Innocent Cheaters: A New Scale Measuring the Moral Disengagement of Marital Infidelity

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Marital infidelity is both socially perceived as immoral and very frequent. This contradiction might be explained through the process of moral disengagement, specifically by the use of certain socially shared moral justifications of infidelity, which consequently foster unfaithful behavior. This research developed and examined the Infidelity Moral Disengagement Scale (IMDS), aiming to capture the strategies of morally legitimizing infidelity used among people in marital relationships. Across two studies (total *N* = 609 married participants) we investigated the dimensions and psychometric properties of the IMDS. Results showed that the dominant strategies of legitimizing marital infidelity are the diffusion of responsibility, the attribution of blame on the cheated partner, advantageous comparisons with other immoral acts, justifying infidelity through certain benefits, and minimizing its negative consequences. The IMDS emerged as negatively related to moral identity and strongly associated to people's past infidelity and to their tendency to engage in unfaithful behaviors.

Key words: marital infidelity, unfaithful behaviors, moral disengagement, scale development

The definition of infidelity has been debated in scholarly literature in the last decades (e.g., Hertlein & Weeks, 2007; Moller & Vossler, 2015). According to a general and a widely accepted definition, it entails violations of the norm of emotional and/or physical exclusivity that most partners of a couple assume (Snyder, Baucom, & Gordon, 2007). Infidelity encompasses several categories of behaviors, such as sexual infidelity, emotional infidelity, extra-dyadic sexual activities, internet infidelity (Blow & Hartnett, 2005).

Past studies indicate a high prevalence of infidelity in intimate relationships. Tafoya and Spitzberg's (2007) meta-analysis suggests that 34% of men and 24% of women have en-

gaged in extramarital sexual relations while a more recent investigation reported that 29% of heterosexual women and 49% of heterosexual men committed infidelity (Haversath & Kröger, 2014). These high percentages are at odds with the people's usually negative attitudes toward the phenomenon (van Hooff, 2017), which are consonant with the negative psychological and social phenomena associated with infidelity, such as decline in psychological health (Shrout & Weigel, 2018) or couple dissolution (Apostolou, Constantinou, & Anagnostopoulos, 2019; DeMaris, 2013). These results indicate that infidelity causes harm to another person – partner or spouse – or even to the whole family (DeMaris, 2013; Thorson, 2013), some authors labeling it as a social problem (Klimas, Ehlert, Lacker, Waldvogel, & Walther, 2019).

These various psychological injuries that can be caused by one partner's unfaithful behavior suggest that infidelity can also be conceived as a violation of one of the most important moral principles, i.e., to avoid harming others (Graham, Haidt, Koleva, Motyl, Iyer, Wojcik, & Ditto, 2013), besides a violation of the norm of emotional and/or physical exclusivity that most partners of a couple assume. In the case of marital relations, exclusivity is further emphasized by the vows that the two spouses make to each other at the time of marriage, rendering infidelity as a deceptive act toward one's partner. This contributes to a more immoral character of extramarital infidelity in comparison to non-marital romantic relationships: while for a romantic relationship flirting with another person or going out with someone else might not carry the same weight, for a marital relationship this could mean a pretty serious betrayal and be considered infidelity. As previously stated, these characteristics render infidelity as immoral (Brake, 2013) and past studies indicate that the strength of one's moral norm is negatively related to unfaithful

behavior and to permissive attitudes toward extramarital relationships (Greeley, 1994). Past research investigated the motivations that the transgressors of the fidelity commitment invoke as justifications for this immoral behavior and classified them under various categories. For instance, Drigotas, Safstrom, and Gentilia (1999) differentiate between sexual or emotional needs that motivate infidelity, permissive norms/attitudes, favorable social context, or revenge/hostility. In a similar approach, Barta and Kiene (2005) identify dissatisfaction, neglect, anger, and sex as the main reasons for unfaithful behavior.

While these various types of reasons may indeed lead to unfaithful behaviors, they can also serve as ways to exonerate oneself from the guilt of committing infidelity by projecting the blame on other agents (most often one's partner). Our study aimed to further investigate the ways in which people morally legitimize infidelity by adopting the conceptual framework of *moral disengagement* (Bandura, 1999), and developing an instrument that addresses the tendency to invoke self-serving arguments that would decrease one's blame for this behavior. Furthermore, we aimed to test the hypothesis that this psychological proneness toward justifying infidelity fosters stronger behavioral tendencies toward unfaithful acts. Under this assumption, many unfaithful partners might use cognitive strategies that result in their representing themselves as innocent for their infidelity. This would contribute to the disentanglement of the paradox of the high rates of infidelity in spite of the significant negative effects of this behavior and of the widespread critical attitudes toward it.

