Internet Infidelity:

Is it Much Different from Traditional Infidelity

and Should Clinicians Take Notice?

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Abstract

The purpose of this literature review is to evaluate extra-dyadic internet affairs (EDIA) and how they are changing the ways clinicians work with clients, when compared to traditional infidelity (TI). The Adlerian perspective on EDIA and issues and treatment of EDIA will be interspersed throughout the research. EDIA is a relatively new phenomenon and one that is likely to only increase due in part to the Internet providing accessibility, affordability and anonymity. A background and brief history of TI is provided, then compared to EDIA, including predictors, signs, and symptoms of EDIA, gender differences with EDIA, the impact of EDIA, and definitions and properties of EDIA. Current clinical treatment(s) for EDIA will be highlighted and the overall need for more education and research into this relatively new phenomenon will be explored.
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The final task in my journey of graduate school has proven to be the most difficult, mostly by my own doing and my lack of courage to be imperfect, but also in part due to incredible life events. Since embarking on this journey I have found a life partner, had a son, become married, and endured my first major injury, surgery, and recovery of my short life.

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**Introduction**

Infidelity, adultery, extra-marital affair, cheating, extra-dyadic relationship, unfaithfulness; all terms used to describe a similar exploit involving a couple that has strayed in their commitment to each other. As our society has continued to evolve, the occurrences and methods of infidelity appear to have evolved as well, yet 97% of Americans believe the act of infidelity unacceptable (Balderamma-Durbin, Rhoades, & Allen, 2012; Campbell & Wright, 2010). Campbell and Wright (2010) found that 20-25% of Americans commit an act of infidelity in their lifetime; 32% of married men and 21% of married women during their marriages. Infidelity is often observed as the number one cause of divorce or ending a relationship (Balderamma-Durbin et al., 2012; Brand, Markey, & Mills, 2007; Cravens, Leckie, & Whiting, 2013; Traeen & Thuen, 2013).

Dijkstra, Barelds, and Groothof (2013) discovered 40% of divorces mentioning infidelity as the primary factor, and more recently, Cravens et al. (2013) learned that one in three divorces were being blamed on Facebook.

The age of the Internet has spawned a greater interest in the study of emotional, or non-sexual infidelity, and when the definition of infidelity is broadened to include non-intercourse acts such as: kissing, flirting, and dating, gender differences appear to be attenuated or disappear (Brand et al., 2007). Additionally, the Internet has created new challenges for clinicians, and the individuals affected by an extra-dyadic Internet affair (EDIA). With the advent of the Internet, the clinicians’ task of helping couples overcome infidelity has become more difficult for six core reasons.
1. EDIA lacks a clear clinical definition, nor is it clearly defined by partners, due in part to the many forms of online interactions that encompass EDIA (Cravens & Whiting, 2014; Gerson, 2011; Henline, Lamke, & Howard, 2007; Jones & Hertlein, 2012; Schneider, Weiss, & Samenow, 2012; Shaughnessy, Byers, & Thornton, 2011).

2. Ease of access makes EDIAs easier to participate in than traditional infidelity (Dijkstra et al., 2013; Gerson, 2011; Henline et al., 2007; Schneider et al., 2012; Wysocki & Childers, 2011).
   a. Ease of access includes: affordability, accessibility, and anonymity, as reported in the “Triple-A” model developed by Al Cooper in 1998 (Cravens & Whiting, 2014; Cravens et al., 2013; Griffiths, 2012).
   b. EDIAs are facilitated or encouraged due to anonymity, convenience, and escape as posited in the ACE model developed by Young, Pistner, O’Mara and Buchanan in 1999 (Goldberg, Peterson, Rosen, & Sara, 2008; Gonyea, 2004; Griffiths, 2012).

3. EDIAs are as damaging if not more damaging from an emotional perspective than traditional infidelities (Brand et al., 2007; Cravens & Whiting, 2014; Cravens et al., 2013; Dijkstra et al., 2013, Henline et al., 2007).
4. Gender differences with infidelity have evolved with the Internet and continue to do so (Brand et al., 2007; Corley & Hook, 2012; Dijkstra et al., 2013; Henline et al., 2007; Jones & Hertlein, 2012).

5. Guidelines for clinical treatment of EDIAs vary due to the relative infancy of EDIA and the prevalence of the EDIA increasing (Hertlein & Piercy, 2008).

6. Therapists’ biases may interfere with or hinder proper treatment of EDIA (Goldberg et al., 2008; Hertlein & Piercy, 2008, 2012).

After detailing the six core reasons of why EDIA is influencing and creating new challenges in contemporary therapy, will be an analysis of current interventions in use by therapists. In addition, scholarly ideas of how therapists can improve their knowledge of EDIA, and improve treatment methodology specific to EDIA will be presented.

For the purposes of this paper, the Adlerian perspective on EDIA will be intertwined throughout including:

1. How EDIA interferes with the life tasks;

2. How the family constellation and family atmosphere may contribute to EDIA formation;

3. What factors contribute to EDIAs occurring including; one’s inferiority complex, mistaken beliefs or goals, gender guiding lines, and striving for significance, belonging and safety;

4. Adlerian philosophies and techniques for treatment of EDIA.
Adlerian Perspective

Alfred Adler and Rudolf Dreikurs are commonly referred to as the founders of the Adlerian approach to psychotherapy, also referred to as Individual Psychology (Sherman & Dinkmeyer, 1987). Originally founded by Adler in 1912, Adlerian concepts have influenced countless therapists and philosophies of mental health (Carlson, Watts, & Maniacci, 2006; Sherman & Dinkmeyer, 1987), even though credit is not frequently given to Adler (Watts & Pietrzak, 2000). Watts and Pietrzak (2000) write, “Adler’s constructivist approach was too far ahead of its time. Thus, the ideas of Adler and subsequent Adlerians were, for the most part, ignored or overlooked because they were considered unscientific or unworthy of note” (p. 445). This sentiment is furthered by Carlson et al., (2006), stating, “When a theory is out of step with the dominant metaphors of its time, its constructs and methods may, inevitably, be undervalued, even as its useful features are assimilated into emerging perspectives of a later day” (p. 40).

Watts and Pietrzak (2000) write “contemporary counselors are expected to be integrative and eclectic” (p. 445). Adlerian therapy is considered to be a flexible, integrative, and eclectic approach to counseling (Carlson et al., 2006; Watts & Pietrzak, 2000). The Adlerian approach to therapy is different for each client, tailored to the unique needs of individuals and situations, and not forcing a client into one particular method (Carlson et al., 2006). Watts and Pietrzak (2000) offer additional support stating, “Adlerian therapy allows counselors to do whatever is in the best interests of clients, rather than forcing clients – and their unique situations – into one therapeutic framework” (p. 445).
The fundamental principles of Adlerian theory are rooted in the belief that all human behavior is goal-directed or purposive (Carlson et al., 2006; Dinkmeyer, 2007; Ferguson, n.d.; McCurdy, 2007; Sherman & Dinkmeyer, 1987). Also, humans are inherently social and want to belong to communities and social groups (Carlson et al., 2006; Dinkmeyer, 2007; Ferguson, n.d.; Sherman & Dinkmeyer, 1987). Furthermore, each individual is unique in their personality, (Carlson et al., 2006; Ferguson, n.d.) and should be viewed holistically (Carlson et al., 2006, Sherman & Dinkmeyer, 1987).

**Goal-Directed Behavior and Life Style**

Adlerian theory believes that all behavior is designed to either overcome feelings of *inferiority* or, to attain a feeling of *superiority* (Carlson et al., 2006; Sherman & Dinkmeyer, 1987). Inferiority feelings are based on *mistaken beliefs* about oneself, others, and the world, which often lead to discouragement (Sherman & Dinkmeyer, 1987). As individuals move through life, their behaviors are motivated by goals that are orientated to what they believe to be important and significant (Carlson et al., 2006).

Each individual’s goals are often acquired in early childhood during the first five or six years of life (Carlson et al., 2006; Sherman & Dinkmeyer, 1987). In childhood, *four goals of misbehavior* are prevalent and include: *attention, power, revenge and inadequacy* (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964). These goals are often carried into one’s adult life, becoming mistaken beliefs that influence one’s perception of their self, others, the world, and their place in it (Carlson et al., 2006; McCurdy, 2007).

An individuals’ *style of living*, or *life style*, refers to a person’s unique way of dealing with life, and is developed in the first five or six years of life (Carlson et al., 2006; Sherman & Dinkmeyer, 1987). For Adlerians, the life style explains an individuals’
methods of dealing with the tasks of life: work, friendship, and love (Carlson et al., 2006; Sherman & Dinkmeyer, 1987). By studying an individual’s life style, including their family and their interactions within the family, an Adlerian trained therapist can begin to understand how a person’s mistaken goals are interfering with that individual trying to fit in or be noticed (Carlson et al., 2006).

