ARTICLE

Self-reported Big Five personality traits of individuals who have experienced partner infidelity

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Abstract

Infidelity is defined as unapproved romantic or sexual behaviors outside of one's relationship. Previous literature has identified characteristics of the partner *involved* in infidelity; this study investigates the Big Five personality traits (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism) of *uninvolved* partners. Relationship quality and physical intimacy are also examined within a married subsample. Data was drawn from the second wave of the National Survey of Midlife Development in the United States (MIDUS), collected through telephone interviews and self-administered questionnaires between 2004 and 2006. Results for the overall sample ($N = 1,577$) indicate that conscientiousness is negatively associated with lifetime partner infidelity. Within the married subsample ($n = 898$), conscientiousness is negatively associated with spousal infidelity, and agreeableness is positively associated with spousal infidelity.

KEYWORDS

infidelity, marriage, personality, sexuality

1 | INTRODUCTION

Infidelity within romantic relationships is a provocative area of research, with numerous complexities and consequences (Atkins, Baucom, & Jacobson, 2001; Fincham & May, 2017; Frederick & Fales, 2016; Munsch, 2015; Shackelford, Besser, & Goetz, 2008; Treas & Giesen, 2000; Walters & Burger, 2013). Much of the prior literature focuses on characteristics of the partner *involved* in infidelity, a logical first step given that those who engage in the unfaithful behavior

warrant primary examination. Far fewer studies, however, have explored characteristics of the partner who was *uninvolved* in the infidelity—in other words, less is known about those who are cheated on. Scholars speculate that this gap in literature may be due to concerns of blaming the victim (Allen et al., 2005). Yet, considering the interdependent nature of romantic relationships (Zayas, Shoda, & Ayduk, 2002), a deeper investigation into the unique role of the uninvolved partner would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the contexts in which infidelity takes place. Paired with the knowledge of individuals who may be more likely to cheat, such findings would help identify those who may be more likely to be cheated on—powerful information for professionals engaged in prevention and intervention efforts with couples.

2 | DEFINITION AND PREVALENCE OF INFIDELITY

Historically, infidelity referred to sexual intercourse with someone outside of the primary relationship (Mark, Janssen, & Milhausen, 2011). Given the increasing diversity in relationship structures and arrangements, a more contemporary definition includes any violation of mutually agreed-upon expectations surrounding emotional or physical intimacy (Drigotas & Barta, 2001). What constitutes "cheating" depends on each couple's negotiations surrounding exclusivity. Some couples see flirtation as harmless as long as no sexual activity transpires, others permit casual sexual encounters devoid of romantic feelings, and a growing number of couples approve of both emotional and sexual relationships with alternate partners (Conley, Ziegler, Moors, Matsick, & Valentine, 2012). Within empirical work, researchers' conceptualization of infidelity may differ from laypeople's understanding of it (Weiser, Lalasz, Weigel, & Evans, 2014). As such, it is important to take each study's approach into account when interpreting findings.

According to a comprehensive review of literature, 25% of married men and 15% of married women have had sex with someone besides their spouse (Allen et al., 2005), and over half of couples are projected to have at least one partner engage in extramarital sex during the course of their marriage (Thompson, 1983). Sexual infidelity rates are even higher for unmarried and cohabiting couples, likely due to lower levels of investment (Treas & Giesen, 2000). Therapists report sexual infidelity as one of the most damaging and difficult issues to treat among both dating and married couples (Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997). In spite of social, cultural, religious, and legal attempts to discourage it (Schneider & Corley, 2002), extramarital sex remains the strongest predictor of divorce, above and beyond money disputes, alcohol and drug use, jealousy, and irritating habits (Amato & Rogers, 1997).

3 | INFIDELITY AND THE BIG FIVE PERSONALITY TRAITS

Within the social sciences, contemporary psychologists often investigate links between individual characteristics and various attitudes or behaviors by first measuring participants' Big Five personality traits: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (Goldberg, 1990). Initially, several specific characteristics are measured and then later collapsed into these five broad categories. Openness encompasses qualities such as being imaginative and adventurous; conscientiousness represents traits such as organization and self-discipline; extraversion measures sociability and preference for stimulation; agreeableness assesses compassion

and cooperation; and neuroticism refers to emotional instability and psychological distress. Individuals receive a score for each of these five categories, ranging from high to low.

3.1 | Involved partner

The majority of prior literature on personality traits and infidelity has focused on the partner who cheated (Allen et al., 2005; Blow & Hartnett, 2005). For example, a cross-cultural study found that low levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness are universally associated with cheating (Schmitt, 2004), and other studies have echoed similar results (McAnulty & Brineman, 2007). Similarly, in a study examining individuals' propensity *not* to cheat, those with higher levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness were more likely to hold back from engaging in infidelity, whereas those with higher levels of openness were less likely to hold back (Apostolou & Panayiotou, 2019). Neuroticism has also demonstrated a positive relationship with the likelihood of infidelity (Whisman, Gordon, & Chatav, 2007). Highly extroverted individuals may be more tempted to cheat as well if they are dissatisfied with their current relationship (Barta & Kiene, 2005).

3.2 | Uninvolved partner

In contrast to the abundant literature on those involved in infidelity, few studies explore the personality traits of individuals who have been cheated on (Allen et al., 2005; Blow & Hartnett, 2005). In one study, individuals who rated their spouses as less agreeable or less conscientious tended to be unhappier with their marriages and therefore more inclined to engage in infidelity (Shackelford et al., 2008). Another survey of college students in dating relationships found that those who had cheated reported having partners lower in openness, extraversion, and agreeableness than themselves (Orzeck & Lung, 2005), suggesting that a mismatch in personality traits might be associated with infidelity. In a study of married couples, individuals with highly neurotic partners had a higher likelihood of engaging in infidelity during the first few years of marriage (Altgelt, Reyes, French, Meltzer, & McNulty, 2018; Buss & Shackelford, 1997). Such studies yield important findings and call for further exploration of the personality traits of uninvolved partners in relationships that have experienced infidelity.

4 | CONSEQUENCES OF INFIDELITY

Infidelity can contribute to the deterioration of a marriage (Amato & Rogers, 1997). However, a deteriorating marriage may also lead to infidelity; those who are less satisfied in their relationships tend to report higher motivation for and engagement in infidelity (Allen et al., 2005; Barta & Kiene, 2005). Perhaps this explains why some scholars argue that infidelity is more appropriately categorized as a symptom of a distressed marriage rather than the cause of it (Previti & Amato, 2004). Interestingly, however, it is not only those in unhappy relationships who cheat; people with high levels of relationship satisfaction have also reported emotional or physical involvement with someone else (Atkins et al., 2001). These findings indicate that, even in the context of happy marriages, spouses may find themselves in unexpected circumstances

that propel them to connect with someone else. In other words, both struggling and successful relationships are susceptible to infidelity.

Regardless of whether couples are happy prior to the infidelity, secretly becoming involved with another partner can pose a serious threat to relationship stability (Fincham & May, 2017). On an individual level, infidelity is associated with depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Cano & O'Leary, 2000), which can have adverse effects on relationship functioning. On a relational level, infidelity can trigger domestic violence (Nemeth, Bonomi, Lee, & Ludwin, 2012), expose uninvolved partners to sexually transmitted infections (Conley, Moors, Ziegler, & Karathanasis, 2012), and is consistently associated with relationship dissolution (Allen & Atkins, 2012; Amato & Previti, 2003; Frisco, Wenger, & Kreager, 2017). In fact, a cross-cultural study that surveyed married couples from 160 societies found infidelity to be the most commonly cited reason for divorce (Betzig, 1989). In families with children, infidelity can create an emotionally stressful climate that results in behavioral problems and academic struggles (Amato, 2010). Although couples therapy may offer opportunities for growth and restored well-being following an unfaithful incident (Bird, Butler, & Fife, 2007), the majority of literature underscores the negative and often irreversible consequences of infidelity.

