

2018

## Financial Infidelity in Couple Relationships

Michelle Jeanfreau

*University of Southern Mississippi*

Kenji Noguchi

*University of Southern Mississippi*

Michael D. Mong

*University of Southern Mississippi*

*See next page for additional authors*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/jft>



Part of the [Business Commons](#), [Counseling Psychology Commons](#), [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#), [Social Psychology Commons](#), and the [Social Work Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

### Recommended Citation

Jeanfreau, M., Noguchi, K., Mong, M. D., & Stadthagen, H. (2018). Financial Infidelity in Couple Relationships. *Journal of Financial Therapy*, 9 (1) 2. <https://doi.org/10.4148/1944-9771.1159>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Financial Therapy by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact [cads@k-state.edu](mailto:cads@k-state.edu).

---

## Financial Infidelity in Couple Relationships

### Authors

Michelle Jeanfreau, Kenji Noguchi, Michael D. Mong, and Hans Stadthagen

# Financial Infidelity in Couple Relationships

**Michelle Jeanfreau, Ph.D.**

**Kenji Noguchi, Ph.D.**

**Michael D. Mong, Ph.D.**

**Hans Stadthagen, Ph.D.**

*University of Southern Mississippi*

*Four hundred and fourteen participants answered questions regarding financial habits within the context of the couple relationship. The Big Five Personality Inventory and a Marital and Life Satisfaction Scale were used to determine the incidence and factors associated with financial infidelity. Results indicated that 27% of participants have kept a financial secret from their partner. Furthermore, both marital and life satisfaction were lower for participants who have experienced financial infidelity than in those who have not. Finally, conscientiousness, a factor from the Big Five Personality Inventory, showed a significant difference, suggesting that more organized individuals were less likely to keep financial secrets. Clinical implications are also discussed.*

*Keywords: couples; finances; relationships; infidelity*

## INTRODUCTION

The tangible qualities of money are evident throughout society. From the rise and fall of the stock market, to the home buyers seeking a mortgage, money's overt power is evident in our everyday lives. Oftentimes, outside of the daily exchange of money that we are accustomed to, the power of money and its influence in relationships is underestimated. Not only does money influence the perception of power, success, status, and competence, but it influences the interactions of romantic partners in a committed relationship (Atwood, 2012; Shapiro, 2007).

It is not uncommon to associate security, love, and care with money (Dew & Dakin, 2011; Shapiro, 2007). Rick, Small, and Finkel (2011) found that couples were more likely to marry a complementary financial partner. That is, spouses differed greatly in how they viewed and spent money. Specifically, researchers found that financially conservative individuals often married spendthrifts, and vice versa. Overall, this complementary attraction led to lower levels of marital satisfaction and higher levels of conflict.

## Financial Infidelity in Couple Relationships

Conflict surrounding a couples' finances are linked to more intense and longer arguments, a decrease in marital satisfaction, and an increase in divorce rates (Britt, Huston, & Durband, 2010; Dew & Dakin, 2011). In fact, financial conflicts are the third most frequently argued topic among couples (Britt & Huston, 2012; Skogrand, Johnson, Horrocks & DeFrain, 2011). Dew and Dakin (2011) studied the characteristics of financial conflicts in couples' relationships and found that financial disagreements positively predicted heated arguments and common couple violence. Conger, Reuter, and Elder (1999) found that men and women were equally affected by economic distress, and they both experienced a cumulative decrease in marital satisfaction because of it. It could be that most couples don't overtly talk about expectations or rules for when, where, or how money should be spent. When the couple realizes they have different expectations or internal rules around spending, conflict can arise. Once the couple has established rules regarding financial behaviors, financial infidelity could occur when one or both partners have broken the established financial rules.

One type of financial conflict involving couples is financial infidelity (Junare & Patel, 2012; Klontz & Britt, 2012), which is currently more of a popular press term that has minimal empirical research. Financial infidelity may be defined as a form of financial cheating that one partner commits with his or her current partner. Financial infidelity includes hiding purchases from spouses, having secret credit cards, or keeping secret personal bank accounts (Junare & Patel, 2012). According to Canale, Archuleta, and Klontz (2015), "financial infidelity includes any purposeful financial deceit between two or more individuals wherein, there is a stated or unstated belief in mutual honest communication around financial matters" (p. 59). Oftentimes, financial infidelities are subtle, and the offending individual does not realize they are doing anything wrong (Elejalde-Ruiz, 2011). The two most common forms of financial infidelity are saving money to be spent on a guilty pleasure or hiding paychecks (Lerner, 2014.). Commonly, the spouse is caught when they have reached a credit card limit, received a bad credit score, or missed a credit card payment (Byrne, 2014).

Several media outlets have done research and written articles about financial infidelity (Golden, 2011; Medintz, Caplin, Feldman & McGirt, 2005; Singletary, 2005) a construct that may be important in understanding the financial dynamics of couple relationships. While infidelity usually has a specific meaning pertaining to adultery, research has also identified another type of infidelity called emotional infidelity (Glass & Wright's 1985; Spanier & Margolis, 1983). Emotional infidelity doesn't include the sexual aspects usually associated with infidelity, and instead is a secret emotional relationship with someone other than the spouse or partner, that creates distance and mistrust in the relationship. Financial infidelity could be another form of infidelity, in that it also creates distance in the relationship. All three forms of infidelity have the shared components of deceit, secrecy, and mistrust, which is a damaging combination to have in a relationship.

