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WHEN WE END, WHERE DO I BEGIN? EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF

RELATIONSHIP DISSOLUTION ON SELF-CONCEPT AMONG AFRICAN-

AMERICAN WOMEN

A DISSERTATION

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A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

BY

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This dissertation is dedicated to all who have inspired and impacted me on this journey to becoming a doctor:

To my ancestors, I thank you for your strength to face horrific and difficult times that paved the way for me to be able to pursue my dreams freely. Thank you for the wisdom that has been passed down from generation to generation and for your visions of liberation, peace, and love. As the concept of *Ubuntu* so beautifully states "I am because we are and, since we are, therefore I am."

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Abstract

The loss of a romantic relationship can have devastating effects on individuals' emotional well-being. Yet, little empirical work has been done that investigates the specific effects of break-ups on changes in self-concept, especially among African-American women. Moreover, given that African-American relationships emphasize interdependence and interconnection as opposed to individualism and autonomy, it is important for research to examine cultural norms specific to African-American women's experiences with romantic relationships. Thus, this study was designed to explore the relationships between interdependence, interconnectedness, and self-concept change among African-American women who have experienced the break-up of a significant romantic relationship, in particular those that ended due to infidelity. One hundred five African-American or African descent female participants ages 18-55 (mean = 21, median = 32) were included in the study. Results indicated that interconnectedness and interdependence were significant predictors of loss of self among African-American women, accounting for 17% of the variance. Further, interdependence and interconnectedness significantly predicted African-American women's rediscovery of self, accounting for 9% of variance. Of particular note is the finding that relationship dissolution as a result of infidelity significantly predicted loss of self among African-American women.

Keywords: Self-concept, Interdependence, Interconnectedness, Infidelity, African-American Women

Chapter 1: Introduction

Love is patient, love is kind, it always trusts, always hopes, and always

perseveres. Love never fails (1 Cor. 13:14-8 New International Version). Many hold

this scripture near and dear to their hearts, especially when they envision the type of

relationship they desire. In stark contrast, it has also been said that love is a battlefield.

This viewpoint disparity suggests that while romantic involvement with another can

create a sense of euphoria, it also carries with it the possibility of loss and betrayal.

Of course, romantic relationships provide many enriching emotional rewards,

but due to the vulnerability required to create these strong connections, romantic

relationships also have the capability to deeply hurt us. When a person enters into a

romantic relationship, s/he often begins to build closeness or a sense of "we-ness," thus

creating greater intimacy within the relationship (Totenhagen, Curran, Serido, & Butler,

2013). This *we-ness* also known as the *need to belong* is found to some degree within

all cultures (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). It is also a fundamental human motivation as

it provides individuals with a mutual exchange of positive emotional rewards such as

caring, compassion, and connection (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Given the known benefits of being in a romantic relationship and the need to

belong, it is disconcerting to read about the status of romantic relationships within the

African-American community. Burton and Tucker (2009) reported that African-

American women are leading the trend in regard to the increase of single motherhood

across cultures; however, minimal progress has been made in understanding what is

occurring at ground level in romantic relationships of African-American women.

Increasing understanding of the unique nature of romantic relationships among African

Americans is critical to developing culturally competent interventions designed to strengthen African-American romantic relationships and thus, in turn, strengthening the family unit and maintaining cultural traditions. Furthermore, given that researchers have found that African Americans' commitment to extended kinship (relatives by marriage) has been responsible for their ability to overcome political, social, and economic hardships over the past 300 plus years (King, 1999), utilizing this collectivist focus to develop therapeutic strategies designed to promote healthy couple and family relationships seems warranted.

It is also important to note that this collective orientation among African Americans reinforces interdependence (Belgrave & Allison, 2010). Mbiti (1970) explained that this orientation differs from that of the individualistic, Western culture in that it is saying, "I am because we are, and because we are I am" (as cited in Bell, Bouie, & Baldwin, 1990, p. 170). This is a powerful statement articulating the essence of the Black family. It is also the cornerstone of African American heritage. Moreover, among collectivist cultures, relationships with others are important because individual well-being is interwoven with, not separate from, that of significant others (Belgrave & Allison, 2010). According to Rusbult, Arriaga, and Agnew (2007), interdependence theory suggests that relationships between people are just as important as the people themselves. This theory also posits that individuals' minimize their autonomous goals in order to compromise with and accommodate their partners (Murray, Holmes, Aloni, Pinkus, Derrick, & Leder, 2009).

In addition to the idea of interdependence in romantic relationships is that of interconnectedness. Interconnectedness is often created in a place of romantic euphoria

in which the individual self evolves by incorporating aspects of the partner into her/his self-concept (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). It is in this place of euphoria that two begin to become one by the blending of ideals, values, goals, activities, social circles, families, and personal characteristics. Hence, by incorporating attributes of the romantic partner into ones' own self-concept, the individual is more susceptible to becoming malleable in that romantic relationship (Slotter & Gardner, 2012). Notably, interconnectedness and collectivism have been found to be core principles of Afrocentric psychology, especially as it relates to African-American romantic relationships and the African-American/Black family (Awosan, 2014). Further, researchers have stated that the interconnectedness of both feminine and masculine roles create a process of interdependent qualities among Black couples that allows for the collective increase of relational well-being (Lawrence-Webb, Littlefield, & Okundaye, 2004). In addition, Lawrence-Webb et al. (2004) stressed the importance of the idea of collectivism and interconnectedness against the shared struggle of racism and oppression, which challenges the survival of Black romantic relationships.

Aside from the qualities that distinguish African-American relationships from those who are more individualistic in nature, the reality is that romantic relationships comprise a major part of most adults' lives. While research has established the fact that romantic relationships bring with them ample benefits, it has also acknowledged that they have the ability to produce significant distress once the relationship ends (Slotter, Gardner, & Finkel, 2010). Furthermore, the condition under which a relationship ends is highly correlated with post-breakup distress, the factor most related being the break-up initiator (Sprecher, Felmlee, Metts, Fehr, & Vanni, 1998).

Of course, romantic relationships can end and, as a result, individuals may experience deep emotional pain over the loss of their partner (Slotter et al., 2010). In turn, this distress has been shown to be related to changes to the self-concept. For example, at the dissolution of a romantic relationship, the individual experiencing distress may alter their appearance, social circle, self-views, recreational activities and so forth (Slotter, 2010). Individuals who have difficulty with a romantic relationship break-up may also engage in behaviors that reflect obsession, anxiety, desperation, and/or dependency on the lost partner (Boelen & Van Den Hout, 2010). However, they may also make positive changes within their lives and self-concepts, including making better health decisions, becoming more active within their communities, and strengthening their mental health faculties, to name a few.

Obviously, the dissolution of romantic unions can occur for a variety of reasons. Unfortunately, one of the main causes within committed romantic relationships is that of infidelity (Amato & Previti, 2003; Charny & Parnass, 1995; Frederick & Fales, 2016). Finding out that a partner has been unfaithful often exacerbates break-up distress and results in trust issues in future relationships. According to Kluwer and Karremans (2009), being betrayed by a significant other is an experience that can severely impact one's sense of self-worth and negatively influence their overall psychological well-being.

Not surprisingly, infidelity has been found to be one of the leading causes for divorce (Buss, 2000; Frederick & Fales, 2016). The impact of infidelity can leave an individual with a great sense of loss and pain. This includes loss of trust and feelings of betrayal (Boekhout, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 1999). As a result of experiencing

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infidelity, individuals may take a stance of "never again" to protect themselves from future betrayals. It has been estimated that approximately 25-30% of individuals engage in some form of infidelity in their lifetime, due to a variety of reasons including finding the extra-pair partner attractive, being bored in the current relationship, feeling unfulfilled in the relationship, and simply being presented with the opportunity (Brand, Markey, Mills, & Hodges, 2007). The assertion that acts of unfaithfulness within romantic unions create conflict among partners is indeed an understatement.

Within the field of counseling psychology, it is critical for psychologists to exhibit multicultural competence in order to be able to effectively work with individuals of all ethnicities. In fact, the American Psychological Association (APA) has multicultural competency guidelines that encourage psychologists to: (a) develop an understanding of their own cultural background and how it influences their attitudes and beliefs, (b) develop knowledge and understanding of the worldviews of individuals from diverse backgrounds, and (c) use culturally appropriate interventions (APA, 2003). The lack of literature pertaining to African-American's romantic relationships only further emphasizes the need for mental health practitioners to incorporate culturally appropriate interventions into both practice and research.