Given the potential costs of infidelity for individuals, couples, and any offspring involved (Fincham & May, 2017), a better understanding of precursors that may lead to cheating—or being cheated on—is a necessary line of inquiry. Romantic relationships are bidirectional in nature (Kearns & Leonard, 2004; Lehnart & Neyer, 2006; Levitt & Cooper, 2010), suggesting that one partner's behavior is not exclusively motivated by their own traits; rather, reciprocal interactions between both partners' personalities tend to influence individual choices (Zayas et al., 2002). Thus, it is important to gather information about each partner when examining interpersonal phenomenon such as infidelity. Such findings could help identify at-risk couples and aid in the design and implementation of preventative measures (e.g., relationship education), as well as intervention efforts (e.g., couples therapy). Efforts to improve relationship quality might help increase the psychological well-being of couples, decrease divorce rates, and support the optimal development of children in the family. The current study adds to the growing literature on personality traits of the uninvolved partner in relationships that have experienced infidelity. In addition, we examine relationship quality and sexual intimacy for those who are still married to the spouse who cheated.

5 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Interdependence theory, an offshoot of social exchange theory, offers an appropriate framework for studying infidelity (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Sprecher, 1998). According to this perspective, human relationships are likened to an exchange of goods. Incentive to enter a romantic relationship is contingent upon the perceived rewards, whether mental (e.g., interesting, funny), physical (e.g., sex, protection), emotional (e.g., love, trust), or social (e.g., companionship, status). Perceived costs of the relationship are also evaluated, either in the form of tangible contributions (e.g., financial support, responsibility of household chores) or sacrificed opportunities (e.g., settling for a less attractive partner, quitting one's job to stay home and raise the children).

Personality traits can be conceptualized as rewards or costs as well, considering their well-documented influence on relationship satisfaction (Lavner & Bradbury, 2010; O'Rourke,

Claxton, Chou, Smith, & Hadjistavropoulos, 2011; Schaffhuser, Allemand, & Martin, 2014; Shackelford & Buss, 2000). For example, high levels of conscientiousness in a partner may be perceived as a reward as qualities such as being responsible, trustworthy, and hardworking generally enhance a relationship (Malouff, Thorsteinsson, Schutte, Bhullar, & Rooke, 2010). On the other hand, high levels of neuroticism in a partner may be perceived as a cost as being around someone who is constantly anxious, jealous, or depressed can erode a relationship (Fisher & McNulty, 2008). Recently, the focus of marriage has shifted from practical concerns to personal motivations such as romance, companionship, emotional connection, and intellectual stimulation (Finkel, Cheung, Emery, Carswell, & Larson, 2015). Such relationship goals likely require a certain degree of similarity and compatibility between partners' personalities, underscoring the critical role of individual characteristics in relationship satisfaction.

According to interdependence theory, the overall worth of one's current relationship is determined by the ratio of rewards to costs; those with higher rewards and lower costs are theoretically most favorable. Individuals may also compare the rewards and costs offered by their current partner to that of other potential partners (comparison of alternatives). If an alternate partner offers certain rewards or lacks certain costs relative to the current partner, it may result in emotional or physical attraction to the alternate partner. In such a scenario, some will end their current relationship before beginning a new one. However, this is not always the case; numerous barriers inhibit people from leaving an unhealthy or unhappy relationship. For example, the risk of legal ramifications, financial instability, social stigma, or children's welfare often deter people from dissolving their current relationship (Donovan & Jackson, 2017). Efforts to minimize such risks while maximizing personal fulfillment may place individuals in a moral dilemma, making infidelity appear to be the only viable option.

It is also important to consider the theoretical rationale behind why individuals who are happy in their current relationship also engage in infidelity (Atkins et al., 2001). Given the increasing expectations for romantic relationships today and the difficulty of finding one partner to meet all of those expectations (Finkel et al., 2015), individuals may in fact be pleased with what their current partner has to offer but also be attracted to unique attributes of an alternate partner that fulfills other needs. For example, an individual's primary partner might be a responsible breadwinner who lovingly cares for the family's basic physiological and safety needs, yet the alternate partner might share the individual's deeper passions and interests, satisfying higher-level emotional, intellectual, and self-expansion needs. These individuals would be even less inclined to sacrifice their current relationship in exchange for the new relationship as both are rewarding in their own ways. Such circumstances illustrate how both satisfied and unsatisfied individuals may justify staying married while engaging in infidelity.

6 | CURRENT STUDY

The current study aims to further explore characteristics of uninvolved partners through the following research questions: (a) Are personality traits associated with partner/spousal infidelity? and (b) For those who stayed with the partner who cheated, are current relationship quality and sexual intimacy related to past infidelity? Our approach is unique compared to prior studies in a number of ways. The few studies that explored this line of inquiry surveyed younger individuals, many of whom were attending college (Altgelt et al., 2018; Orzeck & Lung, 2005; Shackelford et al., 2008). We focus on older individuals in middle and late adulthood, an understudied group that often juggles personal lives while also caring for growing children and aging parents, referred

to as "sandwiched marriages" (Ward & Spitze, 1998). Most of the prior literature also focused on dating relationships or the early stages of marriage (Altgelt et al., 2018; Orzeck & Lung, 2005; Shackelford et al., 2008). We examine an overall sample with varying marital statuses and then examine a subsample of married individuals who have been with their spouses for an average of 25 years. Marriages differ from dating relationships in many ways, including that married partners generally report higher levels of trust and commitment than dating partners (Gottman, Gottman, & McNulty, 2017), which are central to the investigation of infidelity.

To address our research questions, we first examined the Big Five personality traits of all individuals who reported partner infidelity within the overall sample. The relationship quality and sexual intimacy items in our dataset, however, only inquired about current relationships. In order to draw conclusions about how these two constructs relate to infidelity, we needed to create a subsample of individuals who were still with the partner who cheated to ensure that their reports of relationship quality and sexual intimacy were referring to the relationship in which the infidelity occurred. However, for unmarried individuals, start and end dates of dating relationships were not provided, so we could not verify whether reports of current relationship quality and sexual intimacy were about the partner who cheated or a new partner. In contrast, for married individuals, we could confirm if the infidelity happened within their current marriage, and therefore, relationship quality and sexual intimacy reports would be relevant. As such, we created a married subsample to address this research question.

Several methodological issues arise when studying infidelity. First, prevalence rates vary dramatically across samples (Walters & Burger, 2013). In spite of research confidentiality, participants might be reluctant to disclose controversial thoughts or behaviors that could threaten their relationship, resulting in underreports (Drigotas & Barta, 2001). Second, varying interpretations of the term _infidelity_ make it difficult to draw conclusions about a phenomenon that lacks a universal definition. Third, questionnaires that ask about a _partner's_ infidelity (such as the current study) rely on the assumption that the individual is aware of his or her partner's infidelity in the first place. Considering that acts of infidelity are often secretive (Allen et al., 2005), these studies exclude participants who have been cheated on but are unaware of it. Such methodological issues complicate empirical efforts but are not uncommon when studying sensitive issues (Fincham & May, 2017).

On a similar note, it is worth mentioning that the terminology used in the current study to identify each partner merely distinguishes between the participant who reported that he or she was cheated on (uninvolved partner) and his or her partner who reportedly cheated (involved partner). However, it should be acknowledged that infidelity understandably impacts—and therefore involves—both partners. It is possible that the uninvolved partner has cheated him- or herself as well, but a lack of data on own infidelity prevented us from exploring this angle. Accordingly, partners are referred to as _involved_ or _uninvolved_ in the current study for simplicity's sake.

