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# Adolescents' Definitions of Cheating in Romantic Relationships

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Jerika C. Norona entitled "Adolescents' Definitions of Cheating in Romantic Relationships." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Psychology.

Deborah P. Welsh, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Jenny Macfie, Todd M. Moore

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(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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# **Adolescents' Definitions of Cheating in Romantic Relationships**

A Thesis Presented for the  
Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Jerika C. Norona  
December 2013

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## **Dedication**

To my partner, Jonathan.  
Thank you for your love and support.

### **Acknowledgements**

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### **Abstract**

Cheating is a common occurrence in dating relationships. However, less is known about cheating in adolescence, a time when many individuals first experience romantic relationships. An important initial step for research is examining how adolescents define cheating in their romantic relationships. The present study used Thematic Analysis, a qualitative analytic method, to explore adolescents' definitions of cheating and how these definitions might differ across age and gender. Furthermore, the present study examined patterns that emerged within definitions. Results indicate that definitions of cheating included a range of behaviors, such as engaging in physical activity, romantic/intimate involvement, spending time with, talking to, having romantic feelings for, and thinking about an extradyadic partner. Significantly higher numbers of definitions involving heavier physical behaviors were provided by older adolescents and boys compared to middle adolescents and girls. Furthermore, definitions often involved physical, emotional, and non-physical and non-emotional behaviors. Overall, results indicate that cheating is a complex and multifaceted construct for adolescents.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

In the United States, infidelity is a fairly common occurrence in dating relationships (Allen & Baucom, 2006; McNulty & Brineman, 2007). In a recent study on college dating couples, more than half of the young adult participants reported having an emotional connection or being physically intimate with someone other than their romantic dating partner in the past two years (Allen & Baucom, 2006). Furthermore, in another college dating sample, about a third of participants reported cheating on their romantic partner in physical and/or emotional ways (Hall & Fincham, 2009). Infidelity is not only damaging to relationship health, but to the mental health of both partners. Previous research indicates that both those who cheat, as well as those who are cheated on, experience negative effects on mental health and well-being (Allen et al., 2005; Furr & Welsh, 2006). For example, participating in infidelity is related to shame and guilt from transgressing against one's partner, as well as a mix of excitement from being romantically involved with someone new (Feldman & Cauffman, 1999a). According to Welsh, Grello, and Harper (2003), this combination of emotions, as well as the potential end of a relationship, might lead those who cheat toward experiencing depressive symptoms. Furthermore, learning about a partner's infidelity typically results in negative emotionality, including jealousy and distress, which can lead to the dissolution of the relationship and subsequent mental health issues such as depression (McAnulty & Brineman, 2007; Welsh et al., 2003).

Unfortunately, we know far less about infidelity in adolescent dating relationships than we do about infidelity in couples from older age groups. Because marriage is the only legally defined dyadic romantic relationship and involves higher barriers to leaving than dating relationships (Levinger, 1965), much research on infidelity focuses on married couples (e.g., Allen et al., 2005). Furthermore, though previous research that focuses on infidelity in non-married dyadic relationships exists, this research is almost exclusively limited to college dating samples. According to McAnulty and Brineman (2007, p. 109), “By our count, of the 7,253 participants in approximately 30 studies of dating infidelity, a total of 7,138, or 98.4%, of participants were undergraduate students.” Because of the prevalence and importance of dating relationships in younger age groups, understanding infidelity in dating relationships is an important focus for future research. Thus, there is a dire need for studies on infidelity in other age groups, such as adolescence, during which romantic relationships first blossom (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003).

### **Definitions of Infidelity and Cheating in Romantic Relationships**

When studying infidelity in adolescence, it is important to first understand the array of behaviors that individuals perceive as cheating. Varying definitions of “infidelity,” “cheating,” and “unfaithfulness” exist in the literature for both married and dating couples<sup>1</sup> (Blow & Hartnett, 2005; see McAnulty & Brineman, 2007 for a review). However, these terms are granted a specific definition in terms of sexual intercourse or

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<sup>1</sup> For purposes of consistency, the term “cheating” is used to refer to any involvement with someone other than one’s romantic partner (i.e., extradyadic partner).

physical activity with someone other than one's romantic partner (Atkins, Baucom, & Jacobson, 2001; Feldman & Cauffman, 1999a; Feldman & Cauffman, 1999b).

