



Article

Principled Faithfulness: A Measure of Moral Reasons for Fidelity and Its Associations with the Tendency to Engage in Extramarital Relationships, Moral Emotions and Emotion Regulation

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Abstract: The prevalence of infidelity is high, although it can have destructive impacts on marital relationships. Most past research has focused on utilitarian concerns against extramarital behavior, analyzing the motivational forces that either deter or foster infidelity as a function of the rewards and costs that unfaithful behavior would involve for the individual. The present research (total N = 1067 Romanian married participants) aimed to highlight the intrinsic moral concerns that deter infidelity in marital relationships by applying the general framework of the Moral Foundations Theory (MFT). The first study developed a measure of the moral reasons for fidelity and examined its dimensions and psychometric properties. The second study investigated its factorial validity and its relationships with the actual tendency to engage in unfaithful behaviors, the intensity of moral emotions toward infidelity, and the use of different emotion regulation strategies. Overall, the results suggest four types of moral reasons for fidelity: heeding rules, reciprocal ownership, loyalty, and decency and nonmaleficence, and the new scale emerged as having satisfactory psychometric proprieties. Higher scores were positively associated with moral disgust, anger, and contempt toward unfaithful marital partners and compassion toward their spouses, as well as cognitive reappraisal and endorsement of the five moral domains described by MFT. Also, married individuals scoring higher on this measure were also found to have a lower propensity toward infidelity. These findings pinpoint a fine-grained outline of the moral underpinnings of fidelity and indicate their potential relevance for the actual tendency to engage in extramarital relations.

Keywords: infidelity; moral reasons; moral foundations; scale development; marriage

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1. Introduction

Fidelity, the emotional and sexual exclusivity between two partners, is often found in committed relationships. Monogamy is a cultural norm in many cultures, but also an ideal for long-term or marital relationships from an evolutionary point of view (Brandon, 2016; Fye and Mims, 2019). On the other hand, infidelity has been found to inflict psychological damage on the partner and the family, often leading to the dissolution of the marriage (Shrout and Weigel, 2018; Apostolou et al., 2019). At the same time, infidelity has a high prevalence (Haseli et al., 2019), and more recent research suggests that the frequency

of unfaithful behavior may have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic (Coop Gordon and Mitchell 2020). The main objective of the present study was to highlight the specific types of moral concerns that deter infidelity in marital relationships.

Long-term relationships do not automatically imply monogamy, but there are multiple reasons that prevent people from violating their sexual and emotional commitment (Fisher 2016). According to the evolutionary perspective, monogamy offers an organized social structure to a family where child rearing is favored, leads to decreased male competitiveness and sexual promiscuity, contributes to developing solid relationships, decreased pathogen spread, and paternity assurance (Brandon 2016). These reasons highlight important benefits that faithfulness brings to an individual and his/her social group in terms of external rewards and avoiding risks that infidelity would entail. Similarly, the dominant psychological models of the factors preventing infidelity also focus on the utilitarian concerns underpinning faithfulness. For instance, the Investment Model (Rusbult 1980) highlights the relationship outcome value (its perceived ratio of benefits vs. costs), the low quality of alternatives, and an individual's past investments in the relationship as main factors of people's commitment to their relationship. Empirical data have attested to the association between these factors and partners' tendency to refrain from unfaithful behavior (Drigotas et al. 1999; Emmers-Sommer et al. 2010). In the same realm, Apostolou and Panayiotou (2019) highlighted the relational benefits and fear of the unwanted consequences of infidelity on oneself as the main determinants of partners' motivation to remain loyal.

In sum, a consistent body of research has focused on the motivational forces that either deter or foster infidelity as a function of the rewards and costs that unfaithful behavior (and the potential consequent end of the ongoing relationship) would involve for the individual. Our focus in the present study is on a different type of motivation of refraining from infidelity in marital relationships, anchored in the individual's moral principles and adopting fidelity as a moral rule, which would complement the utilitarian concerns against infidelity reviewed above.

Previous studies have highlighted several morally relevant motives against infidelity, such as the desire not to hurt one's partner, valuing monogamy as a personal standard, or religious beliefs upholding marital fidelity (Dollahite and Lambert 2007; Apostolou and Panayiotou 2019; Emmers-Sommer et al. 2010; Fye and Mims 2019). Moreover, the tendency to engage in unfaithful behavior is negatively associated with one's moral self and moral integrity, and positively related with the use of moral disengagement strategies (Lişman and Holman 2021; Lişman and Holman 2022). Our aim was to develop a more comprehensive and fine-grained outline of the moral underpinnings of fidelity by applying the general framework of the Moral Foundations Theory (MFT, Haidt and Joseph 2004; Haidt and Graham 2007) in this specific context. The objective of our two studies was to develop a measure of the moral reasons for fidelity, conceptualized as context-specific applications of the overarching moral foundations described by MFT, through which to examine the specific moral principles fostering marital fidelity as well as their relationships with moral emotions toward infidelity, the use of different emotion regulation strategies, and the actual tendency to engage in unfaithful behaviors.

