



# Having Your Cake and Eating It, Too: Factors Impacting Perception of Life Satisfaction During Outside Partnerships

Alicia M. Walker<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Considering both the prevalence of infidelity and the preoccupation in the U.S. with achieving personal happiness, the question of whether participating in affairs increases perception of life satisfaction is a relevant one. This study utilized a sample population of married individuals specifically seeking extramarital sexual encounters ( $n = 1070$ ) and investigated those factors which influence the individual's overall perception of life satisfaction before, during, and after their affairs. Findings indicate that while affairs do tend to make respondents happy, a number of factors influence perception of life satisfaction during an affair, including a belief that an outside partner is required to remain in a primary partnership, a desire to remain in the primary partnership, at least biweekly sexual events with the outside partner, a belief that the individual loves their outside partner, and seeking out the partnership due to sexual dissatisfaction within the primary partnership. There was also a gender effect. A surprising finding was that even *after* the outside partnership ends, respondents reported a higher life satisfaction rating than *before* the outside partnership.

**Keywords** Infidelity · Gender · Life satisfaction · Relationship satisfaction · Happiness · Extramarital relationships · Affairs · Extradyadic · Women

## Introduction

Culturally, Americans highly value marriage. Recent PEW data shows only one-in-seven never-married adults claim they have no interest in ever getting married (Parker and Stepler 2017). In fact, in the United States, we rate having a healthy marriage as one of our most important life goals (Karney et al. 2003; Cohn 2013) and a stable, intimate relationship as essential to happiness (Christopher and Sprecher 2000). Our expectations of the institution are high: 94% of young adults both

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✉ Alicia M. Walker  
aliciawalker@missouristate.edu

<sup>1</sup> Missouri State University, Springfield, MO, USA

male and female between the ages of 20–29 report an expectation that they will marry their “soul mate” (Whitehead and Popenoe 2001).

However, it is impossible to separate our current expectations surrounding marriage from its social history. Beck-Gernsheim (2002) explains that in the “golden age” of marriage, we had a model of family life we were expected to emulate. This model was a heterosexual couple with children who did not live together until marriage and stayed together until death. Those who deviated from the model kept their unconventionality a secret. Now, Beck-Gernsheim explains in a 2013 interview with *Theory, Culture, and Society*, “there is a much greater diversity of family forms and arrangements today, and above all: The standard model has lost its normative force.” Ulrich Beck points out that due to risk consciousness, fewer people are choosing to get married given the current high divorce rate. Beck also points out that our social move to individualization brought with it a sense that our own desires and wishes supersede our commitments to others.

While many factors influence relational happiness, infidelity continues to be cited as a significant factor in both reports of marital distress and the decision to dissolve marriages (Amato and Previti 2003; Atkins et al. 2001, 2010; Treas and Giesen 2000). With 50–60% of therapy clients citing infidelity as the cause for seeking out counseling, and counselors deeming it the most difficult issue to resolve in therapy, infidelity significantly increases one’s odds of experiencing divorce and is cited most often as the problem prompting a couple to file proceedings (Atkins et al. 2001; Cano and Leary 2000; Fife et al. 2008; Gordon et al. 2005).

The current social construction of marriage in the U.S. is an expectation of sexual exclusivity. The assumption around most relationships in the U.S. is that of strict monogamy, even though couples do not always take time to discuss and define this for themselves. However, we cannot discuss the issue of monogamy without clarifying the difference between relationships which permit sexual and/or emotional and romantic connection with other partners, sometimes referred to as consensual non-monogamy (CNM), and those relationships where no such agreement has been made between partners. An agreement between parties that either can engage in outside sexual relationships is *not* infidelity, and should not be classified as such. Recent research shows that couples practicing CNM enjoy similar relationship quality and psychological well-being as those who report being monogamous (Rubel and Bogaert 2014).

Relationships where there are clear agreements regarding extra-dyadic sexual relationships and infidelity are diametrically opposed practices. In this scenario, one or both partners have outside sexual or romantic partners without the permission, knowledge, or consent of their primary partner. While CNM couples report high levels of trust and satisfaction, the discovery that one partner has been participating in infidelity usually obliterates trust, satisfaction, self-esteem, and happiness. In turn, the betrayal of the non-cheating partner’s trust often leads to their emotional withdrawal from the cheating partner (Brimhall et al. 2008; Campbell et al. 2010; Hertlein et al. 2008).