It is important to reiterate that the responsibility of an affair lies squarely on the shoulders of the involved partner. Infidelity has the potential to permanently damage relationships, expose children to unhealthy conflict, and leave the uninvolved partner with emotional scars that last a lifetime (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Frederick & Fales, 2016; Whisman et al., 1997). Yet, individuals still cheat. The work of social scientists is to explore all aspects of a phenomenon. Although dyadic data would provide the most complete picture of infidelity, few large, nationally representative datasets are dyadic in nature or cover infidelity in depth. Consequently, demographers are limited in their approach and often end up utilizing

one partner's responses to address their research questions. Results should be interpreted with caution, however, as the victim of an affair cannot be held accountable for his or her partner's actions.

7 | METHOD

7.1 | Data

Data for this study were obtained from Midlife Development in the United States (MIDUS), a national longitudinal survey of the health and well-being of adults between ages 24 and 86 years, collected over three waves (MacArthur Foundation Research Network, 1995). Participants were recruited from a nationally representative random-digit-dial sample of non-institutionalized, English-speaking adults within the United States who were contacted through telephone banks. A second wave of data collection (MIDUS II) was utilized for this study as it was the first to include a measure of partner infidelity. It also included self-reported Big Five personality traits, relationship quality scales, and aspects of sexual intimacy. Conducted between 2004 and 2006, MIDUS II collected baseline assessments from 4,963 participants through telephone interviews, self-administered questionnaires, daily diaries, cognitive tests, biomarkers, and neuroscientific measures. For the current study, the telephone interviews and self-administered questionnaires provided sufficient data to address our research questions.

7.2 | Overall sample

Of the original 4,963 respondents in MIDUS II, 922 were excluded from this study as they completed the phone interview but not the self-administered questionnaire, which was the portion of baseline assessments that included infidelity measures. Due to discrepancies in reported birth dates at MIDUS I and MIDUS II, the age variable (which was calculated by subtracting the birth date from the interview date) was deemed unreliable for five respondents, and therefore, those individuals were excluded from the study. Nine participants who reported marrying before age 16 years were also dropped as underage marriage is illegal in most states, so these data would not have been representative of the general population. STATA automatically performs listwise deletion in regression analyses, restricting the sample to those with no missing data on any of the variables in the model. This resulted in a final analytical sample of $N = 1,577$. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for the overall sample, further distinguishing between those who report having experienced partner infidelity at some point in their lifetime ($n = 300$) and those who have not ($n = 1,277$).

7.3 | Married subsample

A married subsample was created to examine how spousal infidelity was related to relationship quality and sexual intimacy among those who were cheated on in their current marriage yet remained married. Due to data limitations, these factors could only be examined within a married subsample (see measures for detailed explanation). Table 2 presents descriptive statistics

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics of overall sample

	Overall (N = 1,577)	Lifetime partner infidelity (n = 300)	No lifetime partner infidelity (n = 1,277)	
	%/M (SD)	%/M (SD)	%/M (SD)	χ^2/t
Gender				26.91***
Women	54%	67%	51%	
Men	46%	33%	49%	
Race/ethnicity				10.75*
Non-Hispanic White	89%	89%	89%	
Non-Hispanic Black	4%	2%	5%	
Hispanic	4%	6%	3%	
Other	3%	2%	3%	
Current age				19.71***
32–44	20%	19%	21%	
45–54	26%	35%	24%	
55–64	26%	26%	26%	
65–84	28%	20%	30%	
Education				12.87**
HS or less	33%	36%	32%	
Some college	28%	34%	27%	
BA or higher	39%	30%	41%	
Household income				10.31*
Less than $20,000	14%	15%	14%	
$20,000–$49,999	29%	30%	29%	
$50,000–$89,999	29%	26%	30%	
$90,000–$149,999	18%	23%	17%	
More than $150,000	10%	6%	10%	
Religiosity				16.90**
Very	22%	20%	22%	
Somewhat	49%	42%	50%	
Not very	20%	23%	20%	
Not at all	10%	15%	8%	
Marital status				109.24***
Married	68%	56%	71%	
Separated	2%	3%	1%	
Divorced	15%	34%	11%	
Widowed	8%	5%	8%	
Never married	7%	3%	8%	

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	Overall (N = 1,577)		Lifetime partner infidelity (n = 300)	No lifetime partner infidelity (n = 1,277)	
	%/M (SD)		%/M (SD)	%/M (SD)	χ^2/t
Big Five personality scales					
Openness (1–4)	2.91 (.54)		2.93 (.56)	2.91 (.53)	$t(1575) = -0.69$
Conscientiousness (1–4)	3.38 (.47)		3.35 (.45)	3.39 (.48)	$t(1575) = 1.22$
Extraversion (1–4)	3.10 (.59)		3.12 (.57)	3.09 (.59)	$t(1575) = -0.31$
Agreeableness (1–4)	3.42 (.52)		3.46 (.53)	3.42 (.51)	$t(1575) = -1.44$
Neuroticism (1–4)	2.08 (.63)		2.15 (.64)	2.06 (.62)	$t(1575) = -2.10^*$

$^*p < .05, ^{**}p < .01, ^{***}p < .001.$

for this married subsample (N = 898) and then distinguishes between those who reported spousal infidelity in their current marriage (n = 46) and those who did not (n = 852).

7.4 | Measures

7.4.1 | Outcome variable

Partner infidelity

Partner infidelity was assessed in a section of the MIDUS II questionnaire that inquired about a variety of experiences throughout one's lifetime: "The following questions are about experiences you may have had at ANYTIME. Check the appropriate boxes next to any of the following experiences you have had." One response category included "Spouse/partner engaged in (marital) infidelity." This item asked participants if they have *ever* been cheated on, whether with a past partner, current partner, or current spouse. The open-ended nature of this item did not specify criteria for what is and is not considered infidelity, allowing participants to answer based on their unique relationship arrangements and definitions of infidelity—whether physical, emotional, or otherwise. Those who reported partner infidelity were asked to provide their age at the time of the incident.

It is important to note that, by asking participants to report their *partner's* infidelity, MIDUS II only accounted for those who were *aware* of it. Some inadvertently find out about their partner's infidelity (e.g., discovering a text on their partner's phone or unfamiliar clothing in their partner's car), whereas in other cases, the partner who cheated may come forward and confess (Brand, Markey, Mills, & Hodges, 2007). However, many individuals who have been cheated on never find out (Allen et al., 2005). Infidelity is a secretive and scandalous topic that is rarely divulged willingly or honestly due to the risk of serious consequences (Amato & Rogers, 1997; Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Whisman et al., 1997). In fact, the dearth of empirical work on the process and prevalence of infidelity disclosure is readily acknowledged (Allen et al., 2005; Blow & Hartnett, 2005); most literature focuses on the aftermath and healing process once admission of infidelity has already taken place (Bird et al., 2007; Olson, Russell, Higgins-Kessler, & Miller, 2002). Due to this methodological limitation, our sample is restricted to participants who were aware of and able to report on their partner's infidelity at the time of the survey.