2. Fidelity in Marital Relationships and MFT

Morality refers to fairness, well-being, justice, rights, and concern for other people, to how individuals believe that they should relate to and treat one another (Graham et al. 2011). MFT (Haidt and Joseph 2004; Haidt and Graham 2007) puts forth five universal moral foundations: harm avoidance (care or concern for the other), fairness (reciprocity), loyalty (in-group), authority (respect for hierarchy), and purity (decency/chastity). People

vary in the extent that they consider each of these principles to be important. These overarching moral foundations have been found to operate across a broad array of contexts, and MFT has been a popular model of widely used intuitive ethics in many fields, from personality domain to decision-making, and political science (Graham et al. 2013). For instance, research findings indicate that these moral foundations shape the way people perceived the Brexit negotiations (Smith 2021), pro-environmental behavior in the climate crisis context (Ertör-Akyazi and Akçay 2021), and highly debated issues such as abortion, immigration or same-sex marriage (Koleva et al. 2012).

This framework may be also useful for advancing knowledge on the motivations for preserving fidelity in marital relationships, by highlighting specific moral reasons that are anchored in these five overarching moral foundations described by MFT. Firstly, the desire not to hurt one's partner has emerged as one of the main reasons that prevent people from being unfaithful (Apostolou and Panayiotou 2019; Emmers-Sommer et al. 2010). Secondly, the moral foundation of fairness opposes deception and fosters just treatment between couple partners, i.e., access to the same opportunities and resources. Thirdly, loyalty to the couple as in-group entails refrainment from any act that would jeopardize its integrity, such as infidelity, which is commonly framed as exiting the ongoing relationship and frequently leads to couple dissolution (DeMaris 2013). Fourthly, respect for authority may imply, in the realm of marital couples, respecting the social rules, traditions, and religious notions protecting marriage and family by explicitly prohibiting adultery. This can be further extended by another potential morally relevant concern, i.e., reciprocal ownership. More specifically, emotional and sexual exclusivity may be also morally motivated by the apprehension of each marital partner as belonging to the other, as emphasized by religious norms diffused in popular culture. Furthermore, many spouses consider that their relationship was not accidental, but they were made for each other, and thus, each is in the others' possession (Dollahite and Lambert 2007). Finally, the generic foundation of purity may correspond to concerns for avoiding adultery as a deviant sexual act that defiles the purity of the primary relationship.

3. Infidelity, Moral Emotions, and Emotion Regulation

Moral emotions are considered to be the key elements in structuring a person's morality by triggering moral judgments and reasoning, and thus influencing the development of self-awareness and moral identity (Horberg et al. 2011; Malti and Latzko 2012). Certain emotions tend to be instilled by specific morally relevant situations through cognitive appraisals focused on the specific moral principle at stake (Horberg et al. 2011). For example, research highlighted associations between emotions of disgust, anger, and contempt on the one hand, and perceived violations of corresponding moral principles, i.e., purity of mind and body, justice/fairness/autonomy, and loyalty to the community, on the other (Horberg et al. 2011). In the realm of intimate relationships, previous studies have indicated that infidelity is predominantly associated with negative emotions, such as anger, sadness, jealousy, depression, anxiety, or guilt (Turliuc and Scutaru 2014; Cann et al. 2001; Foster and Kirshenbaum 2015). In our examination of the specific moral concerns deterring infidelity, we expect the strength of these concerns to be related to the intensity of the moral emotions people experience toward infidelity. Specifically, it could cause disgust because of its component of sexual infidelity, while, at the same time, its facet of involving the betraying relationship commitment could trigger anger and contempt toward the perpetrator together with compassion for the cheated partner.

We also consider two strategies by which people regulate their emotions: cognitive reappraisal (CR) and expressive suppression (ES). People often attempt to adapt to stressors when facing intense emotions by employing these two strategies (Gross and John 2003). Past findings have indicated that the two regulation strategies have different effects,

the frequent use of CR being associated with well-being, while people who chronically suppress the expression of their unpleasant feelings tend to be less authentic and experience more frequent negative moods (Gross and John 2003). These relationships further extend in the realm of interpersonal relationships, as people who use CR feel comfortable sharing their emotions and have closer relationships with their peers, unlike those who suppress, who feel less comfortable expressing their emotions in intimate contexts.

Research on moral decisions has found that CR is associated with more utilitarian choices in “harm to save” moral dilemmas, in which participants must choose between doing nothing and thus allowing several victims to be harmed and actions that would prevent this greater harm by sacrificing fewer victims (Szekely and Miu 2015). These results may be relevant for infidelity in romantic relationships, as partners who often use CR may be more inclined to mentally detach in emotionally charged situations that could involve or lead to unfaithful acts and appraise such situations by focusing on the relevant moral principles. Therefore, we expect CR to be positively associated with the strength of an individual’s belief in the moral reasons for fidelity.

The main aim of the present research was to identify the moral foundations that motivate fidelity in marital relationships, within the framework of the moral principles reviewed above. To achieve this objective, we developed a scale that aimed to capture people’s moral reasons for being faithful to their marital partner. Then, we examined its psychometric properties and its relationship with moral emotions toward infidelity (Study 1) and with the tendency to commit unfaithful behaviors, and two emotion-regulation strategies (i.e., CR and ES) (Study 2).

