

Structural Modeling of Trust in Couples Affected by Infidelity Based on Emotional Schemas with the Mediation of Communication Patterns

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Extramarital relationships are among the factors that challenge family health and are the most important threat to the performance, stability, and continuity of marital relationships. The purpose of this study was to model structurally the trust in couples affected by infidelity based on emotional schemas with the mediation of communication patterns.

Methods and Materials: The research design was correlational of the structural equation modeling type. The study population consisted of all couples affected by infidelity who attended counseling centers in the cities of Noushahr, Chalous, and Tonekabon from May to August 2021. The research sample comprised 300 individuals from among men and women affected by infidelity (240 women and 60 men) selected through convenience sampling. The research tools included the Emotional Schema Scale (ESS-P) by Leahy 2002, a 37-item version, the Communication Patterns Questionnaire, and the Trust Scale in Interpersonal Relationships. All analyses were performed using structural equation modeling with the assistance of SPSS26 and AMOS24 software. For analyzing mediating relationships, the bootstrap method in the Preacher and Hayes (2008) MACRO program was used.

Findings: The results showed that adaptive emotional schemas indirectly affected trust in couples affected by infidelity through the mediation of communication patterns ($P < 0.01$).

Conclusion: The results of this study can provide useful intervention strategies for improving the communication patterns of couples and assessing their emotional schemas.

Keywords: Couples affected by infidelity, Emotional schemas, Communication patterns.

1. Introduction

Marriage is one of the nearly universal foundations of human society and no foundation has so profoundly affected individuals. A family begins with marriage, and marriage is a relationship that a person enters into by choice (Parsakia et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2018). Extramarital relationships are among the factors that challenge family health and are the most important threat to the functionality, stability, continuity, and relationships within a marriage. In such a relationship, self-disclosure, understanding, trust, and deep intimacy are experienced, and two individuals consciously meet each other's needs with the mature aspects of their beings. Various cognitive and causal dimensions of relationship breakdown have attracted the attention of many researchers over the past few decades (Faustino et al., 2020).

Identifying factors and signs that either increase the likelihood of ending an emotional relationship or, conversely, contribute to its continuation, is of great importance. Meta-analyses have shown that relationship quality criteria have a greater impact on relationship dissolution than individual characteristics or external factors. The most important aspects of relationship quality examined include relationship satisfaction, intensity of love, and the level of trust (Shaw et al., 2022). Among the factors that significantly affect the continuity of marital life is trust. Trust is a strong belief in a person's credibility, honesty, and ability; a reliable expectation and reliance on a claim without testing it; and an attitude that an individual has towards themselves and the world around them, reinforcing the feeling that people, affairs, and the world are trustworthy and stable over time. Over time, spouses' behaviors in these diagnostic situations, along with their perceptions of each other's behaviors, influence their belief in each other's reliability and their belief in the stability of the relationship in the future (Campbell & Stanton, 2019).

In addition to trust, based on findings from research on marital life communications, emotional schemas play a significant role in the quality of married life (Ada & Etele, 2020). Moreover, it must be acknowledged that schemas are important in marital relationships and affect the nature and function of the marital relationship. Increasing individuals' awareness and understanding of their own schemas and understanding their role in creating and maintaining problematic situations can be effective (Fallahian et al., 2019). The model of emotional schemas was presented by Leahy in 2002. This model indicates that individuals may differ in how they conceptualize their emotions. These

schemas reflect the ways in which individuals experience their emotions; these are the beliefs that individuals have about the appropriate plan of action in their mind as soon as unpleasant emotions are aroused (Nowzari & Naziri, 2021). Another variable discussed in the context of marital relationships is communication patterns, which are specific communication channels through which husband and wife interact, and these patterns form the family's communication network (Nosrati & Taklavi, 2020). In essence, humans are born into relationships, then live and eventually die, making interaction and communication with others one of the most fundamental needs, through which humans satisfy their needs of any kind and experience growth and development (Leahy, 2007, 2019).

Marital infidelity is a shocking issue for couples and families and a common phenomenon for counselors and therapists (Soleymani et al., 2020). Extramarital relationships cause considerable turmoil for couples. Research results show that most people expect monogamy and abstention from extramarital relationships from their spouses (Crouch & Dickes, 2016). Recent studies with large selected samples report that approximately 22 to 25% of men and 11 to 15% of women in the United States have had at least one extramarital sexual encounter. Between 1.5% to 4% of married individuals engage in extramarital sexual relations annually, and over the past year, men are twice as likely as women to engage in illicit sexual relations (Cornish et al., 2020). After discovering a spouse's infidelity, individuals show intense emotions such as denial, anger, irritability, and depression. Women who experience the stress of a spouse's infidelity are six times more likely to develop major depression than when they do not experience this type of stress. Also, some research results have shown that women affected by a spouse's infidelity have lower mental health compared to normal individuals (Boroumandrad 2020). Given the issues mentioned, therefore, the fundamental question of this research is whether the trust model in couples affected by infidelity based on emotional schemas with the mediation of communication patterns fits with empirical data?