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics of married subsample

	Overall (N = 898)	Spousal infidelity in current marriage (n = 46)	No spousal infidelity in current marriage (n = 852)	
	%/M (SD)	%/M (SD)	%/M (SD)	χ^2/t
Gender				2.00
Women	49%	59%	48%	
Men	51%	41%	52%	
Race/ethnicity				4.04
Non-Hispanic White	91%	87%	92%	
Non-Hispanic Black	2%	2%	2%	
Hispanic	3%	9%	3%	
Other	3%	2%	3%	
Current age				0.34
32–44	25%	22%	25%	
45–54	30%	30%	30%	
55–64	26%	26%	26%	
65–84	19%	22%	19%	
Education				4.81
HS or less	31%	46%	30%	
Some college	26%	22%	26%	
BA or higher	43%	33%	44%	
Household income				2.04
Less than $20,000	4%	2%	4%	
$20,000–$49,999	22%	20%	22%	
$50,000–$89,999	36%	43%	36%	
$90,000–$149,999	25%	26%	25%	
More than $150,000	14%	9%	14%	
Duration of marriage (0–64 years)	24.84 (14.68)	30.20 (12.30)	24.55 (14.75)	$t(896) = -2.55$*
Religiosity				4.51
Very	22%	24%	22%	
Somewhat	49%	43%	50%	
Not very	21%	17%	21%	
Not at all	8%	15%	7%	
Big Five personality scales				
Openness (1–4)	2.89 (.52)	2.85 (.50)	2.89 (.52)	$t(896) = 0.59$
Conscientiousness (1–4)	3.42 (.45)	3.27 (.47)	3.43 (.45)	$t(896) = 2.43$*
Extraversion (1–4)	3.09 (.58)	3.07 (.57)	3.09 (.58)	$t(896) = 0.27$
Agreeableness (1–4)	3.40 (.51)	3.49 (.53)	3.40 (.51)	$t(896) = -1.12$
Neuroticism (1–4)	2.07 (.62)	2.16 (.52)	2.07 (.63)	$t(896) = -0.95$

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

	Overall (N = 898)	Spousal infidelity in current marriage (n = 46)	No spousal infidelity in current marriage (n = 852)	
	%/M (SD)	%/M (SD)	%/M (SD)	χ^2/t
Relationship quality				
Marital satisfaction (0–10)	8.34 (1.70)	7.50 (1.94)	8.38 (1.68)	$t(896) = 3.43$***
Spouse/partner disagreement scale (3–12)	5.82 (2.08)	6.93 (1.96)	5.76 (2.07)	$t(896) = -3.75$***
Spouse affectual solidarity scale (1–4)	3.26 (.49)	2.97 (.54)	3.28 (.49)	$t(896) = 4.23$ ***
Spouse/partner decision-making scale (4–28)	25.04 (4.12)	22.76 (5.46)	25.16 (3.99)	$t(896) = 3.89$***
Sexual intimacy				
Sexual satisfaction (0–10)	5.94 (2.52)	5.07 (2.82)	5.99 (2.49)	$t(896) = 2.43$*
Sexual expression important in relationships				4.61
A lot	29%	37%	28%	
Some	45%	47%	46%	
A little	20%	15%	21%	
Not at all	6%	11%	6%	
Sexual relationships include emotional intimacy				10.68*
A lot	43%	39%	43%	
Some	39%	33%	39%	
A little	14%	13%	14%	
Not at all	5%	15%	5%	

*p < .05, ***p < .001.

7.4.2 | Predictor variables

Duration of marriage

During preliminary analyses, we noticed age effects such that those in later cohorts were more likely to have experienced spousal infidelity relative to younger cohorts, which may have been a proxy for duration of marriage. MIDUS II did not provide data on the length of marriage for married participants, so we constructed a duration of marriage variable by subtracting the date of interview from date of marriage. This variable allowed us to examine the association between length of marriage and spousal infidelity, separate from age.

TABLE 3 Big Five personality trait scales

Big Five trait	Items	α
Openness	Creative, imaginative, intelligent, curious, broad-minded, sophisticated, adventurous	.78
Conscientiousness	Organized, responsible, hardworking, thorough, careless (R)	.69
Extraversion	Outgoing, friendly, lively, active, talkative	.77
Agreeableness	Helpful, warm, caring, softhearted, sympathetic	.81
Neuroticism	Moody, worrying, nervous, calm (R)	.74

Note: Respondents were asked to indicate how well each of these 26 different adjectives described them. Response categories included: 1 (*a lot*), 2 (*some*), 3 (*a little*), and 4 (*not at all*). (R) indicates items that were reverse-coded so that a higher score represents a higher degree of that characteristic. A total score for each Big Five personality trait was calculated by averaging participants' responses across all items within each scale.

Personality traits

The Big Five personality traits include openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Respondents were asked to indicate how well 26 different adjectives described them using scales adapted from existing trait inventories (Bem, 1981; Goldberg, 1992; John, 1990; Lachman & Weaver, 1997; Rossi, 2001; Trapnell & Wiggins, 1990). Table 3 demonstrates how these adjectives were grouped into scales corresponding with each personality trait, along with their Cronbach's alpha reliability score. For each adjective, response categories included: 1 (*a lot*), 2 (*some*), 3 (*a little*), and 4 (*not at all*). Certain items were reverse-coded so that higher scores reflected higher levels of that characteristic. A total score for each Big Five personality trait was calculated by averaging participants' responses across all items within each scale.

Relationship quality

Relationship quality (along with sexual intimacy) was only included in analyses for the married subsample as MIDUS II only assessed these constructs in participants' *current* relationships. Given our specific interest in how partner infidelity was associated with relationship quality and sexual intimacy, it was necessary to determine which participants were still currently in a relationship with the partner who cheated. First, to identify participants' current relationship status, we used a marital status measure with the following response categories: *married*, *separated*, *divorced*, *widowed*, and *never married*. Considering we knew participants' age at the time of partner infidelity and age at marriage for married participants, we could calculate whether the infidelity happened within their current marriage. However, for participants in the remaining marital status categories (*separated*, *divorced*, *widowed*, and *never married*), we could not discern whether they were currently single or in a dating relationship. Furthermore, those in dating relationships were not asked to provide their age at the start of the relationship, which prevented us from being able to compare it to the age at partner infidelity and confirm whether they were still in that relationship. Thus, even if a participant was in a dating relationship and responded to the measures on current relationship quality or sexual intimacy, we could not verify whether the relationship they were reporting on was the same relationship in which the lifetime partner infidelity occurred. Consequently, we were unable to include the relationship quality and sexual intimacy measures in analyses for the overall sample.

For the married subsample, we utilized the following date variables to determine whether partner infidelity happened within their current marriage: birth date, year of marriage, and age

TABLE 4 Relationship quality scales

Scale	Items	α
Spouse/partner disagreement[a]	How much do you and your spouse or partner disagree on the following issues: 1. Money? 2. Household tasks? 3. Leisure activities?	.73
Spouse/partner affectual solidarity[b]	1. How much does your spouse or partner really care about you? 2. How much does he or she understand the way you feel about things? 3. How much does he or she appreciate you? 4. How much do you rely on him or her for help if you have a serious problem? 5. How much can you open up to him or her if you need to talk about your worries? 6. How much can you relax and be yourself around him or her? 7. How often does your partner make too many demands on you? 8. How often does he or she argue with you? 9. How often does he or she make you feel tense? 10. How often does he or she criticize you? 11. How often does he or she let you down when you are counting on him or her? 12. How often does he or she get on your nerves?	.92
Spouse/partner decision-making[c]	1. My partner and I are a team when it comes to making decisions. 2. Things turn out better when I talk things over with my partner. 3. I don't make plans for the future without talking it over with my partner. 4. When I have to make decisions about medical, financial, or family issues, I ask my partner for advice.	.90

[a]Responses ranged from 1 (*a lot*) to 4 (*not at all*), and all items were reverse-coded so that higher scores reflected higher levels of agreement. A total score was calculated with the sum of all three items.
[b]For questions 1–6, responses ranged from 1 (*a lot*) to 4 (*not at all*); for questions 7–12, responses ranged from 1 (*often*) to 4 (*never*). Items were reverse-coded so that higher scores reflected higher levels of support and lower levels of strain (affectual solidarity), and the mean of all 12 items was calculated for a total score.
[c]Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*), and all items were reverse-coded so that higher scores reflected higher levels of joint decision making. A total score was calculated with the sum of all four items.

at the time of partner infidelity. First, we calculated age at marriage by subtracting birth date from year of marriage. For those whose age at the time of partner infidelity was *less than* their age at the time of marriage, we could conclude that the partner infidelity happened in a past relationship. For those whose age at the time of partner infidelity was *greater than* their age at the time of their current marriage, we could confirm that the partner infidelity happened within their current marriage (referred to as *spousal infidelity*).