4. Study 1

The aim of the first study was to develop a scale measuring the moral reasons for being faithful to their marital partner and to examine its factorial structure, its internal consistency and its construct validity through its relationships with the perceived importance of general moral foundations, moral emotions toward infidelity, and socio-demographic variables.

5. Method

5.1. Participants

A convenience sample of 604 Romanian heterosexual people in marital relationships, in their first marriage, participated in this study (53.8% women), with an average length of a marriage of 16.13 years ($SD = 10.38$). Their age ranged from 20 to 77 years ($M = 41.53$; $SD = 9.66$), and their partners’ age ranged from 19 to 76 years ($M = 41.96$; $SD = 9.98$).

5.2. Procedure

Ethics approval for both studies reported in this paper was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the university department where the authors are affiliated. In exchange for course credit, 149 field operators (students) were instructed to identify from among their personal acquaintances at least two female and two male participants in their first marriage, all married for at least one year. In both studies, all participants were informed about the aims of the study before participating and were assured about the confidentiality of their responses. Participants filled in the study measures on an online platform. The survey started for all participants with the consent form for participation, and they indicated their willingness to voluntarily take part in the research by entering the actual survey.

5.3. Measures

Moral reasons for fidelity (MRF). We developed a set of five assertions for each of the five moral values of MFT: care for the partner (avoiding harm), fairness, loyalty, purity, and authority, the latter being addressed by two facets (heeding rules and reciprocal ownership). Each of the 30 items required participants to assess the importance of fidelity considering a specific argument pertaining to a moral principle on a six-point Likert scale (from 1 = “not at all important” to 6 = “extremely important”). Specifically, items targeting care invoked reasons against harshness or cruelty toward one’s partner, e.g., “Fidelity is important because by being faithful you won’t make your partner suffer”. The items pertaining to the fairness principle emphasized the equity between the two partners, e.g., “It wouldn’t be fair that one of the partners would have more erotic or intimate experiences than the other”. Items targeting loyalty emphasized devotion to one’s partner, family, or relationship, e.g., “Fidelity is important because by being faithful married partners show loyalty.” Items invoking purity referred to the potential violation of bodily or mental purity that infidelity may be associated with, e.g., “Fidelity is important because by being faithful people show decent behavior”. The first facet of the moral foundation of authority, i.e., respect for the social and religious rules and traditions related to marriage, was operationalized through items such as “Fidelity is important because by being faithful you don’t break the rule of an honest life”. The second facet of this moral foundation, i.e., reciprocal ownership, was addressed by items such as “Fidelity is important because by being faithful you show that you belong only to your partner”.

The Moral Foundation Questionnaire (MFQ; Graham et al. 2011) consists of 20 items (short version) that measure five moral foundations: avoiding harm (e.g., “Compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial virtue.”), fairness (e.g., “Justice is the most important requirement for a society.”), loyalty (e.g., “People should be loyal to their family members, even when they have done something wrong”), authority (e.g., “Men and women each have different roles to play in society”), and purity (e.g., “People should not do things that are disgusting, even if no one is harmed”) on a six-point Likert scale. Half of the items are rated from “not at all relevant” to “extremely relevant”, and the other ten are rated from “total disagreement” to “full agreement”. All subscales showed appropriate internal consistency, with inter-item correlations larger than 0.15.

Moral emotions of disgust, anger, compassion, and contempt toward infidelity were each assessed through single items that required participants to estimate the degree to which an unfaithful partner would cause them to feel disgust, anger, and contempt, respectively, toward the perpetrator, and the degree to which they would feel compassion for the exclusive partner. Each moral emotion was rated on a 6-point scale, from 1 = “no emotional reaction” to 6 = “very intense emotional reaction”.

Finally, participants’ gender, age, partner age and marriage length were also assessed.

6. Results

We performed an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) in SPSS 21.0 on the set of 30 items, using the Principal Components approach and the Varimax rotation method. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy (0.950) and Bartlett’s test ($p < 0.001$) suggest the appropriateness of factor analysis on our data. The initial results indicated five factors, one of which included only one item. We removed this item and repeated the analysis, which extracted four factors, all with an Eigenvalue higher than their corresponding 95th percentile eigenvalue derived from random data in accordance with the PA criterion (Glorfeld 1995), which further supports the appropriateness of this factorial solution. The four factors accounted for 55.99% of the data variance. The EFA factor loadings and the descriptive statistics of the items are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Factor loadings in EFA analysis and descriptive statistics (N = 604).