According to McAnulty and Brineman (2007), defining cheating with such specificity leads to three main problems for the field. Firstly, there is a lack of understanding of non-sexual and non-physical behaviors that may still be considered cheating by many individuals (e.g., intimate verbal exchanges, gift-giving, etc.). Secondly, without conceptualization of the full range of behaviors that may be considered cheating, we cannot explore how understudied types of cheating affect mental health and well-being (e.g., how spending time with someone outside of the romantic relationship relates to depressive symptoms).

Finally, it is difficult to compare and draw implications from studies that include different definitions of cheating (McAnulty & Brineman, 2007). Importantly, couple members might hold different definitions of cheating, which might explain the discrepancy between high reported disapproval of cheating, yet frequent reports of participation in such behavior (Mattingly, Wilson, Clark, Bequette, & Weidler, 2010). For example, both members of a couple might consider romantic fidelity as important for their relationship; however, both partners may possess markedly different notions about what constitutes romantic exclusivity in their relationship. Thus, if one partner held hands with someone other than his or her romantic partner and did not consider that as a cheating behavior, his or her partner may still consider this act a breach of exclusivity in their relationship. Therefore, in the injured partner's view, the same person who values fidelity in the relationship also committed a cheating behavior. Previous research on this

topic has demonstrated that couple members with discrepancies regarding monogamy in their romantic relationships are at higher risk for relationship distress than couples in which both partners share similar ideas regarding romantic exclusivity (Gonzaga, Campos, & Bradbury, 2007).

Thus, an important step for research on this topic is to clarify the many behaviors that might constitute cheating. Doing so can both guide consistency in definitions for future studies on dating infidelity and help clinicians become aware of the array of behaviors that distressed couples might interpret as cheating in their romantic relationships. Furthermore, because no previous studies have explored how adolescents develop ideas about what constitutes cheating in their first romantic relationships, we currently have little understanding about how conceptualizations of cheating develop over the lifespan. More information on this topic may help uncover developmental processes that lead to the participation in, experience of, and recovery from cheating in later romantic relationships.

To gain a better sense of the range of behaviors that may constitute cheating, many studies have relied on open-ended questions that ask participants to list such behaviors (e.g., Yarab, Sensibaugh, & Allgeier, 1998), or the provision of a list of different behaviors that ask participants to assess whether they view those behaviors as cheating (e.g., Wilson, Mattingly, Clark, Weidler, & Bequette, 2011). These studies reveal that individuals possess varying definitions of cheating with a wide range of behaviors, including physical contact, sexual activity, emotional connection, cognitions about an extradyadic partner, and spending time with an extradyadic partner. For

example, one study that asked college students to list “unfaithful” behaviors showed that participants considered sexual behaviors (e.g., intercourse, oral sex, and sexual touching), emotional connection (e.g., romantic feelings), cognitions (e.g., sexual and/or romantic fantasies), and flirting with an extradyadic partner to be unfaithful (Yarab et al., 1998). Two other studies on college students, which asked participants to rate the extent to which certain behaviors were unfaithful, reported similar findings, such that vaginal sex, oral sex, sexual touching, lying and withholding information, and dating another person were commonly considered unfaithful behaviors (Mattingly et al., 2010; Randall & Byers, 2003). Interestingly, a separate study that asked college-age participants to provide open-ended definitions of unfaithfulness also included secret-keeping and backstabbing as common definitions of cheating, both of which might not necessarily involve physical or emotional contact with an extradyadic partner (Roscoe, Cavanaugh, & Kennedy, 1988). In summary, cheating appears to cover a wide range of physical, sexual, emotional, and cognitive behaviors for young adults.

### **Age-Based Differences in Definitions of Cheating**

Although definitions of cheating have been explored in college-age dating couples, there is a need for such an open-ended exploration for adolescents. As mentioned earlier, the majority of research on dating infidelity involves adult married or college-age individuals (McAnulty & Brineman, 2007). Given that experiencing cheating in romantic relationships can negatively affect well-being and mental health for adults and adolescents (Cano & O’Leary, 2000; Welsh et al., 2003), it is important to continue the exploration of how experiencing infidelity can affect adolescents. An

important first step for such research involves examining how adolescents define cheating, as this is the life stage in which many individuals encounter their first romantic relationships (Carver et al., 2003).