According to a study by the National Endowment for Financial Education (NEFE, 2010), 76% of respondents reported that financial infidelity harmed their relationship, and 10% stated that financial infidelity led to divorce (Byrne, 2014; Junare & Patel, 2012). The NEFE study also reported that 10% of respondents lied about their earnings and debt.

Furthermore, 35% of participants believed that some of their finances should remain private or off limits to their spouse (Bryne, 2014; Junare & Patel, 2012).

Due to a lack of empirical research specifically related to financial infidelity, a more in depth discussion on financial conflicts will provide support for the importance of empirical research with regard to financial infidelity. The secrecy around financial infidelity can be damaging to the relationship and lead to couple conflict.

Britt and colleagues (2010) examined the role of money in marital arguments and found that the couples most likely to have increased conflict about money were those with power imbalances in their relationship. Wives with decreased power because of income or age, or wives with increased power because of financial contributions were the most likely to be involved in conflicts with their spouses regarding money. Dew and Dakin (2011) pointed out that men are still likely to be the primary financial decision makers and are more sensitive to disagreements about money because, historically, they have been expected to retain financial control. Overall, research by Papp, Cummings, and Goeke-Morey (2009) indicated that when a partner doesn't feel like they have the capacity to engage in financial decisions, their perceived self-worth and power is lowered. Additionally, determining who has the final say when making large purchases has proven to be a main source of conflict for couples, particularly when one partner feels they have less influence (Vogler, Lyonette, & Wiggins, 2008). Because power dynamics of couples are comprised of social, psychological, and emotional factors, it is likely that their adoption of money management styles will reinforce the original power hierarchy in the relationship (Vogler et al., 2008).

Money management highlights multiple themes intertwined into relationships, including commitment, trust, power, and control, along with how those themes are expressed and balanced within the marriage (Shapiro, 2007). Atwood (2012) indicated that an individual who is withholding money is likely to be withholding feelings. At times, money can be used as a punishment directed at a partner for not fulfilling their emotional needs. Additionally, hiding money is a way to control information and perceptions of the spouse (Lerner, 2014.).

Not only does financial infidelity undermine trust and commitment, it could also inhibit their ability to achieve intimacy in the relationship because they are not spending time together managing the finances. Financial infidelity also diminishes negotiation and the need for respect in the relationship and often coincides with a lack of communication. Couples lose a valuable opportunity to regularly connect over shared goals and financial decisions (Bennett, 2013.)

Although financial infidelity is a relatively new concept with a general paucity of research from traditional academic literature, it is important to understand its impact on couple relationships. While previous empirical research discusses the negative impact financial conflicts can have on the marriage, it does not always address the behaviors that lead to the negative interactions around financial disagreements, nor has it identified if the behaviors truly constitute financial infidelity. The current exploratory study sought to empirically test the occurrence of financial infidelity, identify behaviors associated with financial infidelity, and to determine their occurrence within marital relationships. We

## Financial Infidelity in Couple Relationships

hypothesized that individuals who identify behaviors associated with financial infidelity would have lower marital and life satisfaction. In addition, we expected that individuals who experienced marital infidelity would be more likely to experience financial infidelity. Finally, the study explored individual personality characteristics that could have an influence on financial decision making and financial behaviors.

### **METHOD**

#### **Recruitment and Screening of Participants**

A convenience sample of participants was recruited through both Facebook, an online social networking website and Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT), an online crowdsourcing website. According to Rife, Cate, Kosinski, and Stillwell (2014), Facebook offers several advantages over traditional samples and is a “viable platform for data collection in the social sciences, and such data should be regarded as comparable (if not superior, given the demographic characteristics of Facebook users) to data from participants who were recruited through other means” (p. 12). AMT allows members to complete “Human Intelligence Tasks” (HITs) and be remunerated for their work. The use of AMT for collection of questionnaire data has been empirically validated (e.g., Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Behrend, Sharek, Meade, & Wiebe, 2011; Goodman, Cryder, & Cheema, 2012) so that data obtained from crowdsourcing has been shown to be as or more reliable than samples recruited with more traditional methods. There is also evidence that samples recruited through AMT are more representative of the U.S. population over other recruitment methods (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2011). Only participants that had a HIT approval rate of at least 95% and a minimum number of 100 completed HITs could participate to assure the quality of responses (following the guidelines proposed by Peer, Vosgerau, & Acquisti, 2014). Additionally, participation was limited to MTurk accounts registered in the United States and the geolocation of the IP addresses was also confirmed.

Quality control measures consisted of four “attention check questions” (ACQ) that had an unequivocal correct answer. One further control measure was completion time as measured by the Qualtrics website: participants that completed the survey in less than five minutes (the minimum deemed necessary to read each item in the questionnaire) were also rejected. Participants that failed two or more quality-control measures were deemed as “inattentive” and their data was not included in the analyses; 66 participants were eliminated in this fashion.