Studies and polls routinely find Americans disapprove of infidelity (Newport and Himelfarb 2013). Certainly most people within marriages report expecting and assuming sexual exclusivity of their partner (Johnson et al. 2002; Treas and Giesen

2000). Yet research on the incidence of infidelity yields varying reports, in large part due to the manner in which the inquiry is made. For instance, asking about a lifetime incidence will yield higher percentages than asking about incidence over the last year or other set time period. Another complication is our own tendency to edit our own sexual histories. We tend to “forget” to count encounters or associations evoking unpleasant memories. For example, some people do not even count sexual experiences where they did not orgasm. Others do not count sexual encounters about which they feel guilty.

The task of determining incidence is complicated by a number of factors, including defining what “counts” as infidelity. The definition of “infidelity” often varies from individual to individual and researchers themselves define it differently from study to study (Blow and Hartnett 2005). Thus, reliable measures of infidelity are both difficult to come by and relatively new; and what does exist employs measures that have been called into question (Atkins et al. 2001) as most of the calculations regarding infidelity incidence are drawn from the General Social Survey (GSS), which relies upon in-person interviews. That is problematic when we take into consideration that participants are less likely to admit to infidelity when asked as part of in-person interviews and surveys (Whisman and Snyder 2007). Most research using the GSS estimates the lifetime incidence of sexual infidelity range between 20 and 37.5% (Atkins et al. 2001; Atkins and Kessel 2008; Wiederman 1997). Given the negative connotation of the terms used to refer to this behavior (“cheating” and “infidelity”) and social desirability, it is widely believed that estimates of infidelity are underreported (Smith 1994). Vangelisti and Gerstenberger found rates as high as 60% of men and 50% women reported sexual intercourse with someone who was not their spouse while married (Vangelisti and Gerstenberger 2014). Rates as high as 85.5% of married people committing infidelity have also been reported (Yarob et al. 1998).

Dissatisfaction with the primary relationship and sexual incompatibility or dissatisfaction have been cited as factors encouraging sexual infidelity (Fisher et al. 2009; Liu 2000; Mattingly et al. 2010; Walker 2014a, b, 2017). Further, people involved in outside partnerships tend to make this behavior a pattern; the relationships are often ongoing as opposed to one-night stands (Omarzu et al. 2012). In other words, people who participate in outside partnerships tend to keep an outside partnership going alongside their primary partnership, replacing lost outside partners with fresh partners, and tend to seek out longer-term arrangements as opposed to encounters of opportunity and chance (Walker 2017).

Given the many negative outcomes created by the discovery of infidelity, the benefits of infidelity are called into question. Finding a willing partner and arranging for a safe space for covert sexual activity are no simple tasks. The person wishing to find an outside partner must take care to conceal their activities, both the sexual contact itself and the interim contact with their lover. Additionally, assuming hotels are utilized for the covert sexual activity, there are costs incurred as well. With this in mind, what drives the individual to undertake the extra work and stress of participation in an outside partnership? Does participation in extramarital relationships increase one’s sense of happiness and satisfaction? Considering the prevalence of infidelity and the preoccupation in America with achieving personal happiness, the

question of whether participating in outside partnerships increases life satisfaction is a relevant one (Lyubomirsky et al. 2005).

This study utilized a sample population of married individuals specifically and purposefully seeking extramarital sexual encounters on an online website catering to affairs, *Ashley Madison*. This study investigates those factors which influence the individual's overall perception of life satisfaction before, during, and after their outside partnerships with a sample obtained online, and is thus skewed heavily in terms of race and class. The sample is predominantly White and middle class. The sample is also largely involved in outside partnerships with other-sex partners. The research questions for this inquiry are:

- Does having an outside partner increase life satisfaction?
- What factors or conditions increase or decrease perception of life satisfaction in individuals who have consciously sought out an outside partnership alongside their primary partnership?

For clarity, the term outside partners in this article refers specifically to those partners outside of a marriage where there is no knowledge of consent of additional partners, and the marital relationship is assumed monogamous by the other spouse.

## Happiness

The consideration of happiness is not a frivolous one. Happiness is correlated with better health and well-being (Davidson et al. 2010). Global happiness studies reveal unsurprisingly that physical health, adequate material conditions, and stable employment all increase happiness (Diener et al. 1999; Di Tella and MacCulloch 2006). However, happiness is more than simply personal attributes and personality, or the circumstances of our lives. It is also culturally influenced, so that each country's average level of happiness varies (Diener and Lucas 2000; Inglehart et al. 2008; Veenhoven 1995).

Our intimate relationships play a role in our perception of life satisfaction (Martikainen 2008). Research tells us that married individuals tend to report being happier than those who remain single (Koopmans et al. 2008; Layard 2005), and this effect is pronounced during the first 2 years (Lucas et al. 2003; Zimmermann and Easterlin 2006), but only if they are treated well within their relationships. Those in unhappy couplings report higher levels of distress than those who are single (Hagedoorn et al. 2006; Hawkins and Booth 2005). However, after a few years of marriage, happiness levels return to the individual's baseline point (Frey 2008; Huppert et al. 2005).