Statement of the Problem

Major gaps in the literature exist related to African-American cultural norms around relationships (i.e., interdependence and interconnectedness). Moreover, no research examines changes in self-concept among African-American women whose relationships end as a result of infidelity. Thus, this study was designed to (a) utilize the culture-specific relationship norms of interdependence and interconnectedness as lenses

through which to examine self-concept change among African-American women post break-up, and (b) test whether infidelity as the cause of relationship dissolution has a unique impact on African-American women's self-concepts. Addressing these omissions may shed light on the lack of longevity in romantic relationships within the African-American community. Additionally, because marriage has played a key role in the traditional African-American family, finding cogent explanations for the decline in marriage and increase in divorce among African Americans may provide direction as to how to strengthen these traditional family bonds (King, 1999; Perry, 2013).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Romantic Relationships

Committed romantic relationships certainly exist outside the institution of marriage; however, marriage is well regarded by many individuals as one of life's most important goals (Karney & Bradbury, 2005; Roberts & Robbins, 2000). Research supports that idea in that studies have found that approximately 90% of all individuals get married. Unfortunately, about 50% or more of marriages fail, while others are marked by conflict, withdrawal, and enduring unhappiness (Raley & Bumpass, 2003). In addition, following the dissolution of a committed romantic relationship, particularly marriage, people have been known to experience emotional turmoil, including feelings of rejection, depression, bitterness, confusion, hostility, loneliness, failure, guilt, and disorganization (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This sense of grief may be best understood as a reaction to the loss of a connection with another person versus just the loss of the person.

On a more positive note, there is also strong evidence that healthy romantic relationships are associated with better emotional and physical health, stronger social ties, better outcomes for children, and stronger community connections (Amato, 2010). Moreover, healthy relationships occur when both individuals within the romantic union invest time, energy, and other resources into the relationship, resources that are lost if the romantic bond were to terminate (Joel, Gordon, Impett, MacDonald, & Keltner, 2013). Thus, it should come as no surprise that researchers have found that the success or failure of romantic relationships has direct implications for the health and well-being of individuals and society (Amato, 2010; Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Perhaps one of the main reasons marriage and committed romantic relationships are still so revered by many cultures lies within the need to belong. According to Barnes and colleagues (2010), the need to belong is "a need to secure and maintain a minimum number of personal relationships that are characterized by frequent, positive (or, at least nonnegative) interactions, mutual emotional concern, and constancy" (p. 1148). Arguably, this need to belong and to be connected with another individual is one that has been of the utmost importance since the beginning of time. As humans, we desire and need to be connected to others. The need to belong applies to individuals from all cultures, is associated with important emotional consequences, guides cognitive processing and behavior, and is associated with negative psychological and physical outcomes when unmet (Barnes, Carvallo, Brown, & Osterman, 2010; Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Romantic relationships and African-American women. Much of the research regarding romantic relationships in the African-American community centers around

single parenting, low socioeconomic environments, and marriage/divorce rates. Nevertheless, Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan (1995) found that 72.4% of African-American women who responded to their survey desired to get married or remarried (if divorced). South (1993) found similar results in a study that asked African-American women if they would like to be married. More recently this rate has declined, with researchers finding approximately 52% of African-American women desire to get married (Cherlin, 2010; Oberlander, Agostini, Houston, & Black, 2010). Interestingly, while more recent research suggests that the majority African-American women continue to value marriage and desire to be married, other research indicates that many are ambivalent about the idea of marriage and choose to stay single (King, 1999; Oberlander et al., 2010). King (1999) provides an explanation for this ambivalence by suggesting that women born after 1950 have a better opportunity to self-actualize prior to becoming a wife, which leads these women to delay marriage while working to achieve other life goals.

Other studies allude to the imbalance between women and men within the African-American population, with women significantly outnumbering men (Cherlin, 1998; Dickson, 1993; Perry, 2013). This imbalance has been found to be particularly problematic for African-American women who choose to delay marriage, due to the diminishing pool of men and increased competition from other women (Cherlin, 2010; King, 1999). Researchers have suggested that the diminishing pool of marriageable men is related to lack of education, unemployment, incarceration, premature death, drug addiction, and the probability that many men in the woman's age cohort will likely already be married (Burton & Tucker, 2009; King, 1999; Pinderhughes, 2002). Other

researchers have suggested that the sex-ratio deficit between African-American women and men has been imbalanced throughout a good portion of history, but highlight that this imbalance has been steadily increasing over the past few decades (Dickson, 1993; King, 1999; Lincoln, Taylor, & Jackson, 2008). This higher probability of decreased options regarding a mate is what some researchers state impacts competition among women (Burton & Tucker, 2009; King, 1999; Pinderhughes, 2002); however, it is important to note that not all women are competing for a partner. This competition speaks to only a portion of women in the dating pool.

Existing research also points to the impact of economic differences on relationships within the African-American community, with women being more likely to achieve higher education and, thereby, earning more than their male counterparts (Dixon, 2008). Although no one explanation of the sex-ratio disparity contributes to all of the problems affecting romantic relationships within the African-American community, together they appear to have a significant cumulative impact. Overall, some researchers assert that this imbalance makes Black women more vulnerable because they are more likely to compromise in their dating selections (McLellan-Lemal, Toledo, O'Daniels, Villar-Loubet, Simpson, Adimora, & Marks, 2013) and, as such, be more likely to remain unmarried (King, 1999).

Although the literature primarily addresses the experiences of African Americans in romantic relationships with other African Americans, LaTaillade (2006) reported that approximately 7% of African Americans who marry, marry someone of a different racial/ethnic background. It has, however, been noted that this percentage may

be lower for African Americans compared to other ethnicities due to history of enslavement and legal sanctions against interracial relationships (LaTaillade, 2006).

Finally, while the focus of this study was on African-American women and their experiences in heterosexual partnerships and marriages, the reality is that infidelity, pain, and betrayal are universal; therefore, the sexual identities of all participants were considered in the current study. In addition, although research on romantic relationships in the context of marriage was reviewed for this study, participants involved in a variety of romantic partnerships (e.g., dating, cohabitating) were also recruited in order to gather a broader view of their romantic experiences.

Relationship dissolution and African-American women. Cherlin (1998) stated that African-American marriages are more likely to end in divorce in comparison to their White counterparts; however, this assumption has not been widely validated. Moreover, although the decline in marriages has been drastically pronounced within the African-American community, researchers suggest this does not mean that there has been a significant decline among committed romantic relationships (Lincoln, Taylor, *&* Jackson, 2008). Rather, this difference is likely better explained by the increasing rates of cohabitation over the past few decades (Lincoln, Taylor, *&* Jackson, 2008). Researchers have found that cohabitation (living with a romantic partner) has increased drastically among Whites and Blacks; however, some scholars believe that cohabitation has become an alternative to being single or married among African-Americans (Lincoln, Taylor, & Jackson, 2008). Another explanation espoused by researchers in regard to African-Americans being more accepting of cohabitation over marriage relates to the gradual adaptation of African Americans over the years to some Eurocentric

cultural values such as independence and autonomy (Bell, Bouie, & Baldwin, 1990). In fact, this cultural value shift has been shown to be correlated with the decline of marriage rates among African Americans (Burton & Tucker, 2009; Lincoln, Taylor, & Jackson, 2008). Dickson (1993) adds that this shift is creating a greater emphasis on self-fulfillment, self-actualization, and individualism. Ultimately, this value shift is likely a by-product of the changes in socialization of African-American boys and girls.

Additionally, Dickson (1993) points out that African-American children are growing up without committed relationship role models, which puts their perception of healthy romantic relationships at risk. This can be seen in the increasing rate of single parents, often women, in the African-American population (Burton & Tucker, 2009). Obviously, there are other things that could be potentially impacting African-American children's relational views, such as the media and how African-American women and men are portrayed. Furthermore, there are many stereotypes within the African-American community regarding African-American males (e.g., lazy, unreliable, and undependable) that play a powerful role in the maintenance of their status within the community (Pinderhughes, 2002). In turn, these stereotypes have skewed perceptions of what a marriageable man looks like and likely impact how African-American women and men view each other (Pinderhughes, 2002).

Infidelity and relationship dissolution among African-Americans. Research supports the fact that infidelity can have devastating and lasting effects and is distressing for both married and unmarried couples. Researchers have found that infidelity occurs in approximately 20-25% of committed relationships, with men more readily engaging in the infidelity (Fincham & May, 2016; Wiederman, 1997).

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Previously documented gender difference studies (e.g., Hansen, 1987) reported that the longer men are in a romantic relationship, the more likely they are to engage in sexual activities with someone else. Whereas, the longer women are in a relationship, the less likely they will be to engage in sex outside of the relationship (Forste & Tanfer, 1996). In stark contrast, Fincham and May (2016) reported that the gap between men and women appear to be closing with similar rates of infidelity being found among both men and women ages 40-45. In addition, research has also found evidence to suggest that African Americans engage in infidelity at higher rates compared to their White counterparts (Fincham & May, 2016). Furthermore, the younger people are when they begin a romantic relationship, the more likely they are to experience infidelity (Atkins, Baucom, & Jacobson, 2001).