#### **Participants**

A total of 414 participants were retained in the final analysis. From AMT, 255 participants passed our quality control measures and were paid \$0.50 for completing the survey. From Facebook, 159 participants completed the survey. Married participants comprised 65% of our sample, while the rest were not married but living with a partner. The average age of the sample was 38.61 years ( $SD = 11.52$ ) and most respondents were female (72.9%). Participants identified themselves as heterosexual (93.5%), with a small proportion identifying as homosexual (1.9%) or bisexual (4.6%). Religious affiliation was

entered as an open-question and responses were then grouped into the following categories: Christian (43.0%), Catholic (19.8%), Judaism (0.5%), Muslim (0.8%), Hinduism (0.01%), Buddhism (0.9%), None (21.0%), Spiritual (0.3%), and Others (0.2%). A large majority of participants identified themselves as White/Caucasian/European American (82.1%), followed by African American/Black (4.8%), Asian (4.8%), Hispanic/Latino (3.4%), Native American (1.7%), and Other/Mixed (3.1%). The sample was comprised of people living in 43 states and the District of Columbia, with the highest number of participants living in California (8.7% of the sample), Florida (8.3%), Texas (8.3%), and New York (6%). Two thirds of participants indicated that they live in an urban area and a third in a rural area. The average length of their current relationship was 11 years 2 months (SD = 10.42; Range = 4 months – 48 years).

## Materials

The survey was divided into five different sections presented in the following order: (a) Demographic data; (b) financial decision making in the household, including questions about financial and sexual infidelity. The wording for each question was adapted to the marital condition (e.g., married or cohabitating) indicated by the participant at the start of the survey (e.g., spouse vs. partner); (c) the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985); (d) the Big Five Personality Inventory (John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991); and (e) the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (Schumm, Jurich, & Boliman, 1990).

## Measures

**Financial infidelity.** The financial infidelity scale questions were adapted from online surveys regarding financial behaviors (National Endowment for Financial Education, 2010) and were developed for the current study. The first question asked whether or not the participants had ever kept a financial secret from their partner (other than a gift from them). The second question asked whether or not they had participated in any of the 14 behaviors that could be potentially defined as financial infidelity. The following are the 14 items: (a) pretend a new purchase is an old one, (b) said I bought something on sale but paid full price, (c) hidden purchases/receipts, (d) taken money out of savings without telling my spouse (partner), (e) hidden credit card statements, (f) opened a credit card without telling my spouse (partner), (g) kept a secret account, (h) lied to cover up debt, (i) kept a raise or bonus secret, (j) spent money on the kids without telling my spouse (partner), (k) gambled away money without telling my spouse (partner), (l) lied about the price I paid for something, (m) spent money on pornographic materials or gentlemen's clubs without telling my spouse (partner), and (n) filed for bankruptcy without my spouse's (partner) knowledge.

**Financial decision making in the household.** Five questions were asked regarding financial decision making in the household. Sample items included: who makes the financial decisions in your household (I, my partner or we), and how do you and your spouse manage your money (we have joint bank accounts and share expenses; we have separate bank accounts and split expenses; or we have a joint bank accounts and individual bank accounts)? Full items are shown in Table 3.

**Other marital conflicts.** Several questions were asked regarding other types of conflicts. One question asked what caused the most conflict in their household. Other questions asked about sexual infidelity. Full items are shown in Table 3.

**Satisfaction with Life Scale.** The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener et al., 1985) contains five items using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Sample items included: in most ways my life is close to my ideal, and the conditions of my life are excellent. The Cronbach's alpha was .92. This scale measures cognitive judgment of satisfaction with one's life.

**Big Five Inventory.** The Big Five Inventory (BFI) (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008) is a measurement consisting of 44 items with a Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*). This is a frequently used measure of big five personality: extraversion ( $\alpha = .87$ ), neuroticism ( $\alpha = .88$ ), conscientiousness ( $\alpha = .82$ ), agreeableness ( $\alpha = .82$ ), and openness to experience ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

**Marital satisfaction.** The Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (Schumm et al., 1990) is a self-report questionnaire that uses three questions to assess marital satisfaction: (a) How satisfied are you with your husband (or wife) as a spouse; (b) how satisfied are you with your marriage; and (c) how satisfied are you with your relationship with your husband (or wife)? The scale ranged from 1 (*extremely dissatisfied*) to 7 (*extremely satisfied*). The Cronbach's alpha was .97.

Finally, participants were asked to enter any closing comments regarding the survey in a free-text box. At the end of the survey, participants were presented with a debriefing of the study and provided contact information should they have further questions.

### **ANALYSIS**

This study was exploratory in nature. All analyses were performed in SPSS 24.0 (IBM Corp, 2016). First, descriptive statistics showed the current state of financial infidelity. Next, chi-square tests were performed to examine the relationships of financial infidelity with demographic information and other supplemental information, such as other marital conflicts. Finally, correlation coefficients were computed to show if there are any relationships between financial infidelity and other important individual differences such as marital satisfaction and big five personality traits.

### **RESULTS**

Twenty-seven percent of participants indicated they have kept a financial secret from their partner. A chi-square test indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between the survey methods (27% for Amazon Mturk & 27% for Facebook) ( $\chi^2(1) = 0.01, p = .93$  with alpha set at .05). This finding supported the reliability of the survey methods as it indicates that providing payment to participate in the survey did not make a difference in their responses. In addition to asking participants to indicate if they have kept a financial secret, participants were also asked to select common financial behaviors they had not shared with their spouse or partner. These responses were tabulated to determine the number of behaviors participants indicated that they had committed. On average,

participants reported having committed 1.57 behaviors ( $SD = 2.11$ ) associated with financial infidelity. Overall, 53% of participants selected items associated with financial infidelity.

