

Living within a Broken Vow: The Impact of Parental Infidelity Among Late Adolescents in Establishing Romantic Relationships

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Abstract

The present study aimed to know the possible impact of parental infidelity among late adolescents in establishing romantic relationships with significant other. It employed a qualitative research and used the approach on social constructivism in which it described the adolescents' experiences about parental infidelity as numerous and subjective as they interact with the social world. A survey was conducted in identifying twelve (12) participants, ages 15 to 19, who experienced parental infidelity from University of the East-Manila enrolled in academic year 2014-2015. One (1) hour in-depth interviews were recorded and guided by the researchers' validated aide memoir. All recorded interactions with the participants were transcribed into field text. The participants' responses were carefully analyzed through Thematic Analysis and Collaizi's procedure. The researchers found that the impact of parental infidelity among late adolescents in establishing relationships is a process and is best depicted through a cross, or The C.R.O.S.S. in Infidelity, with five conceptual themes which also signify the process that late adolescents usually go through after discovering their parents' infidel behavior. The themes conceptualized were: reaction; circumspection; self- recognition; stagnation; and overturn. The C.R.O.S.S In Infidelity may serve as an aid in counseling as well as in creating an intervention program to help these late adolescents cope with the experiences of parental infidelity

Keywords: parental infidelity, late adolescents, establishing relationships

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Introduction

The family is the basic unit of the society. It is where individuals first develop their personalities, as well as build their relationships among family members, especially with their parents. The children initially interact with their parents from which the latter provide examples of desired behaviors that are ought to be learned by the former (Hermes, 2013). The parents are considered as the influential models of the child (McLeod, 2011). They teach the child values on how to face the reality of life and to develop their own behaviors.

By the time an individual reaches late adolescence, he forms relationships with other people. During this period, he becomes more mature. The earlier experiences during the preceding stages of development allowed individuals to gain insights and realizations about the ups and downs of life. When they reach the late adolescent period, they are seen as individuals being emotionally mature. According to Erikson (1963, as cited by Feist & Feist, 2009), late adolescence is the developmental stage when individuals begin to form deeper relationships with their significant others. Likewise, late adolescence is the stage where individuals begin to form intimate and romantic relationships with other people as they enter adulthood.

Parental infidelity is one of the crucial social issues, among with others relating to marriage. It may be one of the primary reasons why parental relationships lead to divorce (Reid, 2014). Having parental infidelity threatens the foundation of the marriage as well as the whole family relationship. It affects the relationship of the child to couples not only emotionally but physically, mentally and socially which may also influence the establishment of the former's relationships. It is a problem which has consequences that permanently damage the parent-child relationship as well as other future relationships. Considering the parent-child relationship as the most important, parental infidelity may be a precursor to the individual's relationships toward his or her own family, and building romantic relationships with others. This familial and social issue can have a big impact on individuals themselves. They may perceive their own family as a failure. As a result, they may have a hard time in decision-making and understanding things surrounding their developing environment, especially within their familial environment.

Parental infidelity may be considered as one of the most controversial social phenomena, seen as one among the major causes of marital instability which often leads to divorce, desertion, single-parenthood and generally failed marriages (Ngozi, Peter & Stella, 2013). It may be a critical part for the self-development of individuals.

Children who come to know the parental infidelity issues of their parents can have deeper, greater, and longer-lasting impacts (Davis, 2011). The present study aimed to know and describe the possible impacts of parental infidelity on the establishment of romantic relationships of individuals whose parents committed the said issue. This study delved on their lived experiences and how they see their present and future lives with these experiences.

Research Design

Social constructivism was utilized in qualitative research. According to Creswell (2013), social constructivism assumes that individuals find meaning and understanding of the world they interact with (Creswell, 2013). The meaning and understanding of the world created by the individuals are subjective. They create varied and multiple meanings to subjective experiences. Social constructivist approach aims to rely as much as possible on the views of the participants in the situations they are in. The subjective meanings of the participants are formed through their interactions with others and through the historical and cultural norms that guide their lives. Crotty (1998, as cited by Creswell, 2008) identified three assumptions in the social constructivism: individuals create meanings as they involve in the world they interpret, making the researchers to use open-ended questions allowing the participants to share their own views; human beings get involve and make sense of the world historically and socially, making the researchers seek to understand the context or setting of the participants and interpret what they discover based on the interpretation formed by the researcher's own experiences; and lastly, meanings are basically generated socially, that is with the interaction with the human community. Induction is used in qualitative research where the researchers generate meanings from the collected data from the field.

