

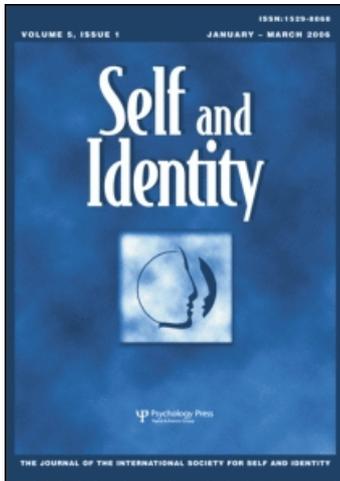
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### Priming the Primal Scene: Betrayal Trauma, Narcissism, and Attitudes Toward Sexual Infidelity

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# Priming the Primal Scene: Betrayal Trauma, Narcissism, and Attitudes Toward Sexual Infidelity

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*We used mindset priming techniques to conduct an experimental study ( $N=316$ ) designed to assess ideas derived from psychoanalytic theory. Specifically, we investigated the possibility that the unconscious activation of the Oedipal situation would lead people—especially men and individuals who possess narcissistic personality features—to become more prohibitive toward sexual infidelity in romantic relationships. Results supported this hypothesis, which was tested using a new scale of attitudes toward sexual infidelity. Although men and narcissists tend to be more permissive towards sexual infidelity in general, when they are led to identify and empathize with the victim of betrayal, they become as disapproving of extra-dyadic sexual involvement as are women and low narcissists. Correlational evidence indicates that narcissism is positively associated with the likelihood of having affairs, the number of partners cheated on, and (for women but not men) the likelihood of being cheated on. In addition, the (self-reported) occurrence of parental cheating behavior is positively associated with one's eventual likelihood of cheating on others. Among daughters (but not sons), a history of parental cheating is associated with increased narcissism and the likelihood of being cheated on. Potential explanations and clinical implications of our findings are discussed.*

**Keywords:** Infidelity; Narcissism; Oedipal conflicts; Priming; Psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalytic theory offers a rich source of theorizing about intrapsychic motivational conflicts, interpersonal behavior, and the relationship between the two. Unfortunately, there have been few satisfying empirical attempts to assess hypotheses derived from this theoretical corpus. The reluctance of empirically

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oriented researchers to embrace Freudian ideas may be attributable in part to popular assumptions that psychoanalytic theory is unfalsifiable and therefore inherently unscientific (Popper, 1962; but see Edelson, 1984, and Westen, 1998). Nevertheless, a handful of adroit experimentalists have been able to demonstrate support for specific, empirically testable hypotheses derived from psychodynamic theory (e.g., Andersen, Glassman, Chen, & Cole, 1995; Baldwin, Carrell, & Lopez, 1990; Erdelyi, 1990; Newman, Duff, & Baumeister, 1997; Wegner, 1994). For example, Silverman and Weinberger (1985) demonstrated the effects of experimentally priming unconscious fantasies like “Mommy and I are one,” and Shaver and Mikulincer (2005) examined the effects of priming attachment security and insecurity. In this article, we, too, adopt an experimental approach to explore psychodynamic ideas concerning the effects of the Oedipal conflict. More specifically, we investigate the notion that reminders of the betrayal trauma associated with the “primal scene”—the child’s real or imagined perception of the parents’ sexual relationship (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973, p. 335)—as well as the child’s knowledge of their parents’ own sexual infidelity—can activate unconscious conflict around sexual infidelity in adulthood and therefore affect conscious attitudes concerning sexual infidelity.

## The Primal Scene

Freud (1910) postulated a universal drive in children to establish and preserve an exclusive, possessive sexual relationship with the opposite sex parent while eliminating the same sex parent as a sexual rival. He further contended that this wish for an exclusive relationship is accompanied by the implicit assumption—created by infantile narcissism—that if the child submits to the authority of the parents and complies with their demands, his or her good behavior will be rewarded with parental affection and the forbidden, denied pleasure (e.g., Watson & Getz, 1990). When the child learns about the parents’ sexual involvement with each other, he or she will feel that this implicit promise has been violated and will respond with intense jealousy and rage, as well as a sense of betrayal and humiliation. In other words, the boy “does not forgive his mother for having granted the favour of sexual intercourse not to himself but to his father, and he regards it as an act of unfaithfulness” (Freud, 1910, p. 171). For both sexes, the sense of sexual betrayal by the desired but “unfaithful” parent leaves “a permanent injury to self-regard in the form of a narcissistic scar” (Freud, 1920, p. 21).

To some extent, the child is expected to identify with all three roles in the Oedipal love triangle: (1) the child as an “injured third party” who has been seduced and betrayed (Freud, 1910); (2) the desired but unfaithful parent; and (3) the successful rival who maintains exclusive possession of his or her mate. As a result, the individual comes to hold conflicted, ambivalent attitudes concerning sexual infidelity (e.g., see Josephs, 2001, 2006). It is theorized that during the course of development, one of these identifications becomes dominant, and this is reflected in the individual’s conscious attitudes toward sexual infidelity in committed romantic relationships. In the normal resolution of the Oedipal conflict, Freud (1923) suggested that the child primarily identifies with the successful parental rival and hopes to grow up to have a satisfying monogamous relationship with someone who will serve as a symbolic substitute for the desired parent. In some cases, however, the angry, hurt, and humiliated feelings associated with being the victim of betrayal are so strong that the child is unable to come to terms with his or her position as an Oedipal “loser.” These

individuals will ultimately be more likely to identify with the (typically opposite-sex) “unfaithful” parent; as adults they are theorized to be more likely to inflict hurt and pain on others by becoming perpetrators of sexual infidelity. In this case, “the child will avenge him- or herself by growing up to become an adult who will seduce and betray others as he or she felt seduced and betrayed” (Josephs, 2006, p. 424).