There are various definitions of infidelity in the literature. Some assert infidelity can only occur if sexual acts are performed, while others argue that infidelity is more of an emotional connection with another person outside of the relationship. Still others view the act of flirting with someone outside the committed relationship as being unfaithful. Hackathorn, Mattingly, Clark and Mattingly (2011, p. 300) defined infidelity as "any sexual act performed outside of one's committed relationship, in which both members have vowed to remain sexually exclusive." Shackelford and Buss (1997) defined infidelity as individuals who either engage in sexual interactions or form deep and meaningful emotional connections with another partner. Weiser and Weigel (2014) concluded that the defining element of infidelity is whether a partner has broken a contract of exclusivity. Thus, it is no surprise that Blow and Hartnett (2005) point out that infidelity is difficult to define, as the perception of the act of infidelity in one

relationship may vary greatly from the perceptions of the act of infidelity in another relationship. Moreover, although some research studies have found that women are generally more upset by emotional infidelity, Lishner, Nguyen, Stocks, and Zillmer (2008) conducted a study in which the majority of male and female participants found both forms of infidelity equally upsetting. Likewise, in a qualitative study completed by Utley (2015), over half the participants included sexual and emotional betrayal in their definitions of infidelity. Therefore, for the purpose of this research, *infidelity* was defined as *a violation to the commitment of exclusivity established by the couple up to and including engaging in any sexual interactions or forming a deep emotional connection with someone outside of the committed romantic relationship.*

While much of the research regarding infidelity in the African-American community has focused on the sex-ratio imbalance and sexually transmitted infections (e.g. HIV, Aids), researchers have also asserted that the rates of infidelity are much higher in the African-American population in comparison to other cultural groups, a disparity some researchers claim is a result of various factors including poverty and the sex-ratio imbalance (Eyre et al., 2012; Penn, Hernández, & Bermúdez, 1997; Utley, 2011). Granted, evidence has shown that there is a sex-ratio imbalance in the African-American community; however, it seems unwise to state that poverty is a direct cause of infidelity versus a mediating factor. Nevertheless, some research has found that as the socioeconomic status increases among African Americans, the likelihood of infidelity decreases due to there being more to lose if an affair were to occur (Penn, Hernández, & Bermúdez, 1997).

In a qualitative study completed by Eyre and colleagues (2012), which looked at infidelity among emerging African-American adults, the term *double standard* was discussed as a form of gender bias, noting one of their participant's statements:

> We expect our women to be faithful, but we ain't gotta be faithful like that. Like I've been with females who like I cheat on'em…but like they'll still accept me back or whatever. But if a female cheat, … there's no talking. Like, "Go on" (p. 239).

Unfortunately, this last statement captures a snapshot of infidelity and how some women may compromise their relational standards in order maintain a romantic relationship.

Eyre and colleagues (2012) also discussed another cultural model of infidelity that appears to be prominent within the African-American population, i.e., *side partner management*. This *side partner* model is predominantly focused on men's behavior and includes keeping the main partner away from the side partner. However, within this model, the side partner or other woman is usually aware of the main partner and creates an environment in which she does not become emotionally attached to the male partner (Eyre et al., 2012). In regard to the *side partner model*, one participant noted: " You got a learn that he got a girlfriend, 'n that they happy. So you just sleepin' with him, 'n the only thing you can do is just sleep with him 'n leave it alone" (Eyre et al., 2012, p. 241). This notion of a "side partner" is a reflection to the damaging narrative of the man and to the compromises that the woman may make within a romantic relationship.

Although these various cultural models have been discussed regarding infidelity among African Americans, it is difficult to generalize to the entire population due to different values and beliefs across various age brackets. Therefore, the values and beliefs associated with these models might be prevalent among the younger generation,

but not among the older generation of African Americans. Despite these differences in values and beliefs, it seems clear that infidelity is negatively impacting African Americans in general. Furthermore, increasing the understanding of the impact of infidelity on romantic relationships appears critical to rebuilding and strengthening the African-American family unit.

   Romantic relationships and collectivist orientation among African-Americans. Research certainly supports the notion that marriage typically and substantially improves the well-being of African Americans (Phillips, Wilmoth & Marks, 2012). Further, marriages and healthy romantic relationships have been seen to act as buffers to the instability of life. These relationships also provide youth the opportunity to learn how to create supportive, intimate relationships of their own (King, 1999). Thus, marriage/committed relationships are viewed as the linchpin in the collectivistic family framework. Among African Americans, collectivist orientation is reflected through strong commitment to family and extended family (Belgrave & Allison, 2010; Parker & Grinter, 2013), and views the experiences of the individual as influencing the experiences of the whole and vice versa (Belgrave & Allison, 2010).

   According to Black and colleagues (2005) interdependence, communal responsibility, and cooperation are priorities of collectivism (as cited in Parker & Grinter, 2013, p. 185). Although one could argue that the notion of collectivism is being broadly generalized, according to most research, individuals of African descent follow a more collectivist way of life even when immersed within Eurocentric America (Malone-Colon, 2007; Parker & Grinter, 2013;). Because of the collectivist nature of African Americans, marriage and marital relationships have always played a significant

role in the tradition of family (King, 1999). Thus, as King (1999) states "a significant decline in marriages weakens the ties that bind families and communities together" (p. 419).

Interdependence Theory

Interdependence theory was developed in order to gain greater insight into individuals' feelings, the nature of their behaviors, and their interpersonal/social interactions with others (Kelly & Thibaut, 1978). An essential component of interdependence theory goes beyond simply looking at the costs and benefits of being in a relationship with someone, focusing more on the interactions between people as the essence of a close relationship (Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 2014). Therefore, with the idea of interdependence, theorists paid particular attention to the pros and cons of the relationship, communication within the relationship, and level of dependence within the relationship, with an understanding that this is indeed a dynamic process (Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 2014). In order to truly understand interdependence within relationships, the developers of the theory make note that interdependence involves each person in the relationship being able to influence the others' experiences, while also having an innate need to obtain value from the outcomes of that particular relationship (Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 2014).

In addition, interdependence theory suggests that people who are more invested (i.e., been in a relationship longer), committed, satisfied in the relationship, and have fewer alternatives should be more distressed if the relationship were to dissolve (Kelly & Thibaut, 1978; Sprecher, Felmlee, Metts, Fehr, & Vanni, 1998). According to Kelly and Thibaut (1978), this theory focuses more on the interaction between partners as the

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essence of close relationships. It has also been used to predict the degree of distress

experienced by those whose relationships dissolve by looking at the relationship

commitment and interconnectedness prior to the breakup (Sprecher et al., 1998).

Interdependence theory also provides a unique interpersonal analysis of

relationships. Murray and colleagues stated that interdependence is essential to

romantic life (2009). Rusbalt, Arriaga, and Agnew (2001) report that interdependence

shapes relationships, in that the properties describe the options and limitations that

characterize relationships, define the possibilities for commitment, power, trust, and

conflict. This theory posits that closeness and interaction is the key to all relationships

and that individuals communicate in order to become closer to one another.

Interdependence implies that partners in a close relationship perceive and influence one

another's behaviors and perceptions, which is consistent with collectivism (Weigel &

Ballard-Reisch, 2014). Individuals from collectivist cultures have been seen to have

interdependent self-concepts, indicating that the self is closely tied to others in the

environment.

Self-Concept

Research defines self-concept as the sense of "me" (Slotter, Gardner, & Finkel,

2010). This includes the person's physical appearance, beliefs, attitudes, material

belongings, and attributes that they think are characteristic of who they are (Slotter &

Gardner, 2009). Slotter and Gardner (2012) stated that people define their self-concepts

largely through the experiences they have in the social world and their relationships

with others. Other researchers further stated that out of all of the relationships

individuals have during their lives, romantic relationships appear to have the greatest

influence on the self-concept (Agnew & Etcheverry, 2006; Lewandowski, Aron, Bassis, & Kunak, 2006; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; Slotter & Gardner, 2009; Slotter et al., 2010).

In order to increase closeness to the romantic partner, people are highly motivated to incorporate aspects of their partner's self-concept into their own, which generally occurs over time and through shared experiences and resources (Slotter & Gardner, 2009). Research has also shown that level of commitment can predict enhanced integration between the self and the romantic partner (Agnew et al., 1998). This malleability of the self-concept in romantic relationships represents a normative process that is usually beneficial for the relationship (Aron, Paris, & Aron, 1995; Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, & Bator, 1997). Therefore, the idea of self-concept in a romantic relationship becomes the sense of "we" after this intertwining of the partner into the self has occurred.   In other words, committed partners integrate aspects of their partner into themselves to promote closeness, which is seen as positive malleability. This phenomenon can be seen in highly committed romantic partners by their use of first-person-plural pronouns (i.e., we, us, our), which indicates greater centrality of the relationship to their life (Agnew, Rusbult, Van Lange, & Langston, 1998; Slotter et al., 2010). The sense of "we-ness" is even greater with married people due to it being difficult to reject traits that were uncharacteristic of themselves prior to the marriage (Aron, Aron, Tudor & Nelson, 1991).

Following the dissolution of a romantic relationship, distressed people are likely to engage in self-concept change due to the relationship being disrupted (Slotter et al., 2010). This can be seen in the individual reconstructing their sense of self in relation to

the loss of the partner (Slotter et al., 2010). The impact of this break-up also takes a toll on an individual's emotional well-being, potentially causing a sense of rejection and depression, among other negative mental health outcomes. There is some good news in all this, as Lewandowski and Bizzoco (2007) found that aside from loss of self, which includes the feeling of losing a part of themselves following relationship dissolution, there is also a rediscovery of self in which the individual is positively reinterpreting the break-up. In their study, Lewandowski and Bizzoco (2007) examined positive changes that occur within people following romantic relationship dissolution, and found that the person who ended a relationship that was deemed low quality, experienced greater growth post-dissolution by reclaiming underdeveloped aspects of their self-concept. However, individuals who deemed the relationship to have been high quality were more likely to experience negative changes within their self-concepts (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007). This shows the evolution that distressing break-ups can go through.