**Social Interest**

Adler believed that each individual was striving to belong, to be a part of the broader human community by contributing directly to the human community. The term used by Adler for this concept is *gemeinschaftsgefühl*, known today as *social interest* (Carlson et al., 2006; Ferguson, n.d.; Sherman & Dinkmeyer, 1987). Sherman and Dinkmeyer (1987) write, “Adler believed that social interest was the measure of mental health, insofar as it reflected the individual’s capacity to give and take, the willingness to participate and cooperate for the common benefit of the group” (p. 12). Simply put, healthy people help other people.

**Historical Perspective of Infidelity**

To understand infidelity, one must first explore the history of infidelity. In the not too distant past, traditional affairs or acts of infidelity had to be plotted and planned by both parties involved; via the telephone, letters, or person to person interactions. Traditional infidelity (TI), for the purpose of this paper, will be defined as; sexual or physical behavior, emotional behavior, or a combination of these behaviors that are perceived as a violation of boundaries within a relationship (Cravens & Whiting, 2014; Cravens et al., 2013; Traeen & Thuen, 2013). TI is reported by clinicians as one of the most difficult issues to work with in therapy (Brand et al., 2007; Dijkstra et al., 2013),
and has been considered by clinicians as the second most damaging problem to
relationships only trailing domestic violence (Cravens et al., 2013). The impacts of TI are
many, some of which are: jealousy, anger, betrayal, rejection, helplessness, shame,
isolation, guilt, devastation, abandonment, depression, anxiety, hurt, relationship ending
or divorce, loss of trust, and acts of revenge (Brand et al., 2007; Cravens & Whiting,
2014; Cravens et al., 2013, Dijkstra et al., 2013; Henline et al., 2007; Traeen & Thuen,
2013).

**Evolutionary Theory**

Infidelity is a complex phenomenon (Traeen & Thuen, 2013). A phenomenon that
cannot be easily explained, as everything can always be different. However, there are
theories that attempt to understand and explain infidelity. One accepted theory of TI by
some researchers and clinicians is evolutionary theory (Brand et al., 2007; Dijkstra et al.,
2013; Henline et al., 2007). The basis of this theory is summarized by Brand, Markey,
and Mills (2007) and Henline, Lamke, and Howard (2007) who posit males and females
have different levels of investment into their offspring. A man, for example, can pursue
relationships from a quantity over quality stance as he needs only to spread his seed.
Quantity over quality may lead to more short-term partners. On the other hand, a woman
may pursue a quality over quantity stance on relationships as she may be choosing a mate
based on their level of providing her offspring with healthy genes, protection and
resources (Henline et al., 2007). Within the context of TI, evolutionary theory posits that
women, when compared to men, are much less likely to use infidelity as a means for
securing short-term partners (Brand et al., 2007).
The Jealousy Response from Infidelity

Jealousy is an emotion first experienced in childhood (Henline et al., 2007). Often jealousy continues to be experienced throughout the lifespan. Henline et al. (2007) utilize the definition of jealousy from Parrott and Smith, (1993) which states: “jealousy, as it pertains to a romantic relationship, is regarded as a fear of losing an important relationship to another person who is viewed as a rival” (p. 114). For men, the fear of having to provide for another man’s child (cuckolding) may drive his jealous behavior, which sometimes can end in aggression or abuse (Brand et al., 2007; Dijkstra et al., 2013).

Actual research on Internet infidelity and the jealousy it produces is scarce, often focusing only on sex differences found with offline infidelity and how sex differences may apply to online infidelity (Dijkstra et al., 2013). In the study conducted by Dijkstra et al. (2013), the research set out to analyze the emotional content of the jealousy response to both offline and online scenarios. Dijkstra et al.’s research showed that feelings of anger and betrayal were paramount for online and offline scenarios presented. The scenarios presented to participants included sexual infidelity behaviors, and emotional infidelity behaviors, i.e. partners falling in love.

Growth of the Internet

There is no arguing that the Internet has changed the world in which we live (Scroxton, 2016). The benefits and pitfalls of the Internet can be researched and argued, and frequently are (Glick, 2016). The focus of this paper, however, is how the Internet has specifically impacted matters of infidelity.
As with the evolution of other technologies (i.e. telephone, computers), the business person was the first to be exposed to and interested in the Internet (Corley & Hook, 2012). As Internet use expanded to homes and schools for educational and recreational activities, women and children began to broaden their interest in and use of the Internet. The advent of electronic mail (e-mail) brought about more change and women became more involved in communicating with family and friends via the Internet (Corley & Hook, 2012). The gender gap that once existed with the use of the Internet has all but disappeared (Corley & Hook, 2012; Gonyea, 2004). Studies have demonstrated that men typically use the Internet for entertainment and leisure, with no specific goal or task in mind, while women primarily use the Internet for communication (Gonyea, 2004). Gonyea (2004) theorized that women’s use of the Internet reflects the emphasis women place on the emotional and mental components of relationships, while men’s use of the Internet may be tied to a pursuit of alleviating boredom, loneliness, and feelings of isolation.

**Prevalence of the Internet**

Anyone with Internet access can go online and immediately be connected to a stranger, halfway across the world, all from the palm of their hand (Scroxton, 2016). In the United States, the Internet stands at a penetration rate of 88% of the population as of November 15, 2015. This statistic represents a growth in Internet availability of 190% from 2000 to 2015. Globally, Internet penetration stands at 46% of the population as of the same date, representing an 832% increase over the same 15 year period (Minniwatts Marketing Group, 2016).
The Internet as a Gateway to Sexual Behaviors

In her 2004 literature review, Gonyea cited prior research of Kibby and Costello (2001), Lane (2000) and, Stern and Handel, (2001) by declaring the sex industry to be one of the largest contributors to the proliferation of the Internet and almost all technological advancements since the printing press. Scroxton’s (2016) article on the history of the internet lends credibility to Gerson’s declaration, remarking that sex and technology go hand-in-hand. Schneider et al., (2012), argued that “online life brought with it both unlimited computer-based admission to filmed and live sexual acts and unrestricted access to flirtation and sexualized interaction, without the need for close proximity to another person”, by way of “webcam and video streaming, computer based interactive sex, adult infidelity chat rooms, online bulletin board systems and porn file transfer sites” (p. 124). The Internet has influenced formation of intimate relationships over the past 20 years (Wysocki & Childers, 2011). Wysocki and Childers wrote that people are now using the Internet to meet spouses/significant others, fulfill sexual fantasies, and create new online communities. Despite the good that can come from the Internet in the formation of relationships, Wysocki and Childers further remarked that the Internet may act as a gateway for individuals that are unhappy in their current relationship to explore relations with others.

Options and Appeal of the Internet

Individuals that are looking for sex are finding what they need on the Internet (Wysocki & Childers, 2011). Website advertising, like ashleymadison.com stating “Life is short. Have an Affair” normalize affair behavior as everyday behavior. The website craigslist.com has a section entitled “Casual Encounters” where people post classified ads
in pursuit of sexual encounters. Facebookcheating.com is a website dedicated to people sharing their stories of infidelity that were discovered via Facebook. Cravens and Whiting (2014) discovered that one in three divorce cases made mention of Facebook. Countless other pornography websites encourage and allow individuals to engage in sexual encounters, whether in a relationship or not, and pornography websites get more visitors each month than Netflix, Amazon, and Twitter combined (Enough is Enough, 2016).

The past decade has shown a rise in Internet dating and issues with EDIA (Cravens et al., 2013; Dijkstra et al., 2013, Hertlein & Piercy, 2008). Henline et al.’s (2007) study examined the phenomena of increased interest in finding sexual connection on the World Wide Web. Henline et al. posited that electronic communication forms (i.e., blogs, email, chatrooms) allow individuals to be less inhibited in their interactions, and this, in turn, can induce a much faster perception of intimacy with another person. Moreover, Henline et al. revealed that online sex includes: the sharing of fantasies, use of real-time cameras, viewing sexually explicit photographs and sharing sexual interests.