Although only 27% of participants stated they had committed financial infidelity, further analysis of individual behaviors that constituted financial infidelity revealed that 53% of individuals selected behaviors. The four most commonly selected behaviors were “hidden purchases” (24%), “lied about the price I paid for something” (23%), “spent money on the kids without telling my spouse” (22%), and “said I bought something on sale but paid full price” (19%). We then performed further analysis to examine the nature of financial infidelity.

A between-subject t-test was performed to compare the mean scores of the number of financial infidelity items selected between those who reported having kept a financial secret and those who reported they did not keep a financial secret from their partner. As expected, those who reported committing financial infidelity selected more items ( $M = 3.77$ ,  $SD = 2.43$ ) than those who reported not having committed financial infidelity ( $M = 0.76$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ );  $t(412) = 12.50$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, this finding suggested that those who reported not committing financial infidelity did keep some financial secrets from their partner as the mean score should be zero if their report was accurate, or if they understood what behaviors should be considered financial infidelity. Consequently, we had to examine which behavior(s) participants who reported not committing financial infidelity indicated that they did commit. Table 1 shows the percentage of those who marked each item. For those who reported not having kept a financial secret from their partner, the highest marked items were “I lied about the price I paid for something” (14%) and “I spent money on the kids without telling my partner” (14%). The next highest items were “I said I bought something on sale but paid full price” (11%) and “I have hidden purchases/receipts” (11%). Thus, those who reported not having kept a financial secret might have thought that these secrets were trivial and did not consider them to be financial infidelity. Less than 10% of the participants marked the remaining items.

Next, we examined how demographic characteristics were potentially related to financial infidelity with chi-square tests (see Table 2). Income and age produced significant differences on the rate of financial infidelity. Those who reported lower income (under \$25K) and younger (20s) or older adults (60+) were less likely than the others to have kept financial secrets from their partner. Marital status and gender did not produce significant differences on financial infidelity. We then examined how individual characteristics would produce differences on financial infidelity. The results are presented in Table 3. There were no statistically significant differences with factors, such as who manages financial decisions. However, the issues regarding how participants reported managing financial issues and other types of infidelity or trust issues showed significant differences on financial infidelity. For example, those who have individual accounts or pay bills in a less structured manner were more likely than those who have a more established budget and plan, to keep a financial secret from their partner. In addition, the couples that have had marital affairs were more likely than those who have not to report having kept a financial secret. Furthermore, if one partner had ever lied about money or had gone anywhere without telling their partner, they were more likely than those who have not to have experienced financial infidelity.

## Financial Infidelity in Couple Relationships

Table 1

### *Percentage of Those Who Committed Financial Infidelity*

---

	Have you ever kept a financial secret from your partner?		
	All	Yes	No
Pretend a new purchase is an old one	15%	40%	6%
Said I bought something on sale but paid full price	19%	42%	11%
Hidden purchases/receipts	24%	60%	11%
Taken money out of savings without telling my spouse	11%	28%	5%
Hidden credit card statements	9%	26%	2%
Opened a credit card without telling my spouse	11%	28%	5%
Kept a secret account	5%	16%	1%
Lied to cover up debt	7%	23%	2%
Kept a raise or bonus secret	4%	13%	1%
Spent money on the kids without telling my spouse	22%	42%	14%
Gambled away money without telling my spouse	5%	10%	3%
Lied about the price I paid for something	23%	47%	14%
Spent money on pornographic material	2%	4%	1%
Filed for bankruptcy without my spouses knowledge	0%	0%	0%

---

Table 2

*The Percentage of Those Who Committed Financial Infidelity in Respect to Demographic Characteristics*

	Marital Status	Statistics
Married (N = 308)	26%	$\chi^2(1) = 0.43, p = .51$
Cohabiting (N = 106)	29%	
	Gender	
Male (N = 112)	28%	$\chi^2(1) = 0.59, p = .81$
Female (N = 302)	27%	
	Ethnicity	
Caucasian (N = 340)	27%	$\chi^2(5) = 6.00, p = .31$
African American (N = 20)	45%	
Hispanic (N = 14)	14%	
Asian (N = 20)	20%	
Native American (N = 7)	43%	
Others (N = 13)	23%	
	Age	
20s (N = 100)	16%	$\chi^2(4) = 14.04, p = .007$
30s (N = 144)	29%	
40s (N = 95)	38%	
50s (N = 49)	27%	
60+ (N = 26)	15%	
	Income	
Under \$25k (N = 71)	13%	$\chi^2(4) = 10.75, p = .03$
\$26k-\$45k (N = 117)	30%	
\$46k-\$65k (N = 90)	27%	
\$66k-\$85k (N = 54)	37%	
\$86k higher (N = 82)	28%	
	Residential area	
Urban (N = 284)	26%	$\chi^2(1) = 0.08, p = .78$
Rural (N = 130)	28%	

## Financial Infidelity in Couple Relationships

Table 3

*The Percentage of Those Who Committed Financial Infidelity in Respect to Individual Characteristics*