Moral Disengagement and Infidelity

Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) describes the mechanisms by which people

diminish the perceived immorality of harmful behavior. The theory states that people make unethical decisions when the processes of moral self-regulation, which normally inhibit negative behaviors through anticipated self-sanctions, are deactivated through a series of cognitive mechanisms collectively called "moral disengagement." These mechanisms that cognitively restructure the behavior in order to appear as morally acceptable are moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, disregarding or distorting the consequences, dehumanization, and attribution of blame. The first three involve the cognitive interpretation of reprehensible behavior in a way that increases its moral acceptability (Bandura, 1986). For example, infidels may justify their extramarital affair through the need for sexual variability or the need to share emotions while the sanitizing language of euphemistic labeling may conceive of an episode of infidelity as "broadening the horizon."

The next three moral disengagement mechanisms (displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, and distortion of consequences) occur when individuals hide or distort the source or the effects of harmful actions (Bandura, 1986). The high prevalence of infidelity can convince many people that it is such a common phenomenon that it can happen to anyone; thus, the widely shared nature of this behavior might redefine it as less immoral. In addition, the secretive nature of extramarital affairs can help unfaithful partners undermine and, thus, distort the serious consequences of their own conduct. The final set of disengagement practices, attribution of blame and dehumanization, redefines the victims of harmful acts as deserving the harm that they suffer. For example, blaming one's partner for the poor quality of the relationship, for his/her prolonged physical distanc-

ing, hostility, or other harm are the reasons most often invoked by infidels when motivating their affairs with another partner outside the relationship (Fincham & May, 2017; Barta & Kiene, 2005).

Another theory relevant for understanding the determinants of people's bad deeds is the moral self-licensing model (Monin & Miller, 2001), according to which prior good behavior make people more likely to engage in subsequent immoral acts. In this framework, the individual might attempt to morally justify his/her infidelity through his/her past investments in the marital relationship and/or through the neglect or abuse that s/he has had to endure from his/her partner, which now would presumably constitute sufficient moral credits to legitimize his/her unfaithful behavior.

Another concept within the moral domain relevant for the development of our instrument is moral identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Black & Reynolds, 2016). People with a high moral identity are more concerned about harm to others and more likely to take responsibility for their behavior (Moore, Detert, Treviño, Baker, & Mayer, 2012). As such, moral identity has been found to be negatively associated with unethical behavior and the use of moral disengagement strategies (Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008). Therefore, we expect our new instrument measuring the moral disengagement of marital infidelity to be negatively associated with moral identity.

In our examination of the construct validity of the new scale, we also aim to assess its discriminant validity through its associations with a measure of another moral factor, i.e., utilitarianism, whose theoretical connections to moral disengagement are weaker. Utilitarianism or utilitarian judgment expresses the general impartial concern for the greater good, for maximizing good consequences even through harmful actions (Greene,

Nystrom, Engell, Darley, & Cohen, 2004). The type of morally – complex situations in which people's decisions are influenced by their tendency towards utilitarian judgments are substantively different from those in which moral disengagement occurs, i.e., legitimizing clearly immoral behaviors, both in general and in the specific context of marital relationships. Consequently, in our examination of the discriminant validity of the scale we develop, we expect this measure of moral disengagement of marital infidelity to have weak associations with utilitarianism.

Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli (1996) developed a measure of moral disengagement and found evidence that children's delinquent and violent behaviors are correlated with the overall scores of the instrument in an Italian sample. Other measures have been developed for assessing moral disengagement in general (Moore et al., 2012) or in specific populations or contexts (e.g., Caprara, Fida, Vecchione, Tramontano, & Barbaranelli, 2009; Holman & Popușoi, 2018). Moral disengagement was found to be a significant factor of reprehensible behavior in various areas, such as corruption (Zhao, Zhang, & Xu, 2019) or unethical decisions in the organizational environment (Fehr, Fulmer, & Keng-Highberger, 2020), information security (Hadlington, Binder, & Stanulewicz, 2021) or unethical behavior in adolescents (Guo, Li, Yang, & Kou, 2021). Therefore, it is plausible that these moral disengagement strategies operate in the area of infidelity and that they are used by individuals, who deviate from the norm of exclusivity in their marital relationship, to diminish their guilt. There is no evidence in the literature regarding moral disengagement strategies in the context of marital relationships, much less in the case of infidelity. However, the study by Navarro and collaborators (Navarro, Larrañaga, Yubero, & Víllora, 2021) indicates a relationship between moral disengagement