Study site and Subjects

The participants of the study were late adolescents with ages ranging from 15 to 19 years, studying in the University of the East – Manila during the academic year 2014 to 2015. There were twelve (12) participants who experienced parental infidelity regardless of the time of its discovery. The profile of the participant included the present romantic relationship status of the individual and his or her parents' marital status.

Procedure

An aide memoir was the main instrument used to gather the data for this study. An aide memoir contains questions which served as a comprehensive guide about topic issues or areas that were covered during the interview (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). It consisted of questions concerned about the experiences of individual regarding parental infidelity, its impact to their family relations and in the establishment of romantic relationships.

A survey form was utilized to identify the prospective participants who participated in the study. Permission was sought from the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences of the University of the East-Manila through a letter of request. Upon approval, participants whose one or both parents committed infidelity were selected through the use of a survey form. When the participants confirmed their willingness to participate in the study, consent forms which are the protection of privacy and confidentiality of information provided by the participants were given to ensure ethical considerations. Also, their availability for the in-depth interviews was considered. The decision of the participants who chose to withdraw at any time during the study was respected.

All in-depth interview sessions lasted for approximately 1 hour per session, guided by the researchers' aide memoir to complete the main purpose of the study. Primarily, the objectives of the study and its possible outcome were explained. The validated aide memoir used for the interview consisted of open-ended questions that helped the participants provide information and insights which allowed them to define parental infidelity, based on their own perspectives and experiences. All interviews and interactions with the participants of the study were recorded. All of the verbalizations were transcribed into field text by the researchers. The researchers used bracketing to identify and limit the researchers' bias about the study. Bracketing is a method that sets aside one's assumptions or expectations about the phenomenon (Husserl, 1913 as cited by De Guzman, 2010). The researchers' saw to it that their own beliefs, knowledge, values and experiences about the parental infidelity will be put aside to accurately describe and interpret the participants' own life experiences.

Mode of Analysis

The responses of the participants reflected through the field text were carefully analyzed through thematic analysis wherein different themes included in the participant's responses as well as its similarities were identified. The themes reflected the impact of parental infidelity among late adolescents in establishing their own romantic relationship. According to Namey et al. (2008), thematic analysis can provide veracity and complexity and improve the meaning of the responses. It can also make it easier to understand the experience of the participants widely.

The researchers used cool analysis in distinguishing significant statements to come up with data categories, and warm analysis to determine the essence of the phenomenon (Barthes, R., 1996). It was used to reveal the whole meaning of the experience of the participants based on the data gathered.

As part of the thematic analysis, the Collaizi's Procedure was used to have a deeper analysis of the field text. This procedure began with reading and re-reading of the interview transcriptions. Second, extraction of significant statements was done. Third was the formulation of meaning for the significant statements. Fourth, the formulated meanings were categorized into themes. Fifth, the findings were integrated into an exhaustive description. Sixth was the validation of the findings. Lastly, the incorporation of any changes of the subjects of the investigation (Collaizi, 1978 cited in Wojnar & Swanson, 2007).

Findings and Discussion

The utilization of the cool, warm and the thematic analyses revealed nineteen (19) categories that were lumped into five (5) interesting conceptual themes that describe the impact and meaning of parental infidelity to late adolescents' establishment of romantic relationship which emerged from their lived experiences regarding parental infidelity. The five conceptual themes that were generated are as follows: reaction, circumspection, self-recognition, stagnation, and overturn. Reaction is any action has a corresponding reaction; hence, knowing that one parent committed infidelity may make an individual respond through various

means. In this model, the first theme: Reaction, refers to the thought constructed, feeling experienced or action performed (towards the infidel or cheated parent) in response to the experience of parental infidelity. The participants' initial response was to feel anger and resentment towards their infidel parent. The consequence in this type of situations was withdrawal from the infidel parent. They were also greatly affected knowing that their father committed infidelity that their studies, faith and interpersonal relationship were disturbed.

Additional inputs from participants were stated as: From the response of EM, "I was really affected, for almost one year I did not entertain my father. I told him that I don't want him to be my father anymore and then when he was hospitalized, I did not visit him, I was really angry at him at that time. I told him that it was his fault that I wasn't able to make it to the top of the class. And then about Jason and then I became suicidal before and I also lost my faith in God." Added by NG, "When I first knew about it, I was irritated with my father because why does he even have to do that? What is the problem? What is wrong? When your wife, your mother is taking care of the house, your children cannot maintain anymore... why do you even have to do that, look for another? The reason why you married each other is because when you're old and you do not look the same anymore, the love should still be there. Why did you marry her if you'll look for another? That's the question that irritates me but I told myself to forgive because he is still my daddy. Although he has done something wrong, he already thought us many lessons about life.