	Who makes decision?	Statistics
I (N = 64)	38%	$\chi^2(2) = 4.42, p = .11$
My partner (N = 29)	24%	
We (N = 321)	25%	
	How do you manage money?	
Joint (N = 204)	21%	$\chi^2(2) = 8.17, p = .017$
Individual (N = 114)	34%	
Joint & individual (N = 96)	31%	
	How do you manage expenses and spending?	
As they come in (N = 144)	28%	$\chi^2(2) = 7.60, p = .022$
Budget (N = 148)	20%	
Once bills are paid, we spend excess money (N = 122)	34%	
	Has your partner ever lied to you about money?	
Not that I know of (N = 249)	29%	$\chi^2(2) = 54.79, p < .001$
Yes (N = 58)	59%	
No (N = 107)	6%	
	Have you and your partner ever argued over money?	
Yes (N = 298)	29%	$\chi^2(1) = 3.08, p = .079$
No (N = 116)	21%	
	What issue causes the most conflict in your home?	
Financial issues (N = 112)	33%	$\chi^2(5) = 13.80, p = .017$
Sexual issues (N = 46)	44%	
Household responsibilities (N = 107)	20%	
Work issues (N = 54)	19%	
Issues with the children (N = 52)	25%	
Others (N = 43)	23%	

	Have you ever spent time with someone you didn't tell your spouse about?	
Yes (N = 64)	47%	$\chi^2(1) = 15.53, p < .001$
No (N = 350)	23%	
	Have you ever gone anywhere and not tell your spouse about it?	
Yes (N = 97)	39%	$\chi^2(1) = 9.87, p = .002$
No (N = 317)	23%	
	Have you ever cheated on your partner?	
Yes (N = 30)	47%	$\chi^2(1) = 6.50, p = .011$
No (N = 384)	25%	
	Has your partner ever cheated on you?	
Not that I know of (N = 160)	40%	$\chi^2(2) = 26.74, p < .001$
Yes (N = 43)	30%	
No (N = 211)	16%	

To further examine the relationship of financial infidelity with other factors, we compared mean scores of marital and life satisfaction instruments and the Big Five Personality Scale between those who have and who have not experienced financial infidelity with between-subject t-tests (see Table 4). Unsurprisingly, both marital and life satisfaction were lower in those who have experienced financial infidelity than in those who have not ( $t(412) = 4.13, p < .001$ ;  $t(412) = 3.87, p < .001$ ). Thus, this result also suggests that the quality of the relationship, as well as general life satisfaction, is lower in those who have committed financial infidelity. As for the Big Five personality factors, there was a significant difference only on the conscientiousness factor ( $t(412) = 3.36, p < .001$ ). Combined with the result of the structured manner of financial management, it suggests that organized individuals were unlikely to keep secrets from their partner. Please see correlations, Table 5.

## Financial Infidelity in Couple Relationships

Table 4

*The Percentage of Those Who Committed Financial Infidelity in Respect to Personality Characteristics*

Financial infidelity	Marital satisfaction	Statistics
Yes	5.34	$t(412) = -4.13, p < .001$
No	5.97	
	Life satisfaction	
Yes	4.66	$t(412) = -3.87, p < .001$
No	5.27	
	Extraversion	
Yes	3.30	$t(412) = 0.96, p = .338$
No	3.21	
	Agreeableness	
Yes	3.80	$t(412) = -1.53, p = .128$
No	3.91	
	Conscientiousness	
Yes	3.78	$t(412) = -3.36, p = .001$
No	4.02	
	Neuroticism	
Yes	2.81	$t(412) = 1.14, p = .262$
No	2.69	
	Openness	
Yes	3.69	$t(412) = 1.73, p = .084$
No	3.56	

Table 5

*Correlations Coefficients*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Infidelity	–								
2 Marital satisfaction	-.25***	–							
3 Life satisfaction	-.25***	.58***	–						
4 Extraversion	.01	.10*	.23***	–					
5 Agreeableness	-.12*	.16***	.26***	.21***	–				
6 Conscientiousness	-.20***	.10*	.13**	.25***	.32***	–			
7 Neuroticism	.11*	-.09	.19***	-.32***	-.39***	-.41***	–		
8 Openness	-.02	-.02	-.07	.17***	.08	.10*	-.11*	–	
9 Age	.05	-.12*	-.06	.09	.12*	.16***	-.18***	.04	–

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

## DISCUSSION

### Financial Infidelity Behaviors

The current study found approximately 27% admitted to keeping a financial secret from their partner. This finding is consistent with the findings from the National Endowment for Financial Education (NEFE, 2010) and a survey commissioned from Harris Interactive by lawyers.com and *Redbook* magazine. The NEFE, in cooperation with Forbes.com, found that “31% of people who combined finances with their significant other have been deceptive with their spouse or partner about money” (Golden, 2011). Subsequently, Harris Interactive found “nearly one-third (29%) of adults...who were in a committed relationship (either married, engaged, or living with a partner) said they had been dishonest about their spending habits” (Singletary, 2005). There are many reasons why financial infidelity occurs, including trust issues, poor communication skills, power, and to avoid conflict (Atwood, 2012; Klontz & Klontz, 2009; Smith, 1992).