The tendency of happiness levels to bump and then return to baseline is a mechanism seen in all arenas of our lives, and is referred to as adaptation (Huppert 2005; Bruni and Porta 2007). Events we deem life-changing will increase our happiness, but then we adapt to that level of happiness at which point our happiness levels return to our personal norm (Bruni and Porta 2007; Huppert 2005; Huppert et al. 2005). Similarly, the satisfaction of meeting a goal has the same effect: a bump followed by a decrease back to our baseline. When considering infidelity, this is an

important idea. If the marriage initially increases happiness, but after a period of time that person's happiness levels decrease, it might become tempting to find something to restore those increased levels of happiness. Additionally, the return to the individual's baseline of happiness could be experienced as a fault or problem in the marriage.

Pleasure is an important component of happiness (Biswas-Diener et al. 2015). Kubovy (1999) points out that while the pleasures of the body are distinct from those the mind, the two are closely related. Scholars have tied pleasure with overall life satisfaction (Diener et al. 2012; Martin et al. 2010; Peterson et al. 2005). In fact, some believe it is a crucial part of experiencing happiness (Kashdan et al. 2008). This also applies to infidelity, which is at its core an attempt to increase the pleasure in one's life.

Studying happiness can be challenging. Researchers have described it as an "elusive concept" (Frey and Stutzer 2002, p. 4). The effort is complicated by the fact that it relies upon self-report. However, studies demonstrate that self-report can be a reliable measure of happiness. Fordyce (1988) found that different happiness measures correlate with one another. Other studies demonstrate that respondents who report higher levels of happiness smile more (Ekman et al. 1990), and their blood pressure and heart rates are lower, too (Shedler et al. 1993). Social desirability bias has not been found to be problematic in happiness studies (Argyle 1987; Veenhoven 1995). Although Diener et al. (1991) did find correlation, they posited that social desirability bias in happiness self-report is a personality characteristic, and thus should not be regarded as a response artifact. Further, Ortiz-Ospina and Roser (2017) explain that "surveys asking people about life satisfaction and happiness do measure subjective well-being with reasonable accuracy." The present data is the result of a survey specifically asking about life satisfaction.

## Theoretical Lens

Most people believe marriage means monogamy, and if someone is unhappy in a marriage to the point of believing another person is required for their happiness, then divorce is the remedy. However, the people in this study refuse to accept and publicly acknowledge the failure of their primary partnerships via divorce or break-up. Although divorce is very common in U.S. culture, stigma is still attached to the event; choosing to remain in a less-than-satisfying primary partnership sidesteps that stigma. However, the individual choosing to avoid stigma through remaining in an unsatisfying union continues to struggle with reconciling their own unmet needs. The participants in this sample create an alternate space—that of their relationships with their outside partners—where those needs can be met. Yet they retain the privilege of the master status of being married, or partnered. Thus, they reject the social norm of marriage as monogamous, but they do so in secret from spouses, friends, family, and coworkers. Through this experience, they redefine "commitment" to mean a resolution to remain in the primary partnership (Walker 2017). Thus, under this paradigm, sex and even emotional intimacy with another partner does not violate their commitment.

They reject the binary proposition of marriage, which dictates that either an individual works out the challenges and stay married and monogamous, or they conclude that the relationship is unsalvageable, break up, and eventually begin seeing new partners (Walker 2017). Thus, they conceive of an alternate solution to a primary partnership that is not wholly working, where their own needs are ignored, unmet, and not prioritized. In this conception, outside partnerships are a workaround to avoid the pain, inconvenience, financial ramifications, and stigma of divorce (Walker 2017). This infidelity workaround is an attempt to increase their own sense of happiness and satisfaction without enduring the pain and inconvenience of a divorce, or finding a new life partner (Walker 2017). In fact, over half of the sample believed having an outside partner enabled them to stay in their primary partnership. Given the ease with which divorce can be obtained in the U.S., culturally, our unions are held to “an extremely high standard” (Druckerman 2007: 273). Thus, when an individual finds themselves in a marriage that fails to meet their expectations, the impulse can be to blame the union itself, or their partner.

At present, our expectations of our partners are at an all-time high (Coontz 2005). Currently in the U.S., people expect their spouses to meet *all* of their needs. The current presentation of the marriage ideal involves marrying one’s “best friend” and requires the spouse to be all things: lover, friend, and partner (Coontz 2005; Kingston 2004). This is a new conception of spousal expectations. “Never before in history ha[ve] societies thought that such a set of high expectations about marriage was either realistic or desirable” (Coontz 2005: 23). This cultural positioning encourages people to *believe* they *deserve* to have those expectations met. In fact, our cultural sense of *entitlement* when it comes to personal fulfillment and happiness “might even make us more likely to cheat” (273) when our marriages do not meet our high expectations.

