
Although there is a paucity of research available on cyber-cheating and its effects on the offline couple, the current research available suggests that Internet relationships and online erotic interactions can have a ‘real’ impact on couples. This paper builds on the current research by exploring theoretical explanations for how individuals might rationalise their online affairs. Drawing from Klein’s object-relations theory we suggest that while on one level individuals might perceive their online interactions to be ‘unreal’ and hence not ‘breaking the rules’ in respect to the offline relationship, on another level energy is being taken away from the relationship and given to another, which is indeed ‘breaking the rules’.

Keywords: cyber-cheating, Internet infidelity, Klein, splitting, object-relations, Winnicott
Taking the Good with the Bad: Applying Klein’s Work to further our Understandings of Cyber-Cheating

Cyber-cheating is still a relatively under-researched and under-theorised topic in the social sciences. Atwood (2002) asserts that “healthcare professionals are often unfamiliar with the dynamics associated with the relatively new concept of cyber-affairs and the electronic process of ‘virtual cheating’ and thus often do not consider the behaviour as infidelity” (p. 37). Given this claim, it would seem that there is an urgent need to consider whether online interactions and erotic activities online are considered to be real acts of betrayal by individuals and their offline partners, and if this behaviour needs to be considered more seriously by healthcare professionals (e.g., relationship counsellors). The research, to date, suggests that cyber-affairs can have a real and possibly serious impact on the offline relationship. Whitty (2003a), for instance, found that individuals do perceive that some interactions that occur online can be considered as acts of betrayal. The study identified three main components of infidelity: sexual; emotional; and, porn. Moreover, it was found that some acts, such as sexual acts pose a greater threat than other acts, such as viewing pornography.

In this paper, we would like to extend on current work in the field by considering theoretically the processes that might take place when people do have cyber-affairs. While we do not subscribe to the view that all online relationships and erotic acts ought to be considered acts of infidelity to all people, we are limiting this paper to considerations to the psychological processes that might take place when these are considered to be acts of betrayal. We firstly consider here, drawing from Winnicott’s (1971/1997) work on potential space, how cyberspace might be seen as an attractive place to play at love and that in many instances this can be therapeutic for individuals. We then turn to considerations raised by
theorists, such as Civin (2000), that cyberspace can also be debilitating. We examine how online infidelities might be perceived by some to be ‘unreal’ acts and focus on justifications and excuses perpetrators might use to explain away these encounters. The taken-for-granted rules of a relationship are also focused on here. Drawing from the foundational object-relations work of Melanie Klein (1986), in relation to the process of splitting, we argue that people are more easily able to justify their online affairs when compared to their offline affairs. To illustrate our argument we provide examples, from a recent study, where individuals were asked to respond to a hypothetical scenario on cyber-cheating (Whitty, 2003c). It is noteworthy that while we would also argue that cyberspace is not limited to Internet interactions, we have restricted this paper to considerations of Internet affairs. We are of the view that attempting to understand, in greater detail, the psychological processes that take place when individuals cyber-cheat may lead to improved treatments for Internet infidelity. The paper goes some way in contributing to raising awareness of some of the more serious consequences of cyber-affairs.

Playing at love: Object-relations

Previously we have argued, when read through the optic of Winnicott’s (1971/1997) object-relations theory, that cyberspace has potential therapeutic benefits to offer. We have suggested that cyberspace is a safe and imaginative place to play at flirting and love (Whitty, 2003b; Whitty & Carr, 2003).

Winnicott was very interested in what he called the potential space — a space between the mother and the infant. He contrasted this "potential space (a) with the inner world (which is related to the psychosomatic partnership) and (b) with actual, or external reality" (Winnicott, 1971/1997, p. 41). Winnicott understood ‘potential spaces’ to be an area of intermediate experiencing that is between inner and outer worlds, “between the subjective
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object and the object objectively perceived” (Winnicott, 1971/1997, p. 100). Winnicott (1971/1997) argued that the potential space is:

the hypothetical area that exists (but cannot exist) between the baby and the object (mother of part of mother) during the phase of the repudiation of the object as not-me, that is, at the end of being merged in with the object. (p. 107)

Winnicott noticed, for example, how an infant would suck and hug a doll or blanket. He suggested that the doll or blanket did not represent a doll or blanket as such, but is rather an as-if object. The infant makes use of the illusion that although this is not the breast, treating it as such will allow an appreciation of what is “me” and what is “not-me” (Winnicott, 1971/1997, p. 41). Although referred to as a transitional object, “it is not the object, of course that is transitional” (Winnicott, 1971/1997, p. 14). The object is the initial manifestation of a different positioning of the infant in the world. The doll or blanket, thus, connects to subjective experience, but is in the objective world.