Interestingly, half of the participants (53%) reported behaviors associated with financial infidelity. The discrepancy in participants admitting they had kept a secret and

## Financial Infidelity in Couple Relationships

selecting one or more of the 14 financial infidelity behaviors in the current survey could mean one of two things; (1) individuals were lying about never keeping a financial secret from their spouse, or (2) they did not perceive their behaviors to be financial infidelity. Of the 14 financial infidelity behaviors listed in the study, the four highest marked behaviors were hidden purchases, lied about the price I paid for something, spent money on the kids without telling my spouse, and said I bought something on sale but paid full price. Previous research (Chethik, 2008; Madden & Janoff-Bulman, 1981) suggests that financial problems are a major source of marital conflict. It may be easier to withhold information on spending or lie about it to avoid conflict over money altogether. Clinicians working with couples should focus on ways to help couples argue less over money and implement a financial plan which could lead to increased marital satisfaction (Dew & Stewart, 2012).

### **Personality Traits**

Upon examination of the personality traits of the individuals surveyed, we found a significant difference only on conscientiousness. This finding suggests that organized and dependable individuals are unlikely to keep financial secrets from their partner. Shackelford, Besser, and Goetz (2008) found that individuals low on conscientiousness were less satisfied with their marriage. While their research looked more specifically at marital infidelity, similarities could be drawn between the two different types of infidelity. If looking at personality traits alone, low conscientiousness has a component of impulsivity related to a lack of organization and low dependability. It is possible that individuals low on conscientiousness commit financial infidelity because they are more likely to spend money more carelessly and without a budget or plan. Previous research (Shaye, 2010; Watson, Hubbard, & Wiese 2000) has also found that higher levels of conscientiousness were related to greater relationship satisfaction.

Another important finding in the current study was that couples who pay their bills in a less structured manner are more likely than those who had a more established budget and plan, to keep a financial secret from their partner. Similarly, Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1995) suggested that couples can use a variety of methods to successfully make financial decisions, but having a plan both partners agreed upon was found to be essential in making financial decisions. Clinicians working with couples should focus on increasing the level of communication directly related to the couples' finances. Additionally, creating a financial balance sheet, budget, and plan as a couple and reviewing it regularly will enhance communication related to finances and spending (Smith, Shelton, & Richards 2016; Weil, 2009).

### **Marital and Life Satisfaction**

Individuals who have lower levels of conscientiousness may be more likely to commit financial infidelity because they are, overall, less satisfied in their relationships (Shaye, 2010; Watson et al., 2000). This is also supported by the findings of the current study. The results support the hypothesis that both marital and life satisfaction would be lower in those who

had experienced financial infidelity. Previous research supports the idea that money and finances are an important aspect of both life and marital satisfaction (Dakin & Wampler, 2008; Johnson & Krueger, 2006; Ruberton, Gladstone, & Lybomirsky, 2016).

### **Marital Infidelity**

Finally, the current research supports the hypothesis that couples who have experienced marital infidelity are more likely to commit financial infidelity. Consequently, financial infidelity may not be specific to financial issues; it could be a consequence of personality traits, specifically, having low levels of conscientiousness. Clinicians should work with couples who score lower on conscientiousness by helping them establish more structured routines and accepting more accountability in their lives and relationships. Roberts, Hill, and Davis (2017) discuss the possibility of increasing levels of conscientiousness by having clinicians act as teachers and “structure the person’s behaviors around pursuing long-term goals, teaching them how to organize their lives so as to achieve these goals, and rewarding them for making progress on changing their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors necessary to achieve those ends” (p. 203). They also discuss the importance of making sure the individual is in the right environment, has the time to commit to implementing the lessons they are learning, and that they are receptive to change (Roberts, Hill, & Davis, 2017).

### **LIMITATIONS**

Although this study has contributed to the understanding of financial infidelity in couple relationships, some limitations should be noted. First, self-report data were used to assess the incidence of and factors associated with financial infidelity, and could be underreported or exaggerated due to the potentially sensitive nature of the subject. Data could also be biased due to the social desirability of what the research was focused on. To minimize this potential threat, all participants were anonymous and provided minimal identifying information. In addition, the survey questions were adapted from a previous survey and developed for the current study. Since the measure was not validated it may not be actually measuring what it was intended to measure. Second, the sample was not particularly ethnically diverse, and therefore, may not have been representative of the general population. AMT is usually more representative of the country as a whole than a convenience sample taken in a given location, but there are no guarantees of who will complete a given task, as there were no quotas set for ethnicity in this study. However, Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz (2012) noted that participants recruited through Amazon MTurk are often more representative of the United States population than participants recruited via in-person sampling techniques. Finally, due to the exploratory nature of the study, relationships ranged from 4 months to 48 years in length. This large relationship range leads to factors such as the length of time of the relationship, age within the relationship, and memory bias as limitations. Looking at the differences in the relationship ages and ranges as it relates to financial infidelity would be a good area for future research.

The current study used empirical research to measure the occurrence of financial infidelity within couple relationships. It was also important to gain a deeper understanding of the behaviors and personality factors that play into couple relationships that experience

## Financial Infidelity in Couple Relationships

financial infidelity. Some important information was found that can drive future researchers. More research should be done on individual perceptions related to financial infidelity to enhance the understanding of the processes of behavior related to finances in relationships. Clinicians can use the information to help with assessment and treatment when working with both premarital and married couples with regard to managing finances within their relationship.



**Money got you feeling down?**  
Financial therapists help to improve thoughts,  
feelings, behaviors, and relationships around  
money to give you a holistic pick-me-up!