Gerson (2011), stated that the online world allows an individual freedom to create an “ideal self, utterly in control, and incommensurately gratified” (p. 153). Gonyea (2004) asserted that the Internet provides people with the ability to construct a new identity, one that may only emphasize the positive aspects of our real identity. Gonyea wrote that the new identity that individuals construct online is enticing for individuals pursuing sexual encounters. Moreover, Gonyea declared that the Internet offers an environment where an individuals’ sexuality can be explored without having to reveal oneself, and the fear or threat of face-to-face rejection is non-existent.
Theories on the Appeal of the Internet

There are several theories regarding the appeal of the Internet as a means of committing an act of infidelity. The most widely referenced theory is Cooper’s (1998) “Triple-A” engine of accessibility, affordability, and anonymity (Cravens & Whiting, 2014; Cravens et al., 2013; Gonyea, 2004, Griffiths, 2014; Hertlein & Piercy, 2008). Another model frequently referenced is the ACE model of anonymity, convenience, and escape introduced in 1998 by Young (Cravens et al., 2013; Gonyea, 2004; Griffiths, 2014). Moreover, Hertlein and Stevenson introduced a theory in 2010 that extends Cooper’s Triple-A model. The extended model includes the Seven As, which are: anonymity, accessibility, affordability, from Cooper’s (1998) Triple-A model, and adding approximation, acceptability, ambiguity, and accommodation. Each of the models will be examined more closely.

Triple-A engine (accessibility, affordability, anonymity). The Triple-A engine posited that where the Internet is accessible, it can be consumed in a multitude of ways; via our phones, home computers, work computers, and any mobile capable device. The cost of Internet service (affordability), has decreased and continues to decrease, making the Internet affordable for most Americans. Fully, 88% of Americans have access to the Internet (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2016), and the smartphone evolution has allowed many people to carry the Internet with them in their pockets.

The ability to remain anonymous online, if one so chooses, allows an individual to create an avatar, a better self, and the ability reveal only what each individual deems to be important (Cravens & Whiting, 2014; Gerson, 2011; Henline et al., 2007; Hertlein & Piercy, 2008). Gonyea, (2004) summarized the Triple-A engine by stating the Internet
provides the opportunity for an individual to create an alter ego. An alter ego consisting only of an individuals’ best merits or the merits an individual perceives others may be most attracted to. Moreover, Gonyea declared the Internet is a place where an individuals’ true identity is unlikely to be discovered, at a price point most people can afford.

**ACE model (anonymity, convenience, escape).** Young’s (1998) ACE model focuses on the addiction factors of online sexual behaviors, and why online sexual behaviors become so addicting (Cravens & Whiting, 2014; Cravens et al., 2013). Gonyea (2004), summarized the ACE model by asserting that the Internet has created a “sexually permissive” environment that allows anonymous interactions, from convenient locations, that provide an element of escape from an individuals’ everyday life and problems.

**Seven As model (anonymity, accessibility, affordability, approximation, acceptability, ambiguity, accommodation).** Having already commented on anonymity, accessibility, and affordability, the three As that make up the Triple-A model, discussed here will be the additional four As that Hertlein and Stevenson (2010) added to accomplish their Seven As model.

Giving credit to authors Ross and Kauth (2002) and Tikkanen and Ross (2003), Hertlein and Stevenson (2010) wrote that approximation, the fourth A, refers to the idea that the Internet has inherent qualities which are very similar to real world situations. Situations perceived to be real world like, allow a person to engage in sexual acts without physically participating in the real world. The fifth A is acceptance. Hertlein and Stevenson discuss the growing cultural acceptance of behaviors exhibited on the Internet, stating that behavior which is viewed as inappropriate in society has found acceptance on
the Internet. The sixth A is ambiguity. Hertlein and Stevenson reported online behaviors as difficult to define as problematic. Additionally, online behaviors are difficult to capture and track. For example, one partner may not be concerned about their partners’ use of pornography on the Internet and another partner may take extreme issue with online sexual interaction. The seventh A refers to accommodation. Hertlein and Stevenson wrote that individuals may differ in their view of self on the Internet. Moreover, the Internet provides an outlet for individuals to act in a way that may be completely different or contradictory from the public self an individual presents.

**Why EDIAs Occur**

Knowing, that everything can always be different, (a common saying of Adlerians), it is important to validate there are no scholarly definitive reasons why EDIAs occur. However, numerous scholars have asserted a variety of reasons for why an EDIA may occur, and what signs and symptoms may lead to an EDIA occurring.

Prior to conducting this research, the opinion was held that any act of infidelity was due to a breakdown in overall communication. The research of Hertlein and Piercy (2008, 2012) and Hertlein (2011) supported the notion of communication breakdowns as a root cause of infidelities. Hertlein (2011) wrote that couples with one partner lacking the ability to communicate or discuss problems are at an increased likelihood of experiencing EDIA. Hertlein and Piercy (2008, 2012) expressed that EDIA is a symptom of an underlying problem that includes communication breakdowns, boundaries breakdowns, or a breakdown in commitment.
Three Predictors of EDIA

Campbell and Wright (2010) wrote about three predictors of infidelity including; intrapersonal characteristics, interpersonal behaviors, and contextual influences. According to Campbell and Wright (2010), intrapersonal characteristic variables that may contribute to an EDIA occurring include: gender, age, education, religiosity, political orientation, race, personality, family of origin characteristics, sexual history and attitudes about relationships. Interpersonal behavior predictors of an EDIA occurring mentioned by Campbell and Wright (2010) include: perceived distress, the belief a partner has already committed an act of infidelity, dissimilarities in personality and education, higher levels of relational autonomy, relational needs not being met, and unequitable relationships. Contextual influence predictors of an EDIA, according to Campbell and Wright (2010) are grounded in environmental components which may influence and incline individuals to infidelities. Contextual predictors included by Campbell and Wright are: change in social status, change in career, change in income, type of employment and employment status, geographic location, and geographic sex ratios.

Signs and Symptoms of EDIA

Cravens et al. (2013) conducted an Internet research study focusing on behaviors unique to Facebook infidelity. The researchers analyzed 90 stories posted on FacebookCheating.com, Cravens et al. discussed in detail one facet of their results. It seems that many individual stories presented warning signs that indicated a partner may be involved with an EDIA. The warning signs were defined by Cravens et al. as recognizable actions including verbal or nonverbal indications that an EDIA was
occurring. Warning signs of an EDIA mentioned by Cravens et al. included: gut feeling, changes in behavior, and secretive or suspicious behavior. Further supporting this, Wysocki and Childers (2011) mention several other warning signs of infidelity including: more time away from home, less frequent sex, less physical contact, and an increase in criticism from the partner.

**Familial History and the Correlation to EDIA**

The research of Fish, Pavkov, Wetchler, and Bercik (2012) discovered that individuals who were aware of their parents’ infidelity, were significantly more likely to report acts of infidelity themselves. The reasoning behind this, declared Fish et al. was that individuals who were aware of a parent’s infidelities were taught poor coping methods for relationship anxieties. Furthermore, the poor relationship anxiety coping methods learned by children carry on to adulthood, and increase likelihood of infidelity behaviors. Additionally, the research of Fish et al. (2012) demonstrated that individuals with lower levels of individual differentiation participated in infidelity at significantly higher levels. Fish et al. (2012) stated this may be in part to create emotional distance with their partner, and to relieve their own anxiety about their relationship.

**Issues of Communication**

Balderrama-Durbin et al. (2012) conducted a study which focused on conflict communication among couples. Balderrama-Durbin et al. (2012) focused specifically on couples that had a known or disclosed extradyadic involvement (EDI), unknown or undisclosed history of EDI, or no history of EDI whatsoever. Findings from the research of Balderrama-Durbin et al. (2012) revealed that individuals with an undisclosed EDI experienced much higher levels of demand-withdraw conflict communication behaviors.
Demand-withdraw communication is a pattern of negative communication behaviors (during conflict) in which one partner blames, while the other partner avoids (Holley, Haase & Levenson, 2013). Balderrama-Durbin et al. (2012) propose that when an unknown EDI exists, the involved partner likely has an overall dissatisfaction with the relationship, unmet relationship needs, and may purposely choose to not disclose the behavior for fear of losing the primary relationship.

**Sex Differences and Similarities with EDIA**

The gender gap in using the Internet is declining (Corley & Hook, 2012; Gonyea, 2004). More women are turning to the Internet to find a sexual partner (Corley & Hook, 2012; Wysocki & Childers, 2011). Brand et al. (2007) concluded that the more broad the definition of EDIA, the more gender differences diminish. However, research of Brand et al. (2007) and Traeen and Thuen (2013) indicated that men and women do not agree on what behaviors constitute infidelity. Both men and women agree that face to face meetings are more likely to occur for both sexes following an emotional attachment online versus a sexual attachment online (Henline et al., 2007). Balderrama-Durbin et al. (2012) discovered that when an EDIA has not been disclosed to a partner, demand behaviors increase for both sexes, meaning a partner engages in blaming behaviors with a partner.