### Parental Cheating

In addition to being an “unfaithful” parent in the child’s mind because of the primal scene, some parents are unfaithful in a more literal sense with respect to their own romantic relationships. Parental cheating behavior is likely to affect children’s attitudes and behavior concerning sexual infidelity later in life and to intensify the Oedipal conflict (e.g., see Walker & Ehrenberg, 1998). Given strong cultural proscriptions against marital infidelity, it is reasonable to assume that if the child becomes aware of parental cheating behavior, he or she is likely to witness highly negative consequences, including emotional distress on the part of the cuckolded parent (Lusterman, 2005). Whether the child ultimately identifies with the role of “perpetrator” or “victim” in adulthood will probably be influenced by the sex of the child, how the issue is handled within the family, and whether or not the infidelity leads to parental separation or is sanctioned in some form (Vangelisti & Gerstenberger, 2004). Depending upon these factors and others, the child is likely to become more sensitive to the injured parent (regardless of the parent’s sex) or instead to adopt a more “competitive” stance and resolve to occupy the more powerful (perpetrator) role rather than the distressed (victim) role.

### The Role of Narcissism

Research reveals that narcissism as a personality characteristic, which involves a defensive, egocentric lack of empathy for others (Campbell, 1999; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995; see Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001, for a review), is positively associated with unfaithful behavior in romantic relationships. Buss and Shackelford (1997) showed, for example, that susceptibility to having an affair is positively correlated with narcissism (as well as negatively correlated with conscientiousness). Atkins, Yi, Baucom, and Christensen (2005) similarly found that narcissism was related to infidelity such that individuals who were more focused on themselves and their own needs and desires were more likely to be involved in an affair. Research by Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, and Finkel (2004) further suggested that narcissists may be impaired in the areas of empathic identification and forgiveness more generally.

A psychodynamic interpretation of the observed association between narcissism and infidelity is that people who are high in narcissism are unable to assimilate the “narcissistic scar” arising from feeling like an injured third party in the Oedipal love triangle. Although the proximal response to betrayal trauma would likely include shock, humiliation, indignation, and feelings of injustice, narcissists may also engage in more distal defense mechanisms, including unconscious identification with the “cheating” parent. As a consequence, they seek to compensate for the wound to their self-regard through an act of revenge, betraying others just as they had felt betrayed. We therefore suggest that people with narcissistic personality organization will generally be more likely to identify with the perpetrator—i.e., the unfaithful partner and/or the “mate poacher” (see Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992; Schmitt,

2005)—in situations involving infidelity and will also regard themselves (but not necessarily their partners) as being entitled to have extra-dyadic sexual relationships. In many circumstances, people who are especially high in narcissism are expected to disidentify with the victims of sexual betrayal, severing any empathic connections in order to feel less guilt concerning their own unfaithful tendencies and/or actions. They are also more likely to cheat on their own romantic partners. When they are made to empathize with victims of the betrayal trauma through a priming technique that requires them to identify with and take the perspective of the victim, however, we hypothesize that narcissists will express attitudes that are less permissive of sexual infidelity.

### **Gender Differences in Attitudes Toward Sexual Infidelity**

In highlighting the relationship between individual differences in personality and attitudes toward sexual infidelity, it would be a mistake to overlook differences between men and women.

Numerous studies have found that men are more likely to possess a narcissistic character structure than are women (e.g., Golomb, Fava, Abraham, & Rosenbaum, 1995; Grilo et al., 1996). This gender difference may be due in part to the fact that narcissism is more consistent with male than with female stereotypes and gender role expectations (e.g., Rienzi, Forquera, & Hitchcock, 1995). A societal double standard exists with regard to sexual infidelity, and it appears to reinforce men's narcissistic sense of entitlement to be unfaithful while discouraging any urges women might have in that direction. In our society—as in many others—men enjoy more freedom than women in nearly every domain of sexual behavior, and this directly affects their attitudes toward infidelity. For instance, Buunk and Dijkstra (2004) describe how men and women have been treated differently in terms of legal, moral, and social consequences concerning infidelity in most ancient and contemporary cultures worldwide. The authors state that for both men and women “adultery engaged in by men is much more easy to forgive than adultery committed by women” (p. 106). This leads women to feel more guilty than men when committing adultery (Spanier & Margolis, 1983). Women also experience their cheating behavior as unique and counter-normative, whereas men regard cheating as rather common and therefore acceptable (Van den Eijnden, Buunk, & Bosveld, 2000). In sum, much evidence indicates that men and women generally find the extra-dyadic sexual behavior of men to be more acceptable as well as more common than that of women.