Learn more at [financialtherapyassociation.org](http://financialtherapyassociation.org)



## REFERENCES

- Atwood, J. D. (2012). Couples and money: The last taboo. *The American Journal of Family Therapy, 40*, 1-19. doi:10.1080/01926187.2011.600674
- Behrend, T. S., Sharek, D. J., Meade, A.W., & Wiebe, E. N. (2011). The viability of crowdsourcing for survey research, *Behavior Research Methods, 43*, 800-813. doi: 10.3758/s13428-011-0081-0
- Bennett, R. (2013, May 25). *Financial infidelity and financial intimacy*. Retrieved from <http://www.passionsaving.com/financial-infidelity.html>
- Berinsky, A. J., Huber, G. A., & Lenz, G. S. (2012). Evaluating online labor markets for experimental research: Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk. *Political Analysis, 20*, 351-368. doi:10.1093/pan/mpr057
- Britt, S. L., & Huston, S. J. (2012). The role of money arguments in marriage. *Journal of Family Economic Issues, 33*, 464-476. doi:10.1007/s10834-012-9304-5
- Britt, S. L., Huston, S. J., & Durband, D. B. (2010) The determinants of money arguments between spouses. *Journal of Financial Therapy, 1*(1), 42-60. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4148/jft.v1i1.253>
- Buhrmester, M., Kwang, T., & Gosling, S. D. (2011). Amazon's Mechanical Turk: A new source of inexpensive, yet high-quality, data? *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 6*, 3-5. doi:10.1177/1745691610393980
- Byrne, J. A. (2014, May 15). Record number of couples committing financial infidelity. *New York Post*. Retrieved from <http://nypost.com/2014/02/15/record-number-of-couples-are-committing-financial-infidelity/>
- Canale, A., Archuleta, K. L., & Klontz, B. T. (2015). Money disorders. In B. Klontz, S. Britt & K. Archuleta (Eds.), *Financial therapy: Theory research, and practice*. (pp.35-67). New York: Springer.
- Chethik, N. (2008). *VoiceMale: What husbands really think about their marriages, their wives, sex, housework, and commitment*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Conger, R. D., Rueter, M. A., & Elder, G. H. (1999). Couple resilience to economic pressure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 76*(1), 54-71. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.76.1.54
- Dakin, J., & Wampler, R. (2008). Money doesn't buy happiness, but it helps: Marital satisfaction, psychological distress, and demographic differences between low- and middle-income clinic couples. *The American Journal of Family Therapy, 36*, 300-311. doi: 10.1080/01926180701647512
- Dew, J. & Dakin, J. (2011). Financial disagreements and marital conflict tactics. *Journal of Financial Therapy, 2*(1), 23-42. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4148/jft.v2i1.1414>
- Dew, J. & Stewart, R. (2012). A financial issue, a relationship issue, or both? Examining the predictors of marital financial conflict. *Journal of Financial Therapy, 3*(1) 4. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4148/jft.v3i1.1605>
- Diener, E., Emmons, R. A., Larson, R. J., & Griffin, S. (1985). The satisfaction with life scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 49*, 71-75. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa4901\\_13](http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa4901_13)

## Financial Infidelity in Couple Relationships

- Elejalde-Ruiz, A. (2011, February 11). Financial infidelity. *Chicago Tribune*. Retrieved from: [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2011-02-11/features/sc-cons-0210-save-financial-infidelit20110211\\_1\\_financial-infidelity-relationship-couples](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2011-02-11/features/sc-cons-0210-save-financial-infidelit20110211_1_financial-infidelity-relationship-couples)
- Glass, S. P., & Wright, T. L. (1985). Sex differences in types of extramarital involvement and marital dissatisfaction. *Sex Roles, 12*, 1101-1119.
- Golden, P. (2011, January 14). Three in 10 Americans admit to financial deception with partners. Retrieved from: <http://www.nefe.org/press-room/news/admitting-to-financial-deceptions.aspx>
- Goodman, J. K., Cryder, C. E., & Cheema, A. (2012) Data collection in a flat world: The strengths and weaknesses of Mechanical Turk samples, *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*, Published online in Wiley Online Library ([wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)) doi: 10.1002/bdm.1753
- IBM Corp. (2016). IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 24.0. Armonk, NY: IBM Corp.
- John, O. P., Donahue, E. M., & Kentle, R. L. (1991). The Big Five Inventory - Versions 4a and 54. Berkely, CA: University of California, Berkeley, Institute of Personality and Social Research.
- John, O. P., Naumann, L. P., & Soto, C. J. (2008). Paradigm shift to the integrative Big-Five trait taxonomy: History, measurement, and conceptual issues. In O. P. John, R. W. Robins, & L. A. Pervin (Eds.), *Handbook of personality: Theory and research* (pp. 114-158). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Johnson, W., & Krueger, R. F. (2006). How money buys happiness: Genetic and environmental processes linking finances and life satisfaction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 90*(4), 680-691. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.90.4.680
- Junare, S. O. & Patel, F. M. (2012). Financial infidelity – secret saving behavior of the individual. *Journal of Business Management & Social Sciences Research, 1*(2), 40-44.
- Klontz, B. T. & Britt, S. L. (2012). How clients' money scripts predict their financial behaviors. *Journal of Financial Planning, 24*(11), 33-43.
- Klontz, B. T. & Klontz, T. (2009). *Mind over money: Overcoming the money disorders that threaten our financial health*. New York: Broadway Books.
- Lerner, M. (2014, June 4). Is your spouse cheating on you...financially? *AOL News*. Retrieved from <http://www.aol.com/article/2014/06/04/is-your-spouse-cheating-on-you-financially/20905793/>
- Madden, M. E., & Janoff-Bulman, R. (1981). Blame, control, and marital satisfaction: Wives' attributions for conflict in marriage. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 43*, 663-674. doi: 10.2307/351767
- Medintz, S., Chaplin, J., Feldman, J., & McGirt, E. (2005). Secrets, lies and money. *Money, 34*(4), 121-128.
- National Endowment for Education (2010). Harris Interactive Quickquery. Harris Interactive. Retrieved from: [https://www.nefe.org/Portals/0/WhatWeProvide/PrimaryResearch/ConsumerPolls/PDF/FinancialDeception\\_Methodology.pdf](https://www.nefe.org/Portals/0/WhatWeProvide/PrimaryResearch/ConsumerPolls/PDF/FinancialDeception_Methodology.pdf)
- Papp, L. M., Cummings, E. M., & Goeke-Morey, M. C. (2009). For richer, for poorer: Money as a topic of marital conflict in the home. *Family Relations, 58*, 91-103. doi: 10.1111/j.1741-3729.2008.00537.x