While the notions of transitional objects and potential space are raised within a context of an infant, Winnicott (1971/1997) insists, however, they are not simply confined to the infants’ experience, but is something that “throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work” (p. 24). We come to rely upon our own resources to experience culture to expand our understanding of the world. In his expanded views on mental health and creativity, Winnicott argues that a person who lives in a realm of subjective omnipotence, with no bridge to objective reality, is self-absorbed and autistic. A person who lived only in the realm of objective reality, with no roots in subjective omnipotence, was viewed by Winnicott as superficially adjusted, but lacking passion and originality. This realm provides relief “from the strain of relating inner and outer reality … that no human is free from” (Winnicott, 1971/1997, p. 24). The tension and strain between inner and outer worlds is not
eliminated, but is bound in this space. Culture and cultural activity, in this context, is an expression of the “inter-play between separateness and union” (Winnicott, 1971/1997, p. 24).

The potential space is not pure fantasy, nor is it pure reality. “In the absence of potential space, there is only fantasy; within potential space imagination can develop” (Ogden, 1985, p. 133). Winnicott believed that given a ‘good enough’ environment the interplay of the inner world and external reality promotes the development of self and facilitates growth. It is a space where we can develop psychologically, to integrate love and hate and to create, destroy and re-create ourselves (see Winnicott, 1971/1997, p. 41).

In line with Winnicott’s object-relations theory, we have suggested that cyberspace is a potential space (Whitty, 2003b, Whitty & Carr, 2003). Cyberspace, like Winnicott’s potential space is perhaps a space somewhere outside the individual, but is still not the external world. The participants and their transitional objects: the computers, monitors, keyboards, mice, software, modems, text, cables, telephone lines, and so forth; all occupy this potential space — a space between the 'real individuals' and the 'fantasy individuals'.

We have argued that flirting is a type of play that can occur in this potential space — cyberspace. Cyber-flirting, although akin in some ways with offline flirting, is characterised here as a unique activity that is a form of play. Of course it can be argued, with justification, that offline flirting is also a form of play. That said, cyberspace seems to offer more opportunities for the type of play that Winnicott described. Similarly, cyberspace offers opportunities for this play to be transformational. We have expressed this view given that offline flirting requires that another be physically present. In face-to-face interactions rejection is more possible and probably more damaging to one’s self concept. Cyberspace, in contrast, gives to many the appearance of a safer environment; a safer space to play and experiment at flirting. Moreover, rejection is less likely to cause distress when you can
disconnect at any time, and the chances are remarkably decreased as to the likelihood of ever having a chance meeting with one’s cyber-playmate.

**A darker side of the Internet**

While contending that cyberspace can be potentially a therapeutic place to play at love we have also acknowledged that cyberspace also has its dark side (Whitty & Carr, 2003). We would also not dismiss the notion that engaging in intimate relationships or erotic acts online might even have a positive effect (at least for the person engaging in these activities). However, in the context of this paper, like Civin (2000), we would like to propose that “Just as cyberspace may potentiate, it may also thwart and debilitate” (p. 40).

Civin (2000) proposes that cyberspace is not as transitional and facilitative as it was first considered by academics. Perhaps this is because of the changing nature of this space, or possibly this is because the darker aspects of cyberspace were not taken into account by early researchers. Civin (2000) has brought to our attention that “… that no object or process, the cyber system included is essentially transitional” (p. 39). Continuing this line of argument, he reminds the reader that Winnicott was not suggesting that all teddy bears and blankets are essentially transitional! Likewise, not all cyber systems will act as transitional objects! He adds that, in stark contrast, cyber systems are potentially invasive, so much so that they can foster persecutory anxiety. Civin states, that for some, “the computer system seems a far cry (in all meanings) from the teddy bear or favorite blanket, and the breach between the cyber system and the transitional or potential looms unnegotiably vast” (2000, p. 51).