Therefore, we expect women to be more prone to the monogamous resolution of the conflict associated with betrayal trauma and to endorse prohibitive attitudes toward infidelity, both because they experience stronger pressure to remain faithful to their partners and because their fear of becoming the betrayed victim again—now in their adult romantic relationships—is frequently activated by awareness of the double standard. In contrast, we expect that men will be more likely than women to identify with the unfaithful parent as a resolution to the Oedipal conflict and feel more entitled to have affairs. Thus, empathic identification with the victim of betrayal is not necessarily salient for men under normal circumstances. It is hypothesized that reminding men of the betrayal trauma—by priming either the primal scene or a case of romantic infidelity from the perspective of the victim—should lead them to change their attitudes concerning infidelity, so that they become closer to sharing the relatively prohibitive attitudes generally held by women.

## Study Overview

Although psychodynamic theory is enormously rich, complex, and difficult to assess empirically, we have conducted an experimental study that makes use of the technique of “mindset priming” (e.g., Bargh & Chartrand, 2000; Mikulincer, Shaver, Gillath, & Nitzberg, 2005; Wilson & Capitman, 1982) to alter patterns of empathic identification in an effort to investigate the lasting effects of the Oedipal triangle. To the extent that tolerance of sexual infidelity among men and narcissists is due to a relative lack of empathic identification with victims of betrayal trauma (a distal defense mechanism), we hypothesized that priming them with scenes of betrayal (from the victim’s perspective) would lead them to join women and those who are low in narcissism in reporting more prohibitive attitudes towards infidelity (a proximal defense mechanism). Because it was necessary to ascertain whether people would react to the primal scene in the same manner in which they would respond to explicit cases of romantic infidelity (i.e., when one spouse catches his or her partner cheating), we constructed two experimental conditions. In the “Primal Scene” condition, participants read a passage that required them to identify with a child who surprises his or her parents by interrupting their romantic embrace. In the “Spousal Betrayal” condition, participants read a passage that required them to identify with a betrayed spouse who has witnessed the philandering of his or her partner. Both of these experimental conditions were compared to a neutral control condition. If it is true that the Primal Scene and Spousal Betrayal conditions do exert equivalent effects on attitudes toward infidelity, this would provide some evidence to suggest that the Oedipal situation is indeed associated with feelings of sexual betrayal.

## Method

### *Participants*

Three-hundred sixteen undergraduate students (70 men, 246 women) participated in the experiment. Their average age was 22 years. In terms of racial/ethnic background, 66.9% identified themselves as Caucasian, 10.9% as Latino/a, 9% as African American, and 4.5% as Asian or Asian American. Most participants (90.3%) reported that they had been in romantic relationships or were currently in one, and a similarly high percentage (79.3%) reported that they had had sexual intercourse in the past.

### *Materials and Procedure*

Study materials were presented in three parts. The first part contained questionnaires designed to measure individual differences in personality (i.e., narcissism). In the second part of the study, participants were asked to read a paragraph that contained the priming manipulation; they were encouraged to identify with the protagonist of the story by writing down what this person may have been feeling or thinking. In the third part of the study, participants were asked for their attitudes about romantic relationships, including their attitudes toward sexual infidelity. Finally, participants disclosed demographic and other information concerning their family and relationship history, including behavioral self- and other-reports of cheating behavior.

*Narcissism scale.* To assess narcissism, including lack of empathy for others, we used 29 items from Millon's (1992) Multi-Axis Personality Measure. Sample items include: "I do what I want without worrying about its effect on others," "I don't blame anyone who takes advantage of someone who allows it," and "I often give up doing things because I'm afraid I won't do them well" (reverse scored). Participants indicated the extent to which they found these items to be descriptive of themselves on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 = "*completely disagree*" to 6 = "*completely agree*", and a mean score was calculated for each participant ( $\alpha = .75$ ). We performed a median split to identify participants who were relatively "high" and "low" on narcissism. Previous research has established that scores on the Millon measure of narcissism correlate highly with scores on the commonly used Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), with  $r$ s ranging from .55 to .75 (Auerbach, 1984; Chatham, Tibbals, & Harrington, 1993).

*Priming manipulation.* After completing the narcissism measure, participants read one of the three vignettes that served as primes, and they answered an open-ended question about the thoughts and feelings of the protagonist in the vignette. The protagonist's sex was always matched with that of the respondent. In the Primal Scene condition, participants read the following:

Jack, a 6-year-old boy, is sleeping in his room. He wakes up and hears some funny noises coming from his parents' bedroom, so he climbs out of bed and starts walking that way. In a moment, he's standing on the doorstep of his parents' bedroom slowly pushing the door open. It makes a squeaking sound. Mom and Dad are in the middle of kissing each other. As they take notice of the sound, they instantly stop hugging, and turn to Jack with a surprised and embarrassed expression on their face. Jack is staring at them, holding the doorknob tightly in his hand. Dad puts his shirt back on and stands up. Mom looks down to check if anything is too revealing.

In the Spousal Betrayal condition, participations read instead the following:

Jack just got home. As he enters his house, he is hearing some funny noises coming from his bedroom, so he starts walking that way. In a moment, he's standing on the doorstep of the bedroom slowly pushing the door open. It makes a squeaking sound. His wife, Mary, and a friend of his are in the middle of kissing each other. As they take notice of the sound, they instantly stop hugging, and turn to Jack with a surprised and embarrassed expression on their face. Jack is staring at them, holding the doorknob tightly in his hand. The friend puts his shirt back on and stands up. Mary looks down to check if anything is too revealing.

