



Understanding Relationship Fidelity



1. Abstract

The goal of this study was to begin to create an understanding of how people think of, define, and experience relationship fidelity; a topic rarely studied. A survey was administered to university students containing open ended questions about their definitions, thoughts, behaviors, and feelings about fidelity. Their responses were coded into major themes. The most common themes identified included behaviors and thoughts such as faithfulness, exclusivity, and feelings like love, caring, and respect. Implications are discussed.

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2. Introduction

Many studies have explored the effects of relationship infidelity in diverse populations and in different relational contexts (Ferronl, Lussier, Stéphane, & Brassard, 2016; Frederick & Fales, 2016) and have examined how various people define infidelity (Guitar et al., 2017). Despite this, few studies have examined how individuals define relationship fidelity and the thoughts, behaviors, and feelings that people associate with fidelity. Though it is unclear how relationship fidelity is understood and experienced, fidelity *is* often an expectation in romantic relationships (Wängqvist, Carlsson, van der Lee, & Frisén, 2016). This study will examine how relationship fidelity is defined, what thoughts and attitudes are associated with fidelity, what behaviors are associated with fidelity, and what feelings are associated with fidelity. Selected references available in accompanying handout.

3. Methods

A sample of 100 students attending Weber State University, recruited through a variety of verbal, printed, and electronic invitations, participated in the study. The survey used to collect responses was created and distributed online using the Qualtrics survey platform. The survey contained five open-ended questions.

- “How do you define fidelity in your relationships?”
- “What actions or behaviors demonstrate fidelity in a relationship?”
- “What feelings accompany fidelity in a relationship?”
- “What thoughts or attitudes demonstrate fidelity in a relationship?”
- “In closing, do you have any other comments that you would like to share regarding the concept of relationship fidelity?”

Responses were sorted by question and then analyzed within the five groups. Using content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), three researchers conducted the following steps:

(a) Initially identified meaning units from within the first 10 email responses, (b) independently suggested thematic codes for each, (c) together compared coding patterns to establish interrater consistency, (d) independently coded the remaining responses with themes, (e) together brought together their resulting themes to gain consensus and collapse overlapping themes into the overarching meanings. Participants were then asked to review the findings and verify that the interpretation of the content analysis maintained its fit with their experience and understanding.

4. Results

Seven themes were identified from the responses that students made to the questions of relationship fidelity. These themes are loyalty and faithfulness; trust, honesty and true; commitment and dedication; communication; love, care, and respect; support, safety, and security; and three subgroups under the theme of exclusivity: cognitive exclusivity, emotional exclusivity, and behavioral exclusivity. Trust and honesty was the theme that was most dominant across the four areas of interest. The most common responses within each category were

- Definition: Loyalty and faithfulness (59%)
- Action and behavior: Behavioral exclusivity (40%)
- Thoughts and Attitudes: Support, safety, and security (34%); love, caring, and respect (33%); thoughts of commitment and dedication (32%); support and safety (33%)
- Feelings: Love and respect (68%).

5. Discussion

In this sample, loyalty and faithfulness was a common definition of fidelity and behavioral exclusivity as well as trust and honesty were frequently mentioned as actions or behaviors associated with fidelity. Support, commitment, and thoughts demonstrating fidelity were thoughts and attitudes many associated with fidelity and love and respect was a feeling that most of the sample associated with fidelity. Professionals who work with couples can use this as a framework to begin to understand how their clients or learners understand and experience relationship fidelity. Researchers should also expand on this by reaching samples from diverse backgrounds and compare how different groups may define and experience relationship fidelity.

