional resources (Singer & Klimecki, 2014). They explained that they first needed to regulate their own emotional state before they could respond to another person's distress. For example, P3 described wanting to "hide in a cave" when conflict became emotionally intense, while P1 and P2 explained that when they were already overwhelmed by their own emotions, they found it difficult to focus on their partner's emotional needs. These accounts suggest that in some situations, it was emotionally costly for participants to empathize with their partners.

What looked like withdrawal may actually be self-protection. Zaki (2014) explains that empathy is managed according to its emotional cost, and when this cost becomes too high, withdrawing helps protect personal resources. From this perspective, participants' withdrawal should not be interpreted as reduced empathy but rather as an attempt to regulate themselves before they were able to respond to their partner.

Barrett's (2017) Theory of Constructed Emotion further helps explain why participants regulated empathy in different ways. Barrett proposes that emotional responses are constructed from previous experiences, current bodily states, and learned emotional concepts. For instance, P3's strategy to "hide in a cave" arose from her past. She learned it

during conflicts with her mother, and now she continues to use it during conflicts with her husband. Even though she wants to be near him and support him during difficult situations, physically she cannot do this because her past experiences taught her to withdraw when emotions become too intense.

While participants with anxious attachment patterns described becoming emotionally overwhelmed, participants with more avoidant attachment characteristics described the opposite experience. P5 described struggling to feel others' emotions, and P7 said he prefers practical solutions over emotional support. Both identified these patterns as rooted in childhood: P5 linked them to his emotionally distant father, while P7 related them to distancing himself from his mother during her illness. This is consistent with deactivating strategies described in attachment research (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Interestingly, both anxious and avoidant participants withdrew during emotionally challenging moments, but the reasons for this differed. Anxious participants described it as a temporary pause because they wanted to support their partner but had to deal with their own emotions first. Avoidant participants, however, did not experience this as a pause. Distancing was their default response, not a reaction to being overwhelmed. This suggests that similar behaviors may reflect different underlying psychological processes. This pattern was previously documented in research on attachment and emotion regulation, where anxious individuals withdraw due to overwhelm, while avoidant individuals withdraw to maintain distance (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

An additional key insight from the findings is that highly empathic participants were not always the ones who provided better emotional support to their partners. This distinction became clearer when empathy was considered separately from compassion (Singer & Klimecki, 2014). These concepts represent different approaches to responding to a partner's distress (Singer & Klimecki, 2014). Empathy involves sharing another person's emotional

state, whereas compassion refers to the motivation to alleviate another person's suffering without necessarily experiencing the same emotional distress.

The present findings suggest that participants with more anxious attachment characteristics often described experiences that were closer to affective empathy than compassion. They appeared to absorb their partners' emotions. P4, for example, described taking "all his pain upon herself,". Similarly, P6 referred to herself as "maximally an empath." Instead of facilitating support, this emotional sharing often became a source of personal distress (Davis, 1983), leaving participants emotionally overwhelmed and, at times, unable to respond to their partner's needs.

In contrast, participants whose narratives were more consistent with secure attachment appeared to describe compassion. P10, for instance, stays calm when supporting her husband. She can listen and understand her partner without losing herself. Unlike participants who became overwhelmed by their partner's emotions, these participants could stay present and supportive without losing their own emotional balance. This pattern is consistent with research indicating that secure attachment facilitates more balanced empathic responding and greater capacity for compassion (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2015). Therefore, the interviews suggest that effective support depends less on sharing emotions and more on the ability to regulate them.

Overall, the findings suggest that empathy is not a fixed trait but shifts depending on attachment patterns and emotional context. People with anxious attachment patterns seemed to rely on hyperactivating strategies and use empathy frequently with their partners, while people with avoidant attachment patterns rely on deactivating strategies, showing less empathy. Nevertheless, what seemed to matter most for sustainable support was not empathy itself, but the ability to respond with compassion since it helps to stay present with the partner without becoming distressed.

4.3 Discussion of Theme 3: The Interplay of Attachment, Empathy, and Infidelity

The third theme explored how participants constructed the meaning of infidelity within their romantic relationships. Although all participants described infidelity as painful, they rarely reacted to the behaviour itself but to what it meant for them. For some, it signified a loss of trust. For others, it symbolized abandonment, dishonesty, or an impact on their self-worth. These different interpretations reflect how people make sense of events based on their personal histories and internal working models (Barrett, 2017; Bretherton & Munholland, 2008).