Finally, participants assigned to the control condition read the following:

Jack wakes up in the morning to the beep of the alarm clock. As he gets out of bed, he hears some noises coming from the kitchen, so he starts to walk that way. In a moment, he's standing on the doorstep of the kitchen, pushing the door open. It makes a squeaking sound. His two roommates are in the middle of making breakfast, one of them boiling eggs, the other making the toast. As they take notice of the sound, they turn toward Jack. He walks to the coffeepot and fills up a cup with the warm liquid. Then he sits down to the table, and opens the daily newspaper on the third page.

The purpose of the first two vignettes was to increase participants' degree of identification and empathy with the victim role and to create an emotional experience that would affect their attitudes toward infidelity. In constructing these

scenarios, we therefore chose situations that would be likely to induce actual emotional experiences (e.g., see Robinson & Clore, 2001).

*Attitudes toward sexual infidelity.* The dependent variable of attitudes toward sexual infidelity was measured with the use of a 33-item scale that contained a variety of possible justifications for behaving unfaithfully in a committed relationship as well as reverse-scored items that directly conveyed prohibitive attitudes. Sample items include the following: “If your partner doesn’t find out about the affair, your partner won’t get hurt,” and “Sexual infidelity is a symptom of a deeper relationship problem that’s avoided.” Participants signaled their agreement or disagreement with each item on a 10-point scale ranging from 1 = “*completely disagree*” to 10 = “*completely agree*”. A mean score was calculated for each participant ( $\alpha = .85$ ).

*Parental relationship history.* Participants were asked whether their parents were both alive and, if so, whether they were still living together. In addition, they were asked: “To the best of your knowledge, did either one of them cheat on the other?” Responses to these questions were coded so that “No” = 1 and “Yes” = 2. Approximately one-fourth (23.8%) believed that at least one of their parents had cheated on the other.

*Personal relationship history.* Participants were asked if they ever had “an ongoing affair while you were involved in a committed relationship” and “[t]o the best of your knowledge, did any of your romantic partners cheat on you?” Responses were coded so that “No” = 1 and “Yes” = 2. Almost one-third of participants (29.7%) admitted that they had cheated on at least one romantic partner; slightly more (38.3%) indicated that they had been cheated on by a partner in the past. Participants were also asked to write a number in response to the following question: “How many of your romantic partners did you cheat on in the past?” Responses ranged from 0 to 17. Finally, they were asked, “Are you a jealous person?” and responded on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 = “*Not at all*” to 6 = “*Extremely*.”

*Debriefing.* At the end of the study, participants were fully debriefed. They were informed about the theoretical background of the study and about the specific hypotheses. They were also provided with information about how to contact psychological services in case they felt the need to talk to someone about issues that were raised by the theme of the study.

## Results

### *Relations Among Parental and Personal Relationship Histories, Narcissism, and Attitudes Toward Infidelity*

We expected that parental cheating behavior, personal cheating behavior, narcissism, and permissiveness concerning sexual infidelity would all be positively associated with one another. Correlational analyses generally supported these predictions (see Table 1). For the sample as a whole, a history of parental infidelity was indeed positively associated with the offspring’s likelihood of having an affair

**TABLE 1** Intercorrelations Among Study Variables for the Entire Sample

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
(1) <i>Narcissism</i>	–						
(2) <i>Parents cheated</i>	.12*	–					
(3) <i>Parents together</i>	–.06	–.49**	–				
(4) <i>Jealous person</i>	–.08	.02	–.11 <sup>+</sup>	–			
(5) <i>Had affairs</i>	.23**	.18**	–.06	.17**	–		
(6) <i>No. of partners cheated on</i>	.28**	.04	–.03	.17**	.59**	–	
(7) <i>Cheated on</i>	.15**	.11*	–.04	.01	.14*	.14*	–
(8) <i>Attitudes toward sexual infidelity</i>	.34**	.08	–.01	.04	.32**	.32**	–.01

Notes: “Narcissism” refers to the mean score on the Narcissism subscale of Millon’s (1992) Multi-Axis Personality Measure (actual range 2.34–4.45). “Parents cheated” is a dichotomous variable that refers to whether or not the participant had a parent who cheated on the other (1 = *No*, 2 = *Yes*). “Parents together” is a dichotomous variable that refers to whether or not the participant’s parents were still living together (1 = *No*, 2 = *Yes*). “Jealous person” refers to the participant’s Likert-scale rating of how jealous s/he is in general (1 = *Not at all*, 6 = *Extremely*). “Had affairs” is a dichotomous variable that refers to whether or not the participant cheated on a romantic partner (1 = *No*, 2 = *Yes*). “Number of partners cheated on” refers to the number of romantic partners that participants reported having cheated on (actual range 0–17). “Cheated on” is a dichotomous variable that refers to whether or not the participant was cheated on by any romantic partners (1 = *No*, 2 = *Yes*). “Attitudes toward sexual infidelity” refers to the mean score on the Attitudes toward Sexual Infidelity Scale that was designed for this study (actual range 2.07–6.48, with higher scores indicating greater permissiveness). <sup>+</sup> $p < .1$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$  (two-tailed).