and the intention of ghosting in romantic relationships, i.e., the intention to break up the relationship without any explanation or willingness to communicate this intention to the partner. On a more general level, past findings highlighted several types of cognitions that are associated with people's real-life infidelity, such as sexual values and permissiveness (Smith, 1994), sexual interests (Treas & Giesen, 2000) or distorted cognitions (Ignat et al., 2018).

Aims of the Present Research

Our goal was to develop and examine a measure of people's strategies through which they justify their extramarital affairs, the Infidelity Moral Disengagement Scale (henceforth, IMDS), built on the expectation that people might rationalize their prospective unfaithful behavior through certain common strategies, which function as cognitively available forms of legitimation even if the behavior is recognized as wrong. Thus, our approach was to customize and measure in the context of extramarital relations the mechanisms of moral disengagement proposed by Bandura and colleagues (1996) in order to capture the cognitive strategies used to self-exonerate one's unfaithful behavior. The first study consisted of the development of the IMDS and of the examination of its dimensionality and psychometric properties. The second study investigated the construct validity of the IMDS through its associations with a general scale addressing moral disengagement and with moral identity, in order to assess its convergent validity. We also examined its association with another dimension of moral judgments and preferences, less theoretically relevant for infidelity, namely utilitarianism, in order to evaluate the discriminant validity of the new scale. Moreover, as the use of the strategies of legitimizing infidelity that the IMDS aims to

capture should encourage unfaithful behavior, we examined the associations between IMDS and intentions toward infidelity as well as its association with past unfaithful behavior.

Study 1

The aim of the first study was to develop an instrument addressing the moral justifications used by unfaithful partners in marital relationships when transgressing the exclusivity norm and to investigate its factorial structure and psychometric proprieties.

Method

Participants

A convenience sample of 362 Romanian heterosexual people in their first marriage, participated in this study (52.2% women), with an average length of a marriage of 10.29 years (*SD* = 8.18). Their age ranged from 19 to 71 years (*M* = 37.04; *SD* = 8.10), and their partners' age ranged from 21 to 69 years (*M* = 37.08; *SD* = 8.20).

Procedure

Ethics approval for the present study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the university department where the authors are affiliated. In exchange for course credit, forty field operators (students) were instructed to identify from among his/her personal acquaintances five female and five male participants in their first marriage, all married for at least one year, but from different relationships. All participants were informed about the aims of the study before participating and were assured about the confidentiality of their responses. Informed consent was obtained. The application of the questionnaires was subsequently done through an online platform so that the operators did not have access to participants' answers.

Measures

The IMDS was developed to measure the different types of justifications that partners use when they violate the rule of exclusivity in marital relations, in line with the mechanisms of moral disengagement described by the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) (Bandura, 1986). An initial set of 32 items was generated to operationalize each of these eight mechanisms in the realm of infidelity, with four items for each strategy, using as inspiration the methodology used to develop a scale in the same psychological area of moral disengagement, i.e., the Civic Moral Disengagement (CMD) scale (Caprara et al., 2009). Each statement referred to marital infidelity, labeled as such or synonymously (e.g., "having an extramarital affair", "cheating", etc.) and included a legitimation of the transgression that is specific to a particular strategy of disengagement. The content of these legitimations, i.e., the specific element invoked as moral argument, paralleled the most common motivations revealed by the research in this area. Thus, for *moral justification*, we included the possible gains often invoked by perpetrators, such as shared affection, maintaining a sense of independence or freedom, or enhancing self-confidence (e.g., "Having a relationship outside of marriage is a way to maintain a sense of independence"). We addressed the strategy of *euphemistic labeling* by reframing extra-dyadic adventures to give them respectable status, e.g., "Having an extramarital affair is part of the "adventure of a lifetime." *Advantageous comparisons* were constructed through much more reprehensible behaviors compared to which an episode of infidelity might seem benign, such as domestic violence or other types of abuse (e.g., "Flirting with someone else is