Self-Concept and Interdependence among African-American Women

Through the collectivist lens, the self-concept is also seen as the interdependent self, which is comprised of parts of the self that are associated with the social in-group and other individuals of importance to the person (Carpenter, 2000). Recalling the concept of interdependence, it is important to know that interdependence or the interdependent self is conceptually viewed as how individuals relate to interpersonal relationships in general, not just romantic relationships. Among African-American women, self-concept is seen as a marker for psychological well-being (Kohler, Sapp, Kohler, & Sandoval, 2002). Additionally, for African-American women, there are self-

referents that makeup the self-concept, with these referents being conceptually distinct, yet interdependent.

These self-referents, as defined by Brown-Collins and Sussewell (1986) include: psychophysiological, African-American, and myself. These three referents combine to include the African-American woman's knowledge of herself as a woman and her experiences of being African-American with her self-concept being processed and mediated through her experiences in the African-American community (Brown-Collins & Sussewell, 1986). It follows that integrating the self with that of the partner could also come with a great cost should the relationship dissolve (Slotter & Gardner, 2012). This cost is equated based on the notion that people are in a sense forced to redefine themselves and to find meaning in order to rebuild their self-concept once the relationship ends (Slotter & Gardner, 2012). Looking further, the psychophysiological referent pertains to the African-American woman's knowledge of herself as a woman. Brown-Collins and Sussewell (1986) also assert that women develop a sense of self through attachment, with African-American women's self-definition being grounded in the context of others.

Consistent with a collectivist orientation, the African-American referent also incorporates the woman's sense of responsibility for others. This referent expresses the experiences of being African-American and experiencing self as African-American, again lending to the notion that "I am because we are, and because we are I am" (Brown-Collins & Sussewell, 1986, p. 7). Additionally, it encapsulates that an African-American woman can experience herself as Black as well as incorporating other possible selves, including future and past selves (Brown-Collins & Sussewell, 1986).

This referent also includes the African-American woman's experience of living in White America and how she understands herself from this individualistic perspective (Brown-Collins & Sussewell, 1986). Further, the African-American referent states that there is a balance for the Black woman between her Afro referent and Euro referent influence that is determined by her experiences with both populations. The Afro referent is especially important as it "operates to maintain the integrity of the Black self by grounding and inculcating her with a sense of community and belongingness" (Brown-Collins & Sussewell, 1986, p. 8).

Lastly, the myself referent discusses the woman's self knowledge that is unique to her own personal history, remembering that the African-American woman's self-concept is processed and mediated through her experiences in the African-American community (Brown-Collins & Sussewell, 1986). This referent consists of combining the cognitive and emotional experiences that define African-American women, including those things that pertain only to the individual and those experiences of what it means to be a Black woman. Another very important aspect of the Black woman's self-concept lies within the Strong Black Woman (SBW) archetype. Dow (2015) notes that the SBW archetype represents "self-reliance, emotional resilience, and moral propriety" and was produced by and for African American women in response to negative mainstream images of African American womanhood (p. 45). By looking at these various self-referents and archetype, one can begin to understand the uniqueness that is the African-American woman's sense of self. According to Kohler, Sapp, Kohler, and Sandoval (2002), the self-concept is purported to be an indicator of the psychological well-being of African-American women. Thus, having a better

understanding of the unique nature of African-American women's self-concept allows

for a deeper understanding of the various aspects of the self that may be impacted by

change. Finally, while Dow (2015) indicated that the SBW archetype originated from a

desire to redefine a Black woman's strength as a value to be respected, it has also

become a "controlling image that both empowers and constrains choices" (p. 46).

Self-Concept and interconnectedness. The integration of the self-concept into

that of the romantic partner's self-concept can also present a major risk of confusion

and emotional distress if the relationship ends (Slotter et al., 2010). As a result of the

influence that romantic partners have on each other, it comes as no surprise that the

dissolution of the romantic relationship is most painful (Slotter et al., 2010). The level

of emotional distress and identity confusion is dependent to some extent on how

interconnected people were to their ex-partner (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). Aron et

al. went on to state that the level of interconnectedness felt towards the ex-partner was

related to how close they allowed themselves to be to the partner during the romantic

relationship. This closeness included emotional intimacy, social connections, and

connections of values. Additionally, they discussed how level of intimacy, which is

defined as self-disclosure in which the individual feels cared for, validated, and

understood, further added to the level of interconnectedness between the partners (Aron

et al., 1992). Regarding African-American women and romantic relationships, Laurie

and Neimeyer (2008) found high levels of interconnectedness among African

Americans. Therefore, it seems possible that African-American women may be at

higher risk for significant distress following the dissolution of a romantic relationship.

Significance of the Study

To date, research on interdependence has found that individuals with higher levels of relational-interdependence value their interpersonal relationships more, adding that they are essential particularly for social support and self-enhancement (Cross, Gore, & Morris, 2003). Furthermore, research on interconnectedness suggests that level of emotional distress and identity confusion are dependent to some extent on how interconnected people are to their ex-partner (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). Despite the fact that interdependence and interconnectedness are key elements of a collectivistic orientation, these relational constructs have not been used as lenses through which to examine the nature of romantic relationships among African Americans. Additionally, while substantial research exists touting the positive aspects of committed romantic relationships, very few studies have explored changes in self-concept when those relationships end. Even fewer studies have focused on the dissolution of romantic relationships or their impact on the self-concepts of African-American women, particularly when those relationships end because of infidelity. Therefore, the current study was designed to explore these uncharted areas in order to provide mental health professionals who work with African-American women experiencing relational distress a better understanding of how their romantic relationships may influence their views of self. Hopefully, information gleaned from this research will be used to develop and implement more culturally appropriate interventions and ultimately improve treatment outcomes for African American women.

Research Questions

This study has been designed to answer the following questions:

1. Do levels of interdependence and interconnectedness predict self-concept change, specifically rediscovery of self (ROS) among African-American women whose relationships have ended?

2. Do levels of interconnectedness and interdependence predict self-concept change, specifically loss of self (LOS) among African-American women whose relationships have ended?

3. Does relationship dissolution due to infidelity predict significant additional variance in self-concept change (LOS) above that predicted by interdependence and interconnectedness for African-American women?

Hypotheses

1. Greater reported levels of interdependence and interconnectedness will predict significantly higher self-concept change scores (ROS) among African-American women whose romantic relationships have ended.

2. Greater reported levels of interconnectedness and interdependence will predict significantly higher self-concept change scores (LOS) among African-American women whose romantic relationships have ended.

3. Infidelity as the primary cause of relationship dissolution will predict significant additional variance in self-concept change scores (LOS) above that of interconnectedness and interdependence for African-American women.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Participants

      This study utilized a sample of 105 women from various geographic locations. Of note, there were a total of 158 participants; however, due to incomplete data, only

105 data sets were used in the analyses. Participation in the study was completely voluntary, and individuals were able to opt out at any point during the process. Therefore, it's possible that, given the personal nature of this study, some individuals may have been reluctant to share intimate details regarding their romantic relationships, and exited the survey before finishing.

Participants were recruited via announcements posted on social media websites (e.g., Facebook and Instagram) and through e-mail listservs. Criteria for inclusion were: must be female, African-American or African descent, at least 18 years of age, been in a committed romantic relationship for at least 1 year, and have had a romantic relationship end within the last three years. All participants reported being female gendered and ranging in age from 18 to 55 years (median age = 32; mean = 21). While not all participants responded to every demographic question presented, those participant numbers and percentages were included for all relevant items. Regarding ethnicity/race of the participants 84.8% (n = 89) reported being Black/African-American/African descent, 3.8% (n = 4) endorsed being Bi-racial, and 0.9% (n = 1) reported being Dominican and Black. Of note, participants endorsed being African-American or of African descent in order to participate in the study; however, 10.5% (n = 11) of participants chose not to indicate a specific ethnicity. In addition, information about participants' sexual orientations was gathered with 86.8% (n = 91) of participants self-identifying as heterosexual, 2.8% (n = 3) lesbian, 2.8% (n = 3) bisexual, and 0.9% (n = 1) as questioning, with 6.7% (n = 7) of the participants not responding. Race/ethnicities of the past romantic partners involved in the dissolution were also gathered, with 65.7% (n = 69) of partners reported being Black/African-

American/African descent, 3.8% ($n = 4$) being White/Caucasian, 2.9% ($n = 3$) being Hispanic/Latino(a), 1.9% ($n = 2$) being Asian/Asian-American, 2.9 % ($n = 3$) being Bi-racial, and 1.9% ($n = 2$) being African-American/Puerto Rican; 20.9% ($n = 22$) did not complete this item. Participants were asked about the gender of their romantic partner involved in the dissolution with 88.6% ($n = 93$) of partners being reported as male and 2.8% ($n = 3$) being reported as female. Nine (8.6%) participants did not respond to this item. Interestingly, length of the past romantic relationship ranged from 1 year to 22 years, with the median length equaling 5 years (mean = 4 years).