( $r = .18$ ,  $n = 298$ ,  $p < .001$ ), his or her narcissism score ( $r = .12$ ,  $n = 307$ ,  $p < .02$ ), and the likelihood of his or her being cheated on ( $r = .11$ ,  $n = 294$ ,  $p < .03$ ).<sup>1</sup> As expected, narcissism scores were positively associated with the likelihood of having affairs ( $r = .23$ ,  $n = 299$ ,  $p < .001$ ), the number of partners cheated on ( $r = .28$ ,  $n = 293$ ,  $p < .001$ ), the likelihood of being cheated on ( $r = .15$ ,  $n = 295$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and the holding of permissive attitudes concerning sexual infidelity ( $r = .34$ ,  $n = 308$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In addition, having had affairs and the number of partners cheated on were both positively associated with permissiveness concerning sexual infidelity (both  $r$ s = .32,  $n$ s = 299 and 293, respectively,  $p < .001$ ).<sup>2</sup>

Nearly all of these correlations held for both male and female respondents when the analyses were conducted for each sex separately (see Table 2), but there were three correlations that were significant for women but not for men. Parental infidelity was associated with the narcissism scores of women ( $r = .16$ ,  $n = 247$ ,  $p < .05$ ) but not men ( $r = -.02$ ,  $n = 60$ ,  $ns$ ), and it was associated with an increased likelihood of being cheated on for women ( $r = .14$ ,  $n = 237$ ,  $p < .05$ ) but not for men ( $r = .03$ ,  $n = 57$ ,  $ns$ ). Finally, narcissism was positively associated with the likelihood of being cheated on for women ( $r = .21$ ,  $n = 237$ ,  $p = .001$ ) but not for men ( $r = -.01$ ,  $n = 58$ ,  $ns$ ). These gender differences are broadly consistent with the notion that daughters may be more likely than sons to identify with the “victim” in cases of sexual betrayal involving one’s parents.

**TABLE 2** Intercorrelations Among Study Variables as a Function of Participant Sex

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
(1) <i>Narcissism</i>	—	-.02	-.18	-.01	.28*	.28*	-.01	.42**
(2) <i>Parents cheated</i>	.16*	—	-.49**	.12	.20	.09	.03	.08
(3) <i>Parents together</i>	.02	-.48**	—	-.12	-.22	.04	-.04	-.19
(4) <i>Jealous person</i>	-.09	.00	-.11	—	.39**	.23 <sup>+</sup>	.05	.13
(5) <i>Had affairs</i>	.21**	.17**	-.01	.01	—	.64**	.27*	.43**
(6) <i>No. of partners cheated on</i>	.27**	.02	-.05	.15*	.59**	—	.14	.35**
(7) <i>Cheated on</i>	.21**	.13*	-.04	.01	.12	.16*	—	-.15
(8) <i>Attitudes toward sexual infidelity</i>	.12 <sup>+</sup>	.09	-.05	.05	.28**	.29**	.05	—

Notes: Correlations for men (with *ns* ranging from 54 to 61) are presented above the diagonal, and correlations for women (with *ns* ranging from 231 to 247) are below the diagonal. "Narcissism" refers to the mean score on the Narcissism subscale of Millon's (1992) Multi-Axis Personality Measure (actual range 2.34–4.45). "Parents cheated" is a dichotomous variable that refers to whether or not the participant had a parent who cheated on the other (1 = *No*, 2 = *Yes*). "Parents together" is a dichotomous variable that refers to whether or not the participant's parents were still living together (1 = *No*, 2 = *Yes*). "Jealous person" refers to the participant's Likert-scale rating of how jealous s/he is in general (1 = *Not at all*, 6 = *Extremely*). "Had affairs" is a dichotomous variable that refers to whether or not the participant cheated on a romantic partner (1 = *No*, 2 = *Yes*). "Number of partners cheated on" refers to the number of romantic partners that participants reported having cheated on (actual range 0–17). "Cheated on" is a dichotomous variable that refers to whether or not the participant was cheated on by any romantic partners (1 = *No*, 2 = *Yes*). "Attitudes toward sexual infidelity" refers to the mean score on the Attitudes toward Sexual Infidelity Scale that was designed for this study (actual range 2.07–6.48, with higher scores indicating greater permissiveness). <sup>+</sup>  $p < .06$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$  (two-tailed).