nothing compared to abusing one's spouse"). The items designed to tap *diffusion of responsibility* highlighted the prevalence of infidelity in society and the permissive attitudes toward extra-dyadic relationships, e.g., "Today, infidelity is very common, so one should not be blamed for an extramarital affair." In addressing *displacement of responsibility* and *attribution of blame*, we considered that past studies revealed that the reasons invoked by the perpetrators often blame the partner or the relationship as the cause of their own behavior (e.g., "If a married person has an extramarital affair, then it may be the partner's fault"). The items addressing the strategy of *disregarding or distorting the consequences* referred to various manners in which the effects of infidelity might be perceived as insignificant (e.g., "If an extramarital affair is not discovered, then it does no harm"). The last strategy, i.e., *dehumanization*, was addressed through items that challenge a partner's right to have a faithful partner (e.g., "Some people are made to be betrayed"). Participants were required to rate their agreement with each statement on a 6-point Likert scale from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 6 ("strongly agree").

Data Analysis and Results

In order to examine the factorial structure of the IMDS, we performed an exploratory factor analysis (EFA). Previous investigations of the factorial structure of other instruments measuring moral disengagement (Bandura et al., 1996; Caprara et al., 2006) revealed different number of factors of these scales. Consequently, we considered that although we developed all items to be specific in content to one of the eight moral disengagement mechanisms postulated by the SCT, an exploratory analysis of their factor grouping is appropriate, in line with other scale-development studies in the area (Caprara et al.,

2009). The EFA was performed in SPSS 20.0 on the set of 32 items, using Principal Axis Factoring for factor extraction and the Direct Oblimin rotation method. First, we reviewed the descriptive statistics for each item and removed nine items due to their low inter-item correlations (i.e., lower than .30) as suggested by Tabachnick and Fidell (2007). For the remaining 23 items, the Keiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy (.952) and Bartlett's test ($p < .001$) supported the appropriateness of factor analysis for our data. Five factors emerged as having an eigenvalue above 1; moreover, both the scree plot and the Parallel Analysis (PA) suggested that this solution would be more appropriate; the latter analysis showed five factors with eigenvalue higher than their corresponding 95th percentile eigenvalue derived from random data in accordance with PA criterion (Glorfeld, 1995). Therefore, five factors were retained for interpretation, which accounted for 62.94% of the data variance. The loadings of the items on each factor and descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1 in the Supplement. All items have skewness and kurtosis values within acceptable limits, i.e., (-2,2) for skewness and (-7,7) for kurtosis, indicating normally distributed data (Hair et al., 2006). Also, the corrected item-total correlations of all items are well above the .2 threshold, indicating that they have satisfactory discriminating power (Kline, 2015). The Cronbach's alpha of the scale (i.e., .94) and McDonald's ω (i.e., .94) indicated excellent reliability.

The first factor ($\alpha = .87$; $\omega = .88$) explains 43.92% of the total variance and consists of five items, three of them were developed to address the strategy of diffusion of responsibility, one addressing displacement of responsibility, and one designed to tap dehumanization (please see Table 1). Beyond their different conceptualizations, all items present one's unfaithful behavior as being instilled by

external causes. The second factor (α = .84; ω = .85), including six items, explains 6.12% of the total variance and combines the mechanisms of attribution of blame (on the marital partner) with those of dehumanization. Overall, marital infidelity is justified through arguments that assert the partner's deservingness of being cheated on either because of a hypothetical blame or an intrinsic flaw. The third factor (α = .72; ω = .73) explains 5.45% of the total variance and includes three items addressing the advantageous comparison mechanism, which invoke as justification acts with much more harmful consequences. The fourth factor (α = .85; ω = .85) combines items targeting moral justification, highlighting potential benefits that infidels would gain from the extramarital affair and euphemistic labeling also highlighting its benefits (e.g., "broadening the horizon"), and its four items explain 4.14% of the total variance. Finally, the fifth factor (α = .89; ω = .89), including five items that explain 3.29% of the total variance, combines five items designed to address the strategy of minimizing or ignoring the consequences and one tapping euphemistic labeling while also emphasizing the lack of detrimental effects of unfaithful behavior ("A one-night stand does nothing more than "spice up" your love life").