Four measures were used to assess relationship quality within the married subsample. A global measure of relationship satisfaction asked participants: "Using a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means *the worst possible marriage or close relationship* and 10 means *the best possible marriage or close relationship*, how would you rate your marriage or close relationship these days?" Three scales were used to further examine relationship quality, as shown in Table 4: *Spouse/Partner Disagreement Scale* (Grzywacz & Marks, 2000), *Spouse/Partner Affectual Solidarity Scale*

(Grzywacz & Marks, 1999; Schuster, Kessler, & Aseltine, 1990; Whalen & Lachman, 2000), and *Spouse/Partner Decision-Making Scale* (Lachman & Weaver, 1998).

The *Spouse/Partner Disagreement Scale* ($\alpha = .73$) included three items: "How much do you and your spouse or partner disagree on the following issues?" with the issues being: "Money matters such as how much to spend, save, or invest," "Household tasks, such as what needs doing and who does it," and "Leisure time activities, such as what to do and with whom." Responses ranged from 1 (*a lot*) to 4 (*not at all*), and all items were reverse-coded so that higher scores reflected higher levels of agreement. The total score for this scale was constructed by calculating the sum of all three items.

The *Spouse/Partner Affectual Solidarity Scale* ($\alpha = .92$) included 12 items, combining 6 items from the *Spouse/Partner Support Scale* (Schuster et al., 1990) and 6 items from the *Spouse/Partner Strain Scale* (Whalen & Lachman, 2000). Questions regarding support included: "How much does your spouse or partner really care about you?" and "How much can you relax and be yourself around him or her?," with responses ranging from 1 (*a lot*) to 4 (*not at all*). Questions assessing strain included: "How often does your spouse or partner make too many demands on you?" and "How often does he or she argue with you?," with responses ranging from 1 (*often*) to 4 (*never*). Items were reverse-coded so that higher scores reflected higher levels of affectual solidarity, and the mean of all 12 items was calculated for a total score.

The *Spouse/Partner Decision-Making Scale* ($\alpha = .90$) included four items: "My partner and I are a team when it comes to making decisions," "Things turn out better when I talk things over with my partner," "I don't make plans for the future without talking it over with my partner," and "When I have to make decisions about medical, financial, or family issues, I ask my partner for advice." Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*), and items were reverse-coded so that higher scores reflected higher levels of joint decision making. The total score was constructed by calculating the sum of all four items.

Sexual intimacy

Similar to the relationship quality measures, the sexual intimacy items were only examined within the married subsample due to data limitations. Among this subsample, three items were used to assess sexual intimacy. A global measure of current sexual satisfaction asked participants: "Using a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means *the worst possible situation* and 10 means *the best possible situation*, how would you rate the sexual aspect of your life these days?" Additional aspects of the participants' sex lives with their current spouse were examined using two measures, with responses ranging from 1 (*a lot*) to 4 (*not at all*): "To what extent would you say that sexual expression is an important part of your relationship(s)?" and "To what extent would you say that your sexual relationship(s) include emotional intimacy?"

Controls

Gender, race/ethnicity, current age, education level, household income, and religiosity were controlled for in both the overall sample and the married subsample, with the addition of marital status in the overall sample. Past literature has demonstrated differences between men and women in terms of prevalence, types, and justifications for infidelity (Glass & Wright, 1985). Higher rates of infidelity have also been reported among certain races/ethnicities (Treas & Giesen, 2000), so we divided our sample into the following categories: *non-Hispanic White*, *non-Hispanic Black*, *Hispanic*, and *other race*. Age has also been associated with engagement in infidelity (Atkins & Kessel, 2008). MIDUS II constructed an age variable by subtracting participants' interview dates from their birth dates, and our study presents results based on the

following age categories: 32–44, 45–54, 55–64, and 65–84 years. Past research indicates differences in infidelity across education and income levels as well (Atkins et al., 2001). For this study, educational attainment was collapsed into the following categories: *high school or less*, *some college*, and *BA or higher*. Household income included earnings of both participants and their partners and is broken down into categories within our tables for descriptive purposes (<$20,000, $20,000–49,999, $50,000–89,999, $90,000–149,999, and >$150,000). Because the household income variable was positively skewed, we performed a log transformation prior to running the analyses. Regarding marital status, participants reported whether they were *married*, *separated*, *divorced*, *widowed*, or *never married*. It is important to note that the *never married* category includes but does not distinguish between those who are single and those who are in dating relationships. Finally, the role of religion has been linked to infidelity with mixed findings (Allen et al., 2005), so we accounted for participants' degree of religiosity, with possible responses including *very*, *somewhat*, *not very*, and *not at all*.

7.5 | Analytic plan

First, descriptive statistics were compared between those who had and had not experienced lifetime partner infidelity, as well as between those who had and had not experienced spousal infidelity within their current marriage. Then, a series of logistic regression models was estimated to predict lifetime partner infidelity in the overall sample using the Big Five personality traits of the uninvolved partner. Next, a series of logistic regression models were estimated to predict spousal infidelity in the married subsample using the Big Five personality traits of the uninvolved partner, four relationship quality measures, and three sexual intimacy items. Poststratification weights for region, age, and education were applied to address unequal probabilities of selection, as well as questionnaire nonresponses and telephone noncoverage, minimizing differences between sample data and population data (MacArthur Foundation Research Network, 1995).

8 | RESULTS

8.1 | Descriptive statistics

8.1.1 | Overall sample

As presented in Table 1, the overall sample consisted of 1,577 adults. Just over half of respondents were women, with ages distributed between 32 and 84 years. The majority identified as non-Hispanic White, two-thirds attended some postsecondary education, and the average household income was $72,627 ($SD$ = $60,061). More than 70% of participants identified as somewhat or very religious. Roughly two-thirds were married at the time of the survey.

Table 1 also compares descriptive statistics between those who reported partner infidelity at some point in their lives (n = 300) and those who did not (n = 1,277). The far right column displays results from chi-square tests for independence along with two-sample t-tests, demonstrating significant relationships at the bivariate level between lifetime partner infidelity and all demographic variables, as well as one of the Big Five personality traits. Twice as many women reported being cheated on relative to men. Education levels were slightly lower among those

who reported lifetime partner infidelity, most of whom were either somewhat or very religious. Far more participants were currently married within the group that did not report lifetime partner infidelity, whereas 37% of those who did report lifetime partner infidelity were currently separated or divorced. Among the Big Five personality traits, those who reported lifetime partner infidelity had slightly higher scores for neuroticism ($M = 2.15$, $SD = .64$) than those who did not report lifetime partner infidelity ($M = 2.06$, $SD = .62$).

8.1.2 | Married subsample

As presented in Table 2, the married subsample consisted of 898 participants. Just under half were women, the majority identified as non-Hispanic White, and participants were fairly evenly distributed across the age groups. Close to 43% of the subsample completed some postsecondary education or higher, and the mean income was $91,081 ($SD = $63,145$). The majority of the subsample identified as somewhat or very religious. Marriages ranged from 0 to 64 years in duration, with an average of about 25 years ($SD = 14.68$).

   Table 2 also compares descriptive statistics for those who reported spousal infidelity in their current marriage ($n = 46$) with those who did not ($n = 852$). Results from chi-square tests for independence along with two-sample t-tests, displayed in the far right column, show significant relationships at the bivariate level between spousal infidelity and duration of marriage, one of the Big Five personality traits, all relationship quality measures, and two sexual intimacy items. The average length of marriage was about 30 years for those who reported spousal infidelity ($SD = 12.30$) and just under 25 years for those who did not ($SD = 14.75$). Of the Big Five personality traits, those who reported spousal infidelity had slightly lower conscientiousness scores ($M = 3.27$, $SD = .47$) compared to those who did not ($M = 3.43$, $SD = .45$). Marital satisfaction was significantly higher for those without spousal infidelity ($M = 8.38$, $SD = 1.68$) than for those who did experience spousal infidelity ($M = 7.50$, $SD = 1.94$). Scores across all three relationship quality scales suggest that those who did not report spousal infidelity agreed more, experienced higher levels of support and lower levels of strain, and participated in more joint decision making than those who did report spousal infidelity. In terms of sexual intimacy, those who had never experienced spousal infidelity reported higher levels of sexual satisfaction ($M = 5.99$, $SD = 2.49$) and more emotional intimacy within their sex lives compared to those who did ($M = 5.07$, $SD = 2.82$).