Aside from anger and resentment, the statements expressed the feelings of disappointment and doubt toward the infidel parent. Some participants showed disappointed because either parent committed infidelity. They couldn't believe that either parent was capable of committing such act. The participants started to have different perceptions about relationships, and love.

In connection with the first theme, which is reaction, the next thing that can possibly happen to individual is to have doubts and fears in establishing their own relationship due to their experience in their parent's infidelity; thus, circumspection may develop. The model proposed that the second possible theme may be *circumspection*. Circumspection refers to the act of thinking carefully about the possible circumstances and consequences before doing or saying something. It is usually the state of being wary or doubtful in taking risk in relationships due to the knowledge of parent's infidelity. With much conviction RT stated "... they're all jerks, I am generalizing that they're all the same. The reason why I have this generalization is because they're not proving that they are different." Added by RT, "I have this feeling that the relationship will just end and there will come a time that he will do the same as what my father did."

These statements demonstrated how the participants generalized that all men are the same, that they all tend to cheat their partner. Based on the experience, one participant expressed that he found difficulty trusting every guy and hesitated committing to a relationship. Due to the infidelity act of one of his parents, he formed a negative impression towards all men and that men cannot redeem themselves. He already assumed that an awful event, like infidelity, is going to happen in his own romantic relationship. Thus, the participant feared that the experiences he had with his parents will happen with his own relationship as well.

Experiencing parental infidelity is an unplanned and unwanted event that no children wanted to go through. It may be traumatic to some, while inspiring to others. At some point in an individual life, acknowledging such unlikely experience might lead to self-recognition of own capabilities or incapacities to do something regarding the experience. The third theme which is shown on intersection of the horizontal and vertical line, is the self-recognition. This study defined self-recognition as the ability to acknowledge one's feelings, emotions, thoughts and behaviors before, during and after the event of infidelity. The verbalizations showed that even though the participants went through a painful experience, they were able to have a positive regard with the experiences they encountered and did not retaliate to show disapproval with their parent's infidel act. JB stated, "...I'm proud of myself, on what I did, on what happened to my family, because I stay as is that wasn't that super rebel." Added by RT, "...if I want to have a relationship or not, it's up to me."

The participants expressed that they still have capability to choose whether or not to commit to a relationship, regardless of their experience. The recognition of the participants that they still have the power to make their own decisions on what to do with their lives is important because this means that they do not want to stick in a stage wherein they will just continue generalizing and hating their parents. After being able to recognize oneself, an individual has to come up with a decision to either stay in a miserable and hating state or think of other ways to adjust with the situation and to be able to cope with it. The next theme shown in the other end of the vertical line is *stagnation*. It is the act of dwelling on the situation and resisting changes thus demonstrating apathy and passivity towards any circumstances after experiencing parental infidelity. Sometimes, the experience was so excruciating that the individual ignores the thought of infidelity. Additional verbalization, AC said, "regarding my father, it's kinda okay already, I just don't want to see him"; Followed by, "I feel like i don't want o have a relationship."

The verbalizations demonstrated the participant's resistance to settle the issue with their parent's infidelity. Due to the infidelity of one of their parents, there were still factors that hindered them to forgive their parents and a disinterest to fix their relationship with one another.

The positive effect of experiencing events such as parental infidelity is at the end, which an individual can learn from. The best way to improve yourself is to use these experiences as a lesson to do better than what your parents did. The final theme shown on The C.R.O.S.S. in Infidelity is *overturn*. Humans are capable of moving on and learning from their experience. Overturn is the act of utilizing the experience regarding parental infidelity as a guide towards betterment of one's disposition. It refers to the process wherein the experience is evaluated in accordance to what is morally right and taken positively as a guide for future behavior (i.e. establishing relationship). But if the experience is only seen from its negative viewpoint, it will only stay on the level of stagnation. The field text showed that Overturn can be associated with insights and realizations that the participants learned from their experiences. This statement showed that the participants created a set of expectation for one's future relationship which could guide his future romantic relationship behavior.

Additional inputs statements stated as: NG explained, “If you really love the person, any changes that will happen to him/her will not lessen your love towards them, even if they change, even if they are not as beautiful as before” Added by NG, “never let your problems get through on your relationship with others and your dreams”

The participants perceived their experiences as challenges and inspiration. It was a challenge because going through parental infidelity was hard and complicated. It was an inspiration for him and for others as well because his experiences in parental infidelity made him a stronger person. This particular participant was able to make decisions and judgment by himself. Moreover, the individual used this particular event to aim for a better life of his own.