**Males and EDIA**

Multiple authors reported that men primarily use the Internet for solitary arousal-activities, i.e. masturbation (Corley & Hook, 2012; Jones & Hertlein, 2012; Shaughnessy et al., 2011). Additionally, men were found to be more upset than women with acts of TI versus acts of EDIA (Brand et al., 2007; Dijkstra et al., 2013; Henline et al., 2007).
Balderrama-Durbin (2012) found that when any infidelity occurs, withdrawal behaviors increase for men, meaning behaviors such as avoidance and less engagement in a relationship. Moreover, Brand et al. (2007) learned that men are more likely to discover an act of EDIA (Brand et al., 2007). Brand et al. declared that men discover EDIA at a higher rate than women in part due to women more frequently revealing their infidelity. Additionally, Brand et al. remarked that men are more adaptive at determining if their partner has been unfaithful, consistent with evolutionary theory.

**Females and EDIA**

Women use the Internet for engaging with others in sexual chat or cybersex (Corley & Hook, 2012; Jones & Hertlein, 2012; Shaughnessy et al., 2011). Women were discovered to be more upset with acts of EDIA versus TI (Brand et al., 2007; Dijkstra et al., 2013; Henline et al., 2007). Additionally, Balderrama-Durbin et al. (2012) discovered that women are more apt to demand more of their partner after an infidelity has occurred. More demand behaviors may be used to gain back power or control in the relationship or to push for change, i.e. ending the relationship wrote Balderrama-Durbin. Moreover, Brand et al. (2007) found that women are more likely to disclose EDIA to their partners. Women’s higher likelihood of disclosure may be a result of them being unhappy in the current relationship and because they were made to feel appealing by the non-partner, resulting in disclosure of the infidelity as a way out of their primary relationship.

**Study Results of Gender Differences and Similarities**

The research of Brand et al. (2007) and Traeen and Thuen (2013) focused on gender differences and similarities concerning attitudes toward infidelity. Brand et al. utilized 1,100 undergraduate students, while the research of Traeen and Thuen involved
1,001 web interviews. Brand et al. (2007) discovered significant variances regarding why infidelity occurs for each sex, and, which sex was more likely to commit an act of infidelity. Traeen and Thuen (2013) remarked that infidelity is the number one reason for ending a relationship for both genders. While the research of Brand et al. (2007) exposed that both genders listed the number one reason for infidelity was an attraction to another person. The research of Traeen and Thuen (2013) and Brand et al. (2007) presented that men who commit acts of infidelity report higher prevalence and more experiences than women. This is consistent with the concept of evolutionary theory, wrote Brand et al. (2007), which posits that men engaging in infidelity pursue quantity over quality, or the “spreading of their seed”, and women pursue more quality over quantity, or, longer-term infidelity relationships.

Traeen and Thuen’s (2013) research showed that men are more likely to end a relationship than women due to infidelity, opposite the findings of Brand et al. (2007). Brand et al. discovered that women are more likely to engage in infidelity as a response to a partners’ infidelity. Moreover, Brand et al.’s (2007) research indicated that women were nearly two times more likely to report an infidelity due to unhappiness in their current relationship, whereas men reported over two times higher that infidelity was a result of dissatisfaction with their sex life.

**Adlerian Perspective of Infidelity**

The Internet did not exist when Alfred Adler formed his views on infidelity in the early 1900’s. However, the views of Alfred Adler on infidelity are not out of date. According to Dinkemeyer (2007), Adler’s philosophy regarding infidelity can be applied
to all relationships, with application in managed care, empirically based treatments, and brief therapy.

Smith (1993) proclaimed that Adler thought marital discord and infidelity was a result of “a defect in one’s life pattern” (p. 207). Smith (1993) elaborates by stating that a tendency towards polygamy is a sign that something is wrong with a persons’ mental status, and a person’s \textit{inferiority complex} can lead to infidelity. Adler also referred to infidelity as “cowardice” (Blanton, 2000; Smith, 1993), in that individuals are fearful to communicate with their partner on what their needs and desires are or which needs and desires are unmet.

\textbf{Inferiority Feelings and Inferiority Complexes}

Adlerian theory considers all behavior to be goal directed, specifically directed, to overcome feelings of inferiority and attain feelings of superiority (Carlson et al., 2006; Fall & Howard, 2015; Sherman & Dinkmeyer, 1987). Feelings of inferiority develop in childhood from our striving for significance, and our striving to meet life’s challenges, to move from a perceived minus to a plus (Sherman & Dinkmeyer, 1987). Carlson et al., (2006) wrote that when a person’s feelings of inferiority actively interfere with their functioning in the tasks of life, that person has likely developed an inferiority complex. For example, one partner has more friends and social outlets than the other partner. The partner with fewer friends and social outlets may blame or react negatively to the partner with the expanded social circle, thus interfering with the task of love. The partner with fewer social outlets develops an inferiority complex about their lack of social outlets and allows inferiority feelings to dictate how they treat their partner. Sherman and Dinkmeyer (1987) further affirmed that feelings of inferiority are founded by our mistaken beliefs.
(formed in childhood) about ourselves, others and the world, and often result in discouragement. When discouraged, individuals act in relationally maladaptive ways or fail to meet the tasks of life of work, friendship, and love (Fall & Howard, 2015).

Regarding discouragement in relationships, Bettner and Lew (1993) asserted that when an individual feels their self-esteem threatened, instead of cooperating with their partner, the individual may resort to blaming the partner. Furthermore, Bettner and Lew (1993) declared a result of threatened self-esteem may be an individual making excuses for their own behaviors or defending their actions to their partner.

**Masculine Protest**

Adler believed that one of the forces driving feelings of inferiority (for individuals in marital relationships) is misconceptions about gender expectations, or, as he referred to this, a mistaken “masculine ideal” that is not based in reality (Blanton, 2000; Smith, 1993). Men grow up with the conviction they are superior to women, and women grow up being told they are inferior to men (Smith, 1993). When men strive to maintain their perceived superiority, or women strive to overcome their perceived inferiority, many disputes and resentments may occur.

**Impact of EDIA**

Any time an infidelity occurs, whether traditionally or via the Internet, and is either discovered, or disclosed, the impact of infidelity on both partners is wide and varying. Responses to, and, impacts of EDIA include: anguish, depression, fury, humiliation, and anxiety (Brand et al., 2007). Traeen and Thuen (2013) mentioned emotional pain as a primary impact of an EDIA. Cravens and Whiting (2014) declared that guilt over the affair, less time spent with partner, shame, loss of trust, and the
relationship ending as impacts of an EDIA. Lastly, Goldberg et al. (2008) and Fish et al. (2012) commented on the familial system impact and the adverse impact an EDIA could have on children.

Schneider et al., (2012) conducted research using an online survey with 34 respondents including 28 questions about their partners’ cybersex activities. Results of the survey identified nearly 88% of respondents reported their partners’ online behaviors had a negative effect on their relationship, 71% reported having lost trust in their partner, with only 48% of those believing that trust could be restored. Almost two-thirds of the respondents reported seeking professional help specifically regarding their partners’ Internet use. In addition, nearly 56% of respondents believed they had been traumatized by their partners’ online sexual activities. Schneider et al. (2012) compared the impact of discovering EDIA to that of suddenly losing a child, job, or home, and those experiencing the betrayal elicited behaviors consistent with a trauma response.

Apart from the varying perceptions individuals have about their own online interactions, individuals impacted by an EDIA also struggled in determining whether or not they were being told the whole truth (Schneider et al., 2014). Over half of respondents to a survey conducted by Schneider et al. (2012) reported they did not believe they had been told the full truth from their partner regarding their online activities. The same survey by Schneider et al. (2012) produced a result indicating over two-thirds of the partners that had been cheated on had attempted to discover additional information by sifting through their partners’ phone, computer, or wallet. Moreover, Schneider et al. (2012) stated that often times betrayed partners want to know more details in order to better understand EDIA and to avoid future circumstances of EDIA.
This thirst for additional information about the EDIA can also lead to snooping behaviors (Schneider et al., 2012).

**TI and EDIA Similarities and Differences**

Scholarly opinions vary on the impact of EDIA when compared to the impact of TI. Henline et al. (2007) found from their research, that, similar to TI, EDIA elicits a greater distress response emotionally versus sexually. Citing prior research of Buss, Larsen, Westen, and Semmelroth, 1992; Buunk, Angleitner, Oubaid, and Buss, 1996; and Buss et al. 1999, Henline et al. (2007) reported that nearly two-thirds of participants viewed emotional infidelity as more upsetting than sexual infidelity. However, when Henline et al. compared their results to results of a study of TI performed by Roscoe, Cavanaugh, and Kennedy (1988), EDIA, specifically *emotional* involvement online, was nearly four times more likely to provoke a response of unfaithful behavior, when related to similar TI behaviors. Cravens et al. (2013) and Hertlein and Piercy (2008) both reported similar findings where the emotional impact of and sense of betrayal with EDIA was similar to TI when compared to prior TI research.