Item	Factor				M	SD	Sk	K
	F1	F2	F3	F4				
MRF24	0.179				5.04	1.25	-1.44	1.62
MRF25	0.168				5.10	1.13	-1.45	2.06
MRF11	0.168				4.72	1.60	-1.03	-0.15
MRF30	0.167				5.33	1.01	-1.85	3.73
MRF22	0.163				4.93	1.38	-1.28	0.80
MRF21	0.162				4.98	1.34	-0.38	1.20
MRF12	0.162				4.75	1.44	-1.09	0.30
MRF13	0.147				5.01	1.48	-1.50	1.19
MRF27		0.171			5.08	1.35	-1.55	1.49
MRF20		0.171			5.00	1.27	-1.48	1.80
MRF29		0.163			5.13	1.44	-1.78	2.15
MRF4		0.158			4.90	1.47	-1.22	0.41
MRF23		0.155			5.52	0.96	-2.54	6.87
MRF15		0.154			4.35	1.79	-0.71	-0.90
MRF26		0.151			5.48	0.96	-2.37	6.09
MRF16			0.171		5.50	0.83	-2.05	5.01
MRF28			0.170		5.71	0.63	-2.94	11.07
MRF19			0.168		5.45	0.86	-1.88	4.01
MRF18			0.167		5.59	0.76	-2.46	8.05
MRF17			0.162		5.47	0.88	-2.04	4.82
MRF14			0.161		5.48	0.84	-2.13	5.98
MRF10			0.143		5.23	1.08	-1.71	2.89
MRF9				0.174	5.39	0.97	-1.89	3.81
MRF7				0.167	5.27	1.13	-1.85	3.18
MRF1				0.165	5.49	0.91	-2.04	4.08
MRF8				0.156	5.57	0.80	-2.47	7.32
MRF6				0.154	5.25	1.02	-1.50	2.23
MRF5				0.144	5.43	1.01	-2.29	5.75
MRF3				0.140	5.10	1.19	-1.57	2.31

Extraction method: principal component analysis.

The first factor explains 38.99% of the variance of the data and includes eight items, which generally invoke the motivation to preserve fidelity as a way of displaying respect for virtues and rules, and honesty. Therefore, we labeled this factor *Heeding rules* ($\alpha = 0.90$). The second factor explains 7.67% of the data variance. Among its seven items, most (i.e., five) were developed as targeting the principle of *Reciprocal ownership*; thus, we decided to label it as such ($\alpha = 0.82$). The third factor, explaining 5.21% of the data variance, included among its seven items those designed to address the *Loyalty* dimension ($\alpha = 0.85$). Finally, the fourth factor explains 4.11% of the data variance and its seven items included assertions developed to target purity and care for the partner as reasons to uphold fidelity; therefore, we labeled it *Decency and nonmaleficence (by avoiding harming the partner)* ($\alpha = 0.81$). The Cronbach's alpha of the overall scale ($\alpha = 0.93$) indicated excellent reliability.

The associations between the MRF total score and its factors, MFQ, moral emotions and the socio-demographic variables assessed (see Table 2) indicate the scores on the new scale are positively associated with stronger endorsement of all the five moral foundations measured by MFQ and the intensity of all infidelity-related emotions.

Table 2. Correlation matrix and descriptive statistics between study variables (study 1 N = 604).

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
1. MRFs	5.22	0.70	-																	
2. F1	4.98	1.00	0.89**	-																
3. F2	5.06	0.94	0.87**	0.72**	-															
4. F3	5.49	0.62	0.80**	0.61**	0.60**	-														
5. F4	5.36	0.69	0.80**	0.59**	0.60**	0.65**	-													
6. MFQ	4.60	0.68	0.35**	0.35**	0.26**	0.32**	0.26**	-												
7. Harm	4.83	1.42	0.25**	0.22**	0.15**	0.27**	0.23**	0.73**	-											
8. Fairness	4.55	1.55	0.18**	0.16**	0.11**	0.20**	0.15**	0.76**	0.50**	-										
9. Loyalty	3.95	1.77	0.32**	0.33**	0.25**	0.27**	0.21**	0.79**	0.49**	0.54**	-									
10. Authority	4.40	1.62	0.34**	0.37**	0.28**	0.25**	0.20**	0.73**	0.37**	0.37**	0.53**	-								
11. Purity	4.60	0.68	0.25**	0.24**	0.17**	0.23**	0.20**	0.80**	0.46**	0.57**	0.51**	0.50**	-							
12. Disgust	4.94	0.79	0.28**	0.27**	0.28**	0.24**	0.14**	0.26**	0.18**	0.15**	0.15**	0.24**	0.24**	-						
13. Anger	4.52	0.85	0.17**	0.15**	0.19**	0.15**	0.06	0.23**	0.19**	0.16**	0.11**	0.20**	0.21**	0.63**	-					
14. Compassion	4.23	0.94	0.11**	0.10*	0.08*	0.12**	0.09*	0.15**	0.07	0.06	0.11**	0.16**	0.17**	-0.03	-0.11**	-				
15. Contempt	4.49	0.98	0.22**	0.22**	0.21**	0.16**	0.12**	0.22**	0.18**	0.16**	0.13**	0.17**	0.21**	0.71**	0.67**	-0.03	-			
16. Gender	53.8% fem (325)		0.01	0.03	-0.04	0.04	-0.00	0.03	0.02	0.01	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.03	0.09*	0.03	0.07	-		
17. Age	41.53	9.66	0.05	0.09*	0.02	0.00	0.02	0.12**	0.04	0.09*	0.13**	0.08*	0.11**	0.09*	0.03	0.01	0.04	-0.08*	-	
18. Partner_age	41.96	9.98	0.05	0.10*	0.00	0.02	0.03	0.12**	0.05	0.10*	0.14**	0.07	0.10**	0.09*	0.05	0.00	0.06	0.17**	0.89**	-
19. Marriage_1	16.3	10.38	0.10**	0.14**	0.08*	0.04	0.05	0.10**	0.01	0.08*	0.14**	0.08*	0.09**	0.11**	0.03	0.00	0.09*	0.04	0.88**	0.86**

** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$. MRFs—moral reasons for fidelity scale, F1—heedng rules; F2—reciprocal ownership; F3—loyalty; F4—decency and nonmaleficence; MFQ—Moral Foundation Questionnaire.