Given the wide variety of definitions provided by adult and young adult populations, it is likely that such definitions also differ for younger individuals who engage in romantic activity. Firstly, definitions of cheating might differ for adolescents because of the nature of their romantic experiences. During a unique time in which individuals begin having romantic relationships, adolescents learn how to navigate different romantic experiences with their partners (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009). As a result, adolescents' relationships might not involve as many sexual experiences as young adult dating relationships or adult marriages, but rather incorporate behaviors such as kissing and intimate touching, which are more common activities in this age group (Welsh, Haugen, Widman, Darling, & Grello, 2005). According to McNulty and Brineman (2007), certain definitions of cheating that involve sexual behaviors might not be identified in open-ended responses because individuals are not yet engaging in such behaviors. Thus, adolescents' open-ended definitions of cheating might involve other types of behaviors that are more characteristic of their romantic relationships.

Secondly, as described by McNulty and Brineman (2007), a wide range of definitions exists for "having sex" and "virginity" (Bogart, Cecil, Wagstaff, Pinkerton, & Abramson, 2000; Carpenter, 2001; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). Thus, it is likely that definitions of "cheating" also differ between and within age groups (McNulty & Brineman, 2007). Furthermore, in clinical practice, "infidelity" and "cheating" are left

for romantic partners to define individually (Wagers, 2003). Because individuals' ideas about what constitutes infidelity and cheating likely develop over time and through previous experiences in their romantic relationships, understanding how a person develops his or her views concerning his or her partner's romantic betrayal would help guide clinical work with clients who have participated in cheating, or have experienced cheating in their romantic relationship.

### **Gender-Based Differences in Definitions of Cheating**

Gender and cheating in romantic relationships is a much-studied topic in adult samples. Research points to gender differences in the prevalence of, reactions to, and definitions of cheating behaviors (Blow & Hartnett, 2005). However, previous studies yield varying results. For example, in studies that examine sexual cheating behaviors, men report cheating more often than women (e.g., Glass & Wright, 1985; Hansen, 1987; Yarab et al., 1998). However, when other non-sexual definitions of cheating are included, the prevalence of cheating is comparable for women and men (Brand, Markey, Mills, & Hodges, 2007). Additionally, men have been found to experience more negative emotions after learning about their partner's *sexual* cheating behaviors, while women experience more negative emotions after learning about their partner's *emotional* cheating behaviors (Cramer, Abraham, Johnson, & Manning-Ryan, 2001-2002). Regarding definitions of cheating, an open-ended study that asked college students to report cheating behaviors did not find any differences between women's and men's definitions (Habibi, 2011). Overall, research on gender and cheating with adult and



young adult age groups reveal inconsistent results, and an exploration of whether there are gender differences or similarities in definitions of cheating is needed for adolescents.

### **Patterns in Definitions of Cheating**

Another area that has yet to be explored is patterns in individuals' definitions of cheating. Many of the previous studies on definitions of cheating focus on only one type of behavior (e.g. sexual, emotional); however, given that adolescent romantic relationships involve more non-sexual affectionate behaviors than sexual behaviors (Welsh et al., 2005), it is likely that their definitions of cheating include multiple types of behaviors. For example, while definitions of cheating behaviors in adulthood might include sexual behaviors and emotional involvement with an extradyadic partner, adolescents may consider both non-sexual and verbal behaviors together as constituting cheating. Exploring patterns in the ways adolescence define cheating in romantic relationships can further our understanding of how adolescents conceptualize this behavior.

### **The Present Study**

In a sample of adolescents (ages 14-21), the present study used an exploratory, open-ended approach to analyze adolescents' definitions of cheating (Thematic Analysis; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Due to the lack of previous studies on cheating in this developmental period, utilizing this exploratory approach helps discern the different types of behaviors that adolescents consider as cheating. Additionally, in using a developmental framework, the present study also tested for differences in definitions

based on age and gender. Finally, definitions of cheating overlapped with one another to discern patterns in responses were explored.