In U.S. society, marriage is as an achieved status (Coontz 2005), and serves as a social standing of great significance (Cherlin 2009). Models of idealized marriages, expected roles within marriages, and expectations of sexual relations within marriages surround us through media, and offer up marriage as an antidote to unhappiness and loneliness. The culture industry produces a cultural life script that trains and socializes women to desire marriage as an accomplishment (Kingston 2004). Cherlin (2009) explains, “Getting married is a way to show family and friends that a person has a successful personal life. It is the ultimate merit badge” (50). Thus, ending a marriage is a loss of status. Additionally, there are financial and custody concerns.

Given the current state of expectations of marriage, those who participate in infidelity with no plan or desire to leave their marriages can be seen as utilizing a workaround to try to achieve the culturally constructed ideal of personal relationships. For those who believe they cannot “get it all” in one relationship, giving up their primary partnership to chase another primary partnership in the hopes that they can both replicate the positives of their primary partnership and gain the aspects they currently lack is a big gamble. However, holding onto the primary partnership with its existing benefits and supplementing with an outside partnership could begin to appear to some as a reasonable strategy to achieve the socially sanctioned goals of relational satisfaction and happiness.

Unlike many who participate in outside partnerships, the respondents in this study made a conscious decision to pursue an outside partner. Further, they did so with the aid of an outside party, *Ashley Madison*, a website designed specifically for married people seeking outside partners. Thus, these are not people who “happened” into an outside partnership, nor are they individuals who “fell in love” with someone with whom they had routine contact. This was a formal and deliberate attempt to secure an outside partner for sexual contact. This is significant and delineates this sample from other groups of individuals who have participated in outside partnerships as the result of opportunity or access. The participants in this study created an opportunity purposefully, and made calculated decisions to bring an outside partner into their lives.

## Method

Infidelity is typically a closeted behavior. The current social construction of marriage in the United States assumes sexual exclusivity, and there is a prevailing disapproval of infidelity throughout society (Laumman et al. 1994; Barkhorn 2013). Thus, acquiring a sample for a study of infidelity is challenging due to a lack of a sampling frame. This data was collected from a survey conducted with the cooperation of *Ashley Madison*, a niche dating site with a global market designed specifically for married individuals seeking an extramarital partner. As a result of the specific membership of that site, this sample is predominantly White and middle class.

### Data Collection Method: The Online Survey

The survey primarily consisted of closed-ended items, although a small number of questions offered a write-in option. Closed-ended items provide a standardized measure since all the participants are exposed to the same repeated stimuli, such as item stems and response categories (Johnson and Christenson 2008). This method also permits the researcher to utilize numerical data with maximum response comparability (Dillman et al. 2007; Johnson and Christenson 2008). An advantage of a web-survey is that bias created by social desirability is reduced (Kreuter et al. 2008).

The design of the structured 40-item questionnaire sought to investigate the perceived satisfaction and happiness of the respondent before, during, and after their extramarital partnerships, as well as the respondents' history of extramarital partnerships. The tool used to discern that information was a 0 to 10 scale modeled after the Gallup World Poll (GWP). This tool requires self-report and measures happiness with reasonable accuracy (Ortiz-Ospina and Roser 2017). Each respondent was asked to measure their perception of life satisfaction before, during, and after the outside partnership. These measures were done retrospectively. Measures of relationship sexual activities and communication methods were modeled after questions used in the National Health and Social Life Survey (Laumman et al. 1994). The researcher further developed the survey questions for this study. The survey was then field-tested with graduate student volunteers to assess readability and time-required.

(One of the negotiations with *Ashley Madison* regarded the amount of time it would take respondents to complete the survey.)

The email invitation and the survey itself included a brief explanation of the survey's purpose; the survey itself had clear directions throughout for survey completion, which have been found to be critical components of an internet survey (Czaja and Blair 2005; Sue and Ritter 2007). Additionally, the invitation and the survey itself indicated confidentiality. Respondents provided an email address, which ensured that each respondent responded to the survey only once. Using an internet survey provided a means of collecting data from a closeted population, but it also afforded low cost and speedy data collection regardless of geographic distribution and size of the sample.

*Ashley Madison* recruited its members to participate in the survey through email invitation, which went out to members in three geographically-focused waves. Specifically, the website targeted members by region of the United States. One blast went to members reporting a zip code in the Northwest region of the U.S. Another went to members reporting a zip code in the Midwest region of the U.S. And the final blast went to members reporting a zip code in the Northeastern and South-eastern region of the U.S. The researcher was not privy to the number of invitations issued. Thus, the response rate is unknown.