*Effects of Priming, Sex, and Narcissism on Attitudes Toward Infidelity*

To investigate our hypotheses concerning the effects of experimental reminders of betrayal trauma, sex, and narcissism on permissiveness concerning sexual infidelity, we conducted a 3 (Experimental Condition: primal scene vs. spousal betrayal vs. control)  $\times$  2 (Participant Sex: male vs. female)  $\times$  2 (Narcissism: high vs. low) univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the dependent variable of attitudes toward infidelity. The analysis yielded three main effects and three two-way interactions. The three-way interaction was not statistically significant.<sup>3</sup>

A main effect of participant sex revealed that men were indeed much more accepting of infidelity ( $M = 3.86$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ) than were women ( $M = 2.97$ ,  $SD = .87$ ),  $F(1, 296) = 35.71$ ,  $p < .001$ . Similarly, high narcissists held significantly more permissive attitudes concerning infidelity ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ) than did low narcissists ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ),  $F(1, 296) = 7.05$ ,  $p < .01$ . In addition, there was a reliable interaction involving participant sex and narcissism,  $F(1, 296) = 3.99$ ,  $p < .05$ . There was a stronger positive association between narcissism and permissiveness toward infidelity for men ( $r = .42$ ,  $n = 61$ ,  $p < .001$ ) than for women ( $r = .12$ ,  $n = 247$ ,  $p < .06$ ),  $Z = 2.24$ ,  $p < 0.03$  (two-tailed), for the difference between the two correlations. That is, male narcissism was more likely than female narcissism to manifest itself in acceptance of cheating behavior.

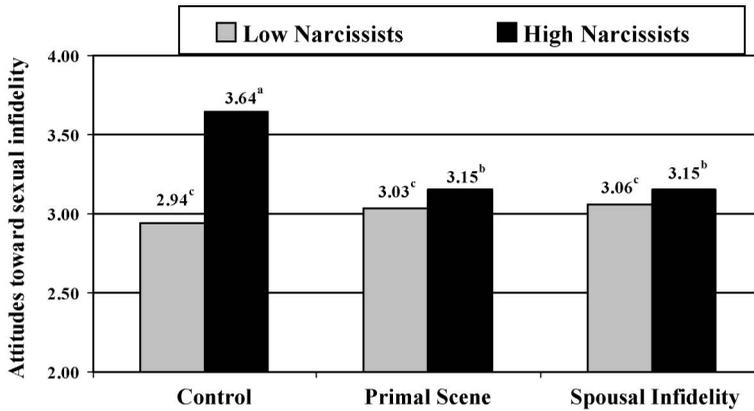
There was also evidence that participants' attitudes toward sexual infidelity were affected by the experimental condition to which they were assigned. A marginal main effect of experimental condition,  $F(2, 296) = 2.80$ ,  $p = .06$ , indicated that permissiveness toward infidelity was slightly higher in the control condition ( $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ) than in the primal scene ( $M = 3.09$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ) or spousal betrayal conditions ( $M = 3.11$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ), although none of these pairwise differences attained significance.

More importantly, the analysis yielded support for the hypothesized interaction involving experimental condition and narcissism,  $F(2, 296) = 3.22$ ,  $p < .05$ . As can be seen in Figure 1, high narcissists were significantly less permissive of infidelity in the primal scene ( $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ) and spousal betrayal ( $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ) conditions than in the control condition ( $M = 3.64$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ),  $F(2, 154) = 3.91$ ,  $p < .03$ . For high narcissists, means in the primal scene and spousal betrayal conditions were nearly identical,  $t(112) = 0.04$ ,  $p = .97$ , so they were combined to increase statistical power. When the combined experimental conditions were compared to the control condition, the difference was found to be statistically significant,  $t(155) = 2.80$ ,  $p < .01$ . For low narcissists, however, there was no effect of experimental condition on attitudes toward infidelity,  $F(2, 148) = 0.23$ ,  $p = .79$ . They scored consistently low on acceptance of infidelity, with means ranging from 2.94 to 3.06 (see Figure 1); there was no difference between means observed for the experimental conditions (combined) and the control condition,  $t(149) = -0.66$ ,  $p = .51$ .

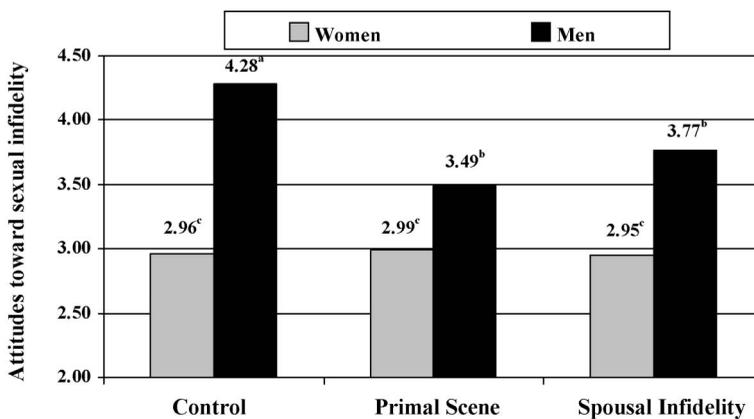
The interaction between experimental condition and narcissism can also be interpreted in terms of whether the effect of narcissism on permissiveness toward infidelity was moderated by experimental condition. We found that high and low narcissists differed significantly in terms of attitudes toward infidelity in the control condition,  $t(99) = -3.44$ ,  $p < .001$ , but not in the primal scene,  $t(104) = -0.65$ ,  $p = .52$ , or spousal betrayal,  $t(99) = -0.45$ ,  $p = .65$ , conditions (see means in Figure 1). That is, priming high narcissists with either of the two "betrayal" scenarios led them to express attitudes that were very similar to those of low narcissists,

presumably because these scenarios encouraged them to identify more than they typically would with the “victim” role.