Specifically, the research questions were as follows: (1) How do adolescents define “cheating?” (2) How do definitions differ across age groups? (3) How do definitions differ across gender? (4) How do definitions of “cheating” overlap with one another? In line with the exploratory analytic method, the literature was not reviewed prior to examining adolescents’ responses, as to remain blind to existing definitions. As a result, a priori hypotheses were not formed.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Method**

#### **Participants and Procedures**

This study was a part of a larger examination of the development and health of adolescent romantic relationships called the Study of Tennessee Adolescent Romantic Relationships (STARR). Participants were recruited from a previous study of 2,201 adolescents from high schools in a midsized Southeastern city that included rural, suburban, and urban communities. Adolescents who were dating someone for four or more weeks were invited to participate in the current study. Two age groups were recruited for participation: Middle adolescents, from the ages of 14 to 17 years old, and late adolescents, from the ages of 17 to 21 years old. The final sample included 204 middle adolescents and 214 late adolescents (418 individuals).

The majority of the sample was Caucasian (90.6%), with the remainder of the sample identifying as African American (6.2%), Asian (1.2%), Hispanic (.7%), Native American (.5%), and Other (.7%). Almost half of the sample reported that they lived in a suburban neighborhood (46.7%), followed by those who lived in rural areas (31.6%), and urban areas (20.8%). Parental education level (the highest level of education completed by either parent) was used to gauge socioeconomic status. Fifty-five percent of the participants reported that neither parent had a college degree, while 45% reported that at least one parent had a college degree or higher.

Participants came to the laboratory for about three hours of data collection. Participants filled out questionnaires in separate rooms and were reimbursed \$30 for their

time. Parents of participants provided consent before any data were collected from participants. All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Tennessee.

### **Measures**

The Sexual Behaviors Questionnaire (SBQ) was developed for STARR to assess sexual activity within romantic relationships. An initial version of the sexual behaviors questionnaire was pilot tested in a previous study with adolescent couples (Rostosky et al, 1999). The version used in the present study is a 45-item measure that includes several frequency ranges, checklists, and open-ended questions, which ask about both past and present sexual behaviors. For this study, one open-ended item was used to assess adolescents' definitions of cheating. Participants were asked, "In your own words, what behaviors would you label as cheating?" and were permitted to provide as many behaviors as they desired. Responses were transcribed and compiled electronically.

### **Analytic Strategy**

Responses were examined using an inductive, bottom-up approach according to Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Specifically, categories in the coding system were generated from participants' responses, as opposed to a top-down approach whereby theory and/or past studies guided the creation of coding categories. In line with this coding system and to maintain the integrity of the categories that emerged from the data, past research on definitions of infidelity, cheating, or unfaithfulness in dating couples was not reviewed until after the development of the coding manual and achieving reliability.

In the first phase of formal coding, two graduate students and one undergraduate research assistant read through the responses multiple times to familiarize with, and immerse themselves in, the data. Then, responses were inductively examined to create coding categories based on emergent themes. Each verb was coded as a single unit (e.g. kissing, hugging, talking with someone else). The coding team met biweekly to examine responses and refine the coding categories as necessary. Category names were then assigned numerical codes. In the second phase, a second undergraduate research assistant was trained for reliability coding. The two undergraduate research assistants independently coded a subset of responses, and then collectively met daily with the rest of the coding team to discuss results and resolve any discrepancies. A random sample of 20% of the responses (85/418) was used to determine reliability for the coding categories, which was excellent ( $K = .86$ ). Reliability checks were conducted periodically to prevent coder drift. A summary of emergent categories, definitions, and examples appears in Table 1. The final coding manual (Norona, Khaddouma, Samawi, & Welsh, 2013) is available from the author.

## Chapter 4

### Results

In this section, the categories that emerged from adolescents' responses are described, beginning with the most frequent. Differences in the frequency of popular responses between middle and older adolescents, as well as between adolescent girls and boys, are then discussed. Finally, the most frequent overlaps in definitions are presented.

Descriptive and non-parametric statistics were used for quantitative data analyses. Because participants were allowed to provide as many behaviors as they desired, the complete range of responses offered by participants, rather than only one part of participants' responses, was analyzed. Of the 418 participants, 97% of participants (N = 405) provided at least one verb that they labeled as "cheating;" 67.2% (N = 281) provided a second verb; 34.2% (N = 143) provided a third verb; 8.6% provided a fourth verb, 2.4% (N = 10) provided a fifth verb, and 1.0% (N = 4) provided a sixth verb. A total of 889 definitions were obtained across all 418 participant responses.