The email invitation included a link where the respondent could complete the survey. Anonymous survey response data was managed by a third-party vendor, Qualtrics, who also administered the survey questions. The first blast of email invitations went out March 14, 2013, and the survey collection closed June 7, 2013. Survey questions did not have to be answered in order, and could be skipped entirely if the respondent chose not to respond to a query. At the conclusion of the survey, a thank you message was generated for each respondent. For clarity, the data considered here is only the data of those who indicated within the survey that they were participating in infidelity.

## Dependent Variable

The measure utilized for the dependent variable in this study was a continuous variable created from the 0 to 10 scale modeled after the Gallup World Poll (GWP) measuring life satisfaction during the outside partnership. The higher the number, the better the respondent perceived their life during the time period. To reduce recall bias, respondents were also asked to apply the same scale to the period prior to, and after the end of the outside partnership. While this reduces recall bias, the author acknowledges that this action does not entirely repair the bias.

## Independent Variables

The measures used in this study for the independent variables were the belief that the respondent needed an outside partner to remain married, the respondent's frequency of desire to end their primary partnership, the degree to which the respondent loved their primary partner, the degree to which they loved their outside partner,



the number of sexual encounters the respondent reported with their outside partner in a month's time, as well as the reasons for the respondent having sought out an outside partnership in the first place. Initial collection response categories for belief of respondent that an outside partner was needed, frequency of desire, the degree to which the respondent loved their primary and outside partner were "completely," "very much," "somewhat," "not really," and "not at all." However, for ease of analysis, these variables were all converted to dichotomous variables where 1=yes and 0=no. The variables for the belief that an outside partner was needed to remain married, the respondent's frequency of desire to end their primary partnership were created by coding "frequently," "sometimes," and "occasionally" as "yes" (1) and "rarely" and "never" as "no" (0). The variables for whether the respondent loved their outside partner and primary partner were created by coding "completely," "very much," and "somewhat" as "yes" (1) and "not really" and "not at all" as "no" (0). During initial collection, the frequency of sex with the outside partner over the course of the month was a write-in answer. The data was divided into a dichotomous variable where 1=yes, the respondent reports having sex with their outside partner twice a week or more, and 0=no, the respondent does not report having sex with their outside partner as often as twice a week.

Initial responses regarding what area of the primary partnership led the respondent to seek out an outside partner were categorical. Categories included "sex," "companionship," "emotional support," "intimacy, passion," or "other," which permitted a write-in. The categories were collapsed into sex, emotion, and other, which encompassed such write-in reasons as "commuter couple," "not wishing to be monogamous," "revenge," and "variety." Categorical responses of "sex," "passion," and write-ins such as "commuter couple," and "variety" were coded as 1=Respondent reported the reason for seeking an outside partner was solely a sexual deficit in their primary partnership. Categorical responses of "companionship," "emotional support," "intimacy," "all of the above," and the write-in response of "revenge" were coded 0=Respondent not solely a sexual deficit within their primary partnership. Even though "all of the above" includes sex, it does not indicate that the primary reason for seeking an outside partner was sexual, but rather that there was an emotional need present as well. Likewise, "revenge" indicates an emotional issue within the primary partnership, or on the part of the respondent, who likely feels hurt and betrayed by their primary partner. So, while those respondents may have been seeking a sexual encounter with someone outside their marriage to "even the score," they were not doing so because of a sexual lack within their primary partnership.

This decision was made in an effort to discern whether the area of their primary partnership they were trying to supplement impacted their perception of life satisfaction as a result of the outside partnership. The researcher hypothesized that the more complex the area trying to be supplemented, the less likely an outside partnership would be able to fill the gaps of the primary partnership and increase life satisfaction. Thus, if a respondent's primary partnership is lacking in an emotional intimacy component replacing that via outside partner would prove more difficult than simply finding an outside partner with whom they are sexually compatible, and meeting for sex occasionally. The replacement of emotional intimacy cannot be achieved through meeting with an outside partner for an hour or two a few times

a week. Additionally, considering that the participants in this study could not find both fulfilling emotional intimacy *and* satisfactory sex with their primary partner, it seems unlikely they would find both of those things in an outside partner. Thus, the analysis was completed with separate categories of participants dependent upon how complex their goals for participation in outside partnerships.

## Control Variables

Respondents' age and years of schooling were measured in years. Education was left in number of years, but anything over 24 years of schooling (which would indicate a terminal degree) was collapsed together. Binary variables were included for gender (female = 1; male = 0), race (white = 1; other = 0), and marital status (married = 1; unmarried = 0). The sample was 87.17% (1107) White, 66.30% male (842), and 88.50% (1124) married.