- Peer, E., Vosgerau, J., & Acquisti, A. (2014) Reputation as a sufficient condition for data quality on Amazon Mechanical Turk, *Behavior Research Methods*, 46, 1023-1031. doi: 10.3758/s13428-013-0434-y
- Rick, S. I., Small, D. A., & Finkel, E. J., (2011). Fatal (fiscal) attraction: Spendthrifts and tightwads in marriage. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 48(2), 228-237. doi:10.1509/jmkr.48.2.228
- Rife, S. C., Cate, K. L., Kosinski, M., & Stillwell, D., (2014). Participant recruitment and data collection through Facebook: The role of personality factors. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 1-15. doi: 10.1080/13645576.2014.957069
- Roberts, B. W., Hill, P. L., & Davis, J. P. (2017). How to change conscientiousness: The sociogenomic trait intervention model. *Personality Disorder: Theory, Research, and Treatment* 8(3). 199-205.
- Ruberton, P. M., Gladstone, J., & Lybomirsky, S. (2016). How your bank balance buys happiness: The importance of "cash on hand" to life satisfaction. *Emotion*, 16(5), 575-580. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/emo0000184>
- Schumm, W. R., Jurich, A. P., & Boliman, S. R. (1990). Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale. In J. Touliatos, B. F. Perimutter, & M. A. Straus (Eds.), *Handbook of family measurement techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Shackelford, T. K., Besser, A., & Goetz, A. T. (2008). Personality, marital satisfaction, and probability of marital infidelity. *Individual Differences Research*, 6(1), 13-25.
- Shapiro, M. (2007). Money: A therapeutic tool for couple's therapy. *Family Process*, 46(3), 279-291. doi: 10.1111/j.1545-5300.2007.00211.x
- Shaye, A. (2010) Infidelity in dating relationships: Do Big Five personality traits and gender influence infidelity? (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from Ebscohost. (2010-99020-436)
- Singletary, M. (2005, October 25). Couples need to be open about finances. *Boston.com*. Retrieved from: [http://archive.boston.com/business/personalfinance/articles/2005/10/23/couples\\_need\\_to\\_be\\_open\\_about\\_finances/](http://archive.boston.com/business/personalfinance/articles/2005/10/23/couples_need_to_be_open_about_finances/)
- Skogrand, L., Johnson, A. C., Horrocks, A. M., & DeFrain, J. (2011). Financial management practices of couples with great marriages. *Journal of Family Economic Issues*, 32, 27-35. doi:10.1080/01494929.2013.766296
- Smith L. L. (1992). How couples misuse money. *Family Therapy*, 19(2), 131-135.
- Smith, T., Shelton, V. M., & Richards, K. V. (2016). Solution-focused financial therapy with couples. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 26(5), 452-460.
- Spanier, G. B., & Margolis, R. L. (1983). Marital separation and extramarital sexual behavior. *Journal of Sex Research*, 19, 23-48.
- Vogler, C., Lyonette, C., & Wiggins, R. D. (2008). Money, power and spending decisions in intimate relationships. *The Sociological Review*, 56(1), 117-143. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2008.00779.x>
- Wallerstein, J. S. & Blakeslee, S. (1995). *The good marriage: How and why love lasts*. New York, NY: Warner Books
- Watson, D., Hubbard, B., & Wiese, D. (2000) General traits of personality and affectivity as predictors of satisfaction in intimate relationships: Evidence from self- and partner-ratings. *Journal of Personality*, 63(3), 413-449. doi: 10.1111/1467-6494.00102

## Financial Infidelity in Couple Relationships

Weil, B. K. (2009). *Financial infidelity: Seven steps to conquering the #1 relationship wrecker*. New York: Plume.



Certified Financial Therapists - I™ are equipped to help clients reach their financial goals by thoughtfully addressing financial challenges, while at the same time, attending to the emotional, psychological, behavioral, and relational hurdles that are intertwined.



Learn more about Financial Therapy at  
[www.financialtherapyassociation.org](http://www.financialtherapyassociation.org)