Finally, the analysis yielded a marginal two-way interaction involving experimental condition and participant sex,  $F(2, 296) = 2.63, p = .07$  (see Figure 2). Internal analyses revealed that the experimental condition affected the attitudes of men,  $F(2, 58) = 3.06, p = .05$ , but not of women,  $F(2, 244) = 0.05, p = .95$ . Paralleling the results for narcissism, men were significantly less permissive of infidelity in the primal scene ( $M = 3.49, SD = 1.06$ ) and spousal betrayal ( $M = 3.77, SD = 0.83$ ) conditions than in



**FIGURE 1** Mean scores on attitudes toward sexual infidelity as a function of experimental priming condition and level of narcissism. *Note:* Higher scores indicate greater permissiveness toward sexual infidelity. Means with different superscripts within each group (high vs. low narcissists) differ from one another according to planned contrast test comparisons ( $p < .05$ ).



**FIGURE 2** Mean scores on attitudes toward sexual infidelity as a function of experimental priming condition and participant sex. *Note:* Higher scores indicate greater permissiveness toward sexual infidelity. Means with different superscripts within each gender group differ from one another according to planned contrast test comparisons ( $p < .05$ ).

the control condition ( $M=4.28$ ,  $SD=1.19$ ). When the combined experimental conditions were compared to the control condition, the difference was found to be statistically significant for men,  $t(59)=2.34$ ,  $p=.02$ , but not for women,  $t(245)=-0.09$ ,  $p=.93$ . Thus, we may conclude that reminding people of either the Oedipal situation or a case of spousal betrayal tended to decrease their acceptance of sexual infidelity (compared to a control condition), but these differences were statistically significant only for two groups that were relatively permissive of infidelity to begin with, namely high (vs. low) narcissists and men (vs. women). The fact that priming people with the Oedipal situation exerted the same effects as priming them with an explicit case of spousal betrayal provides at least indirect evidence that the primal scene is experienced by many people (especially men and narcissists) as an instance of betrayal trauma.

## Discussion

Using a new scale of attitudes toward sexual infidelity, we found that, under most circumstances, men and narcissistic people hold somewhat more permissive attitudes concerning infidelity in comparison with women and less narcissistic people. We theorized that these differences stem from divergent ways of resolving conflicting feelings associated with the early experience of betrayal trauma. More specifically, we assumed that men and narcissistic people defend against painful and angry feelings by disidentifying with the victim of betrayal and identifying instead with the more powerful role of the perpetrator. However, when high narcissists and men are actively encouraged to empathize with the victim, they exhibit attitudes towards sexual infidelity that are as prohibitive as those held by low narcissists and women. (Presumably, a priming technique that increased the strength of identification with the perpetrator role would lead high narcissists and men to be *more* rather than less permissive concerning infidelity, but we did not investigate this possibility in the current research.)

This pattern emerged in the experimental condition that explicitly primed sexual betrayal, but, more important from the perspective of psychoanalytic theory, it emerged also in the condition in which the Oedipal situation was primed. This suggests that being reminded of one's parents having a sexual relationship has similar psychological consequences as does thinking about spousal infidelity later in life. We further theorized that whereas the differences between high and low narcissists originate in their varying abilities to assimilate the "narcissistic scar" that early betrayal represents, differences between men and women were more likely due to the pervasive double standard in society. This double standard allows greater freedom for men in almost all areas of sexuality and judges women's extra-dyadic sexual activity especially harshly. Presumably, this makes women chronically aware of men's propensity to cheat and makes them particularly uncomfortable about their own impulses to be unfaithful, which in turn leads them to hold strongly prohibitive attitudes concerning infidelity.

Sex differences in attitudes toward infidelity are consistent with other theoretical frameworks as well. The evolutionary approach, for example, postulates innate differences between men and women in their sensitivity to their partners' extra-dyadic sexual involvement. Buss and his colleagues have accumulated evidence showing that men respond with more intense negative emotions to their partners' sexual infidelity than women do, whereas women exhibit more jealousy in response to their mates' emotional betrayal (Buss et al., 1992; but see DeSteno & Salovey,

1996). Evolutionary theory explains these differences by pointing to men's elevated concerns about their paternity and women's intense concerns about their partners' parental investment in raising their child (e.g., see Schmitt, 2005). Attachment theory offers another plausible explanation for the sex differences we have found. There is now empirical evidence available suggesting that men are more prone to the dismissive attachment style in general, which would make it more likely for them to cope with sexual betrayal by disengaging from significant relationships and to deny the importance of intimacy (e.g., Feeney, 1999). Thus, there may be multiple reasons why men and women would deal with the conflict arising from betrayal differently.

Furthermore, we obtained indirect evidence that people experience the sexuality of their parents as a form of betrayal. All of us know that there is something uncomfortable about contemplating our parents as sexual beings. In addition, we obtained correlational evidence suggesting that parental infidelity (i.e., parents cheating on one another)—but not parental separation—was related to specific personality and behavioral outcomes for their children. More specifically, daughters (and, to a lesser extent, sons) who reported that one or both of their parents had been unfaithful were more likely to be narcissistic, to report cheating on their own romantic partners, and also to have been cheated on themselves. The finding that narcissistic daughters (but not sons) were more likely to report having been betrayed is an especially interesting one. We speculate that this may be due to women who are narcissistic (possibly because one or both of their parents were narcissistic) disproportionately selecting narcissistic mates who are, in turn, more likely to engage in romantic “game-playing” as well as cheating behavior (see Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002, p. 349). Because there is very little research that addresses the consequences of parental infidelity on children's long-range outcomes (but see Walker & Ehrenberg, 1998), these findings are potentially important, especially insofar as they may stimulate further empirical investigation.