8.2 | Multivariate analyses

8.2.1 | Overall sample

Table 5 presents a series of logistic regression models predicting lifetime partner infidelity in the overall sample. The first model includes gender, race/ethnicity, current age, education, household income, and marital status as control variables ($\chi^2 = 105.80$, $p < .001$). The second model adds religiosity ($\chi^2 = 111.18$, $p < .001$). The final model incorporates the uninvolved partner's self-reported Big Five personality traits ($\chi^2 = 114.32$, $p < .001$). Across all three models, significant predictors include gender, race/ethnicity, education, marital status, religiosity, and one of the Big Five personality traits (conscientiousness). Pairwise comparisons of marginal

TABLE 5 Weighted logistic regression predicting lifetime partner infidelity in overall sample ($N = 1,577$)

	Model 1 OR (*SE*)	Model 2 OR (*SE*)	Model 3 OR (*SE*)
Gender (reference is Men)			
Women	1.68** (.27)	1.79** (.29)	1.90*** (.33)
Race/ethnicity (reference is Non-Hispanic White)			
Non-Hispanic Black	.27* (.16)	.30* (.17)	.32* (.18)
Hispanic	1.75 (.58)	1.74 (.58)	1.78 (.60)
Other	.76 (.37)	.77 (.37)	.74 (.35)
Current age (reference is 32–44)			
45–54	1.29 (.28)	1.32 (.29)	1.29 (.29)
55–64	.84 (.19)	.86 (.19)	.84 (.19)
65–84	.62 (.16)	.65 (.17)	.65 (.17)
Education (reference is HS or less)			
Some college	1.00 (.18)	.98 (.18)	.95 (.18)
BA or higher	.58** (.11)	.55** (.11)	.54** (.10)
Household income	.99 (.09)	.97 (.09)	.99 (.09)
Marital status (reference is married)			
Separated	2.56 (1.28)	2.63 (1.37)	2.42 (1.31)
Divorced	3.04*** (.61)	2.81*** (.56)	2.77*** (.55)
Widowed	.58 (.21)	.56 (.20)	.56 (.20)
Never married	.41* (.16)	.37* (.15)	.36* (.14)
Religiosity (reference is very)			
Somewhat	—	.97 (.20)	.93 (.19)
Not very	—	1.41 (.33)	1.33 (.31)
Not at all	—	2.03* (.58)	1.88* (.55)
Big Five personality trait scales			
Openness (1–4)	—	—	1.28 (.23)
Conscientiousness (1–4)	—	—	.68* (.13)
Extraversion (1–4)	—	—	.85 (.14)
Agreeableness (1–4)	—	—	1.03 (.21)
Neuroticism (1–4)	—	—	.97 (.13)
Constant	.22 (.23)	.24 (.25)	.57 (.75)
Log-likelihood	−702.64	−696.14	−692.21
Model chi-square	105.80***	111.18***	114.32***

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

linear predictions were run separately for each categorical variable, and significant results are discussed.

According to our final model, controlling for all other variables, the odds of reporting lifetime partner infidelity are 90% higher for women relative to men ($p < .001$). Individuals of non-Hispanic Black race/ethnicity have 68% lower odds of reporting partner infidelity than

non-Hispanic Whites ($p < .05$), and Hispanic individuals have 5.5 times higher odds of partner infidelity relative to those who are non-Hispanic Black ($p < .01$). Compared to individuals between 45 and 54 years of age, adults between 55 and 64 years have 35% lower odds ($p < .05$) and those between 65 and 84 years have 50% lower odds ($p < .01$) of reporting partner infidelity. For those with a Bachelor's degree or higher, the odds of partner infidelity decrease by 46% relative to those who attended high school or less ($p < .01$), and adults with a Bachelor's degree or higher have 44% lower odds than those with only some postsecondary education ($p < .01$). Compared to married individuals, the odds of lifetime partner infidelity are nearly three times higher for those who are divorced ($p < .001$) and 64% lower for those who have never been married ($p < .05$). Widowed adults have 77% lower odds ($p < .05$) and never married adults have 85% lower odds ($p < .01$) of reporting partner infidelity relative to separated adults. Compared to divorced adults, widowed adults have 80% lower odds ($p < .001$) and never married adults have 87% lower odds ($p < .001$) of reporting partner infidelity. Individuals who are not at all religious have 88% higher odds of reporting partner infidelity compared to those who are very religious ($p < .05$) and over twice the odds of those who identify as somewhat religious ($p < .01$). Regarding the self-reported Big Five personality traits, a negative association emerged such that, for every 1 unit increase in conscientiousness, the odds of reporting lifetime partner infidelity decrease by 32% ($p < .05$).

8.2.2 | Married subsample

Table 6 presents a series of logistic regression models for the married subsample predicting spousal infidelity within participants' current marriages. The first model includes gender, race/ethnicity, current age, education, household income, and duration of marriage as control variables ($\chi^2 = 28.21$, $p < .01$). The second model adds religiosity ($\chi^2 = 34.73$, $p < .01$). The third model incorporates the Big Five personality traits ($\chi^2 = 48.53$, $p < .001$), and the final model adds the relationship quality and sexual intimacy measures ($\chi^2 = 60.65$, $p < .001$). Significant predictors of spousal infidelity across all four models include race/ethnicity and duration of marriage. Religiosity becomes significant in the final model, once relationship quality and sexual intimacy are accounted for, along with two of the Big Five personality traits (conscientiousness and agreeableness). Significant results are discussed from pairwise comparisons of marginal linear predictions for each categorical variable.

According to our final model, controlling for all other variables, Hispanic individuals have nearly seven times higher odds of reporting spousal infidelity relative to non-Hispanic Whites ($p < .01$), and those who are categorized as 'other' race/ethnicity have 93% lower odds than Hispanic adults ($p < .05$). For every additional year of marriage, the odds of spousal infidelity increase by 8% ($p < .001$). As for religiosity, those who are not at all religious have almost four times higher odds of reporting spousal infidelity relative to those who are very religious ($p < .05$). Individuals who are not at all religious have over four times the odds of reporting spousal infidelity compared to those who are not very religious ($p < .05$), as well as to those who are somewhat religious ($p < .01$). Regarding the self-reported Big Five personality traits, a negative association emerged for conscientiousness such that, for every 1 unit increase in this trait, the odds of reporting spousal infidelity decrease by 53% ($p < .01$), whereas a positive association emerged for agreeableness such that, for every 1 unit increase in this trait, the odds are nearly tripled ($p < .01$).