7. Discussion

The results of the first study suggest the existence of four types of moral reasons for fidelity. Two of them correspond to distinct moral principles in the framework we adopted in our approach on the moral underpinnings of fidelity, i.e., *Loyalty* and *Reciprocal ownership* as a distinct facet of respect for authority, while two others blend, in the specific context of fidelity, nuances of other general moral principles. Nevertheless, although each of these two factors (i.e., the first and the last) included items designed to address two different moral foundations, they maintained coherent and meaningful content. The first

factor, *Heeding rules*, includes items designed to invoke the other facet of the moral foundation of authority and purity. However, the content of the items targeting purity that were retained in this factor is also relevant for one's inclination to respect authority in terms of traditional virtues and rules. Similarly, the last factor, *Decency and nonmaleficence*, includes items developed on two other foundations, i.e., purity and care. They invoke specific reasons for refraining from unfaithful behaviors that portray infidelity as inflicting harm on the partner or violating the norm of decency, which may also entail indirect social harm on the partner. Furthermore, the pattern of associations between the total scores on the new scale as well as its factors on the one hand, and moral foundations and emotions toward infidelity support the convergent validity of MRFs, as individuals scoring higher on this measure emerged as showing higher endorsements of the five moral domains measured by MFQ and by experiencing stronger emotions towards unfaithful partners and their cheated spouses, indicating stronger moral outrage toward infidelity.

8. Study 2

The second study aimed to examine the factorial validity of the MRF scale and its criterion validity through its associations with the propensity towards infidelity, as well as its associations with the habitual use of two emotion regulation strategies (CR and ES) and socio-demographic variables.

9. Method

9.1. Participants and Procedure

The second study enrolled 463 Romanian heterosexual people in marital relationships (50.1% women) with an average length of a marriage of 14.88 years ($SD = 9.84$). Their age ranged from 19 to 67 years ($M = 40.64$; $SD = 9.66$) and their partners' age ranged from 19 to 72 years ($M = 38.14$; $SD = 9.72$). The procedure was identical to the one used in the first study, and it involved 114 field operators (students).

9.2. Measures

Moral reasons for fidelity (MRF). Subjects responded to the 29 items in the first study, on a six-point Likert scale, from "total disagreement" to "total agreement" ($\alpha = 0.93$).

Propensity toward Infidelity scale (PTIS; Lişman and Holman 2021) is a one-dimensional scale that measures the inclination to engage in unfaithful behaviors on a six-point Likert scale from 1 = *strongly disagree*; 6 = *strongly agree* (e.g., "The lack of sexual relations with my spouse would be a reason for me to have an extramarital relationship"; $\alpha = 0.91$)

Emotional regulation strategies (ERQ; Gross and John 2003), measuring two types of regulation: cognitive reappraisal (e.g., "When I want to feel less negative emotion, I change the way I'm thinking about the situation."; $\alpha = 0.78$) and expressive suppression (e.g., "I keep my emotions to myself."; $\alpha = 0.71$), on the same six-step Likert scale.

Also, participants' gender, age, partner age and marriage length were also assessed.

10. Results

In order to check the factorial validity of the MRFs, we performed a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in AMOS 22 on the MRF items and factorial structure that emerged from Study 1, using the maximum likelihood estimation method. The overall model fit was assessed with the following model fit indices: the goodness of fit index (AGFI), the comparative fit index (CFI), the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). CFI and AGFI values over 0.90, SMRM values lower than 0.08, and an RMSEA lower than 0.070 (with the upper confidence intervals below 0.080) indicate acceptable fit (Hu and Bentler 1999; Kline 1998; Steiger 2007).

The results of the CFA indicated that most of the model fit indices did not meet our cut-off criteria: $\chi^2(550) = 1919.28$, $p < 0.001$, GFI = 0.80, CFI = 0.85, SRMR = 0.056 and RMSEA = 0.073 [95% CI 0.070; 0.077]. In order to identify the poor fitting items, we decided to exclude all the items with standardized factor loading lower than 0.40 in the attempt to maximize the stability of the final factorial solution. We also took into account the squared multiple correlations and identified overlapping items by examining the modification indices and the standardized residual covariances of the items. Based on these criteria, we dropped 13 items progressively (four items from the *Respect for rules and traditions* subscale, and three items from each of the other three subscales). The final model with 16 items demonstrated good fit on all fit indices we considered: $\chi^2(98) = 238.64$, $p < 0.01$, AGFI = 0.90, CFI = 0.95, SRMR = 0.040, RMSEA = 0.067 [95% CI 0.058; 0.075]. The items in the final version of the MRFs, and their unstandardized and standardized factor loadings are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. The final version of the MRFs and the factor loadings (study 2 N = 463).