Interestingly, only a small fraction (5%) of respondents to the research of Henline et al. (2007) reported that any action considered to be infidelity in real life would also be viewed as infidelity when occurring online. In contrast, a slightly larger portion (8%) of participants reported that online interactions are not viewed as real, and, as a result, online interactions were not viewed as infidelity. Dijkstra et al. (2013) found similar results which reported individuals participating in online unfaithful behaviors frequently justify online sexual acts as acceptable because there is not any real life contact with another person.
Defining EDIA

The Internet, has made defining what it means to cheat increasingly more difficult, when compared to TI, for both clinicians, and partners (Cravens & Whiting, 2014; Gonyea, 2004; Hertlein & Piercy, 2012; Schneider et al., 2012). Various studies reveal that both participants and practitioners have diverse opinions of what behaviors constitute infidelity (Cravens & Whiting, 2014). Additionally, therapists, often disagree on the definition of EDIA, and rarely use definitions in a consistent manner (Hertlein, 2011). Hertlein and Piercy (2008) report that the Internet, is “forcing couples, therapists, and society to expand the definition of what is considered infidelity behavior” (p. 483).

The difficulty with defining EDIA is multi-layered and more difficult for clinicians and partners to define when compared to TI (Cravens & Whiting, 2014). For example, with TI, a partner intentionally meeting someone, carrying on a phone conversation, flirting, going to a gentlemen’s club or a ladies night, or engaging in physical sexual contact are frequently viewed as acts of infidelity. Often, couples have established ground-rules and boundaries for these types of interactions, whether spoken or unspoken. With EDIA, the behaviors viewed as cheating are relatively new, and often have not been discussed by a couple (Cravens et al., 2013). For example, many couples have not discussed their perspectives on: viewing pornography online; participation in chat rooms, albeit sexual chat rooms; understanding cybersex or sexting as infidelity or online sexual addiction issues. These concerns all pertain to EDIA and cloud the ability to come to a clear definition for both clinicians and partners.
Characteristics of EDIA

Scholars have attempted to define the characteristics of EDIA. Gerson (2011) posited four properties of cyberspace betrayal that include: suddenness of betrayal, physical site of exposure, permanence of record, and, addictive nature or quality. Jones and Hertlein (2012) established four key dimensions of EDIA including: involved parties, view of problem, physical symptoms, and, presence or absence of addictive properties. The four dimensions of EDIA are compared and contrasted to Internet addiction and Internet sex addiction. First discussed will be Gerson’s research on EDIA.

**Suddenness of exposure.** With EDIA, the discovery of the betrayal is often abrupt and intense (Gerson, 2011). For example, finding pictures sent to a partner online, or discovering an email chain a partner has been participating in outside of their primary relationship. A result of the sudden exposure(s) of the infidelities, can be an abrupt dismissal by the betrayed partner Gerson wrote. An example of abrupt dismissal provided by Gerson was the blocking or removal of a partner from a social network website.

**Physical site of exposure.** Gerson (2011) argued the second property of EDIA, physical site of exposure, to be important due to the betrayal taking place in the home occupied by both partners. Gerson declared the offended partner may feel more violated when discovering acts that have taken place in the home. For example, a partner sneaking out of bed to chat online with someone else.

**Permanence of record.** A third unique aspect of EDIA lies in the permanence of record. Gerson (2011) asserted there is a subtle way in which EDIA cannot be corrected in a couples’ story, that it never becomes past tense. Gerson’s research highlighted that
with technology, the data can be archived, meaning the evidence of the act of betrayal could be reexamined by the offended partner, when and if they become anxious.

**Online addiction.** The fourth element of EDIA, Gerson (2011) contended, is the prevalence of the behavior to be addictive and obsessive versus impulsive or episodic. Specifically, Gerson referenced individual offender responses, which suggested an inability to control the behavior. Additionally, Gerson declared the 24 hours a day availability of the Internet allows a user constant access, adding to the addictive nature of EDIA. Gerson compares this to TI where only a few moments or several hours may be used.

In contrast, Jones and Hertlein (2012) approached defining EDIA by viewing EDIA in comparison to *Internet addiction* and *Internet sex addiction*. The model developed by Jones and Hertlein (2012) contradicts the addiction component of Gerson’s (2011) model. Jones and Hertlein’s (2012) model claimed that with EDIA, use of the Internet is purposeful, and intended to develop a relationship. Furthermore, when comparing to EDIA, Internet addiction and Internet sex addiction was about speed, accessibility and the potency of the information (Jones & Hertlein, 2012).

**Involved parties.** Jones and Hertlein’s (2012) perspective of EDIAs defined an EDIA as a relational activity. Furthermore, an EDIA generally involves a third party and constitutes a breach of relationship contract. Jones and Hertlein (2012) stated that *Internet addiction* and *Internet sex addiction* is frequently a singular activity, although sometimes involving many other people. Additionally, *Internet sex addiction* and *Internet addiction* are more about the addiction to an activity, whereas EDIA is focused on developing a relationship (Jones & Hertlein, 2012).
**View of problem.** Jones and Hertlein (2012) argued that EDIA is an act that is characterized by the content of the activities online. Moreover, an EDIA is an act that is primarily done in secret from a partner. Additionally, Jones and Hertlein contended that the amount of time spent online and the chosen time of the day online should be considered when classifying EDIA versus Internet addiction or Internet sex addiction. Jones and Hertlein encouraged clinicians to explore the online sexual activities of a person to help determine if an addiction issue exists or if EDIA is the goal of the person.

**Secrecy.** Hertlein and Piercy (2008) assert that secrecy is a critical component to defining EDIA. With an EDIA, the ability to conduct, and conducting the EDIA behaviors are relatively easier, as mentioned in the discussion of Cooper’s Triple-A model and Young’s ACE model. The accessibility and convenience provided by the Internet can allow a person effortlessly act in secret. Cravens and Whiting (2014) elaborate on the idea of secrecy, stating that secrecy can occur with EDIA in several ways. Cravens and Whiting gave examples, such as: closing out chat windows when a partner approaches, deleting browsing history, and erasing online interactions or pretending to be working on something else while engaged in acts of EDIA. Furthermore, Cravens and Whiting emphasized the ability to do all of the aforementioned with a smartphone or tablet, thus making an EDIA more convenient to perform in secret.

**Presence or absence of addictive properties.** The speed of information being received, and the potency of the information are elements crucial to Internet addiction and Internet sex addiction (Jones & Hertlein, 2012). Jones and Hertlein (2012) further declared that EDIAs are focused on building relationships and connections. Furthermore, Jones and Hertlein stated that access is a purposeful behavior with EDIA.
Additional properties of EDIA. Inherent to any act of infidelity, whether online or face to face, is the violation of relational expectations and boundaries (Brand et al., 2007; Traeen & Thuen, 2013; Lambert, Negash, Stillman, Olmstead, & Fincham, 2012). Violation of relational expectations and boundaries can be either emotional violations or sexual violations. Traeen and Thuen (2013) expanded on relationship expectations by stating that most people would consider any sexual activity with an extradyadic partner to be a violation of relational expectations and boundaries. Furthermore, Traeen and Thuen (2013) stated, activities such as kissing, caressing, or dating an extradyadic partner without prior consent, violate relational expectations and boundaries, as well as social norms for monogamous relationships.

Defining Components of EDIA

Cybersex. Shaughnessy et al.’s (2011) analysis of 292 university students’ definitions of cybersex guided the structure of three categories for online sexual activity. From analysis of the students’ definitions of cybersex, Shaughnessy et al. created three categories of online sexual activity: non-arousal activities, solitary-arousal activities, and partnered-arousal activities. Non-arousal activities were defined as activities performed for the purpose of seeking sexual information, i.e. articles on self-pleasure or articles on how to please a partner. Solitary-arousal activities were defined as acts done alone, i.e. masturbation while viewing pornography. Partnered-arousal activities were defined as acts performed in conjunction with another participant in real time.

The research of Shaughnessy et al. (2011) discovered that cybersex was reliably defined as a collaborative activity, involving sexual gratification. Shaughnessy et al. (2011) suggested that the goal of cybersex was an interpersonal interaction. Furthermore,
Shaughnessy et al. stated that the definition of cybersex should include a real time component.

In contrast, Corley and Hook (2012) defined cybersex as two or more people engaged in simulated sex talk online for the purpose of sexual pleasure. Gonyea (2004) cited Leiblum (1997) in defining cybersex as, “any type of sexual behavior or commodity that can be made available through a computer or modem” (p.21). Furthermore, Gonyea declared that misconceptions exist about cybersex only involving masturbation or affairs, and asserts any definition should include: pornography, erotica, real-time sexual chats and real-time sex shows viewed.