## Data Analysis

Once the data collection concluded, the researcher analyzed the data for variance and trends. A repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted to ensure the difference between life satisfaction measures was significant. Ordinary least squares regression models were used to estimate the factors which influence a respondent's life satisfaction during an outside partnership. Due to heteroskedacity, the model employed robust standard errors. The overall model had a  $p < 0.001$  significance. All models used a significance level of 0.05 and two-tailed tests (Table 1).

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics—sample characteristics (N = 1270)

Variables	Number	(%)	Range	Mean	(SD)
Education in years			2–24	16.00	3.02
< Bachelors	403	32.29			
Bachelors or above	845	67.70			
Graduate degree/above	362	29.00			
Age in 10 years			2.4–7.7	4.58	1.01
Female	428	33.70			
Married	1124	88.50			
White	1107	87.17			
OP due to sex not emotion	853	67.17			
Belief OP needed to stay married	632	49.76			
Desire to leave PP	563	44.33			
Loves PP	824	64.88			
Loves OP	351	27.64			
At least biweekly sex with OP	222	17.48			

## Descriptive Results

Over half of the sample agreed that they believed they *needed* an outside partner to remain in their marriage (551 or 52.08%). The respondents demonstrated commitment, understood as psychological attachment and an intention to persist long-term in the relationship (Arriaga and Agnew 2001), to their primary partnership despite their extramarital activities. The majority of the sample agreed that they loved their primary partner (699 or 66.07%). Less than half of the sample agreed that they loved their outside partner (290 or 27.41%). Less than half of the sample reported contemplating leaving their primary partner (472 or 44.61%). In this sample, less than 20% of the respondents reported having sex with their outside partner twice a week (200 or 18.90%). More than half of the sample reported seeking out an outside partner due to a sexual lack within the primary partnership (745 or 70.42%).

## Discussion of Results

The mean of the variable measuring perception of life satisfaction *before* the respondent's current or last outside partner was 5.47. The mean of the variable measuring perception of life satisfaction *during* the respondent's current or last outside partnership was 7.68. The mean of the variable measuring perception of life satisfaction *after* the respondent's current or last outside partnership was 5.67. A repeated-measures ANOVA demonstrated the difference between groups with a  $p < 0.001$  significance. Thus, for the participants of this sample, their perception of life satisfaction is higher *during* an outside partnership. More interestingly, while their perception of life satisfaction *after* an outside partnership ends was reported as lower than *during* the outside partnership, it is still higher than it was *before* the partnership.

Regressions showed that a respondent's belief that they love their primary partner was not a significant when controlling for other factors (Table 2). A belief that the individual needs an outside partner in order to remain married positively influences their perception of life satisfaction *during* an outside partnership by 0.48 with a  $p < 0.001$  significance. If a respondent reported a desire to exit their primary partnership, their perception of life satisfaction declined by 0.30 with a  $p < 0.0011$  significance. In other words, these respondents likely believed they could get everything they needed from a single person; they just believed they would not get it from their current spouse. Functional specificity proves a useful lens when considering this finding.

Functional specificity essentially purports that people "engage in selective and purposive activation of ties" (Perry and Pescosolido 2010: 346). People do not get all of their needs met by one person in their social network. Rather, people may go to one person in their social network if they want a companion to watch a romantic comedy, and another one if they want to visit a museum. Or, in this

**Table 2** Reasons, beliefs, feelings and controls (N = 1081)

Variables	Model 1 <i>b</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	Model 2 <i>b</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	Model 3 <i>b</i> ( <i>SE</i> )
Loves PP	0.22 (0.10)	0.12 (0.09)	0.13 (0.09)
Belief OP needed to stay married	0.51*** (0.08)	0.46*** (0.08)	0.48*** (0.08)
Desire to leave PP	-0.25** (0.09)	-0.30*** (0.09)	-0.30*** (0.09)
OP due to sex not emotion	0.11 (0.10)	0.25** (0.10)	0.30** (0.10)
Loves OP		0.81*** (0.09)	0.79*** (0.09)
At least biweekly sex with OP		0.34*** (0.10)	0.33*** (0.10)
Education			-0.02 (0.01)
Age			0.05 (0.05)
Female			0.29*** (0.09)
Married			0.08 (0.14)
White			0.07 (0.13)
Constant	7.55*** (0.12)	7.15*** (0.12)	6.94*** (0.36)
R-squared	0.04	0.13	0.14

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$  (two-tailed test)

context, a person may have a social tie whose sole role in their lives is that of “lover.” It is reasonable to assume that what is motivating many of these participants who want to remain married is the fact there are simply some things they “need” that they cannot get from their primary relationship. Although cultural norms present marriage as a “general store,” from which we can find the resources to fulfill all of our emotional, psychological, and sexual needs, functional specificity presents the idea that our relationships are more of a “boutique,” where each social tie provides something unique and specific to our lives (346). For the participants of this study, perhaps even their sexual and intimate relationships take on a “boutique” quality rather than the “general store” ideal that is presented to us (346).