How participants reacted to infidelity seemed to depend also on their attachment patterns. Those with more anxious characteristics often saw betrayal not just as a relationship problem, but as proof of their own inadequacy. P8, for example, imagined that if her partner cheated, it would confront her with her "own inadequacy" and she would blame herself rather than focus on his behavior. Similarly, P6 described infidelity as one of the most painful events she could imagine. These findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that individuals with anxious attachment are more likely to experience infidelity as a threat not only to the relationship but to their sense of self (Allen & Baucom, 2004; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Participants with more avoidant attachment patterns viewed infidelity differently. P5 and P7 both described betrayal as something that finishes a relationship immediately, but they explained it in different ways. P5 focused on the loss of trust and had little interest in discussing the reasons. P7, however, wanted to understand why it happened, but his previous experience had already taught him that understanding would not change the outcome. This difference reflects what attachment research describes as deactivating strategies: both men, in their own way, kept emotional distance as a way to protect themselves (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Additionally, studies have shown that avoidant individuals may perceive infidelity as

less distressing but more relationship-threatening because it confirms their negative views of others' trustworthiness (Allen & Baucom, 2004).

In contrast, participants whose narratives were broadly consistent with secure attachment describe more flexible responses. Instead of viewing infidelity as a single act, P9 and P2 repeatedly returned to the idea that it is important to understand the wider context of the act before making a decision. They reflected on their partner's intentions, the circumstances around infidelity, and whether the relationship itself could still be repaired. Such findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that secure attachment is associated with greater emotional regulation and perspective-taking in romantic relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). It seems that securely attached participants appeared able to tolerate the emotional pain of infidelity without becoming too overwhelmed, which allows them to consider the context and possibility of restoring the relationship.

About half of the participants said infidelity was unforgivable, while the others described conditions under which they might forgive. This split may reflect not only attachment differences but also broader cultural trends. Recent surveys in Russia show a mixed picture: negative attitudes remain widespread, but there is also a growing willingness to work through relationship crises rather than finish the relationship immediately (VCIOM, 2025). This suggests that both the categorical rejection and the willingness to understand may coexist within the same cultural context. Furthermore, research has shown that forgiveness for infidelity is more likely when the offending partner demonstrates genuine remorse and when there is a shared commitment to relationship repair, which may help explain why some participants were willing to consider the context and others were not (Gordon & Baucom, 1999).

These findings may broaden Gorniewicz's (2011) theoretical model, which proposes that empathy may represent a mechanism linking attachment and responses to infidelity.

According to it, empathy may act as a protective factor, meaning that the more empathy people have, the better they understand the pain they can cause their partner. However, the findings revealed a different picture. Many participants who described themselves as empathetic admitted that they could imagine being unfaithful. The reason for infidelity was emotional disconnection or dissatisfaction with the relationship. For example, P3 stated, "I would explain it to myself that I'm not getting enough attention. I feel cold, hunger in the relationship. I want to feel wanted again." P8 similarly stated that she would seek emotional connection outside the current relationship if she felt disconnected. Thus, empathy alone does not prevent infidelity. It may function as a deterrent when the relationship is perceived as satisfying. However, when emotional connection is disrupted, empathy may not serve as a deterrent factor to infidelity. This finding is consistent with Zaki's (2014) motivational model of empathy, which proposes that empathy is not automatic but depends on a person's motivation and emotional resources.

Additionally, in clinical settings, empathy is an important component for healing after infidelity, particularly during the Meaning-making stage (Gordon & Baucom, 1999). According to this model, empathy helps the injured partner see the unfaithful partner not simply as a "bad person," but as someone with vulnerabilities and weaknesses who made a mistake within a particular relational context. However, the present findings suggest that understanding following infidelity may depend less on empathy and more on emotion regulation and perspective taking. Immediately following imagined infidelity, participants were primarily occupied with their own emotional reactions to the betrayal, leaving little room for engaging with the partner's perspective (Zaki, 2014). For instance, P1 described that in "the heat of the moment" he would not have a "sincere desire to find out what and why,". Similarly, P5 explained that he "immediately lost any desire to discuss anything or try to fix anything" after discovering infidelity.