#### Definitions of Cheating

Two behaviors that constituted cheating emerged as the most frequently given: Physical behaviors (62%; 551/889) and romantic/intimate involvement with an extradyadic partner (11.1%; 99/889). Of the 551 responses in the physical behaviors category, more than half of the given behaviors included potentially sexual behaviors *not involving* genital contact (e.g., kissing, making out; 58.3%; 321 responses), while the remaining physical behaviors included sexual behaviors *involving* genital contact (e.g., sexual intercourse, oral sex; 31.6%; 174 responses), and lighter, more affectionate

behaviors (e.g., holding hands, dancing; 8.0%; 44 responses). Other behaviors that emerged from the data to a less frequent extent included spending time with, talking with, having romantic feelings for, and thinking about an extradyadic partner, as well as keeping secrets from or betraying one's romantic partner. Furthermore, many adolescents included a wide range of behaviors in their responses (e.g., "Anything from hugging to having sex with someone else; 10.2%; 91 responses). Frequencies for reported behaviors of cheating are presented in Table 2.

### **Comparison of Definitions by Age**

A Pearson's chi-square test was used to compare middle adolescents' (ages 14 to 17 years old) and older adolescents' (ages 17 to 21 years old) frequencies of their first given response. Because chi-square analyses assume that observations are independent from each other, only the first response given by participants was used in chi-square tests, as it was assumed that the first response was the most important or salient to participants. Because the base rates of certain coding categories were low, only categories with an expected count greater than five were compared between age groups (i.e., potentially sexual behaviors *not involving* genital contact, potentially sexual behaviors *involving* genital contact, romantic/intimate involvement, and time expenditure). Middle and older adolescents' first given responses differed significantly with regard to potentially sexual behaviors *not involving* genital contact, whereby more middle adolescents gave this definition as their first verb,  $\chi^2(1, 418) = 4.49, p < .05$ . Furthermore, more older adolescents' first given responses included potentially sexual behaviors *involving* genital contact, which was marginally significant,  $\chi^2(1, 418) = 73.58, p = .059$ . Middle and

older adolescents did not differ significantly with regard to any of the other analyzed categories.

### **Comparison of Definitions by Gender**

A Pearson's chi-square test was used to compare adolescent girls' and boys' frequencies of their first given definition. As in the previous analysis, because the base rates of certain coding categories were low, only categories with an expected count greater than five were compared between genders (i.e., potentially sexual behaviors *not involving* genital contact, potentially sexual behaviors *involving* genital contact, romantic/intimate involvement, and time expenditure). Adolescent girls' and boys' first given responses differed significantly with regard to potentially sexual behaviors *involving* genital contact, whereby more boys gave this definition as their first response,  $\chi^2(1, 418) = 7.12, p < .01$ . Adolescent girls and boys did not significantly differ with regard to any of the other analyzed categories.

### **Patterns in Definitions**

To find patterns in definitions (i.e., combinations of cheating behaviors that often appeared in adolescents' responses), two-dimensional matrices for each combination of verbs (e.g., Verb 1 x Verb 2, Verb 1 x Verb 3, etc.) were created. Totals of 15 matrices and 66 possible unique combinations of definitions (e.g., time expenditure and affect, cognitions and verbal) were calculated. Frequencies for each possible combination were tallied, and a total of 655 combinations in definitions were obtained from participant responses.



Of the 655 combinations, the three most frequent combinations in definitions were (1) potentially sexual *behaviors not involving* genital contact and *involving* genital contact (26.0%; 170 responses); (2) potentially sexual behaviors *not involving* genital contact and a range of different behaviors (13.9%, 91 responses); and potentially sexual behaviors *not involving* genital contact and romantic/intimate involvement (7.9%; 51 responses). The frequencies for the ten most frequent overlaps in definitions are presented in Table 3.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

The purpose of the present study was to explore how adolescents between the ages of 14 and 21 years old define “cheating” in romantic relationships utilizing a qualitative analytic method (Thematic Analysis; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additionally, age- and gender-based differences in definitions were examined. Finally, patterns in definitions of cheating were explored.