Goldberg et al. (2008) wrote that cybersex can initiate or disguise relational problems, and consumers of cybersex have been found to have negative impacts of several areas. The impacted areas include: sleep patterns, attending to responsibilities, personality, loss of interest in sex and decline in relationship investment (Goldberg et al., 2008). Additionally, Goldberg et al. declared that partners of cybersex users may experience negative reactions including betrayal, hurt, rejection, devastation, and loneliness. Furthermore, the ambiguity of cybersex can lead to confusion as the user may see it as a form of entertainment, and the partner may see it as a relationship betrayal (Goldberg et al., 2008).

**Sexting.** Wysocki and Childers (2011) utilized an online survey, with 5,187 respondents, to study how people use technology to find real-life partners. Sexting, a component of the research of Wysocki and Childers, was defined as a new phenomenon that denotes the sending and receiving of sexually explicit photos or words using mobile phones. Furthermore, Wysocki and Childers reasoned that the purpose of sexting is to
excite or turn on another person. Additionally, the purpose of sexting is to increase the likelihood of a relationship (Wysocki & Childers, 2011).

**Pornography.** Lambert et al. (2012) defined pornography as the display of sexually-explicit material via the Internet, smart phone or other electronic devices with the purpose of stimulating sexual arousal and activity. Fall and Howard (2015) defined pornography as any media which displays sexually explicit images for masturbation or other sexual uses. Fall and Howard further claimed that issues related to pornography consumption will continue to increase and clinicians should be prepared.

**Clinical Definitions of EDIA**

Clinicians struggle with, and, often disagree on how to define EDIA (Henline et al., 2007; Hertlein, 2011; Hertlein & Piercy, 2008). Jones and Hertlein (2012) argued that a clinician must determine whether or not an individual has an addiction, or has committed an act of infidelity, before moving ahead with treatment. Jones and Hertlein further declared that determining whether the focus is relational, or individual, could shift the focus of treatment, and the number of sessions needed to achieve treatment goals. Additionally, Jones and Hertlein warned that misdiagnosis of Internet addiction could lead to issues for a therapist not specialized in addiction issues. If a clinician is focused only on what a client presents in session, the addiction may not be treated (Jones & Hertlein, 2012).

Hertlein and Piercy (2008) wrote about the difficulties clinicians have in agreeing to what defines EDIA. Hertlein and Piercy’s research study involved 508 practicing marriage and family therapists. The research of Hertlein and Piercy indicated that some therapists include sex in their definition, while other therapists exclude sex and only focus
on emotional intimacy. What is agreed upon when defining EDIA is the inclusion of secrecy and the component of trust being breached (Hertlein & Piercy, 2008).

Hertlein and Piercy (2012) conducted a study involving in-depth interviews with 15 practicing therapists, all with experience treating EDIA. Hertlein and Piercy utilized a self-selection process, likely ridding of any therapists uncomfortable or lacking knowledge on the subject of EDIA. Findings of Hertlein and Piercy revealed that clarification of the definition of EDIA in therapy is a key component to moving forward. Additionally, acknowledging that the EDIA is a symptom of an underlying problem (Hertlein & Piercy, 2012).

Gonyea (2004) discussed how the shift in energy that occurs with EDIA is pertinent to defining it, i.e. shifting energy from a persons’ partner to someone else. Gonyea expressed that EDIA is the use of sexual energy outside of a primary sexual relationship in a way that damages the relationship. Additionally, neglecting to acknowledge that the drain in energy will affect the partner or the relationship as long as it remains a secret (Gonyea, 2004). Gonyea wrote that acts of EDIA highlight the crumbling connection between partners, and the inability or unwillingness to be self-aware or grow.

**Perceived EDIA**

Henline et al. (2007) utilized an anonymous study of 123 participants (median age of 21) in committed relationships. Henline et al. hoped to clarify a definition of EDIA, identify similarities and differences between TI and EDIA, and uncover the perspective and belief that EDIA will lead to TI. One task the researchers assigned to participants included a survey that identified the online behaviors or activities each participant
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considered to be unfaithful. Responses were categorized into 14 behavior categories. The four highest behaviors in ranking order were:

1. Cybersex or sexual chat (44.7%)
2. Emotional involvement with online contact (39%)
3. Online dating, plans to meet or meeting the online contact (37.4%)
4. Sexual interactions or flirting (37.4%) (Henline et al., 2007, p. 117)

Interestingly, Henline et al.'s research found only 10.6% of respondents listed accessing online pornography as EDIA, and 8% of respondents answered that no online behaviors are unfaithful.

Henline et al. (2007) then compared the results to a study by Roscoe et al. (1998) that explored TI, Henline et al.’s results reported a significant difference in responses of emotional involvement with a contact when compared to TI. Results of Henline et al. indicated there was nearly four times more likelihood of an EDIA to be perceived as an unfaithful behavior, when compared to the TI results of Roscoe et al.

Henline et al. (2007) also examined distress responses of EDIA. The survey responses of participants consistently indicated that participants found emotional infidelity to be more distressing than sexual infidelity, when responding to scenarios. Men were found to be consistently less distressed by hypothetical scenarios of both emotional and sexual EDIA than women.

**Treating EDIA**

Similar to the definition(s) of EDIA, clinicians also often disagree on assessment and treatment of EDIA (Hertlein, 2011; Hertlein & Piercy, 2008, 2012). Often the disagreement is, in part, due to the difficulty in distinguishing between addiction and
infidelity (Jones & Hertlein, 2012). What is agreed upon by therapists is that infidelity, whether EDIA or TI, is one of the most difficult issues for counselors to address (Dijkstra et al., 2014; Fish et al., 2012; Heintzelman, Murdock, Krycak, & Seay, 2014; Olmstead, Blick, & Mills III, 2009). Moreover, infidelity is one of the most common presenting problems that marriage and family therapists face (Butler, Rodriguez, Roper, & Feinauer, 2010). Furthermore, the prevalence of EDIA is increasing (Hertlein & Piercy, 2008). Hertlein and Piercy (2008) wrote that as the use of the Internet continues to become more socially acceptable for meeting people, the occurrence of EDIA will continue to increase.

**Commonalities of Treatment of EDIA**

The three most common factors of EDIA for therapists to treat are: exchanging flirtatious emails or texts, meeting someone online and becoming sexual or meeting them offline, and use of pornography (Hertlein & Piercy, 2008). In response to these factors of EDIA, several authors have recommended interventions to work with impacted client systems. Even though treatment models specific to EDIA are still developing (Hertlein, 2011), there are commonalities for treatment of EDIA. One treatment is assisting couples to set boundaries and discuss expectations regarding the use of technology (Cravens & Whiting, 2014; Cravens et al., 2013, Dijkstra et al., 2013; Schneider et al., 2012).

Another treatment intervention is assisting the couple system to define EDIA and aspects of it, including cybersex, pornography, and sexting (Cravens et al., 2013; Fife, Weeks, & Stellberg-Filbert, 2013; Hertlein, 2011, Shaughnessy et al., 2011).

Cravens and Whiting’s (2014) research revealed that couples rarely establish rules or boundaries for social networking sites despite reported problems with online behaviors. Cravens and Whiting concluded that couples that share passwords and have
access to each-other's accounts, have significantly higher levels of trust. Schneider et al. (2012) recommended encouraging clients to establish agreement on specific uses of the computer, i.e. no going online without the partner present, no pornography use while children are home, or installing pornography blocking software.

Regarding defining EDIA and aspects of it, Shaughnessey et al. (2011) recommended clinicians define cybersex with their clients and challenge their clients to define it with their partners. Cravens et al. (2013) suggested similar actions by clinicians and encouraged the clinician to reevaluate the couples’ definition of infidelity with the couple, inclusive of each individual’s online behaviors. In helping a couple define EDIA, Hertlein (2011) endorsed assisting a couple to find agreement regarding Internet usage. Additionally, Hertlein recommended therapists address the ambiguity of EDIA and what it means to be unfaithful.