Item	Subscale	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β
Fidelity is important because by being faithful				
1. you don't violate one of the most important values.	Heeding rules	1.11	0.07	0.78
2. you don't break the rule of an honest life.	Heeding rules	0.89	0.06	0.76
3. you show that you don't covet something that is not yours.	Heeding rules	1.17	0.08	0.76
4. the rule of monogamy is honored.	Heeding rules	Set to 1		0.73
5. the partners belong to each other.	Reciprocal ownership	1.32	0.10	0.67
6. you show that you belong to your partner.	Reciprocal ownership	1.41	0.09	0.73
7. marriage means becoming "someone's", thus people should have romantic relationships only with their partner.	Reciprocal ownership	1.59	0.09	0.82
8. only the spouse has the right to live intimate experiences with his/her partner.	Reciprocal ownership	1.26	0.10	0.65
9. married partners must show loyalty.	Loyalty	0.95	0.05	0.82
10. you show how important the couple is to you.	Loyalty	0.84	0.05	0.78
11. you demonstrate your commitment to your partner.	Loyalty	0.80	0.05	0.76
12. you show that the couple is above any external temptation	Loyalty	Set to 1		0.76
13. people don't hurt their partner's self-esteem.	Decency and nonmaleficence	0.83	0.08	0.59
14. you are not behaving in a disgusting manner.	Decency and nonmaleficence	1.23	0.10	0.70
15. people show decent behavior.	Decency and nonmaleficence	1.17	0.10	0.73
16. people show that they are not cruel or indifferent to their partner.	Decency and nonmaleficence	1.18	0.10	0.67

Note: All factor loadings were significant at $p < 0.001$.

The descriptive statistics of the final MRFs and of its subscales, as well as of the other study variables are presented in Table 4, and the correlations between variables are presented in Table 5. The results indicate that the MRFs and each of its factors were negatively associated with propensity toward infidelity and positively associated with cognitive reappraisal. Expressive suppression emerged as unrelated to the MRFs and its subscales, but positively related with propensity toward infidelity. In terms of gender comparisons, female participants scored higher than their male counterparts on two of the MRF subscales and on the cognitive reappraisal subscale, while male participants scored higher on the propensity toward infidelity measure and on the expressive suppression subscale.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics study 2 (N = 463).

Variable	Alpha Cronbach	Minimum	Maximum	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
MRFs	0.93	2.05	6.00	5.09	0.85	-1.26	1.33
F1	0.85	1.00	6.00	4.91	1.12	-1.00	0.29
F2	0.87	1.00	6.00	5.37	0.85	-2.02	4.65
F3	0.82	1.40	6.00	4.92	1.14	-1.38	1.58
F4	0.79	1.20	6.00	5.16	0.88	-1.30	1.48
PTIS	0.91	1.00	6.00	1.84	0.96	1.47	1.93
Cogn_r	0.78	1.00	6.00	4.47	0.88	-0.30	-0.00
Suppress	0.71	1.00	6.00	3.20	1.10	-0.01	-0.46
Age	-	19.00	67.00	40.68	9.66	0.01	-0.87
Part_age	-	19.00	72.00	40.64	9.72	0.08	-0.66
Marriage_l	-	1.00	49.00	14.88	9.84	0.27	-0.95
Gender	-	1.00	2.00	232 (50.1% females)			

MRFs—moral reasons for fidelity; F1- fidelity as respect for rules and traditions; F2—loyalty to the partner; F3—fidelity as respect for partner’s ownership; F4—fidelity as decency that avoids harming the partner; PTIS—propensity toward Infidelity Scale; Cogn_r—cognitive reappraisal; Suppress—expressive suppression; Part_age—partner age; Marriage_l—marriage length.

Table 5. Correlations between study variables (study 2 N = 463).

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. MRFs	-										
2. F1	0.90 **	-									
3. F2	0.83 **	0.67 **	-								
4. F3	0.85 **	0.69 **	0.61 **	-							
5. F4	0.82 **	0.69 **	0.62 **	0.54 **	-						
6. PTIS	-0.41 **	-0.35 **	-0.45 **	-0.33 **	-0.28 **	-					
7. Cogn_r	0.32 **	0.31 **	0.29 **	0.19 **	0.31 **	-0.09	-				
8. Suppress	-0.01	-0.01	-0.07	0.03	-0.04	0.11 **	0.01	-			
9. Gender	0.09	0.10 *	0.08	0.02	0.11 *	-0.16 **	0.14 **	-0.16 **	-		
10. Age	-0.01	0.03	0.01	-0.08	0.01	-0.03	0.04	0.09 *	-0.06	-	
11. Part_age	-0.01	0.04	0.01	-0.09	0.01	-0.07	0.04	-0.00	0.22 **	0.89 **	-
12. Marriage_l	0.02	0.07	0.01	-0.03	0.01	-0.07	0.01	0.06	0.04	0.86 **	0.86 **

** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; MRFs—moral reasons for fidelity; F1- fidelity as respect for rules and traditions; F2—loyalty to the partner; F3—fidelity as respect for partner’s ownership; F4—fidelity as decency that avoids harming the partner; PTIS—propensity toward Infidelity Scale; Cogn_r—cognitive reappraisal; Suppress—expressive suppression; Part_age—partner age; Marriage_l—marriage length.