This theory challenges the socially constructed idea of our time that a person’s spouse, fiancé, or girlfriend should be everything: perfect parent, equal partner, amazing lover, and best friend. This explains the finding that the less an individual considers leaving their primary partner and the more sex they are having with their outside partner, the better that person perceives their life during the outside

partnership. If someone believes their primary partnership is going to last the rest of their life, but they also recognize all of their needs cannot be met by their primary partner, having an outside partner would increase that person's happiness. In the same way, if a person has sought out an outside sexual partner, the more often they exercise this aspect of the partnership, their satisfaction would increase since the person is more often meeting whatever needs their primary partner cannot fill.

A belief that the respondent loved their outside partner, increased a respondent's perception of life satisfaction by 0.79 with a  $p < 0.001$  significance. While human relationships are more "boutique" than "general store," we cannot simply plug in any warm body to fill a void or need. Thus, the more bonded we feel to the person we turn to for our "boutique" needs, the happier that association will make us. When respondents sought out an outside partnership due to a perceived sexual deficit within the marriage versus a perceived emotional deficit, perception of life satisfaction increases by 0.30 with a  $p < 0.01$  significance. This suggests that the use of an outside partner to fill in emotional intimacy gaps from a primary partnership may not be as effective in terms of increasing life satisfaction as pursuing those associations solely for sexual variety, or for sexual satisfaction.

Being female increases the effect by 0.29 with a  $p < 0.01$  significance. This can be explained by the "monogamy malaise" women undergo in long-term, monogamous relationships (Basson et al. 2004; Bloemers et al. 2013; Klusmann 2002), and the tendency for a new partner to provoke a rally in women's levels of desire (Chivers and Timmers 2012). The monogamy malaise refers to the observed effect in monogamous relationships that women's sexual desire declines over the course of the relationship, but if the woman takes a new partner she will experience a return of sexual desire (Walker 2017; Klusmann 2002). The boost in sexual desire experienced by women in outside partnerships may work more effectively as a salve for the monogamy malaise and boredom women struggle with when inside otherwise satisfying primary partnerships. Relighting the flames of their sexual desire with a new partner could well round out their life satisfaction. This also buttresses the work of Ryan and Jethá (2010), who suggest a biological force prompting women to crave variety.

Education, age, marital status, and race had no significant effect. Respondents who reported having sex with their outside partners at least twice a week reported an increased perception of life satisfaction by 0.33 with a  $p < 0.01$  significance. Frequency of contact plays a role in the participants' perception of life satisfaction. It is possible that the complications of having an outside partnership can only be balanced by a certain level of sexual contact with their outside partners. Anything less than twice weekly may render the amount of work involved more salient.

The results showed that for people who have purposefully sought out an outside partner, being committed to their primary partnership, loving their outside partner, believing that they need to have an outside partner to stay in their marriage, having sought out an outside partner because of a perceived sexual deficit within their primary partnership, and being female all increase an individual's perception of life satisfaction during their outside partnership.

## Limitations

One limitation of this study is the data collection method. Although internet surveys are cost effective and reduce geographical dependence, they do pose limitations. For example, 22–33% of households are without internet access altogether (Dillman 2012). Internet surveys also limit sampling demographics by skewing them toward White, educated, married populations (Dillman 2012), and this study is no different. The sample is largely White and middle class. This study is further limited by the nature of the site used to recruit respondents. *Ashley Madison* requires a costly membership for male members, but female members can use the site for free. This skews socioeconomic standing of the sample. Also, because of a lack of sampling frame, the study recruited a purposive, non-random sample. That is, the researcher sought out participants who had experienced the phenomenon under investigation. Thus, the entire sample is comprised of participants who have both previously experienced an outside partnership and are capable and willing to discuss their personal experiences regarding the phenomenon with the researcher. Some respondents were also currently involved in an outside partnership, but had also had an outside partnership in the past.

Additionally, these participants intentionally and deliberately sought out outside partners online. They did not meet someone at work and experience a spark that provoked their participation in infidelity, they made a decision to create a profile and vet partners from a pool online. Thus, the findings are not generalizable to those individuals whose outside partnerships were the result of organic contact with an outside partner. Nor do they suggest that participating in outside partnerships would increase the life satisfaction of every married person, or that those who have never considered outside partnerships should do so. This is a non-randomly selected, limited sample. As such, its results cannot be generalized.