**Models of Treatment of EDIA**

Although treatment models are still developing for EDIA due to its infancy as a presenting issue in therapy, some models exist which address the issue or EDIA specifically. Cravens and Whiting (2014) building on Jones and Hertlein’s (2012) model, believed it was important to determine whether the actions of a partner are EDIA or compulsive behavior. Once the specific actions are identified, Cravens and Whiting (2014) recommended defining EDIA and its components as a couple, focusing on communication, setting boundaries, establishing rules, and discussing how rules and boundaries will be reinforced.
Hertlein and Piercy (2012) posited seven themes for therapists working with couples that have experienced EDIA. The themes were developed from their in-depth interviews with 15 therapists experienced in treating EDIA. The seven themes are:

1. Develop physical boundaries,
2. Develop psychological boundaries,
3. Manage accountability, trust, and feelings,
4. Develop awareness around etiology of the Internet relationship,
5. Assess the couple’s context and readiness of change,
6. Assessment of the presence of unique circumstances,

Hertlein (2011) elaborated on the seven themes, discussing how a therapist can attend to the factors of EDIA. She posited that treating EDIA by implementing environmental strategies, such as moving a computer or limiting its use does not work due to the multifunctionality of computers and the Internet’s overall accessibility outside of the home or work environment. Hertlein recommended a deeper focus on the qualities of the Internet itself, including the vulnerabilities of the individual participating in EDIA. Further, Hertlein stated that treatment models of EDIA should give attention to the self-of-therapist at some point during treatment. Issues of sex and infidelity and how comfortable a therapist is with them are directly tied to one’s value system (Hertlein, 2011). Hertlein adds that the therapists’ beliefs, religiosity, and personal, and professional experience play an important role in treatment.
Adlerian themes in treatment of EDIA. Themes of Adlerian psychology reside within the above treatment recommendations. Hertlein (2011) and Hertlein and Piercy (2008) both discussed the need for therapists to attend to the factors that led to EDIA, including the exploration of personality issues, individual desires, the couples relationships, and extended family issues. Without mentioning Adlerian concepts, Hertlein (2011) and Hertlein and Piercy (2008) recommended that therapists employ a holistic approach with the couple, by conducting a lifestyle analysis on the couple and each individual, both tools inherent to Adlerian couples’ therapy.

Bettner and Lew (1993) discussed the process of helping a couple understand, (1) why they chose each other, (2) how their lifestyles fit together, (3) misinterpretations of each-others behaviors, and (4) how or why the partner may be acting as they do (p. 374). Bettner and Lew further declared that the discovery of the discouragement behind the behavior, can assist the offended partner in seeing the offending partner more realistically, as a partner who needs encouragement.

McCurdy (2007) asserted that couples’ counselors can use the lifestyle assessment to understand and to raise awareness with the couple in regard to how each individual views themselves in the world. Also, by utilizing the lifestyle assessment, counselors can assist clients in discovering their mistaken beliefs, developed early in childhood, and how those mistaken beliefs play a role in the client’s current lifestyle (McCurdy, 2007).

Dinkmeyer, Jr. (2007), offered support stating that counselors search for the reasons of behaviors within a relationship that move forward or move backward the development of the relationship.
Hertlein (2011) discussed the need for therapists to work together with their clients, and encourage their clients to work together. This working together concept is Adlerian as well, supported by Carlson et al. (2006) in that “the roles of the client and therapist as equal, collaborative partners in the psychotherapy endeavor must be made clear. It is crucial that the clients understand that they have an active coworker role in therapy” (p. 72). The term Adlerian’s use for work together, is mutual respect, and the collaboration between therapist and client is necessary for change occur, wrote Carlson et al. (2006).

Fish et al., (2012) and Olmstead et al., (2009) discussed the need for therapists to explore each client’s family of origin, and early childhood behaviors. Exploring the family of origin and childhood behaviors with clients can assist each client to understand how each individual’s past can influence their current behaviors and their commitment within an intimate relationship.

Schneider et al. (2012) discovered that family systems with chemical abuse, and partners of chemical abusers, often were dysfunctional, and childhood wounds frequently presented, which led to beliefs that may interfere with an individuals’ emotional health. Family of origin is a crucial aspect of Adlerian therapy. Carlson et al. (2006) remarked that each individuals’ family and environment growing up (family atmosphere), shapes their consciousness. Additionally, Carlson et al. stated that each individuals’ interactions with their family are the most important factor in determining one’s personality. By studying family of origin interactions, a therapist can begin to understand how an individual’s current behavior is a misguided attempt to fit in (belong) or be noticed.
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(significance). For all individuals the striving for belonging and significance begins in the first five or six years of life (Sherman & Dinkmeyer, 1987).

Moving Toward Forgiveness

With discovered acts of EDIA, the notion of forgiveness may be difficult due to the accessibility of the Internet (Hertlein & Piercy, 2012). Despite the difficulty, forgiveness is viewed as an integral step in recovery from infidelity (Hertlein & Piercy, 2012). In addition, forgiveness should be a therapeutic goal facilitated by clinicians (Fife et al., 2013; Heintzelman et al., 2014). Fife et al., (2013) stated that healing and reconciliation cannot occur without forgiveness. Fife et al. acknowledged that several models of forgiveness are available, but few are directly related to forgiveness of infidelity, and none of the forgiveness models identified were specific to EDIA.

Heintzelman et al. (2014) conducted a study on couples that stayed together after infidelity. Heintzelman et al. determined differentiation of self to be a significant predictor of forgiveness. Differentiation of self refers to the ability of a person to experience intimacy and autonomy within a relationship, in addition to how well an individual reacts under stress (Heintzelman et al., 2014). Heintzelman et al. (2014) reasoned that the ability to think through stressful situations while still maintaining a relationship promotes the cognitive work necessary for forgiveness. Individuals that possessed a higher differentiation of self, reported higher levels of forgiveness (Heintzelman et al., 2014), supporting the suggestion of Heintzelman et al. that individuals who are less emotionally reactive, are more likely to stay connected, communicate their feelings, and better equipped to work through issues resulting from infidelity. An additional finding of Heintzelman et al. was that individuals reporting
higher levels of forgiveness, also reported more growth within their relationship after the infidelity occurred.

For some clinicians, incorporating forgiveness in therapy may be uncomfortable (Fife et al., 2013). The uncomfortableness for clinicians may be derived from the assumed connections of forgiveness to religion and spirituality, failing to recognize forgiveness as a core factor of the healing process for many clients. Furthermore, the struggle to define forgiveness by clinician and client may impede the healing process (Fife et al., 2013). Fife et al. suggested clinicians make time to help their clients define and understand what it means to forgive and how beneficial forgiveness can be to the healing process.

**Models of forgiveness.** Fife et al. (2013) created a model for the forgiveness of infidelity, which includes aspects of forgiveness relevant for both the betrayed partner and the offending partner. Prior to engaging a couple in the process of forgiveness, Fife et al. encouraged clinicians to first attend to other aspects of treatment for infidelity, including managing the initial crisis, encouraging a commitment to treatment, examining the relationship prior to the infidelity, and establishing appropriate boundaries. However, specific attention is given to the concept of defining forgiveness (Fife et al., 2013). Moreover, Fife et al. recommended that clinicians challenge their clients to discuss and define forgiveness to alleviate any misunderstanding. Further, Fife et al. stated that clinicians should be clear with their clients that forgiveness is not an absolution for what occurred.

The model developed by Fife et al. (2013) consists of four unifying factors in facilitating forgiveness: (1) empathy, (2) humility, (3) commitment and hope, and (4)
apology. These four factors highlight the relational elements of forgiveness, in that the behaviors of one partner could have a calming effect and may enable progress towards forgiveness with the other partner (Fife et al., 2013). For this approach to be successful, Fife et al. noted that both partners must have expressed a commitment to the relationship and aspire to reconcile and rebuild.

Choosing to forgive a partner for infidelity can involve an enormous amount of courage (Fife et al., 2013). Clinicians working with clients on empathy, humility, commitment, and hope can prepare the couple for a genuine apology, and ultimately forgiveness (Fife et al., 2013). Furthermore, Fife et al. wrote that the expression of empathy and remorse are of critical importance to an apology being accepted. Moreover, a clinician may need individual sessions with the offending partner to assist the partner to prepare a genuine apology. It often takes time to help an offending partner to accept responsibility for the damage the EDIA may have caused (Fife et al., 2013).

Forgiveness is a process that takes time and does not necessarily end when therapy does (Fife et al., 2013; Olmstead et al., 2009). Olmstead et al. (2009) interviewed 10 licensed marital and family therapists regarding how they treat infidelity and move couples toward forgiveness. Similar to suggestions of Fife et al., (2013), Olmstead et al. (2009) indicated a need for clinicians to attend to components of the infidelity before attending to forgiveness. Olmstead et al. recommended clinicians conduct family of origin work, obtain relationship history, and discuss and assess the mutual acceptance of responsibility. Once these issues have been addressed, a clinician can begin to facilitate forgiveness. Olmstead et al. (2009) recommended the four key components of forgiveness, discovered in their research, be implemented in sequential order. The four
key components of forgiveness discovered include: (1) understanding forgiveness, (2) psychoeducation, (3) clarity, and (4) time (Olmstead et al., 2009).

**Issues of Treatment for Therapists**

A clinician will face issues in treatment throughout his or her career. EDIA and TI have been found to bring about some similar issues which therapists must work through in order to be successful with their clients. Two of the most frequent matters of infidelity include: (1) a therapist’s biases (Goldberg et al., 2008; Hertlein & Piercy, 2008, 2012), and (2) issues of confidentiality and disclosure (Butler et al., 2010). Different from TI, and largely due to the relative newness of EDIA, is the issue of a therapists’ lack of education and preparation for working with clients on EDIA (Dijkstra et al., 2013; Goldberg et al., 2008; Heintzelman et al., 2014).