Queries regarding current relationship status were also posed to participants with 45.7% ($n = 48$) reporting being single, 16.2% ($n = 17$) reporting being in an exclusive relationship, 3.8% ($n = 4$) being married, 1.9% ($n = 2$) being in a non-exclusive relationship, 0.9% ($n = 1$) being engaged, 2.9% ($n = 3$) divorced, and 1.9% ($n = 2$) being separated or dating. Twenty-eight (26.7%) participants did not report to this item. To get a better understanding of the romantic relationships participants were involved in, quality of the relationship was gathered with 18.1% ($n = 19$) of relationships being reported as high quality, 39.0% ($n = 41$) as mid-level quality, and 25.8% ($n = 27$) as low quality; 17.1% ($n = 18$) did not complete this item. In addition, reason for the dissolution of the romantic relationship was collected. Because participants were able to select multiple options regarding reason of the relationship break-up, percentages exceed 100%. Thirty-seven (35.2%) participants endorsed sexual infidelity (64.8% did not endorse this item; $n = 68$), 35.2% ($n = 37$) endorsed emotional infidelity (64.8% did not endorse this item; $n = 68$), 23.8% ($n = 25$) reported they grew apart (76.2% did not select this item; $n = 80$), 11.4% ($n = 12$) reported dissolution due to emotional abuse

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(88.6% did not mark this item; $n = 93$), 4.8% ($n = 5$) due to physical abuse with 95.2%

($n = 100$) of participants not choosing this selection; 6.7% ($n = 7$) endorsed financial

issues with 93.3% ($n = 98$) not endorsing this selection, 31.4% ($n = 33$) reported

repeated lying within the relationship and 68.6% ($n =72$) of participants did not endorse

this item. Thirty-two (30.5%) endorsed lack of communication, while 69.5% ($n = 73$)

did not endorse this particular item; 27.6% ($n = 29$) indicated incessant arguments with

72.4% ($n = 76$) omitting to answer the question, and 16.2% ($n = 17$) endorsed Other

(e.g., lack of commitment, cultural differences, value differences, lack of maturity, lack

of respect, incompatibility, etc.). Eighty-eight (83.8%) participants did not complete

this item. Participants were also queried regarding whether or not infidelity was the

main cause of the relationship break-up, with 42.8% ($n = 45$) reporting "yes" and 44.8%

($n = 47$) reporting "no." Thirteen (12.4%) respondents did not complete this item.

Instrumentation

 Demographics. Participants were asked to complete a short demographic

questionnaire. Demographics included multiple choice and open-ended questions

regarding: age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, current relationship status,

occupation, length of time of the past committed romantic relationship, reason for the

dissolution of the romantic relationship, partners gender and ethnicity, quality of the

most recent past romantic relationship, and coping mechanisms following the

dissolution. Additionally, participants were asked reasons they stayed or left the

relationship, specifically if infidelity was involved and the nature of that infidelity.

Lastly, participants were asked an open-ended question regarding self-concept changes

due to the experience of infidelity (See Appendix D for full Demographic measure).

Interdependence. Relationships are essential for self-definition, self-enhancement, and self-expression for individuals high in Relational-Interdependent Self Construal (RISC; Morry, Kito, Mann, & Hill, 2012). Thus, the RISC scale (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000) was used to assess the relational interdependence of each participant. Significantly, interdependence is a concept that looks at the importance of all interpersonal relationships to an individual, not just their romantic relationships. Given the claim that African-Americans are interdependent by nature (Bell, Bouie, & Baldwin, 1990), this scale proves to be appropriate to measure such interdependence. The RISC measures general tendencies to think of oneself in terms of relationships with close others (i.e., "My close relationships are an important reflection of who I am", and "My sense of pride comes from knowing who I have as close friends"). Participants were asked to rate items on a 6-point scale with responses ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores reflect higher RISC.

The RISC correlates moderately with other measures of interdependence, empathy, and communal orientation (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000). It does not correlate with measures of independence or instrumentality. It also correlates positively with measures of commitment to relationships, self- disclosure to others, and social support (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000). This is important as the RISC was created to look at the various aspects that are involved in an interdependent relationship. More importantly, this study is interested in assessing whether or not African American women are more interdependent at their core, as previous research has found. Test–retest reliability ranges from .63 to .73 have been reported over a 2-month period. When compared to other instruments measuring interdependent self-construal, the

convergent validity of the RISC was .56, indicating that the measure does tap the relational dimension of the self-concept (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000; See Appendix A for full measure). Cronbach's alpha for the RISC in the current study was .85, indicating strong internal consistency reliability.

Interconnectedness. Participants' levels of interconnectedness with their self and the romantic partner's self were assessed utilizing the well-validated Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). Unlike the RISC scale, the IOS measure looks specifically at an individual's connectedness within a romantic relationship. The original IOS scale was found to have higher correlations when describing a romantic partner versus a friend or family member (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). Further, the IOS scale was developed to measure both an individuals' subjective feeling of closeness and their objective interactions (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). The IOS measure has not been well-validated with the African-American population; however, because it has demonstrated good validity in previous studies and is the only measure developed to measure this construct to date, it was selected for use in this study based on its established validity. This scale is a single-item, pictorial measure of relationship closeness. It depicts seven sets of two circles that vary in the extent to which they overlap. One circle is labeled to represent the self and the other is labeled to represent the romantic partner. The first set of circles does not overlap at all. The overlap between the circles increases incrementally with each set, resulting in the seventh set of circles being almost completely overlapping. The greater the degree of overlap between the circles indicates greater inclusion or integration of ones' self with that of the romantic partner's self (1 = the least integration, 7 = the most integration).

Participants were instructed to select the set of circles that most closely represented their level of self-other integration with their most recent romantic partner. Aron et al. (1992) found that the IOS scale demonstrated adequate convergent validity (e.g., strong correlations with other measures of relationship closeness, ranging from .22 - .45), predictive validity (e.g., prediction of relationship maintenance over time; $r = .46$), discriminant validity (e.g., low correlation with an anger-sadness), and test-retest reliability ($\alpha = .95$ for romantic relationships; See Appendix B for full measure). Given that it is not possible to assess internal consistency for single-item measures (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992), a Cronbach's alpha cannot be calculated for the IOS as used in the current research study. Additionally, Aron et al. (1992) discussed how using test-retest reliability is the simplest way to attempt to get reliability scores on a single-item measure. However, due to the scope and brevity of the current research, a test-retest reliability coefficient could not be obtained.

Self-Concept Change Measure. To assess for self-change within the self-concept, participants were asked to complete the Loss of Self (LOS) scale and the Rediscovery of Self (ROS) scale, (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007). The LOS has been positively associated with negative emotions, mental disengagement, and denial, while the ROS has been associated with greater acceptance and positive emotions (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007). Given there are no self-report measures that have been normed with the African-American population, these measures are being utilized on their established reliability and validity. The LOS is a 6-item scale that generally uses a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (a great deal); however, for the purpose of this study, the LOS was reduced to a 6-point Likert-type scale

ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree), eliminating the neutral response marking. Of note, the neutral response marking was eliminated in order to control for ambivalence in responding. The LOS measures participants' feelings of loss following romantic relationship dissolution, with higher scores indicating poorer self-concept recovery. Items included in this scale are: ''I do not know who I am,'' ''I have lost my sense of self,'' ''I do not feel like myself anymore,'' and ''I feel incomplete.'' Previous research has shown a Cronbach's alpha of .90 for the LOS (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007). For the current study, Cronbach's alpha = .91, indicating strong internal consistency reliability.

The extent to which participants feel they have become reacquainted with aspects of the self was assessed utilizing the Rediscovery of Self (ROS) scale (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007). The ROS is also a 6-item scale that is measured using the same Likert scale as the LOS, with higher scores indicating greater recovery of self-concept. Items included in the ROS scale are: ''I have regained my identity,'' ''I have reclaimed lost parts of myself that I could not express while with my partner,'' ''I have become reacquainted with the person I was before the relationship,'' and ''I have rediscovered who I am.'' A Cronbach's alpha of .91 has been reported by Lewandowski and Bizzoco (2007). The current study's Cronbach alpha = .89, indicating strong internal consistency reliability. The LOS and ROS are presented in Appendix C.

Procedure

After obtaining IRB approval, this research study was administered online using Qualtrics. Each participant was asked to read and sign an electronic informed consent

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form before participating in the research. Participation was voluntary and involved

completion of one demographic questionnaire and four additional measures.

Participants could opt out of the study at any time without penalty.

Participants in the study were also given the option to enter into a drawing for

one of two $25.00 Visa gift cards. If they chose to enter into the drawing, they were

asked to submit their e-mail address independently of the study by e-mailing the

researcher. This information was maintained in a separate database from the one in

which the research data was stored. No other identifying information was collected.

Design

The measures utilized in this study were analyzed using a correlational design in

order to determine the relationship and predictability among study variables. The

predictor variables included: interdependence (measured using the RISC scale),

interconnectedness (measured using the IOS), and infidelity (dichotomous demographic

variable). Self-concept, the criterion variable, was measured using the LOS and ROS.

The data was analyzed using IBM SPSS statistical software.