Discussion

The results of the first study suggest a five-factor structure of the scale addressing the moral disengagement strategies concerning infidelity in marital relationships. Most of the factors emerged as targeted by items that were developed to address at least two different strategies of moral legitimization of infidelity. Nevertheless, the items content is coherent across the items in each set in terms of their main focus. Specifically, the first factor includes items that allow individuals to deny their *agency* in producing the behavior, and thus mitigate responsibility for infidelity through the diffusion and displacement of responsibility. The items of the second factor attribute blame (directly or implicitly) on the betrayed *spouse*. The next two factors include items that either offer *advantageous comparisons* of infidelity or justify it by highlighting valuable *benefits* that infidels would gain from the extramarital affair. Finally, the items in the fifth factor minimize the *consequences* of infidelity.

Study 2

The second study aimed to test the factorial structure of the IMDS instrument through confirmatory factor analysis in another sample of married participants in order to examine its construct validity through its relationships with general civic moral disengagement, intentions toward infidelity, and moral identity as well as its criterion validity through its associations with past unfaithful behavior. Given the sensitive nature of the topic addressed by the IMDS, we also examined the degree to which the answers it elicits are affected by social desirability.

Method

Participants

The second study enrolled 247 Romanian heterosexual people in their first marriage (48.6% women), with an average length of 10.86 years (*SD* = 8.48). Their age ranged from 24 to 62 years (*M* = 37.88; *SD* = 7.61) and their partners' age ranged from 23 to 64 years (*M* = 38.14; *SD* = 9.95).

Procedure

After approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the university with which the two

authors are affiliated and after obtaining the participants' informed consent, the same procedure as in the first study was used.

Measures

The 23-item version of the IMDS developed in Study 1 was used (α = .93).

Civic Moral Disengagement (CMD, Caprara et al., 2009). This 32-item scale addresses people's general tendency to justify immoral civic behavior. Participants expressed their agreement with each item on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from (1) "strongly disagree" to (6) "strongly agree" (e.g., "Given the widespread corruption in society, one cannot disapprove of those who pay for favors"). The scale had good internal consistency (α = .93).

The *Intentions Toward Infidelity Scale* (ITIS; Jones, Olderbak, & Figueredo, 2011) is a 7-item scale asking respondents to estimate their likelihood of engaging in infidelity behavior (e.g., "How likely are you to be unfaithful to a partner if you knew you wouldn't get caught?") on a 6-point Likert scale (α = .81).

The *Infidelity Scale* (IS; Drigotas et al., 1999) was used to measure past unfaithful behavior, through 11 items that require respondents to think about a person from their past to whom they were very attracted while involved in another relationship, and to assess various intimate behaviors that might have occurred in this extra-dyadic relationship (e.g., "How much flirting occurred between the two of you?") on 6-point Likert scale (α = .94).

The *Moral Identity Questionnaire* (MIQ; Black & Reynolds, 2016) measures the degree to which moral standards are important for participants' view of themselves and of the world. The MIQ comprises 20 items that address two facets of moral identity, namely, Moral Self (e.g., "I try hard to act honestly in most things I do"; α = .85) and Moral Integrity (e.g., "Lying and cheating are just things you

have to do in this world"; α = .87). Respondents are required to express their agreement with each item on a 6-point Likert scale (overall α = .89).

The *Utilitarianism Scale* (US; Baron, Scott, Fincher, & Metz, 2015) was used to measure utilitarian judgment, which favors impartiality and the criterion of the supreme good in any circumstance (Kahane, Everett, Earp, Farias, & Savulescu, 2015). The US includes 13 items (e.g., "When we can help some people a lot by harming other people a little, we should do this") that require respondents to estimate their agreement on a 6-point Likert scale (α = .71).

The short version of the *Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale* (Strahan & Gerbasi, 1972), which requires respondents to express their agreement with each of the 10 items on a 6-point Likert scale, was also used. Because the internal consistency and the average inter-item correlations of the items were below acceptable limits, we removed two items to improve the scale reliability. The resulting α = .57 was below the .70 limit, but the average inter-item correlations of .15 indicated an acceptable level of reliability (Briggs & Cheek, 1986).

The statistical procedure used, the fit indices and their benchmarks, and the criteria in evaluating the psychometric qualities of the IMDS in Study 2 are detailed in the Supplement.