The study considered the fourth and fifth themes as the turning point wherein the participant either dwelled on and endured the situation or realized and positively perceived the experience and redirected one’s situation.

Conclusion

This study aimed to know the impact of parental infidelity to late adolescents in establishing romantic relationship. To be able to come up with the impact/s of parental infidelity, questions pertaining to their experience were asked. The participant provided answers which included his: feelings and thoughts regarding parental infidelity, the actions performed and emotions expressed after discovering his parent’s infidel behavior, and plans in the future regarding his own relationship. All of the participants experienced parental infidelity and admitted that at one point in their life, they felt angry and blamed the parent(s) for the conflict.

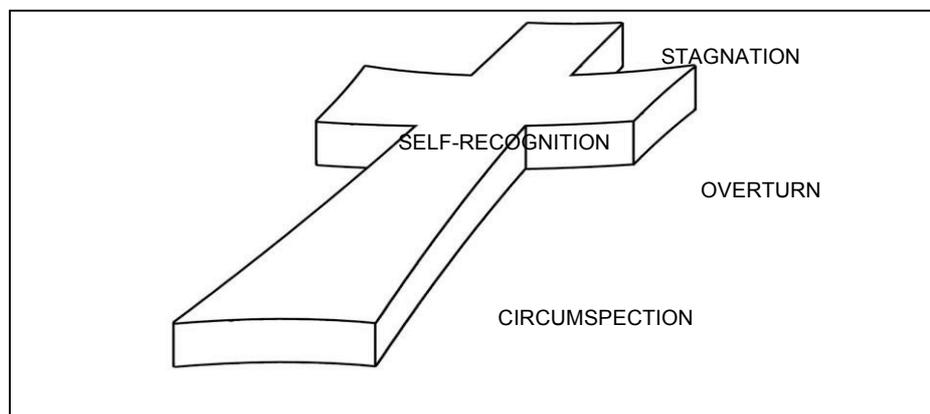


Figure 1. The C.R.O.S.S. in Infidelity

Interestingly the study came up with a cross which the researchers called as “The C.R.O.S.S. in Infidelity”. Universally, the cross is considered as the greatest representation of God’s love for mankind. For Christians, it symbolizes: the suffering God has gone through to save mankind from sin, as well as the hope of redemption. For some Filipinos, a cross may represent as a burden that each and everyone has to carry. However, it may denote a hope that one day, the suffering that we went through will pay off. Along the way, people carrying a heavy cross may give up while others may take the challenge of carrying it and utilizing it as a means to a better self and a better life. Just like the cross carried by

God, all problems, struggles and obstacles are heavy to carry but along the way these are all blessings in disguise. All these challenges and opportunities will make one stronger and wiser.

In relation to the study, the cross was used as a representation of an experience of parental infidelity that every child has to carry. It is a fortuitous event that no child desired to experience and has no control of. The child has to go through his journey towards Calvary while carrying “the cross of infidelity”, which is a means to a better future and a better disposition if one decided to carry it through and use it for good. The field text, was thematized, and lumped into five (5) categories namely reaction, circumspection, recognition, stagnation and overturn. These categories can be illustrated in The C.R.O.S.S. in Infidelity, which reflects the impact of parental infidelity to children who experienced infidelity.

Based on the study, reaction is the response (thought, feeling or action) expressed towards the infidel or cheated parent after discovering the parent’s infidel behavior. The usual reactions expressed by the participants were anger, hatred, resentment, disappointment, hurt and empathy. This theme corresponded to the case study conducted by Malate (2010) which stated that adolescent children lost their respect, their affection changed, and their communication became conflicting towards their authoritarian father after discovering the latter’s infidel act. Children also hold grudges toward their infidel father, thereby putting barriers and increasing the gap or distance between their relationships.

The second theme is circumspection, which is usually referred to as the state of being wary or doubtful in taking risk in relationships due to the knowledge of infidelity of parents. This theme is supported by the study of Amato (2005, as cited by Osarenren, Nwaginigwe and Anyama, 2013) which stated that adolescents who are aware of the failure of their parents’ marriage have negative concept about marriage. Adolescents who are from broken families experience fear and/or anxiety and have difficulty engaging in relationships.

The third theme is self-recognition which refers to the acknowledgement of one’s thoughts, feelings and emotions about oneself as well as one’s experience which will be used in deciding which direction to take. This theme corresponded with the study of Cui, Fincham and Durtschi (2010) which indicated that parental conflict (i.e. divorce) does not have direct effect in young adult’s romantic relationships. It will still depend on the individual’s own perception about how he/she will use the experience in his/her own life. Parental infidelity may have a positive and negative effect but the final decision still depend on them whether they will take the experience as a challenge or an inspiration in facing their life.