Civin (2000) presents the reader with case studies to illustrate how the cyber system can foster persecutory anxiety. For example, in his presentation of the online experiences of a person he calls Jeannette, Civin demonstrates how she was eventually forced off the net after she angered someone for sharing software he had sent to her. This rage changed to jealousy
and Jeannette found she was being emailed more frequently than she could cope with and, in addition, feared her husband would eventually discover her online relationships. Other examples of deleterious effects of cyberspace might include, harassment, cyberstalking, and addiction. This paper, however, examines the problems that arise when individuals engage in cyber-affairs.

**Melanie Klein: ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ objects**

We would like to suggest here, that while the motivations for an online affair might be similar to why individuals seek affairs offline (e.g., problems encountered in the relationships, personality factors) the appeal and the way the online relationship is perceived can be potentially different. We would argue that online affairs may appear to be in some ways more seductive than offline affairs.

To explain this we would like to draw from Melanie Klein’s work on splitting. Splitting, she believed, was one of the most primitive or basic defence mechanisms against anxiety. According to Klein (1986) the ego prevents the ‘bad’ part of the object from contaminating the ‘good’ part of the object by splitting it off and disowning a part of itself. An infant in its relationship with the mother’s breast conceives it as both a good and bad object. The breast gratifies and frustrates and the infant will simultaneously project both love and hate on to it. On the one hand the infant idealises this ‘good’ object, but on the other hand, the ‘bad’ object is seen as terrifying, frustrating and a persecutor threatening to destroy both the infant and the ‘good’ object (Carr, 1997). The infant projects love and idealizes the good object but goes beyond mere projection in trying to induce in the mother feelings toward the bad object for which she must take responsibility (that is, a process of projective identification). This stage of development Klein termed the *paranoid-schizoid position*. The infant may, as another defence mechanism for this less developed ego, seek to deny the reality
of the persecutory object. While in the normal development we pass through this phase, this primitive defence against anxiety is a regressive reaction that, in a sense of always being available to us, is never transcended. The ‘good’ objects in the developed super-ego come to represent the fantasized ego-ideal and thus “the possibility of a return to narcissism” (Schwartz, 1999, p. 18).

In line with Klein’s object-relations theory it might be useful to understand the individual one is having an online affair to be the ‘good object’. Given that the interactions that take place in cyberspace can be seen as separate to the outside world it is potentially easier to split an online affair off from the rest of the individuals’ world. As we will elaborate on further in this paper, the online relationship can potentially cater to an unfettered, impotent fantasy this is difficult to measure up to in reality. Hence, the online affair can potentially lead to a narcissistic withdrawal.

**Relationship scripts**

Engaging in extra-dyadic relationships is considered by most individuals, at least in Western countries, to be an act of betrayal. It is generally taken-for-granted by heterosexual couples that engaging in an intimate relationship with someone other than one’s partner, especially in respect to sexual activities, is unacceptable and a breach of the rules of the relationship. Research has found that sexual infidelity is one of the most common causes of marital break-ups (e.g., Betzig, 1989; Pittman & Wagers, 1995). In fact, Pittman and Wagers (1995) found that, in their clinical experience, more than 90% of divorces were attributed to sexual infidelity.

While heterosexuals might have scripts available to them as to what are acceptable face-to-face interactions with the opposite sex while still maintaining a romantic relationship, given the nature and the newness of the Internet, the rules are yet to be clearly established as
to what are acceptable online encounters. Although it has been found that individuals hold similar attitudes towards online and offline infidelities (Whitty, 2003a), more recent work has found that when presented with a hypothetical scenario of a partner potentially cheating online, that not all participants were convinced that this was ‘real’ betrayal (Whitty, 2003c). In the study referred to here, participants were given one of two versions of a story-completion task based on a task devised about traditional offline infidelity by Kitzinger and Powell (1995). They were presented with one of the versions presented below:

Version A: Mark and Jennifer have been going out for over a year. Then Mark realises that Jennifer has developed a relationship with someone else over the Internet…;
Version B: Jennifer and Mark have been going out for over a year. Then Jennifer realises that Mark has developed a relationship with someone else over the Internet…

While Kitzinger and Powell (1995) found that 90% of their sample interpreted their cue story, which was developed in respect to offline infidelity, to be an act of sexual involvement, this was not the case in this particular study. While all of the participants understood this to be a dilemma about infidelity, some were divided as to whether the betrayer believed they were committing an act of infidelity, while others wrote that the partner was not certain that they had been betrayed. Moreover, unlike Kitzinger and Powell’s study, when participants interpreted the cue story as a story about sexual involvement, this was not necessarily about a sexual relationship, but in many cases was exclusively an emotional involvement.