Chapter 4: Results

Preliminary Analyses

In order to see if the data met the assumptions of normality, linearity,

multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity, tests were conducted which indicated that there

were no violations of these assumptions. Pearson's correlational analysis was utilized

to examine the relationships among all relevant variables (See Table 1). Only two

demographic variables, Sexual Orientation and Partner Gender (both categorical), were

significantly correlated with the criterion variables, Loss of Self (LOS) and Rediscovery

of Self (ROS). Thus, both variables were dummy coded for analyses (Sexual Orientation: 0 = Heterosexual and 1 = Non-heterosexual; Partner Gender 0 = Male and 1 = Female). Sexual Orientation was found to be significantly and positively correlated with LOS ($r = .19$, $p < .05$), indicating that those participants who identified a sexual orientation other than heterosexual were observed to have experienced a greater loss of self after the break-up of a romantic relationship. Gender of Partner was significantly and negatively correlated with ROS ($r = -.23$, $p < .05$) and Interdependence ($r = -.32$, $p = .001$). This finding indicates that those participants whose partners were male reported lower rediscovery of self scores, while also exhibiting lower levels of interdependence following the relationship dissolution. In addition, LOS and Infidelity were significantly positively correlated, $r = .32$, $p < .01$. In other words, African-American participants who reported that their relationships ended due to infidelity also endorsed significantly greater loss of self. Further, Interdependence and Interconnectedness were significantly positively correlated, $r = .30$, $p < .001$, indicating that participants who reported higher levels of interdependence within all relationships also reported higher levels of interconnectedness within their romantic relationships.

Results also revealed a significant positive correlation between Interdependence and Rediscovery of Self, $r = .35$, $p < .001$. This indicates that participants who endorsed higher levels of interdependence also endorsed greater levels of self-rediscovery following the dissolution of a romantic relationship. Interconnectedness and Loss of Self were significantly positively correlated, $r = .27$, $p < .01$, indicating that the more interconnected participants felt in their romantic relationships, the greater loss

of self they experienced following the break-up (See Table 1 for means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations).

T-tests and ANOVAs were also conducted to examine potential significant group differences on the variables of interest. No significant differences were found.

Primary Analyses

A hierarchical regression was conducted to test the first hypothesis that Interdependence and Interconnectedness would significantly predict Self-Concept Change, specifically Rediscovery of Self (ROS) for African-American women whose romantic relationships have ended. Sexual Orientation and Partner Gender were entered into Block 1 to control for their effects, and Interdependence and Interconnectedness were entered into Block 2. Results indicated that the full model was significant and predicted 14% of the variance in Rediscovery of Self scores [$F(5, 100) = 4.23$, $p < .05$, $R^2 = .14$ (adjusted $R^2 = .11$)]. At the first step, Sexual Orientation and Partner Gender did not predict significant variance in Rediscovery of Self – ROS. Interdependence and Interconnectedness were entered in step 2 and accounted for 9% of the variance in ROS, with Interdependence being the most significant individual predictor ($\beta = .31$). Results from the first regression are reported in Table 2.

A second hierarchical regression model was conducted to test the second and third hypotheses. Sexual Orientation and Partner Gender were entered into the first block, and Interdependence and Interconnectedness in the second block. Infidelity as the cause of romantic relationship dissolution was entered into the model at the third step. The full model was significant and predicted 28% of the variance in Loss of Self scores [$F(5, 100) = 7.59$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .28$ (adjusted $R^2 = .24$)]. At the first step, Sexual

Orientation and Partner Gender predicted significant variance related to Loss of Self (LOS) after the breakup of a romantic relationship [$F(2, 103) = 3.73$, $p < .05$, $R^2 = .07$ (adjusted $R^2 = .05$). Interdependence and Interconnectedness were entered at the second step and predicted a significant amount of additional variance [$F(4, 101) = 4.91$, $p < .005$, $R^2 = .17$ (adjusted $R^2 = .13$)]. Infidelity as the primary cause for relationship dissolution predicted an additional 11% of the variance related to African-American women participants' reports of Loss of Self. In the final model, Partner Gender, Sexual Orientation, Interconnectedness, and Infidelity as the primary cause of relationship dissolution were all individually significant predictors. Infidelity as the primary cause of relationship dissolution made the largest unique contribution to Loss of Self variance ($\beta = -.34$), followed closely by Interconnectedness ($\beta = .32$), Sexual Orientation ($\beta = .21$), and Partner Gender ($\beta = -.20$). See Table 3 for detailed regression results.

Finally, a review of the qualitative data (i.e., open-ended questions and fill in the blank responses; e.g., reason of dissolution-other, coping-other, if you experienced infidelity within your most recent romantic relationship how has your self-concept changed?) included in the study was conducted. It is important to note that this review was not a formal thematic analysis; therefore, not all responses fit into the main themes/categories found during the review of participant responses. Further, not all participants responded to the open-ended questions presented during the survey. Examples of themes that arose during the review regarding other reasons for dissolution included: lack of commitment ($n = 3$), cultural value differences ($n = 5$), grew apart ($n = 4$), and lying ($n = 2$). A total of 21 participants (20%) provided a response to this open-ended question, leaving eighty percent ($n = 84$) who did not offer any additional

response. Among the small numbers of participants who responded to the open-ended

question regarding reason of dissolution, the themes arose infrequently, yet consistently.

One main theme that arose consistent with the quantitative results was lack of

commitment. Lack of commitment was mentioned in regard to infidelity and

faithfulness. Interestingly, one participant noted "pressure for marriage" as the reason

for dissolution while another one stated:

> "His family perceived me as a threat and I was physically and verbally abused
> by them. They excluded him and treated him poorly because he was with me.
> They wanted his money and he didn't want to lose them. Most of the emotional
> abuse came from his older sister as she guilted him into doing things making
> him remember how their mother wasn't there for them and how she helped him
> out as a child. He felt obligated to do as she said. Made me angry and made
> him resent me."

Representative themes found during the review of "other" coping mechanisms included:

counseling ($n = 4$), food (eating; $n = 4$), time for self and self-reflection ($n = 4$),

school/work($n = 4$), and medication (prescribed and illegal; $n = 3$). A total of 27

participants (25.7%) provided a response to this open-ended question, leaving 74.3% (n

$= 78$) who did not offer any additional response. As would be expected, participants

who responded endorsed more than one coping mechanism. Interestingly, the majority

of the responses that were provided under "other" coping mechanisms included some

type of behavioral action and/or activity, either positive or negative in nature. The

quantitative data reflects that having a solid support system (consistent with

interdependence) predicts greater rediscovery of self. Qualitative results on coping

mechanisms also reflected a support theme (i.e., counseling), echoing that support is an

important factor in self-rediscovery.

Lastly, a review of the question posed to participants regarding possible self-concept changes surrounding infidelity was conducted. Response examples included internalizing the negative event (e.g., self-blame; $n = 7$), re-evaluation of self-worth ($n = 7$), self-love/discovery ($n = 12$), and no change ($n = 11$). A total of 79 participants (75.2%) provided a response to this open-ended question, leaving 24.8% ($n = 26$) who did not offer any additional response. Of note, 26 (24.8%) participants indicated that the question was not applicable to them. These responses seem consistent with the study finding that participants who had experienced infidelity in their romantic relationship endorsed greater loss of self after the relationship ended. Notably, there were many insightful responses to this question, one of which stated:

> "Infidelity doesn't necessarily have anything to do with the person not loving you, sometimes it's about having variety. The thing that hurts the most is the dishonesty about it. If the person is upfront about it, then it's easier to accept."

Another participant noted:

> "I realized that I needed to value, appreciate, and love myself more (not deal with cheating, lack of commitment, etc.). I sacrificed a lot of myself (values) and compromised who was/am (a firm believer in right and wrong by God's standards) during that relationship and the damage that I had to allow God to repair wasn't worth the relationship in retrospect."

Lastly, one participated stated:

> "At first, I felt vulnerable…weak…naïve. I thought I was the on who did something wrong and thought about what I did to make my partner cheat. I felt like I was flawed and unworthy of love in a way. I now don't think that most of the time. I know my partner made his own choices. I realized that vulnerability isn't a bad weakness and that I had courage to stand up for what I believe meaning I left and was strong enough to not go back."

Taken together these varied responses shed additional light on the extent to which the breach of trust resulting from infidelity may impact the manifestation of loss of self among African-American women.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The results of this study contribute additional information on African-American women's romantic relationships in the context of collectivistic cultural relational norms (i.e., interdependence and interconnectedness). Specifically, for the African-American women participants in this study, level of interdependence was found to be a statistically significant individual predictor of rediscovery of self (self-change indicator) following the break-up of a romantic relationship. Notably, interconnectedness was not a significant individual predictor of rediscovery of self. This finding suggests that although there may have been strong interconnectedness in the romantic relationship, having a strong support system (interdependence) allowed for greater self-rediscovery. This finding is consistent with the collectivist view, with its emphasis on the importance of the self as an integrated part of the broader family and cultural community. It also echoes similar findings from Constantine, Gainor, Ahluwalia, and Berkel (2003), in that numerous studies have shown that a significant part of coping for African-Americans comes from having an interdependent system that offers support and harmony during difficult times. Having this type of support could be indicative of why having a strong sense of interdependence plays a significant part regarding African-American women's rediscovery of self. It also echoes the innate need for humans to belong, with the essence of belonging being a vital element to survival. Thus, it makes sense that having a solid family and friend foundation provides the support necessary for self-rediscovery.