Results

Confirmatory factor analysis. The CFA model fit indices result indicated a poor fit of the hypothesized model to the data: χ^2 (220) = 590.6, p < .001, GFI = .82, CFI = .91, and RMSEA = .08. Examining the residual covariance matrix, we found that eight items had large residual covariance with items from other factors, which suggested that they load on more than one factor. Consequently, we

dropped these items progressively (see Table 1). The final model to emerge from these modifications had a good fit: χ^2 (220) = 125.8, p < .001, CFI = .98, GFI = .938, AGFI = .90, and RMSEA = .04 [CI .03; .06]. The items in the final version of the IMDS, their factor loadings and their descriptive statistics are presented in the Supplement. Most of the eight items that were eliminated had been designed to tap different disengagement strategies than those addressed by the majority of the remaining items that pertained to the factor extracted in the first study. Consequently, the item composition of the factors in the final version of the scale is more homogeneous in terms of the moral disengagement strategies addressed by each item set as defined by SCT. The descriptive statistics of these five factors of the IMDS and their correlations are reported in Table 2 in the Supplement, followed by the final version of the IMDS scale. Their skewness and kurtosis values fall within acceptable limits, most being in the (-1,1) range, indicating negligible departures from normality.

Construct and criterion validity. Pearson correlations between IMDS and CMD scales, MIQ, ITIS, IS, US and M_C, as well as between IMDS and gender, age, partner age and marriage length are presented in Table 1. Results show strong positive associations between our scale addressing the tendency to morally legitimize infidelity and the intention towards infidelity scale (i.e., ITIS), as well as between IMDS and the measure of general moral disengagement (i.e., CMD). Also, moderate to high negative associations were found between IMDS and the scale addressing moral identity, both overall and in relation to its two facets (i.e., moral self and moral integrity). In regards to the influence of social desirability tendencies on the responses to this scale, the results show a small negative association between IMDS and M_C, similar in magnitude to the correlation between the latter and the other scales. The IMDS was positively and strongly associated with past unfaithful behavior (i.e., IS). Gender also emerged as being associated with IMDS scores, with males scoring higher on the new instrument.

Table 1 *Pearson correlations between the study variables (study 2)*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. IMDS	-												
2. CMD	.71**	-											
3. ITIS	.78**	.56**	-										
4. IS	.71**	.43**	.67**	-									
5. MIQ	-.63**	-.72**	-.56**	-.42**	-								
6. MS	-.38**	-.40**	-.34**	-.22**	.80**	-							
7. MI	-.67**	-.78**	-.59**	-.46**	.93**	.52**	-						
8. M_C	-.30**	-.28**	-.25**	-.23**	.48**	.53**	.36**	-					
9. US	-.01	-.11	-.03	.00	.24**	.34**	.14*	.04	-				
10. Gender	-.12*	-.09	-.13*	-.13*	.13*	.11	.12*	.00	.08	-			
11. Age	.03	-.03	.07	-.09	.06	.06	.05	.18**	.05	.02	-		
12. Partner age	.03	-.03	.05	-.10	.07	.06	.06	.17**	.04	.28**	.87**	-	
13. Marriage length	.11	.06	.14*	-.02	-.03	-.01	-.03	.18**	.04	.13*	.83**	.81**	-

Note. IMDS – Infidelity Moral Disengagement; CMD – Civic Moral Disengagement; ITIS - Intentions towards Infidelity Scale; IS – Infidelity scale; MIQ – Moral Identity Questionnaire; MS – Moral Self; MI – Moral Integrity; M_C - Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale; US - Utilitarianism Scale.
*p < .05; **p < .001

Discussion

The results of the second study support the adequacy of the five-factor structure of the new instrument suggested by the first study. The convergent validity of the new scale is supported by the pattern of relationships between IMDS and the scales addressing the general moral disengagement of negative behaviors, and the intentions to engage in unfaithful behavior. In this respect, the relationship of the new measure with the latter (i.e., ITIS) emerged as stronger than with the former (i.e., CMD), which may stem from the correspondence in existential domain and behavior (i.e., marital infidelity) between IMDS and ITIS. The CMD scale, although identical to IMDS in the core psychological dynamic they address (i.e., moral disengagement), refers to many areas of the social life, in contrast to the specific focus of our new instrument, which may explain their weaker, albeit significant, association.