Although the majority of the participants (86%) wrote in their stories that the aggrieved felt that they had been betrayed, and 51% wrote that the betrayer believed that they had been unfaithful, a number of participants were uncertain that this was a scenario about infidelity. Explanations given as to why the scenario should not be considered as infidelity were that:

- the interaction was ‘just a friendship’;
- the interaction was merely flirtation or fun;
• the relationship was with an object (computer) in virtual space, rather than with a real human being;
• the interaction was with two people who had never met and did not ever intend to meet; and,
• it could not be infidelity as there was no physical sex taking place.

Given that the results from this study present somewhat different results to the Kitzinger and Powell’s study on offline infidelity, this suggests that there is something different about the relationships we form online. This can be partly attributed to some people’s beliefs that these relationships are not completely real. As illustrated in the following quote elicited from the study mentioned above:

Mark at first brushes it off thinking that its “only the Internet, no harm in having fun.” (12MM)

Fitness (2001) has pointed out that the key to defining betrayal lies in “relationship knowledge structures”; for example, individuals’ theories, beliefs and expectations about how relationships should normally work and how their own relationships should work. Given that the types of interactions that take place online are somewhat different and perhaps in some ways feel less real than offline relationships, it might be that virtual sex and developing close emotional bonds with someone online might be perceived by some as not breaking the rules of the offline relationship. However, in saying this, we would like to suggest that acts of infidelity are not necessarily limited to sexual acts, such as sexual intercourse, kissing and so forth. Rather, part of the expectations of a relationship can be both ‘mental exclusivity’ as well as ‘sexual exclusivity’ (Yarab, Sensibaugh & Allgeier, 1998). As Fitness (2001) also contends:

Essentially, betrayal means that one party in a relationship acts in a way that favours his or her own interests at the expense of the other party’s interests. In one sense, this behaviour implies that the betrayer regards his or her needs as more important than that needs of the partner in or the relationship. In a deeper sense, however, betrayal sends an ominous signal about how little the betrayer cares about, or values his or her relationship with, the betrayed partner. (p. 73)
Hence, if acts of betrayal are not limited to ‘real’ sexual acts then it is quite plausible to consider various types of online relating to be construed as acts of infidelity by the offline couple.

This notion that online acts can be considered as acts of betrayal is nicely summarised in the following extract:

“It is cheating.” She said rather calmly.
“No I’m not cheating. It’s not like I’m bonking her anyway. You’re the one I’m with and like I said I have NO intentions of meeting her.” He hopped into bed.
“It’s ‘emotional’ cheating.” She said getting annoyed.
“How so?” He asked, amusement showing in his eyes.
“Cheating isn’t necessarily physical. That’s one side of it …” He pulled the sheets over him and rolled over.
“Well… I know you have not met her yet that’s why, but I’m still a little annoyed, Mark.” She sat on the edge of the bed.
“Don’t be mad. You’re the one I love. So how is it emotional cheating.” He sat up.
“You’re keeping stuff from me. Relationships are about trust! How can I trust you if you keep stuff from me about the ‘Internet’ girl?” (51FM)

Online relationships: Fantasy or reality?

If we are to take on the argument that cyberspace can be perceived in a similar way to Winnicott’s understanding of potential space (see Whitty, 2003b; Whitty & Carr, 2003) then while potential space does offer greater opportunities to flirt and play at love, these relationships are not complete fantasy. We would like to suggest here that given the lack of scripts currently available as to what is acceptable behaviour online and given the nature of cyberspace, some individuals might find it easier to justify or rationalise engaging in an online affair. On one level the relationship or sexual encounter can be seen as fantasy and not real. However, at another level, the relationship or sexual encounter can be understood as hurting the offline relationship. Therefore, in line with Melanie Klein’s work, we would like to propose that splitting is easier to do in respect to online infidelity than offline infidelity.

Fitness (2001) contends that there are four main ways that individuals account for their betrayal: a) conceding that an offence has been committed accompanied by remorse and
possibly an attempt to re-establish the relationship; b) an admittance of the offence together with excuses of extenuating circumstances, such as alcohol, stress, and illness; c) in a more defensive account where the offence is admitted, however, the offender minimizes its wrongness or seriousness; and, d) denials of having committed any offence or refusals to take any responsibility for it.