#### **Definitions of Cheating**

Adolescents’ definitions of cheating constituted a wide range of behaviors, including engaging in physical activity, romantic/intimate involvement, spending time with, talking to, having romantic feelings for, and thinking about an extradyadic partner. Furthermore, many adolescents included a wide range of behaviors in their responses (e.g., “Anything from hugging to having sex with someone else”). These results suggest that cheating involves a multitude of behaviors according to middle and older adolescents. Whereas cheating typically involves sexual behaviors for older dating couples or married couples (Atkins et al., 2001; Feldman & Cauffman, 1998a; Feldman & Cauffman, 1998b), middle and older adolescents’ definitions also involve behaviors that are more characteristic of younger dating relationships (Welsh et al., 2005). Although physical activity emerged as the most frequent definition, the appearance of affective, cognitive, and verbal definitions point to the complex nature of cheating during this developmental period.

### **Age-Based Differences in Definitions of Cheating**

Analyses revealed some interesting age-related differences in definitions of cheating. Middle adolescents were more likely to define cheating as engaging in sexual behaviors that did not involve genital contact with someone other than a boyfriend or girlfriend; older adolescents, in contrast, were more likely to define cheating as engaging in genitally-oriented sexual behaviors. It is probable that these age-related differences are due to developmental changes in the types of relational experiences of youth over the course of adolescence. Middle adolescents' romantic relationships are more likely to involve lighter, non-genital, sexual behaviors, as they are only beginning to explore their sexuality during this time (Collins et al., 2009). Older adolescents, with more experience with romantic relationships as well as more sexual experiences might engage in genital sexual behaviors with their romantic partners and thus identify those behaviors as cheating. For example, for middle adolescents, defining features of romantic relationships compared to friendships might include behaviors such as kissing. Thus, when partners in these relationships engage in those same special behaviors with others outside their romantic relationship, it may be considered treating that person as a romantic partner. As adolescents mature and develop, they are more likely to engage in other types of behaviors with their romantic partners, such as sexual intercourse, and are more likely to define cheating according to those terms. Thus, it is likely that adolescents' definitions of cheating in romantic relationships depend on their experiences in exclusive romantic relationships.

### **Gender-Based Differences in Definitions of Cheating**

An interesting gender-related difference in definitions of cheating also emerged. Compared to adolescent girls, adolescent boys were more likely to define cheating as engaging in sexual behaviors that involved genital contact with someone other than a boyfriend or girlfriend. This suggests that adolescent boys' ideas of cheating are more oriented towards sexual acts, whereas adolescent girls' ideas may involve types of non-physical behaviors as much as it does sexual activities. This is consistent with evolutionary perspectives on sexual relations, whereby men are more threatened by sexual acts of infidelity because of the inability to determine fatherhood of their offspring, while women are more concerned with other factors that determine whether fathers of their children will remain committed to them and provide emotional and financial support (Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992). The results are also consistent with Western cultural scripts that emphasize genital sexual behaviors as a primary romantic relationship objective for males and relational intimacy and connection as a primary romantic relationship objective for females (Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003; Tolman, 2002). Based on the salience of these cultural scripts, it is not surprising that adolescent boys are more likely to define cheating as involving genital sexual behaviors, while girls are more likely to use broader definitions.

### **Patterns in Definitions of Cheating**

Most previous research examining definitions of cheating has focused on single behaviors that participants considered as cheating rather than patterns of behaviors. To expand on previous literature, the present study explored whether and how certain

definitions overlapped with one another. Results showed that the majority of participants provided multiple categories of behaviors in their definitions of cheating. Although physical behaviors were the most frequently provided definition, participants also provided non-physical definitions often and along with physical behaviors. Those who indicated behaviors that were potentially sexual and *not involving* genital contact also tended to indicate other types of physical and non-physical activities, such as being romantically intimate with, spending time with, or thinking about an extradyadic partner. Together, these findings point to the intricacies of adolescents' definitions of cheating.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

This study has several important limitations. First, it was difficult to categorize colloquial terms and phrases used by adolescents in the present study, such as “going out” and “dating.” To promote synchrony and clarity across responses, future open-ended studies on definitions of cheating should require participants to describe the specific behaviors that they provide in their definitions of cheating. This will also allow for comparisons of findings across different studies. Furthermore, because of the cross-sectional nature of the data, it is unknown whether middle and older adolescents' definitions do adapt and parallel the changes in their romantic experiences over time. Longitudinal analyses are required to learn more about the development of these definitions.