We have distinguished between proximal and distal responses to the trauma of betrayal. At the moment of traumatization (or reminders of traumatization), the immediate or proximal response is most likely shock, humiliation, indignation, and a feeling of being wronged that comes from identification with the victim role. Our findings suggest that this will translate into short-term increases in prohibitive, moralizing attitudes among men and high narcissists. Although identification with the unfaithful parent (or “cheater”) is unlikely to be a proximal response to betrayal trauma, it may well be a more distal defense mechanism, a more long-term unconscious strategy of coping with abusive treatment. The research literature on infidelity reveals that some people do report being unfaithful as an intentional act of revenge for a partner's relational transgression, that is, as an act of retributive justice, but this may not be their initial response (Tafoya & Spitzberg, 2007). Rumination about relational transgression appears to precede and predict revenge motivation (McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001, McCullough, Giacome, & Root, 2007). Our study focused on proximal defensive responses, most especially increases in prohibitive attitudes in response to experimental primes. Although we did not directly examine more distal defensive response such as identification with the perpetrator (i.e., more permissive attitudes in the long-run), our correlational findings concerning narcissism are generally consistent with this psychodynamic account. Future research would do well to investigate both proximal and distal responses to betrayal trauma under controlled settings.

The question remains, however, what is it specifically about contemplating our parents' sexuality that causes anxiety? It is possible that the answer lies in the dread

of incest or in violating some other social taboo rather than in the implicit betrayal that parental sexuality may represent (e.g., Kilborne, 2003). Even if betrayal proves to be the crucial factor that provokes anxiety concerning parental sexuality, betrayal can be conceived as a specific type of threat to the attachment system. If so, it may be that the primal scene evokes a kind of attachment insecurity. Becoming more promonogamy would then represent a way of restoring a secure connection to the home base when exploring a world of sexual opportunities outside of that secure base (e.g., see Shaver & Mikulincer, 2005). It is also possible that the identification with the victim role *in general* leads people to become more prohibitive, passing harsh judgment on the aggressor in any situation that involves hurting or betraying another person in any domain of social interaction. These alternatives, when taken together, suggest that it is possible that our results may reflect a single manifestation of a more general process. It is possible that other kinds of attachment insecurities or negative affect associated with sexuality, as well as identification with the victim in general would lead high narcissists and men to express more prohibitive attitudes in general. Even so, this would not nullify more specific psychoanalytic hypotheses. It would only mean that the link between betrayal trauma and attitudes toward infidelity is part of a more general psychological process. As DeSteno, Valdesolo, and Bartlett (2006) recently argued, the experience of jealousy, which is an emotional response to the existence of a romantic triad, presupposes a fundamental human need to “feel good about the self” and to ward off potential threats to valued relationships. Our study, therefore, addresses dynamics that are central to basic processes underlying the formation and maintenance of self and identity.

If our interpretation is correct, it has useful implications for clinical practice. When conflicts surrounding infidelity are salient in either individual or couple's therapy, encouraging empathic identification with the victim of sexual betrayal may enable high narcissists and men to refrain from cheating behavior or at least to recognize its negative consequences for others. To the extent that disidentifying with the victim of romantic betrayal is defensively motivated, it may be useful to help high narcissists and men to work through the underlying “narcissistic scar” generated by childhood experiences of Oedipal defeat and humiliation. Despite the theoretical questions that remain open, our endeavor to provide support for classic psychoanalytic ideas may be considered successful. We were able to apply a widely used experimental method (i.e., mindset priming) to obtain empirical support for psychoanalytic ideas that have often been considered untestable and unscientific. Recent trends in the fields of social or clinical psychology emphasize the importance of developing a scientific basis for psychodynamic theory and treatment, and the current study represents another step in this direction.

## Notes

1. There was no evidence that a history of parental separation was associated with the offspring's likelihood of cheating or being cheated on, which suggests that parental cheating may have unique effects that are independent of other types of marital problems.
2. We conducted additional analyses to determine whether assignment to specific experimental conditions affected participants' self-reported parental or personal relationship histories. For continuous dependent variables (self-reported jealousy and number of partners cheated on), we conducted univariate ANOVAs, and for categorical dependent variables (whether or not parents cheated, whether or not parents were still together, whether participants reported having affairs, and whether

participants were cheated on), we conducted  $\chi^2$  tests. Only one comparison, namely whether participants reported having been cheated on, was found to differ as a function of experimental condition,  $\chi^2=9.50$ ,  $N=295$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p < .01$ . Participants who were exposed to the spousal infidelity passage were more likely to report that they had been cheated on (50.5%) than were participants who were exposed to either the primal scene (31.0%) or control (33.3%) passages.

3. We also conducted a pair of regression analyses in which narcissism was treated as a continuous independent variable and experimental condition was either effects-coded or dummy-coded. The general pattern of results was similar to what is reported here, but the two-way interactions did not always attain statistical significance in the regression analyses.

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