11. Discussion

The second study led to the statistical refinement of the MRFs through the selection of the best-fitting items for tapping marital partners' strength of their moral motivation for being faithful to their spouses. The four factors of the new scale that emerged in the previous study were confirmed by the new findings, and the MRFs emerged as having satisfactory factorial validity. Furthermore, the associations between the MRFs and its factors with the other variables considered were in line with theoretical expectations and with implications of past findings. The new measure was negatively associated with a propensity toward infidelity, supporting its criterion validity, and females were more likely to endorse two of the moral reasons addressed by the MRFs, while also having a lower tendency toward unfaithful behaviors than males, in line with previous results in various cultures, including in the Romanian context (Lişman and Holman 2023). This further supports the construct validity of the new scale. The study results also highlighted significant relationships between the MRFs and the use of cognitive regulation, discussed in the next section.

12. General Discussion

This study investigated the specific moral foundations of the fidelity of marital partners, complementing past research on the motivations that foster this behavioral commitment and oppose infidelity. Its findings highlighted a set of distinct moral factors fostering fidelity and anchored in the general moral domains described by the MFT. They also indicated that marital partners with stronger commitment to these beliefs are less inclined to engage in extramarital relationships, experience more intense moral disgust, anger and contempt towards unfaithful marital partners and compassion towards their spouses, and use cognitive reappraisal more often to cope with their aversive emotions.

Most of these previous studies have approached marital fidelity from a utilitarian perspective, by underscoring the advantages that fidelity offers to the individual and their social group in terms of external incentives and the mitigation of risks associated with infidelity (e.g., Brandon 2016). Our research focused on another facet of these motivations, which has received less attention in past research, namely the intrinsic and, more specifically, moral factors of fidelity in marital relationships. Previous studies in this area have revealed general protective factors against infidelity, such as religiosity-based morals or moral integrity (e.g., Fye and Mims 2019; Lişman and Holman 2021) or specific motives, such as refraining from unfaithful acts to avoid hurting one's partner (e.g., Emmers-Sommer et al. 2010). Our research builds on these findings and employed a top-down approach to fidelity motivations, driven by the specific implications of the MFT in the specific social context of marriage.

Our findings highlight the negative relationship between the strength of one's moral reasons for fidelity and the likelihood of engaging in extramarital relationships. This confirms the moral basis of marital fidelity and the appropriateness of the MFT framework for analyzing people's motivations and behaviors in the specific social context of marital relationships. They also provide a fine-grained outline of the moral underpinnings of fidelity by indicating four specific moral dimensions: loyalty, heeding rules, reciprocal ownership, and decency and nonmaleficence.

In the social arena in general, loyalty is fundamental for the cohesiveness of the group, either as a community or as a family, providing comfort and protecting from adverse external factors through this unifying connection among in-group members (Eldridge 1983). Loyalty can be expressed both to the partner and to the relationship, and it is also an important component of social identity. As such, Johnson (1999) distinguishes between three types of commitment: personal (*want to*), moral (*ought to*), and structural

(*have to*). Loyalty is perfectly calibrated on the first two forms, which the author describes as internal motivations to remain in the current relationship, as opposed to the third external form, which is focused on negative consequences of leaving the relationship and thus pressures partners to remain faithful, even if their personal or moral commitment is low. In this perspective, moral commitment entails the beliefs and moral values that hold marital partners together under the more general social identity of “marriage” or “family” and therefore instill loyalty to this social structure. Furthermore, respecting this principle of loyalty entails avoiding all acts that would endanger marital relationships, such as infidelity.

The moral principle of heeding rules implies maintaining social order through respect for tradition and the norms and values promoted by the community. These normative references explicitly define marriage, and our results suggest that people who are more inclined to internalize social rules as moral principles have a stronger motivation towards marital fidelity. Past research focused on the religious dimension of this normative motivation and highlighted the importance of religious beliefs (Dollahite and Lambert 2007) and of the notion of “sanctified marriage”, i.e., the perception of marriage as having a spiritual character and significance (Mahoney et al. 1999), for one’s commitment to being faithful. Our results extend this normative perspective by indicating that marital partners’ adherence to the social rules that prescribe the permissible behaviors within the marriage roles, with or without a religious foundation, is an important factor of their tendency to engage in extramarital relationships.

Reciprocal ownership also emerged as a moral foundation of marital fidelity. It entails a set of beliefs, also anchored in the normative social definitions of marriage, that describe each spouse as having exclusive rights to engage in intimate relationships with the other. This perspective may be also fostered by beliefs in the uniqueness and pre-determination of their relationship, akin to the “soulmate” notion of marriage, features that exclude all other individuals as potential intimate partners. The strength of these beliefs may be also positively linked to the emotional intimacy and to the consequent sense of personal fulfillment that spouses experience in their marital relationship (Amato 2009).