While the stories in Whitty’s study (2003c) demonstrated examples of each of these accounts, a unique finding that emerged was that when excuses were made, they were typically along the lines of the relationship not being real. However, when confronted with this excuse the aggrieved would still see that an act of betrayal had occurred and as a consequence trust had been broken. This is exemplified in the following extracts:

“When she confronts him about it one night over dinner, he denies everything saying that they were just friends. And that she should not take it so seriously and worry about it because it was not a real relationship, but a net relationship. That net relationships mean nothing because everyone lives in virtual reality. Jennifer accepts his theory, but decides to leave him in the end, her departing words are, “I’m sorry Mark, but I can’t be with someone who wants to live in virtual reality with someone, and in reality with me.” (6FM)

“She tried to explain that he was just a faithful companion and the only feelings he had were not real as this man was just words on a screen, but he couldn’t understand the relationship and why she would need to tell others of their private lives.” (55FJ)

Interestingly, the second extract raises another expectation of an offline relationship; that there are some aspects of the offline relationship that ought to remain private and not shared with others. Part of the objection the aggrieved seems to have here is that the perpetrator has inverted priorities.

It has been argued that offline infidelity occurs because there are problems in the relationship, or because of certain personality characteristics (see Fitness, 2001). Buss and Shackelford (1997) have identified some key reasons why people betray their partners, including: complaints that one’s partner sexualizes others; exhibits of high levels of jealousy and possessiveness; is condescending; sexual withholding; and, abuses alcohol. Of greater interest to this paper is that Buss and Shackelford found a strong link between narcissism and
susceptibility to infidelity. These are perhaps the same reasons why individuals are motivated to initiate online affairs. However, drawing from Klein’s theory, we would like to suggest that these relationships are perhaps easier to maintain than an offline affair. We contend that the online relationship can become idealised through the process of splitting, while simultaneously, denying the ‘bad’ aspects of the person they are having the affair with and at the same time the bad aspects in themselves. It is possibly easier to idealise an individual online (the ‘good’ object) when you can more easily filter out the potential negative aspects of the relationship (the ‘bad’ object). The relationship can be turned on or off at one’s leisure and the communication content, to some extent, can be more easily controlled. Moreover, the Internet does provide an environment where it is easier to construct a more positive view of the self and avoid presenting the negative aspects of the self. In contrast, it is not so easy to indulge in one’s fantasies of perfection in an offline affair as one has to still deal with the ‘real’ person.

The work of Christopher Bollas is also useful to consider here. Bollas (1987) described how the search for the idealised lover can be a quest to compensate for a deficiency in the ego. As he states:

Some forms of erotomania may be efforts to establish the other as the transformational object. The search for the perfect crime or the perfect woman is not only a quest for an idealized object. It also constitutes some recognition in the subject of a deficiency in ego experience. The search, even though it serves to split the bad experience from the subject’s cognitive knowledge, is nonetheless a semiological act that signifies the person’s search for a particular object relation that is associated with ego transformation and repair of the ‘basic fault’. (Bollas, 1987, p. 18)

In line with Bollas’s thinking, cyberspace provides more radical opportunities to find that perfect object, the object that resonates with the good aspects of oneself and that allows one to disregard the ‘bad’ objects that perhaps the offline lover is more inclined to bring to one’s attention. Also, given the potential anonymous nature of the Internet, one is less likely to be caught out engaging in online infidelities. Hence, as argued earlier, cyberspace does in
many ways provide one with *a safer place* to play at love. Moreover, as Cooper (1998) contends, three factors that make the Internet such a powerful medium for online sexual activities, include ‘access’, ‘affordability’ and ‘anonymity’. Taken together these aspects suggests that cyberspace is not only a different place for infidelities to be acted out but possibly a more attractive space to engage in such activities – in spite of that absence of ‘real’ physical sex.

In conclusion, we believe that despite the lack of real bodies in cyberspace, online affairs can have a real impact on the offline relationship. We have raised the notion here that, given the nature of cyberspace, individuals might be more easily able to rationalise their online betrayals, however, this does not necessarily make the betrayal any less severe. Moreover, online relationships have a certain seductive appeal which in some ways could be potentially more damaging to an offline relationship than an offline affair. Drawing from Klein’s work we have made the claim here that splitting is easier with an online affair compared to an offline affair, where the object of one’s affections in face-to face encounters are more real are apparent.

**References**