Furthermore, the new instrument was negatively related to moral identity, in line with the theoretical expectations concerning the relationship between the latter and one's tendency to legitimize reprehensible acts. The degree to which the responses on the IMDS items are contaminated by social desirability was found to be relatively low, which further indicates the construct validity of the scale. The almost null correlation between IMDS and the scale measuring another facet of moral preferences, i.e., utilitarianism, supports the discriminant validity of the new instrument. Past unfaithful behavior emerged as positively related to the IMDS scores, which argues in favor of the criterion validity of the new instrument. Also, men were found to score higher than women on the IMDS, in line with previous results highlighting gender as a significant factor of extramarital behav-

iors (Haseli, Shariati, Nazari, Keramat, & Emamian, 2019).

General Discussion and Conclusion

This research aimed to explore the strategies of moral justification used in the context of marital infidelity, which might contribute to the disentanglement of the apparent paradox that marital infidelity is both immoral and very frequent. While past research has investigated the reasons invoked by unfaithful partners in a descriptive manner, we approached marital infidelity through the perspective of moral disengagement, thus investigating the moral legitimizing function that such reasons might serve.

The results of the two studies suggest that most cheating spouses preserve their moral image mainly through the following strategies of moral justifications: the diffusion of responsibility for their behavior, attribution of blame (on the cheated partner), advantageous comparisons (with more serious misdeeds), moral justification, and minimizing the consequences of infidelity. Some of these self-exoneration strategies correspond to reasons frequently invoked by cheating spouses as explanations for their behavior as found by previous studies. For instance, unfaithful spouses often invoke partners' inappropriate behavior, such as hostility or emotional/sexual neglect, as the cause of his/her unfaithful behavior (Barta & Kiene, 2005; Scott, Post, Stanley, Markman, & Rhoades, 2017). This cluster of reasons corresponds to the moral disengagement strategy of attributing the blame on the partner and these arguments might even be the output of this strategy when explaining a real episode of infidelity. However, while the various reasons for past infidelity collected by previous research describe the way infidels explain and attribute their conduct, our results further indicate that

the tendency to use such justifications for infidelity is related to actual behavioral engagement in extramarital affairs.

Additionally, the IMDS emerged as strongly related both to past unfaithful behavior and to intentions to commit infidelity, which supports not only the validity of the IMDS but also its behavioral relevance, as this intention has been found to be an important predictor of subsequent behavior (Jones et al., 2011). Another indication of the criterion validity of the IMDS is the correspondence between the gender differences found on this new scale and the frequent finding across past studies that men are more likely to engage in unfaithful behaviors than women (Haseli et al., 2019). The results indicate that men are more likely to morally rationalize marital infidelity; future research should explore in-depth these gender differences in the perception and consequent legitimization of unfaithful behavior. The influence of people's experience with unfaithful partners on their tendency to justify infidelity is also a topic worthy of future investigations.

One limitation of this research is that it relied on self-reported measures and on responses from samples that are not representative: not only did we not use probabilistic sampling in determining the participants to be recruited in our studies, but all those who ultimately participated in our research belong to the social network of university students. This may further limit the representativeness of our findings. Second, we used past (and not current) unfaithful behavior as a criterion for the new scale, which only allowed us to examine its postdictive, and not concurrent or predictive, validity. Third, the final version of the IMDS was extracted in the second study from the same dataset on which we verified the structure that emerged in the first study, and not on a new sample of participants. Therefore, the structure of the new scale

may not be definitive, as future investigations could highlight necessary changes in its item composition. Furthermore, the norm of exclusivity in the marital relationship was assumed as morally relevant for our participants, but this personal relevance was not directly measured. Relatedly, we did not measure any characteristic of the marital relationships of our participants, such as satisfaction or intimacy, which may be important for their perspective on infidelity. It is also important to note the specific cultural context of the research (i.e., the Romanian one), which may limit the generalizability of its findings.

In sum, the results support the validity and reliability of the IMDS as a new instrument addressing the tendency and the strategies to morally legitimize extramarital affairs. The scale was found to be related to past infidelity and to the intentions to commit unfaithful behavior, suggesting that these strategies serve as cognitive mechanisms that allow perpetrators to avoid self-sanctions when violating the rule of exclusivity in their marriage, thus favoring the occurrence of actual infidelity.

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