TABLE 6 Weighted logistic regression predicting spousal infidelity in married subsample ($N = 898$)

	Model 1 OR (*SE*)	Model 2 OR (*SE*)	Model 3 OR (*SE*)	Model 4 OR (*SE*)
Gender (reference is Men)				
Women	1.19 (.41)	1.22 (.42)	1.16 (.46)	.98 (.41)
Race/ethnicity (reference is Non-Hispanic white)				
Non-Hispanic Black	1.63 (1.63)	1.70 (1.68)	1.63 (1.34)	1.33 (1.15)
Hispanic	4.50* (2.73)	4.39** (2.48)	4.82** (2.73)	6.66** (3.86)
Other	.71 (.76)	.55 (.60)	.64 (.65)	.48 (.57)
Current age (reference is 32–44)				
45–54	.56 (.28)	.53 (.26)	.46 (.23)	.51 (.28)
55–64	.42 (.25)	.39 (.23)	.38 (.23)	.36 (.25)
65–84	.26 (.23)	.25 (.21)	.24 (.19)	.18 (.18)
Education (reference is HS or less)				
Some college	.65 (.27)	.67 (.27)	.67 (.28)	.74 (.34)
BA or higher	.57 (.24)	.57 (.23)	.58 (.24)	.63 (.27)
Household income	1.26 (.31)	1.23 (.28)	1.25 (.31)	1.21 (.33)
Duration of marriage	1.06*** (.02)	1.07*** (.02)	1.07*** (.02)	1.08*** (.02)
Religiosity (reference is very)				
Somewhat	—	.80 (.32)	.79 (.33)	.90 (.41)
Not very	—	.90 (.45)	.95 (.49)	.88 (.55)
Not at all	—	2.53 (1.35)	2.66 (1.46)	3.73* (2.33)
Big Five personality trait scales				
Openness (1–4)	—	—	1.34 (.51)	1.24 (.49)
Conscientiousness (1–4)	—	—	.36** (.13)	.47* (.17)
Extraversion (1–4)	—	—	.74 (.27)	.83 (.34)
Agreeableness (1–4)	—	—	1.95 (.82)	2.92* (1.48)
Neuroticism (1–4)	—	—	1.05 (.23)	.84 (.20)
Relationship quality scales				
Marital satisfaction (0–10)	—	—	—	.94 (.13)
Spouse/partner disagreement (3–12)	—	—	—	1.14 (.09)
Spouse affectual solidarity (1–4)	—	—	—	.57 (.31)
Spouse/partner decision making (4–28)	—	—	—	.96 (.05)
Sexual intimacy measures				
Sexual satisfaction (0–10)	—	—	—	.97 (.09)
Sexual expression important in relationships (reference is A lot)				
Some	—	—	—	.63 (.26)
A little	—	—	—	.50 (.29)
Not at all	—	—	—	.87 (.62)

TABLE 6 (Continued)

	Model 1 OR (*SE*)	Model 2 OR (*SE*)	Model 3 OR (*SE*)	Model 4 OR (*SE*)
Sexual relationships include emotional intimacy (reference is A lot)				
Some	—	—	—	.88 (.40)
A little	—	—	—	.94 (.63)
Not at all	—	—	—	.99 (.75)
Constant	.00* (.00)	.00* (.01)	.01 (.02)	.01 (.05)
Log-likelihood	−169.67	−167.97	−162.41	−149.63
Model chi-square	28.21**	34.73**	48.53***	60.65***

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

9 | DISCUSSION

Infidelity is a complex and controversial phenomenon. It can be one of the most damaging experiences within romantic relationships, with serious consequences for both the couple and any children involved (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Whisman et al., 1997). The majority of infidelity literature has focused on the partner *involved* in infidelity (Atkins et al., 2001; Mark et al., 2011; Orzeck & Lung, 2005; Schmitt, 2004), as well as overall relationship quality between the involved and uninvolved partners (Previti & Amato, 2004; Scott et al., 2016; Shackelford et al., 2008). The current study offers a novel contribution to the infidelity literature through its focused investigation of the *uninvolved* partner. Specifically, we examined their self-reported Big Five personality traits, along with reports of relationship quality and sexual intimacy, among those who experienced spousal infidelity in their current marriage.

9.1 | The Big Five personality traits

Conscientiousness was negatively associated with partner infidelity in both the overall sample and the married subsample. Defined as being organized, responsible, hardworking, careful, and thorough, conscientiousness is not only an appealing quality in a partner (Dijkstra & Barelds, 2008) but also a necessary one for healthy relationship functioning (Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford, 1997). Having an unreliable, immature, or lazy partner could increase stress and conflict when navigating day-to-day responsibilities such as paying bills, doing household chores, attending work events, honoring personal commitments, and so on. If the couple has children, the increased parenting workload likely places additional strain on the relationship (Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009), further exacerbating issues surrounding dependability. According to interdependence theory, lack of conscientiousness in one's partner could be considered a cost of the relationship. The individual may also begin to notice and admire conscientious qualities in others (i.e., comparison level of alternatives). If emotional or physical attraction develops toward one of these alternative partners, it could lead to infidelity. Prior empirical work shows that perceived inequities, marital conflict, and declines in relationship satisfaction do, in fact, increase chances of cheating (Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Prins, Buunk, & van Yperen, 1993; Spanier & Margolis, 1983).

Within the married subsample, agreeableness was positively associated with spousal infidelity. Agreeableness is defined as being helpful, warm, caring, softhearted, and sympathetic. Similar to conscientiousness, these are typically desirable qualities in a spouse (White, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 2004). However, in contrast with previous findings (Buss, 1991; Orzeck & Lung, 2005), the *positive* association between agreeableness and spousal infidelity in this study raises some interesting questions. Perhaps individuals with agreeable spouses become accustomed to their highly understanding and accommodating partners, so much so that they assume even infidelity—if discovered—will be pardoned. Negative repercussions for a positive personality trait may seem counterintuitive through the lens of interdependence theory; however, extreme levels of positive traits are not always socially desirable (Borkenau, Zaltauskas, & Leising, 2009) and may even be taken for granted in marriage. As such, those with highly agreeable spouses may indulge in their temptations if they only anticipate mild and minimal consequences. In other words, the agreeable traits are not what *motivate* a partner to cheat; rather, the infidelity is likely prompted by other factors, but the involved partner may take comfort in the fact that his or her spouse's agreeableness might cushion the blow should he or she ever find out.

Another explanation for our finding regarding agreeable partners may have more to do with why couples *remained married* after infidelity. Although there are many reasons why couples either make up or break up after a partner has cheated, it is also possible that personality characteristics of the uninvolved partner influence the decision to keep the marriage intact as he or she may have the upper hand in deciding the future of the relationship if the involved partner is remorseful and wants to remain together. For example, agreeableness has been linked to higher levels of trust and commitment (Ellis, Simpson, & Campbell, 2002; Mooradian, Renzl, & Matzler, 2006). After having been cheated on, an individual who is highly agreeable may be more likely to forgive and trust his or her spouse again, enabling the marriage to survive. Indeed, one study found that, upon discovering their wife's infidelity, men's own level of agreeableness negatively predicted their intentions to divorce (Shackelford & Buss, 1997). This supports the notion that, regardless of what one's spouse has done, one's own characteristics might influence the fate of the relationship. It follows that less agreeable individuals who have experienced spousal infidelity may have divorced because of it.

Alternately, highly agreeable individuals may stay with their cheating spouses due to sunk costs (Kelly, 2004; McAfee, Mialon, & Mialon, 2010). The average duration of marriage for those in our study who experienced spousal infidelity and remained married was 30 years ($SD = 12.30$). These individuals got married at 24 years of age ($SD = 7.02$) and reported the spousal infidelity around the 35 years of age ($SD = 8.03$), meaning that, on average, these adults were married for at least 10 years before their spouse cheated. People often make substantial investments within the first decade of their marriage (Kelly, 2004), such as buying a home together, having children, and establishing familial and social networks. Such investments are likely to serve as barriers to divorce for many, considering the various other aspects of their lives that will change if they end their marriage (Donovan & Jackson, 2017). Although highly agreeable partners likely disapprove of spousal infidelity, they may also be willing to make amends in efforts of keeping the peace in order to protect the life they have built.