In addition, interconnectedness emerged as a significant individual predictor of loss of self (self-concept change indicator). In other words, participants who reported greater levels of interconnectedness also reported greater loss of self following the

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dissolution of their romantic relationship. This finding indicates that although participants may have had family and friend support (interdependence), it was not sufficient to buffer the impact of their level of interconnectedness within the romantic relationship, thus contributing to greater reported loss of self once the relationship ended. This is consistent with previous research suggesting that interconnectedness in romantic relationships occurs through the blending of ideals, values, hobbies, family, friends, and so forth (Slotter & Gardner, 2010). This blending of the self into the romantic partner creates a sense of *we-ness,* which results in losing a part of the self when the relationship ends. This makes sense in that a major difference between interconnectedness and interdependence is that interconnectedness looks specifically at romantic relationships versus interdependence, which looks at all relationships. This result is also consistent with Laurie and Neimeyer (2008), who found high levels of interconnectedness among African Americans. Given that researchers such as King (1999) have emphasized the interwoven nature of Black romantic relationships, it seems understandable that level of interconnectedness would be a stronger predictor of loss of self. Slotter and colleagues (2010) discussed similar findings conducted with a White sample population, stating that romantic relationships require vulnerability and this vulnerability leaves room for damage.

Similarly, the theme that emerged from the qualitative data of multiple hurts or indiscretions within the romantic relationship may also suggest that the end of a romantic relationship by itself may not contribute to loss of self, but when combined with other mediating factors (i.e., number of indiscretions, type of indiscretion, attachment style, etc.), may contribute to a more profound sense of loss of self.

Finally, the last hypothesis was supported in that relationship dissolution attributed to infidelity predicted significant additional variance in self-concept change, specifically loss of self, among African-American women. Infidelity as the cause of relationship dissolution was also found to be the most significant individual predictor of loss of self over and above that of interconnectedness. To illustrate, Sharpe, Walters, and Goren (2013) discuss how the consequences of infidelity, whether sexual or emotional, can have devastating and lasting effects on an individual's self-perception due to the major breach of trust and loyalty. Additionally, Fincham and May (2016) discuss how infidelity has reliably been found to be associated with poorer mental health and relationship dissolution. The negative effects of infidelity were seen in the current study with the finding of significant additional variance being accounted for regarding loss of self among Black women. The behaviors that make up the infidelity could also impact the level of loss a person feels (e.g., multiple sexual encounters, oral kissing, oral sex, etc.) or prior experience with infidelity. Importantly, the idea of prior experience with infidelity may impact loss of self across time versus a simple one-time occurrence, meaning that each time infidelity occurs within the relationship, a person may lose a little bit of themselves. This idea was mentioned by a few participants via the open-ended demographic variables and questions, with one participant notably stating "All men cheat. You have to know when enough is enough."

While some research has yielded similar findings with women from other racial/ethnic groups, these studies did not examine the relationships among interdependence and interconnectedness as they related to self-change. In addition, given the research noting that infidelity occurs at higher rates within the African-

American community, the current research provides additional support as to the damaging effects of infidelity (i.e., greater reported loss of self) on African-American women's romantic relationships.

Limitations and Future Research

Of note, the measure examining interdependence among African-American women had a minor error with only 10 of the 11 original items being included in the actual data collection. However, the reliability for the measure in the current study was still very high, indicating that the measure tapped into African-American women's sense of interdependence. Furthermore, the use of a single-item measure for interconnectedness is also a study limitation. Although the IOS has been utilized and cited by over 1000 research documents, with the most recent being in 2016, there are still limitations to their use. Some researchers believe that although a single-item measure allows for test-retest reliability, they do not allow for the approximation of psychometrically vital internal-consistency reliability of the measure (Loo, 2001). In contrast, Bergkvist (2015) noted that the utilization of single-item measures are comparable to multiple-item measures, specifically if the total number of items in the study measure is at least 7. Therefore, although the use of the IOS has been highly validated, there are still some concerns with the use of single-item measures that should be noted.

There were several other limitations to this study, including the use of self-report measures, and the fact that the measures used have not been normed on the African-American population. Based on the gap in literature surrounding self-concept changes among Black women and romantic relationships, it is important to continue

utilizing measures that have been normed on other populations in order to establish norms for the African-American population. In addition, norming measures on the African-American population may help reduce the risk of clinical errors being made such as interpreting differences as a deficit, overlooking symptoms, or over-pathologizing normality. Other limitations to this study were the correlational design and small sample of participants, which make generalizations to the broader population of African-American women impossible. Further, while the study sample included women who LGBTQ-identified ($n = 7$), the sample size was too small to accommodate any comparative analyses. Therefore, future studies could benefit from looking specifically at LGBTQ-identified African American women.

One factor this study did not address is that of resilience. Resilience has been defined as the ability to bounce back and thrive in the face of adversity and hardship (Friborg, Hjemdal, Rosenvinge, & Martinussen, 2003). Moreover, resilience has been shown to be a multi-dimensional concept in which psychological skills/abilities are prevalent, but the construct also encompasses an individuals' ability to utilize his/her external support systems (e.g., family, friends, social) to effectively cope with stressful situations (Friborg, Hjemdal, Rosenvinge, & Martinussen, 2003). It is also possible that interdependence is an aspect of resilience that serves to assist African-American women in their journey to rediscover themselves following the dissolution of their romantic relationships. Thus, future research should include the variable of resilience in the examination of African-American women's romantic relationships to explore how it influences African-American women's experience of romantic relationship loss.

Although attachment was not examined in this study, research has shown that attachment may impact the way an individual handles the dissolution of a romantic relationship. For example, attachment theorists have found that experiences that occur in late childhood, particularly within family relationships have a great impact on individuals and are internalized as relationship schemas (Kogan, Grange, Simons, Brody, Gibbons, & Chen, 2013). Researchers have also found that an alteration in attachment style, patterns, and beliefs are likely to change in response to interpersonally and emotionally significant life circumstances (e.g., the dissolution of a romantic relationship; Davila & Sargent, 2003). Further, interpersonal loss, such as that of a romantic relationship has been noted as playing a prominent role within Attachment theory because of the likelihood of its emotional significance (Davila & Sargent, 2003). Therefore, individuals who experience distress following a romantic relationship break-up may also manifest aspects of more insecure attachment, which, in turn, could affect future relationships (Gillath, Sesko, Shaver, & Chun, 2010). This distress may also manifest in fear of rejection or abandonment (anxiety) or discomfort and reluctance for closeness (avoidance) (Gillath et al., 2010). Therefore, attachment styles should also be examined in order to determine the impact, if any on self-concept among African American women following relationship dissolution.

Moreover, some of the demographic questions included in this research regarding quality of the romantic relationship prior to dissolution and coping mechanisms following the dissolution of the romantic relationship could also serve as an integral focus for use in future studies. Verhofstadt, Buysse, Rosseel, and Peene (2006) found results similar to other researchers regarding quality of the romantic

relationship, specifically finding that when partners perceived their relationship as supportive and important, they were less likely to perceive it as a source of conflict. Furthermore, quality of relationship was discussed as looking at the support one receives within a romantic relationship, the conflict that is experienced within or related to the relationship, and the depth of the relationship (Verhofstadt et al., 2006). Taking a more in-depth look at how Black women view the quality of their past romantic relationship could shed light on how they perceived their self-concept changing regarding the relationship.

Obviously, continued research with African American women is needed in order to continue strengthening the therapeutic interventions utilized. Future research could look more in depth at the possible differential impact of emotional versus sexual infidelity, as well as, single versus multiple acts of infidelity occurring within the romantic relationship. Looking at theses additional aspects of infidelity seems important as type of infidelity and repeated offenses are likely to have a greater impact on how individuals internalize the events (Frederick & Fales, 2016; Green, 2004). Additionally, the current study queried participants regarding infidelity; however, specifics regarding who in the relationship committed the act of infidelity were not gathered. Determining which partner committed the infidelity should be included in future research as self-change (i.e., LOS, ROS) is relative to the person whose partner committed the breach of trust.

Another limitation to the current study and area for future research is understanding and gaining knowledge regarding whether participants were more traditional or nontraditional concerning gender roles in their romantic relationships.

This information should be included in future studies, as the 21st century woman is very different from the woman of 50 years ago.