Once participants could manage their initial distress, they became more able to engage in perspective taking and consider the wider context of the relationship. P9 wanted to know why and how it happened, and whether there was a way to fix things. P4 wanted to see genuine remorse. These accounts suggest that emotion regulation is a prerequisite for perspective taking, but perspective taking alone does not guarantee forgiveness. Rather, it creates a necessary foundation upon which forgiveness may become possible. This pattern is consistent with the regulatory model of forgiveness (Ho, Van Tongeren, & You, 2020). It emphasizes that forgiveness is an emotion regulation process. According to it, people need to manage their initial emotional responses before engaging in the cognitive appraisal needed for forgiveness. Participants who could regulate their emotions and reappraise the situation were more open to understanding the context of infidelity. In contrast, those who became overwhelmed or emotionally numb did not have the self-regulatory resources needed to engage in this reappraisal process, making forgiveness more difficult.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that people with anxious attachment patterns expressed emotional difficulties in processing infidelity, many of them still expressed a willingness to forgive. For instance, P3, P4, and P8 all described that they would be open to forgiving their partner under certain conditions. P4 wanted to see genuine remorse, P3 reflected that she would try to understand the reasons behind the betrayal, and P8 acknowledged that while infidelity would confront her with her "own inadequacy," she would still consider forgiveness if her partner showed genuine regret because she still feels attached and does not want to be alone. This may suggest that for anxiously attached individuals, their strong emotional investment and fear of abandonment may motivate them to stay in the relationship and try to repair the relationship, even when the process is emotionally costly (Simpson, 1990; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

One of the most interesting findings was that participants spoke differently about their own potential infidelity compared to their partners'. While discussing a partner's betrayal, participants focused more on trust, honesty, and the future of the relationship. However, they talked more about guilt, responsibility, and emotional consequences when they discussed their infidelity. All participants mentioned that the only reason why they would cheat would be emotional disconnection. This finding is interesting in relation to existing theoretical frameworks. While attachment anxiety is associated with fear of abandonment and seeking reassurance, research suggests that anxious individuals may be more prone to infidelity when they feel emotionally neglected or when the relationship fails to meet their needs for closeness (Bogaert & Sadava, 2002). Avoidant individuals, in contrast, may engage in infidelity as a strategy for maintaining distance or escaping relationship demands (Allen & Baucom, 2004). The participants in this study, however, reflected that emotional distance was the only reason they could imagine for infidelity, suggesting that attachment patterns alone do not fully explain why people cheat.

For some participants, imagining their own infidelity was worse than knowing their partners cheated. This was particularly evident in P6's and P5's accounts. They both explained that even if their partner forgave them, they would not forgive themselves. Rather than focusing on the relationship, they reflected on how infidelity would affect the way they viewed themselves. The findings therefore suggest that participants were concerned not only about losing their relationship but also about losing the image of themselves as trustworthy partners. This is consistent with research on moral identity, which suggests that individuals are motivated to maintain a consistent self-image as a moral person, and violations of this identity, such as committing infidelity, can lead to significant psychological distress (Mulder & Aquino, 2013). Additionally, research suggests that self-forgiveness is often harder than forgiving others. When people are the ones who caused harm, they must find a way to live

with the knowledge that they have done something that goes against their own values. (Tangney et al., 2005).

Overall, the findings suggest that participants with different attachment patterns interpreted infidelity in different ways. Participants with more anxious attachment characteristics often experienced betrayal as a threat to their sense of self and became emotionally overwhelmed, whereas participants with more avoidant attachment characteristics tended to interpret infidelity as a clear relational boundary that left little room for further discussion. Participants with more secure attachment patterns were more open to considering the context since they wanted to understand the circumstances before deciding whether the relationship could continue. This does not mean they were more forgiving, but they were more willing to engage with the situation rather than react immediately. These findings also challenge the assumption that empathy acts as a deterrent to infidelity, since when highly empathic people are dissatisfied with a relationship, they still can imagine being unfaithful. Lastly, what seemed to matter with regard to the possibility of forgiveness was not empathy itself, but the ability to manage strong emotions first and only then try to see things from the partner's perspective.