Finally, decency and nonmaleficence emerged as another specific reason for fidelity in marital relationships. This involves refraining from extramarital relationships as such behavior has the potential of hurting one’s spouse either directly or because of its social stigma (being perceived as indecent), which would further affect the cheated partner. According to past research on the five universal foundations (Graham et al. 2011), the moral principle of avoiding harm is associated with traits such as empathy, kindness and the importance of being careful, generous, compassionate, and dedicated. In the context of intimate relationships, these are also traits that describe a relationship based on love and commitment, infusing strong motivations to protect one’s partner by remaining faithful, in line with past findings that highlighted the desire not to hurt one’s partner as a protective factor against infidelity (Emmers-Sommer et al. 2010).

Our results also showed that the intensity of the emotions triggered by infidelity were positively associated with the strength of the individual’s moral reasons for fidelity. We found that the infidelity of a partner can cause anger, disgust, or contempt, but also compassion for the cheated partner. These results attest, once again, to the moral underpinnings of fidelity as addressed by the measure we developed and are consistent with previous research that has linked these emotions to moral foundations such as purity of mind and body, justice, autonomy, loyalty to the community, and compassionate concern for people in vulnerable situations (Horberg et al. 2011).

We also found the use of cognitive regulation as a strategy for regulating emotions to be negatively related to marital partners’ propensity toward infidelity. Past research on responses to moral dilemmas showed that cognitive reappraisal involves not only framing

the situation in a way that highlights the importance of saving as many people as possible, but also the reduction of the negative emotions that the individual experiences in these dilemmas and that tend to shift his decision towards the other choice (Szekely and Miu 2015). Therefore, marital partners who often use reappraisal to regulate their affective states may be more capable of reducing the intensity of emotions that may otherwise motivate engagement in unfaithful behaviors, such as those associated with being attracted to someone else or negative emotions experienced during conflicts with the partner. As previous studies have shown (Fye and Mims 2019; Dollahite and Lambert 2007), partners who remain faithful to their spouses are not always satisfied with the relationship and may face conflicts or meet attractive alternatives. Nevertheless, they deploy strategies to overcome such critical moments, and our findings pinpoint reappraisal as one of these strategies. Furthermore, our results indicated that the use of reappraisal is positively linked with the strength of individual's moral reasons for fidelity. This further suggests that the process of emotion regulation through reappraisal also involves shifting the individual's mindset from the behavioral tendencies instilled by his current feelings, which may entail engaging in extramarital relations with an attractive alternative or looking for such alternative partners, towards the rational and moral rules that apply in that situation. This recurrent mental activation of the moral reasons for fidelity further strengthens the individual's adherence to them, as the association between the scores on our measure and reappraisal suggests. Furthermore, the positive relationship between the latter and marital partners' propensity towards infidelity indicates that reappraisal may mediate the negative effect of the strength of their moral reasons for fidelity on the likelihood of engaging in extramarital affairs.

A possible limitation of the present study may stem from the delicate nature of the subject of infidelity, which may have raised social desirability concerns in our participants and thus influenced their answers. Similarly, we did not control for the effects of education on the strength of participants' moral beliefs on this topic. Some of the moral concerns about infidelity may be more prominent in the educational contents that individuals in a specific culture are exposed to throughout their development. This may render these moral beliefs more mentally salient and thus generate stronger agreement with the MRFs items, although this may only partially reflect the individual's personal views on marital fidelity. Furthermore, we used self-report measures, and did not assess participants' actual involvement in extramarital relations, nor features of their marital relationship that may have been influential on their perspective on fidelity, such as marital satisfaction or emotional intimacy. Future research could explore such associations to specific individual and relationship characteristics, and thus advance knowledge on the topic of the individual stability of the moral reasons for fidelity, respectively on their dependency on the current relationship context. Also, our research was performed on an Eastern European sample, which limits the generalizability of our findings, as prior studies have emphasized the importance of cultural beliefs, values, and social norms for the acceptability of infidelity (Haseli et al. 2019; Pazhoohi 2022). Further studies on the psychological dynamics of infidelity and their associations should broaden the cultural diversity of their samples. Future research could also examine in more detail the differences in the prevalence of the specific moral reasons for fidelity between individuals with various ages and marital experience.

To conclude, this study highlighted a set of distinct moral reasons for fidelity in marital relationships and developed a novel measure for assessing the strength of these moral beliefs. It also found that marital partners who endorse these moral reasons for fidelity are less likely to engage in extramarital relationships. Therefore, our findings stress the moral foundation of marital fidelity and offer a new research perspective on the factors of infidelity, complementing past studies that emphasized utilitarian concerns that deter

spouses from being unfaithful to their partners, alongside individual personality factors or relationship characteristics (Emmers-Sommer et al. 2010; Apostolou and Panayiotou 2019). Specifically, our study highlights the relevance of several moral anchors of fidelity beyond such contextual or individual features, motivating spouses to be faithful to each other and thus contributing to the endurance of the relationship over time.

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