9.2 | Marital status

Within the overall sample, divorced participants were most likely to report lifetime partner infidelity. Although we cannot confirm which relationship they were referring to, over one-third of
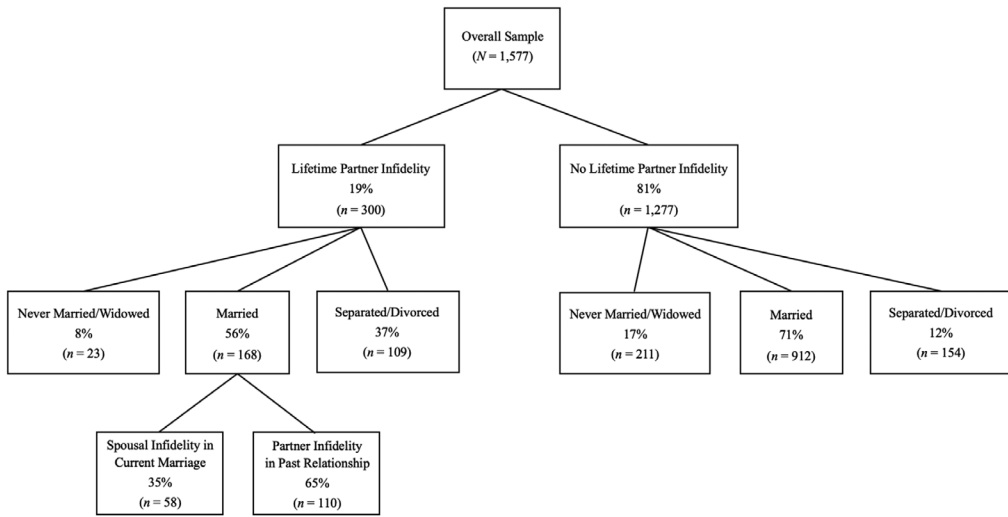
FIGURE 1 Flowchart of partner infidelity and marital status within overall sample

all participants who reported being cheated on at some point in their lives were separated or divorced at the time of the survey (see Figure 1). Because infidelity often leads to divorce (Frisco et al., 2017), it is likely that some of these individuals were cheated on in a previous marriage and are now separated or divorced because of it. Never married participants, in contrast, were less likely to report lifetime partner infidelity. One explanation might simply be that a portion of them have never been in a relationship before and therefore have no infidelity to report. Others in the *never married* category may have dated, albeit only with casual, short-term partners, which provided a narrower time frame and fewer opportunities to cheat relative to long-term relationships. Also included in the *never married* category are those in long-term dating and cohabiting relationships, who still tend to be less committed than married couples (Forste & Tanfer, 1996) and have fewer barriers to breaking up (Donovan & Jackson, 2017). Therefore, perhaps individuals in such relationships are able and willing to end their current relationships prior to engaging with a new partner, resulting in lower infidelity rates in this population. Conversely, lower levels of commitment in dating and cohabiting relationships might be coupled with lower expectations for honesty (Roggensack & Sillars, 2013). In other words, during the early stages of casual dating, partners may not feel obligated to be completely faithful or provide full disclosure of their extradyadic interactions until their relationship reaches a certain level of seriousness. Thus, dating or cohabiting individuals may technically cheat just as much as those in committed relationships but feel less pressure to admit it to their partners, resulting in fewer reports of lifetime partner infidelity within the *never married* category.

9.3 | Duration of marriage

Within the married subsample, length of marriage strongly predicted spousal infidelity such that the longer one was married, the more likely he or she were to report having been cheated on by his or her spouse. Prior literature has also found that the more time an individual spends in a relationship, the more opportunities there are to meet someone else, and therefore, the risk of engaging in infidelity increases (Atkins et al., 2001). If relationship or sexual

satisfaction has deteriorated over the years, there may be added incentive to seek the thrills of a new and different partner (Liu, 2003; Treas & Giesen, 2000). In light of recent marital trends emphasizing romantic chemistry, emotional intimacy, and intellectual stimulation, individuals who no longer feel that their marriage nurtures these higher-level needs may be further motivated to cheat (Cherlin, 2004; Finkel et al., 2015). In addition, the more time one has invested in a marriage, the greater the barriers to divorce (Donovan & Jackson, 2017). Thus, for individuals married a long time, engaging in infidelity may actually seem less consequential than other options.

9.4 | Gender

In the overall sample, women reported partner infidelity more than men. The majority of our sample identified as heterosexual, suggesting that men engage in infidelity more than women, which is consistent with much of the past research (Allen et al., 2005; Blow & Hartnett, 2005). Gender was not significant in analyses of the married subsample, however, indicating that differences between men and women disappear once duration of marriage, relationship quality, and sexual intimacy are included. Prior work supports this narrowing gender gap in infidelity rates as women report cheating just as much as men when the definition is broadened to include emotional intimacy (Brand et al., 2007).

9.5 | Relationship quality and sexual intimacy

Interestingly, relationship quality and sexual intimacy were strongly associated with spousal infidelity at the bivariate level for married couples, indicating that there were significantly different reports among those who were cheated on compared to those who were not. However, once demographic characteristics were controlled for and the Big Five personality traits were added to the model, relationship quality and sexual intimacy became nonsignificant. In other words, there were no significant differences in relationship quality or sexual intimacy between those who did and did not report spousal infidelity. One explanation might be that many other factors influence relationship quality and sexual intimacy besides infidelity, especially if the infidelity happened early on in the marriage. Furthermore, this study only accounts for the *uninvolved* partner's perception; the *involved* partner's relationship and sexual satisfaction might differ. In addition, relationship quality and sexual intimacy may initially drop after one partner cheats but eventually recover if the couple is motivated to stay together and commits to working on the marriage. If so, this study provides hope to couples who experience infidelity. Although some marriages end because of it, it may serve as an opportunity for growth and positive change in others.

9.6 | Limitations

A few limitations of this study are worth mentioning. MIDUS II assessed infidelity by asking participants if their partner/spouse had ever cheated. This item assumes that the uninvolved partner is *aware* of the infidelity, which is not always the case. However, this is a somewhat unavoidable methodological problem when data are only collected from one partner and

asks about the *other* partner's private behaviors. Among those who *were* aware of their partner/spouse's infidelity and reported it, no additional data were collected regarding the nature, frequency, and context surrounding the infidelity, preventing examination of the nuanced complexities inherent within most infidelity experiences. For example, an impulsive one-night stand motivated by alcohol and sexual desire should be empirically differentiated from a long-term affair that evolved out of deeper emotions and conscious commitment. It is also unknown whether the participants engaged in infidelity themselves, which could theoretically play a role in their partner's justification for their own infidelity. Indeed, Buunk (1980) found that individuals were more likely to cheat if they thought their partners were having an affair themselves. Moreover, *uninvolved* partners' perception of their own personality traits, relationship quality, and sexual intimacy may not align with *involved* partners' perceptions. Future studies are encouraged to collect dyadic data from couples that experience infidelity in efforts to provide a more complete account of antecedents and consequences from each partner's perspective.

9.7 | Significance of our study

An important contribution of this study was its use of self-reported Big Five personality traits for *uninvolved* partners in relationships that have experienced infidelity. Rather than relying on the *involved* partner's perception of his or her partner's characteristics, this approach allowed uninvolved partners the opportunity to describe themselves. Allen et al. (2005) speculate that the lack of research on uninvolved partner characteristics may be due to concerns of "blaming the victim" (p. 109), yet they emphasize the need for responsible and ethical work in this area if we truly want to understand infidelity from all angles. Given the high prevalence of infidelity (Drigotas & Barta, 2001) and serious consequences that come along with it (Amato & Rogers, 1997; Amato & Sobolewski, 2001), it is necessary to conduct thorough, well-rounded research on the phenomenon. The current study takes an important step in this direction. Another major strength of this study is the open-ended measure of infidelity. As opposed to listing emotional or physical behaviors that may or may not be considered cheating across all couples, this item inquired whether one's partner had ever engaged in infidelity and left the interpretation up to the respondent. For the sake of this study, it was less important to adhere to rigid definitions and more important to acknowledge and trust the uninvolved partner's perception of infidelity. Our significant findings within a large, nationally representative sample underscore the merit of this line of research. Future studies are encouraged to build upon this work by utilizing dyadic data to identify personality characteristics of each partner, as well as measuring relationship quality and sexual intimacy before and after the infidelity, from each partner's perspective.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

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