The fourth theme is stagnation wherein the participant showed resistance, apathy and passivity on what is going around him despite the fact that he’s aware that there is something wrong within the family. One study by Thorson (2009) supported this theme. The findings showed that individuals protect the information about their parents’ infidelity. Individuals secure the information about the event within the family to maintain harmony and still feel that they are part of the cultural norms and to protect the family from outside scrutiny or judgment by other people.

The last theme found is overturn which refers to the utilization of the experience regarding parental infidelity as a guide towards betterment of one's disposition and in facing life. This also refers to the plans of the participants about their lives and how they are going to be a partner in their future relationships and a parent on their own. Most participants utilize their experience as a model for future behavior and remarked that individuals are the one who are responsible for their actions and reactions. This theme corresponded with the study conducted by Spence (2009) stating that parental i did not seem to contribute in higher risk taking behavior. Likewise, the absence of the relationship may be due to the fact that children can see the damaging effects that infidelity (a risky behavior in itself) can have, and choose not to engage in behaviors that may have similar consequences.

The impact of parental infidelity among late adolescents in establishing relationships is a process. The first process was the initial reaction of the individual towards the event and then, a formation of circumspection. This was followed by the recognition of the state of the individual before, during and after the event. From there the creation of negative and positive ideation may occur. The negative impact is stagnation wherein the individual tolerates, accepts and endures the experiences he has gone, he is going, and will go through while the positive impact is overturn wherein the individual think of ways on how to avoid incidents like parental infidelity.

Implications and Future Research

The results of the study affirm the principles of social cognitive theory which states that real-life experiences and exposure may be a guide in shaping an individual's behavior. In relation to the study, the presence of parental infidelity in the family may affect the thinking process and decision making skills of the child. It is important for parents to be good models because it influences the development of personality, behaviors and traits of their children.

Given the findings above, the guidance counselors could act as second parents and would have additional insights about the issues of parental infidelity in guiding the adolescents coping with the said phenomenon through counseling. The guidance counselors may also create several guidance and counseling programs that are more effective in helping adolescents cope with parental infidelity. These programs may be focused on the Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) of Albert Ellis. REBT therapists believe that human beings are fallible, having the potential for rational and irrational thinking.

They develop a way of understanding the world through his or her obedience to a unique philosophy, a concept known as philosophical conditioning. A person has his/her own philosophies that lead to rational or irrational thinking. Rational thinking leads a person to healthy ways of living, resulting to unconditional acceptance of self, of other people, and of the things around. Unconditional acceptance teaches persons how to accept themselves and not to depend on others in developing their self-esteem and a more effective belief system. Irrational thinking leads a person to develop emotional distress, dysfunctional behaviors, and neurotic ways of living. REBT believes that it is the individual who develops his or her unique way of thinking. REBT is an insight-oriented approach that allows person

to choose new ways of thinking and act in healthier ways. REBT can also be considered a constructivist approach where a person can reconstruct his or her own meaning-making system. In relation to the present study, A (activating event) refers to parental infidelity experienced by the participants that caused them to think on what they are going to do with their own lives upon knowing the issue between the parents. Since B is the irrational belief from the activating event, B (irrational belief) refers to stagnation and circumspection where the participants think that their experiences toward parental infidelity may not continue on with their lives due to apathy and passiveness in the environment.

The participant may also be distrustful and doubtful on others because they generalize people and events based on their experiences of parental infidelity, especially in establishing romantic relationships. C (consequential feeling or behavior) refers to the reaction of the participant toward parental infidelity. They may develop their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that allow them to recognize (self-recognition) themselves in response to their experiences of parental infidelity. D (disputation) refers to the overturn thinking, feeling, and behaving of the participants caused by their disputation on their irrational beliefs regarding themselves in experiencing parental infidelity, allowing their lives to be better. And lastly, E (effective new responses) refers to the effective responses of the participant in identifying their thoughts and behaviors in adjusting and coping with the experiences of parental infidelity in order to improve their belief system and to continue facing their lives with rational thinking.

Through this research, future researchers and readers may gain information regarding the process that the children had to go through in putting the pieces together in redefining their personality and changing their negative perception about love caused by the excruciating experience of parental infidelity that they did not expect to happen. The results of this study provide knowledge on how to deal with the lived experiences of those people who are experiencing infidelity in their family. Likewise, this study will be a basis for further future investigations about the said phenomenon.

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