Counseling Implications

It is the researchers' hope that this study will influence the work that is being done within the therapeutic community with African-American women and families. Understanding that greater levels of interconnectedness influence African-American women's reported loss of self following the break-up of the romantic relationship sheds light on an important issue that may need to be addressed in counseling sessions. Further, discussing coping strategies and support systems will also be of importance for therapists to discuss with their African-American female clients as this study suggests that African-American women's support systems are vital to their likelihood of being able to successfully bounce back from the break-up of a romantic relationship. Notably, when working with Black women, it is critical for clinicians to have awareness regarding the Strong Black Woman archetype, its ramifications, and to explore whether this is a part of the client's identity. For example, in a study conducted by Dow (2015) one participant reported "sometimes I don't want to be strong, sometimes I want to be weak…I think people need to know being an African American woman is hard" (p. 47). In the current study, some participants noted utilizing food, substances, and other activities to keep busy as their way of coping with a relationship that ended. Therefore, having awareness and knowledge regarding the Strong Black Woman archetype and how it may impact Black women's ability to be successful in treatment may assist clinicians in working with Black women to find strength in being vulnerable with others and open to the therapeutic process.

In addition, when working with African American women who have experienced a relationship ending, it will also be imperative for the clinician to gain an understanding on how the Black woman experiences the world, including whether or not she tends to live and/or think in more collective ways versus independent ways. It will also be important to explore the impact the romantic relationship had on the client, including their perceptions of the event and life moving forward. Having gained an understanding regarding the various components that make up the African American woman's self-concept, it will be important for the clinician to explore how these intersecting worlds impact the client's view of the break-up. It is also important that clinicians are aware of the possibility of transference and countertransference within the therapeutic relationship related to their own personal biases, fears, and values about infidelity given therapy may likely be utilized by some African-American women as a coping mechanism.

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Appendix A: Tables

Table 1

Pearson Correlations, Means and Standard Deviations for Relevant Study Variables

Variable	*M*	*SD*	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*
1.Interdependence	4.09	.53	--	.30*	.09	.36**	.05	-.16*	-.32*
2.Interconnectedness	3.87	2.02	--	--	.27:	.12	-.01	.13	-.05
3. LOS	2.65	1.28	--	--	--	.06	-.32*	.19*	-.07
4. ROS	4.08	1.27	--	--	--	--	-.13	-.15	-.23*
5.MainCauseInfidelity	1.53	.50	--	--	--	--	--	.00	-.11
6. Sexual Orientation[a]	1.09	.29	--	--	--	--	--	--	.38*
7. Partner Gender[a]	1.05	.21	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

Note. $N = 111$; *$p < .01$, ** $p < .001$; [a] denotes dummy coded variables and point biserial correlations

Table 2

Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting ROS in African-American Women

IV	Step	R^2	ΔR^2	FChange	df	B	SE B	β
PartnerGender/	1	.05	.05	2.92	(2,103)	-.60	.62	-.10
Sexual Orientation		--	--	--	--	-.30	.44	-.07
Interdependence/	2	.14	.09	5.29*	(4,101)	.71*	.24	.31
Interconnectedness		--	--	--	--	.02	.06	.03

Note. **$p < .001$, *$p < .05$

Table 3

Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting LOS in African-American Women

IV	Step	R^2	ΔR^2	FChange	df	B	SE B	β
PartnerGender/	1	.07	.07	3.73*	(2,103)	-1.24*	.60	-.20
Sexual Orientation		--	--	--	--	.92*	.40	.21
Interdependence/	2	.17	.10	5.74*	(4,101)	-.09	.22	-.04
Interconnectedness		--	--	--	--	.19*	.06	.32
Main_Infidelity	3	.28	.11	15.39**	(5,100)	-.84**	.21	-.34

Note. **$p < .001$ *$p < .05$

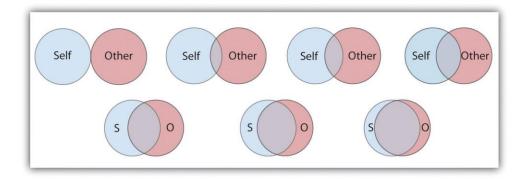# Appendix B: Relational-Interdependent Self-Construal Measure

The following statements concern how you view your interpersonal relationships. We are interested in how you generally experience close relationships (i.e. friendships, romantic, etc.). Respond to each statement by indicating how much you agree or disagree with it.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
My close relationships are an important reflection of who I am.	○	○	○	○	○	○
When I feel very close to someone, it often feels to me like that person is an important part of who I am.	○	○	○	○	○	○
I usually feel a strong sense of pride when someone close to me has an important accomplishment.	○	○	○	○	○	○
I think one of the most important parts of who I am can be captured by looking at my close friends and understanding who they are.	○	○	○	○	○	○
When I think of myself, I often think of my close friends or family also.	○	○	○	○	○	○
If a person hurts someone close to me, I feel personally hurt as well.	○	○	○	○	○	○
In general, my close relationships have very little to do with how I feel about myself.	○	○	○	○	○	○
My close relationships are unimportant to my sense of what kind of person I am.	○	○	○	○	○	○
My sense of pride comes from knowing who I have as close friends.	○	○	○	○	○	○
When I establish a close friendship with someone, I usually develop a strong sense of identification with that person	○	○	○	○	○	○

Appendix C: Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) Scale

Considering the dissolution of your most recent romantic relationship, please select which level of self-other integration most closely represents the relationship between you and that romantic partner.

 Choices start from 1 = Top Row far left (no integration) --- 7 = Bottom Row far right (almost complete integration)

Appendix D: Loss of Self (LOS) and Rediscovery of Self Scales

The following items are assessing your feelings of loss in relation to your self-concept following the dissolution of your most recent romantic relationship.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1.) I do not know who I am.	○	○	○	○	○	○
2.) I have lost my sense of self.	○	○	○	○	○	○
3.) I feel as though many of my good qualities have been lost.	○	○	○	○	○	○
4.) I feel as though I am missing a part of me.	○	○	○	○	○	○
5.) I do not feel like myself anymore.	○	○	○	○	○	○
6.) I feel incomplete.	○	○	○	○	○	○

The following statements concern the extent to which you feel like you have become reacquainted with aspects of the self following the dissolution of your most recent romantic relationship.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1.) I have done the things I once enjoyed that I could not do while I was in my relationship.	○	○	○	○	○	○
2.) I have regained my identity.	○	○	○	○	○	○
3.) I have reclaimed lost parts of myself that that I could not express while with my partner.	○	○	○	○	○	○
4.) I have focused more on my needs that were neglected while with my partner.	○	○	○	○	○	○
5.) I have become reacquainted with the person I was before the relationship.	○	○	○	○	○	○
6.) I have rediscovered who I am.	○	○	○	○	○	○

Appendix E: Demographics

What is your age?

What is your current occupation?

What is your race/ethnic background?

- ○ Black/African-American/African Descent
- ○ White/Caucasian
- ○ Hispanic/Latino(a)
- ○ Asian/Asian American
- ○ Native American/American Indian
- ○ Bi-racial
- ○ Other:

What is the race/ethic background of your most recent ex-romantic partner?

○ Black/African-American/African Descent
○ White/Caucasian
○ Hispanic/Latino(a)
○ Asian/Asian American
○ Native American/American Indian
○ Bi-racial
○ Other:
⬚

What is your sexual orientation?

○ Heterosexual
○ Gay
○ Lesbian
○ Bisexual
○ Asexual
○ Questioning
○ Queer
○ Do not wish to report

*There is also an option for *other*

What is the gender of your most recent ex-romantic partner?

○ Male

○ Female

What is your current relationship status?

○ Married

○ In an exclusive relationship

○ In a non-exclusive relationship

○ Single

○ Engaged

○ Divorced

○ Other:

How long was your most recent past committed romantic relationship?

Thinking about your most recent past romantic relationship, how would you rate the quality of the relationship?

○ High

○ Mid-Level

○ Low

What reason(s) caused the romantic relationship to end?

☐ Sexual Infidelity

☐ Emotional Infidelity

☐ Emotional Abuse

☐ Physical Abuse

☐ Financial issues

☐ Grew Apart

☐ Repeated Lying

☐ Lack of Communication

☐ Incessant arguments & quarrels
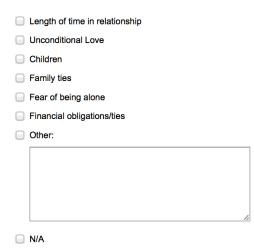
☐ Other:

[text box]

Was one of the main causes of this relationship dissolution due to the experience of infidelity?

(Infidelity is defined as *a violation to the commitment of exclusivity established by the couple up to and including engaging in any sexual interactions with or forming a deep emotional connection with someone outside of the committed romantic relationship)*

○ Yes

○ No

If you experienced infidelity in your most recent romantic relationship and decided to stay in the relationship, what was/were the reason(s)?

☐ Length of time in relationship

☐ Unconditional Love

☐ Children

☐ Family ties

☐ Fear of being alone

☐ Financial obligations/ties

☐ Other:

[text box]

☐ N/A

If you experienced infidelity in your most recent romantic relationship and decided to leave, what was/were the reason(s)?

☐ Trust Broken

☐ The act of infidelity itself

☐ Outside Influences (e.g., family, friends)

☐ Other:

[text box]

☐ N/A

Did you re-enter into a relationship with the same partner who committed infidelity after a brief break-up?

- ⦿ Yes
- ⦿ No

What coping mechanisms did you utilize as you dealt with this relationship dissolution?

- ☐ Spiritual Life
- ☐ Family/Friends
- ☐ Exercise
- ☐ Other

If you experienced infidelity within your most recent romantic relationship, how has your self-concept changed as a result of this experience?