This is not to say this study is without merit, however. While our navigation of sexual relationships and monogamy is often perceived as private, the reality is that “infidelity is a dynamic social process subject to influence by the context in which it is embedded” (Munsch 2012: 48). Looking at the practice of sexual non-exclusivity among people who are involved in an assumed-monogamous primary partnership sheds light on intimate relationships. Further, examining what is frequently deemed as deviant yields a better understanding of the average.

## Implications

The data presented here suggest further inquiry is warranted. Specifically, an inquiry into participation in outside partnerships with a more diverse sample may yield different results. The results of this study indicate a need for longitudinal studies to examine the impact of time and changing relationship dynamics on individuals’ impressions of satisfaction and participation in outside partnerships. This study considers heterosexual outside partnerships. Further investigation into

same-sex outside partnerships is warranted. Additionally, qualitative inquiry into participation in outside partnerships may expand on these findings.

The data in this study reveal that people's experiences of navigating outside partnerships are much more nuanced than previous studies suggest. Considering the top three reasons cited by couples seeking counseling include infidelity, this study has implications for practice as well. Marriage and family therapists are inevitably faced with clients who have experienced incidences of infidelity, or even adult children trying to process their parents' experience and handling of infidelity. Studies consistently show infidelity as one of the most problematic issues within a relationship and one of the most difficult to treat (Gordon et al. 2005; Fife et al. 2008; Whisman et al. 1997). Incidence of infidelity within a primary partnership put the couple at greater risk to divorce or separate (Atkins et al. 2005; Amato and Previti 2003; Amato and Rogers 1997). The findings here can help mental health professional understand the complexities in their clients' motivations for and responses to participation in extramarital relationships. In particular, the data may help to shed light on particular primary partnership dynamics influencing women to seek out an outside partner. Clinicians must address infidelity in therapy with clients, and the present study offers additional information with regard to how people view and construct their experiences with outside partnerships.

## Conclusion

The data here suggests that the reasons an individual seeks out an outside partner greatly influence their satisfaction with that experience. Their commitment to their primary partnership is also a significant influence. Participants in primary partnerships which were satisfying in non-sexual arenas reported greater perception of life satisfaction as a result of their participation in outside partnerships. For this sample, the happier and more fulfilling the primary partnership, the more satisfying the experience of outside partnerships. This is perhaps counter to what one might have expected, and challenges current ideas about infidelity and relationship satisfaction. More inquiry is warranted on this topic. Additionally, the findings regarding gender challenge traditional views of women and sexual satisfaction.

The results of this study on which factors influence the individual's overall perception of life satisfaction before, during, and after their outside partnerships shed light on the beliefs of those individuals whose outside partnerships are not the result of opportunity or chance, but rather purposefully entered into relationships. The respondents sought out these liaisons by making a profile on a website for just such purpose, vetting possible candidates through messaging and public meets, and ultimately entered into a discrete relationship with an outside party. The question of whether these outside liaisons brought them enhanced life satisfaction hinges on a multiplicity of factors, including their opinion that such an arrangement is necessary for the continuation of their primary partnership, how often they think about ending their primary partnership, how much they love both their outside partner, the amount of weekly sex with their outside partner, and their reasons for initiating such an arrangement. There is also a gender effect, with women perceiving greater

life satisfaction during an outside partnership. The data presented in this paper buttress previous research on gender and non-monogamies. For example, the historical perspective that monogamy has been required and expected from women, yet merely suggested for men (Reay and Phillips 2011; Ryan and Jethá 2010).

This study was conducted on a non-random sample and the results cannot be generalized to the greater population. Neither can these results be generalized to all populations participating in infidelity, as these people purposefully sought out outside partnerships as opposed to participating in an organically occurring liaison. This sample is skewed White and middle class. Thus, further inquiry into race and class with regards to outside partnerships is warranted. Additionally, although *Ashley Madison* permits members to search for same-sex partners, the pool of such participants is small. Thus, participants do not tend to use the site for anything beyond heterosexual couplings.

The study suggests further inquiry is warranted into longitudinal studies of those involved in outside partnerships. It is possible that over time the individual's perception of life satisfaction may wax and wane. Additionally, it is possible that the individual's commitment to remaining in their marriage may wane over time as well. Long-term outside partnerships as compared to serial outside partnerships may show an effect. Longitudinal studies would also shed light into what—if any—effect a long-term outside partnership may have on an individual's belief that they love their primary partner.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** The sole author declares that he/she has no conflict of interest.

**Human and Animal Rights Statement** No animals were involved.

**Ethical Approval** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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