4.4 Limitations

There are several limitations in the study. Firstly, the sample of 10 participants does not represent the whole population. Still, it provides some insight into the cultural context of Russia. In addition, the study relied on participants' reflections on their childhood, which may not provide an objective account of their early experiences. Furthermore, the current study did not use a formal attachment style assessment because attachment patterns were identified from discussions about participants' childhood and their relationships. While this approach is consistent with the interpretative nature of IPA, it means that the attachment classifications are interpretative rather than diagnostic. Finally, many discussions of infidelity were

hypothetical rather than based on personal experience. Although some participants had experienced infidelity before, for others it was a new experience. Therefore, actual responses may differ from what they described in the interview.

4.5 Implications for Practice and Future Research

The findings of the present study have several implications for both clinical practice and future research. To start with, the findings highlight the importance of integrating people's attachment styles while working with couples. Understanding the attachment style of the partner may provide more information about their earlier experiences of care, control, emotional availability, and trust. This may bring better understanding between partners and promote more constructive conflict resolution. In addition, this study suggests that empathy should not always be viewed as an entirely positive characteristic. The distinction between costly empathy and less costly compassion, discussed earlier, may be particularly useful in this context. In therapy, it may be helpful to guide individuals away from absorbing their partner's emotions toward more compassionate responses that allow them to stay engaged without becoming exhausted. Furthermore, findings related to infidelity are important for relationship counselling. Participants gave different opinions and meanings to infidelity, and these differences suggest that therapists should not assume that partners interpret infidelity in the same way. Instead, they need to explore what betrayal, trust, honesty, and forgiveness mean for each individual to better understand their reactions and the future of the couple.

The present findings may also provide several directions for future research. For instance, longitudinal research may provide a better understanding of how attachment patterns develop and change in the context of romantic relationships over time. Additionally, qualitative studies may focus exclusively on people who have experienced infidelity in their ongoing relationships to compare how their reactions differ from the hypothetical scenarios described in the present study.

5. Conclusion

The study explored how attachment-related patterns and empathy may shape the way people experience and make sense of infidelity in their romantic relationships. Ten Russian-speaking adults in committed romantic relationships participated in the study. The study used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to analyze participants' experiences.

The findings showed that attachment-related patterns were connected to the ways participants understood and responded to infidelity. Participants whose narratives reflected more anxious attachment characteristics often experienced betrayal as a threat to their sense of security and self-worth. They described strong emotional reactions, fears of abandonment, and, in some cases, a tendency towards self-blame. Participants whose narratives were more consistent with avoidant attachment characteristics were more likely to view infidelity as an irreparable violation and to focus on the loss of trust and the need to protect themselves emotionally. Participants whose narratives reflected more secure attachment characteristics generally showed greater flexibility in considering the context of betrayal. Still, their responses were not identical and could include strong boundaries around infidelity.

Empathy appeared to play a more complex role than facilitating closeness after infidelity. When participants were in pain themselves, they had little motivation to share their partner's emotions. In contrast, people who could regulate their emotions and see the bigger picture and context around the relationship could think about the potential for forgiveness. Moreover, high empathy did not appear to function as a universal deterrent to infidelity: participants who described themselves as highly empathetic still admitted they could imagine being unfaithful when they felt emotionally disconnected from their partner.

Another important finding was the difference between imagining being betrayed and imagining oneself as the unfaithful partner. When discussing a partner's infidelity, participants mainly focused on trust, honesty, forgiveness, and whether the relationship could

continue. When imagining themselves as the person who had cheated, however, they focused more strongly on guilt, personal responsibility, and how the betrayal would affect their view of themselves. For some participants, the possibility of their own infidelity appeared particularly threatening because it challenged their sense of identity as a trustworthy and caring partner.

Overall, the study shows that how people interpret infidelity depends on their attachment patterns, their capacity for emotional regulation, and the meanings they construct around betrayal. Empathy alone does not facilitate understanding and does not automatically prevent infidelity. At the same time, these patterns are not fixed or deterministic. It is important to attend to individual differences and subjective meaning, as these trends do not apply uniformly to everyone.

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