Additionally, it is unclear whether the findings from the present study can be generalized to other demographics. Although the present sample included socioeconomic diversity, it was limited in its ethnic diversity. Furthermore, the present study included

only mixed-gender couples. Future research with individuals from a more diverse population who perhaps have different relational experiences with romantic partners will paint a more complete picture about definitions of cheating during this developmental stage.

To strengthen the results of the present study, it would be beneficial for future research to conduct a mixed methods study that includes both open-ended questions about adolescents' definitions of cheating, as well as close-ended questionnaires with lists of behaviors that might constitute cheating. Because of the open-ended nature of the present study, it is possible that there are certain cheating behaviors not captured merely because they did not come to mind for adolescents in the present sample when they provided their responses. Future studies that ask adolescents to rate whether they consider behaviors as cheating can help capture more of such behaviors and create a clearer picture of how adolescents define cheating.

Overall, because these findings point to the complex nature of cheating in romantic relationships, it is important for future studies to include several types of behaviors in addition to physical activity with an extradyadic partner. It is possible that experiencing other non-physical types of infidelity might have different prevalence rates, predictors, and consequences for the well-being of both adolescents and their romantic relationships.

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## Appendix

*Table 1. Definitions and Examples of Emergent Categories*

Category	Definition	Examples
Physical behaviors	Any action that involves physical contact	
Affectionate behaviors	Physical contact that does <u>not</u> involve sexual behaviors	“Hugging,” “hand-holding,” “dancing”
Potentially sexual behaviors <i>not involving</i> genital contact	Physical contact that involves sexual behaviors <u>without</u> genital contact	“Kissing,” “messing around,” “touching”
Potentially sexual behaviors <i>involving</i> genital contact	Physical contact that involves genitals	“Fingering,” “oral sex,” “intercourse” “anal sex”
Unspecified physical actions	Vague physical contact	“Physical activity”
Secret-keeping	Lying to, withholding truth from, or not being trustworthy to partner	“Lying,” “dishonesty,” “anything they hide from me”
Affect	Romantic feelings	“Loving,” “having feelings”
Cognitions	Thinking in a way that resembles how one thinks about his/her partner	“Thinking about another”
Verbal	Verbal exchanges	“Talking on the phone”
Romantic/intimate involvement	Romantic activity, courtship behaviors, or intimate involvement	“Dating,” “Acting like boyfriend/girlfriend,” “more than just friends”
Time expenditure	Spending time	“Going on a date,” “go to the movies”
Range of behaviors	Responses that indicate a range of behaviors	“Anything more than X,” “etc.”
Miscellaneous	Vague and unspecified behaviors	“Doing things with,” “everything”

*Table 2. Frequency of Behaviors That Constitute Cheating*

Category	Percentage
Physical behaviors	62.0
Potentially sexual behaviors <i>not involving</i> genital contact	36.2
Potentially sexual behaviors <i>involving</i> genital contact	19.6
Affectionate behaviors	5.9
Unspecified physical actions	1.3
Romantic/intimate involvement	11.1
Range of behaviors	10.2
Miscellaneous behaviors	5.5
Time expenditure	3.7
Verbal behaviors	2.5
Affect	2.5
Cognitions	1.1

*Note.* Total number of observations = 889.



*Table 3. Overlaps in Definitions of Cheating*

Overlap	Percentage
Physical behaviors <i>not involving</i> genital contact and involving genital contact	26.0
Physical behaviors <i>not involving</i> genital contact and a range of behaviors	13.9
Physical behaviors <i>not involving</i> genital contact and romantic/intimate involvement	7.8
Physical behaviors <i>not involving</i> genital contact and affectionate behaviors	6.9
Physical behaviors <i>not involving</i> genital contact and miscellaneous behaviors	4.3
Physical behaviors <i>involving</i> genital contact and romantic/intimate involvement	4.0
Physical behaviors <i>not involving</i> genital contact and time expenditure	3.2
Physical behaviors <i>not involving</i> genital contact and cognitions	2.6
Physical behaviors involving genital contact and a range of behaviors	2.6
Physical behaviors involving genital contact and affectionate behaviors	2.4

*Note.* Total number of observations = 655.

### **Vita**

Jerika C. Norona was born and raised in San Francisco, California. She earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz. In 2012, she began her doctoral training in Clinical Psychology at the University of Tennessee. Her research interests include the development of romantic relationships in adolescence and emerging adulthood.