**Therapist’s Biases**

A therapist cannot help but allow their personal biases to come into their therapy, as therapists are shaped by their experiences and environment (Hertlein & Piercy, 2008). Hertlein and Piercy (2008) wrote that biases “operate outside of the therapist’s awareness” (p. 493) and, “can come from small and subtle aspects of a therapist’s life” (p. 493). Experiences with technology, personal relationships, and therapists’ beliefs about the use and impact of the Internet regarding sexual behaviors can impact a therapists’ biases (Hertlein & Piercy, 2008). Hertlein and Piercy stated that the value system of the therapist influences defining the problem and determines the course of treatment.

Hertlein and Piercy (2008) studied the impact a therapist’s age, gender, religiosity, and a therapist’s own experiences with infidelity, and the impact to the way
the therapist assessed and treated clients with issues of EDIA. Findings from the study varied greatly. However, results did point to overall differences in how therapists assess and treat their clients based on age, gender, religiosity, and past experiences with infidelity.

Hertlein and Piercy researched the subject of EDIA again in 2011, focusing more specifically on themes of therapist’s treatment of EDIA. Hertlein and Piercy explained that most of the therapists in their study reported they would not alter their treatment based on the gender of their clients. However, Hertlein and Piercy noted the therapist’s statements within their interview responses did reveal differences in their treatment. Hertlein and Piercy’s discovery of gender differences in treatment could possibly be explained by the Adlerian concept of gender guiding lines. Gender guiding lines are developed in early childhood from clients’ expectations regarding gender-related actions (Carlson et al., 2006). Carlson et al. expand on their definition of gender guiding lines by giving an example of a father that is never home and a child then determining that men are not around. Adding to the example, Carlson et al. declared that the mother that stays with the father that is not around could lead to a child determining that women stay with men that are not around.

Confidentiality and Disclosure

Confidentiality is viewed as one of the most critical aspects of any counseling relationship, and is upheld by the code of ethics of the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists (AAMFT), stating that statements between the clinician and each partner of a marriage must be kept confidential unless written permission to share is granted (Butler et al., 2010, p. 85). In 2010, Butler et al. conducted research with the
intent of discovering therapists’ attitudes regarding infidelity secrets, their relational impact, and, discussed infidelity from an ethical perspective.

Butler et al.’s (2010) research discovered that many times in couple’s therapy, infidelities are kept secret from a partner, yet often disclosed to therapists during one-to-one sessions without the offended partner present. This disclosure and successive request for confidentiality of the disclosure can jeopardize the equal advocacy in relational therapy as a therapist is bound by ethical standards to honor the confidentiality request (Butler et al., 2010). Trouble can arise when a clinician begins withholding relationship-relevant information.

Butler et al. (2010) also discussed the topic of relationship equality. Each partner has an equal freedom of relationship choice, which requires access to all relationship-relevant information. Withholding of relationship-relevant information by one partner is a denial of informed relationship choice. If a therapist honors the confidentiality of a disclosed infidelity, the therapist may create more chaos and turmoil for a couple attempting to achieve their goal of secure attachment and improved commitment, as infidelity secrets have a negative impact on a couples trust, security and safety (Butler et al., 2010). Furthermore, couples that keep infidelity secrets divorce at a much higher rate than those that disclose infidelity secrets (Marin, Christensen, & Atkins, 2014).

The research of Butler et al. (2010) asserted that a majority of therapists agreed that healing cannot take place unless infidelity secrets are disclosed. A majority of therapists also agreed on the practice of clients voluntarily waiving their confidentiality regarding relationship-relevant information, with exceptions in circumstances where disclosure may not benefit the couple. Such situations may include: terminal or serious
illness, imminent divorce, potential for violence or abuse, one partner struggling with serious mental health issues, or the infidelity had occurred a very long time ago and is not deemed as relevant to the presenting issues of the couple (Butler et al., 2010).

Butler et al. (2010) declared that therapists failing to have an informed consent in place regarding disclosure of relationship-relevant information are at a greater risk of finding themselves in an ethical bind, potentially leaving the choice of disclosure to the offending partner. Butler et al. advocated strongly for obtaining informed consent at the outset of therapy. Obtaining informed consent at the beginning of therapy can help establish trust with both partners in that the therapist will equally advocate for both partners with no secrets held from either partner (Butler et al., 2010).

**Therapist Education and Preparedness**

Given the relative age of EDIA as a presenting issue for therapists, many therapists report feeling unprepared in dealing with EDIA (Goldberg et al., 2008). Therapists and clinicians have a need for furthering their education on assessment, and treatment of EDIA (Dijkstra et al., 2013; Dinkmeyer Jr., 2007; Fall & Howard, 2015; Heintzelman et al., 2014; Jones & Hertlein, 2012). The research by Goldberg et al. (2008) presented a lack of education in graduate school on issues of EDIA leading to newly licensed clinicians feeling unprepared when working on EDIA with clients.

Hertlein (2011) recommended that therapists in some cases may benefit their clients by embracing the same technology that led to EDIA. Hertlein stated that encouraging clients to explore the positive uses of technology within a couples’ relationship such as sending romantic emails or online chatting could enhance their
relationship. Additionally, the use of technology positively could shift a couples’ view of technology from one of impairment to enhancement (Hertlein, 2011).

**Benefits of the Internet**

The Internet and use of the World Wide Web is not all negative. In fact, Jones and Hertlein (2012) reported the establishment of relationships that are based on emotional rather than physical reasons as one benefit. Griffiths (2012) and Wysocki and Childers (2011) stated that access to social communities that would have been difficult without the Internet as another benefit. Gonyea (2004) and Griffiths (2012) agreed that freedom to explore ones sexuality safely and anonymously as a benefit to individuals and couples. Finally, Fall and Howard (2015) determined using the Internet as a way to relieve stress when it does not interfere with other life tasks as beneficial to couples.

**Discussion**

The topic of EDIA is a relatively new phenomenon to the field of psychology, a topic that will continue to be discussed by clinicians, and presented by clients in treatment (Goldberg et al., 2008; Hertlein & Piercy, 2008). Research demonstrated that aspects of EDIA are much different from aspects of TI in many regards, however, treatment of EDIA when compared to TI is not that much different. It appears there is a need in the field of couples’ therapy to study effective methods of helping couples understand and cope with issues of infidelity (Peluso, 2007). There currently is no agreed upon assessment and treatment protocol for EDIA, which would be useful (Hertlein & Piercy, 2008).

An Adlerian approach to therapy is an eclectic and holistic approach (Carlson et al., 2006). Adlerian theory considers many factors when working with clients, however,
of primary importance is “the creation of a therapeutic relationship built on trust, cooperation, and collaboration” (Fall & Howard, 2015, p. 280). Carlson et al. (2006) and Sherman and Dinkmeyer (1987) recommended clinicians gather knowledge of a client’s childhood and family systems to gain an understanding of each individuals and the couples’ history. Furthermore, Carlson et al. and Dinkmeyer recommended performing a lifestyle analysis with the couple and each individual, including early recollections. Moreover, determining how each partner’s issues interfere with their tasks of life (Fall & Howard, 2015), and identifying the beliefs, feelings and behaviors between the partners can ultimately lead to a better sense of quality in the relationship (Carlson et al., 2006).

Adlerians also emphasize the results of therapy and how to ensure improved results. Carlson and Sperry (1993) discussed extending the results of therapy by having quarterly, semi-annual, or annual checkups. Carlson and Sperry wrote that these checkup sessions could involve the therapist ensuring couples are making time for communication, practicing encouragement with one-another, positively resolving conflict, making time for fun together, and planning future activities and time together.

While there are many approaches to the treatment of EDIAs that may help, further research and education in assessing and treating EDIA is needed. Ideas put forward include expanding clinical research to: (1) include a broader range of age groups (Brand et al., 2007; Traeen & Thuen, 2013; Wiederhold, 2011), (2) include more couples that stay together after infidelity (Heintzelman et al., 2014), (3) include more research that is based on actual events and not hypothetical scenarios (Brand et al., 2007), (4) more qualitative research regarding therapist’s social background, gender, and impact of
treatment (Hertlein & Piercy, 2008, 2012), and, (5) more research on the positive uses of internet sexuality for couples (Gonyea, 2004).

**Conclusion**

EDIA is an issue that is not going away and will likely increase. Therapists and clinicians can best prepare for this issue by seeking out education and self-educating on the many aspects of EDIA. EDIA is a symptom of a greater underlying issue that a couple is experiencing. Encouraging each partner to have the courage to be imperfect and face their fears of communicating with their partner could result in more open communication and ideally a more satisfactory relationship.
References