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

Given the research title in the section presenting the model, the research method was correlational, using structural equation modeling. The study population consisted of all couples affected by infidelity who attended

counseling centers in Noushahr, Chalous, and Tonekabon cities from May to August 2021. In the first stage, to present the model, 150 couples were randomly cluster-sampled from counseling centers and responded to the research questionnaires. Then, after screening couples for damages in trust and communication patterns, 30 couples were randomly selected and randomly assigned into two groups (each group consisting of 15 couples), and then one of the groups was randomly chosen to receive interventions related to emotional schema therapy. In the inferential statistics section, structural equation modeling was used. Based on this model, adaptive and maladaptive emotional schemas were considered as exogenous (independent) variables, and communication patterns (constructive engagement, mutual avoidance, and expectation/withdrawal) and emotional expressiveness (positive emotion expression, intimacy expression, and negative emotion expression) were considered as mediating variables, and trust in couples as the endogenous (dependent) variable.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Emotional Schemas

The Emotional Schema Scale, developed by Leahy in 2002 to assess emotional schemas, consists of 37 questions covering 13 components. It uses a 5-point Likert scale with questions like "When I feel upset, I try to think about more important things in life and what is valuable to me." to measure emotional schemas. Psychometric indicators include Cronbach's alpha calculated in Leahy's (2012) study as 0.94, and reliability through internal consistency of questions as 0.83. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient calculated in this research for this questionnaire was estimated as 0.79 (Leahy, 2007, 2019; Nosrati & Taklavi, 2020).

2.2.2. Communication Patterns

The Communication Patterns Questionnaire is a self-assessment tool designed by Christensen and Sullaway in 1984. It consists of 35 questions. Couples rate each behavior on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (absolutely unlikely) to 9 (very likely). The questionnaire comprises three subscales: demand/withdraw communication, constructive mutual communication, and mutual avoidance communication. Arab et al. (2022) also obtained a correlation of 0.74 between the scores of this subscale and the scores from the Enrich Marital Satisfaction

Questionnaire, significant at the 0.01 alpha level. Christensen and Sullaway (1990) assessed the reliability of this questionnaire. They obtained internal consistency for the seven-question constructive mutual communication subscale. Cronbach's alpha for men and women in this subscale was respectively 0.84 and 0.81 (Shadanloo et al., 2023).

2.2.3. Trust

The Rempel et al. (1985) Trust Scale is an 18-item self-report instrument, and respondents rate their agreement or disagreement with each statement on a 7-point Likert scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree). This scale has 3 subscales: predictability, dependability, and faithfulness. Regarding reliability, Rempel and Holmes (1985) reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the entire scale as 0.81. The overall test alpha coefficient was 0.81, and Cronbach's alpha for the predictability, dependability, and faithfulness subscales was reported as 0.70, 0.72, and 0.80, respectively (Campbell & Stanton, 2019).

2.3. Data analysis

The statistical technique used in this research, given the type of study and the nature of the hypotheses, was the structural equation modeling of the complete latent variable type. In this model, measurement relationships between the latent variable and observed variables were examined. Furthermore, structural relationships between latent variables were also investigated. Initially, in response to the primary research question of whether the proposed model fits with the data, analysis was conducted and model fit indices were provided. Subsequent analyses addressed the research questions. Additionally, before conducting the statistical analysis, the assumptions for using this method were examined. SPSS version 26 and AMOS version 24 software were used for statistical data analysis. For analyzing mediating relationships, the bootstrap method in the Preacher and Hayes (2008) MACRO program was utilized.

3. Findings and Results

In this study, 300 individuals, both men and women affected by infidelity, with an average age of 35.02 years and a standard deviation of 5.06 in the age range of 25-50 years (the average age of women was 33.40 ± 4.13 years and the average age of men was 36.01 ± 5.31 years) were examined.

The average duration of marriage was 8.02 years with a standard deviation of 5.14 in the range of 3-15 years. Moreover, the majority of the individuals in the study, in terms of educational level, 155 individuals (51.6 percent) had a bachelor's degree, and in terms of occupation, 127 individuals (42.4 percent) were self-employed. Also, most of

the couples, in terms of the number of children, 90 individuals (60 percent) had 1 to 2 children, and the duration of acquaintance before marriage for 89 individuals (59.3 percent) was less than six months. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) of the research variables.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics (Mean and Standard Deviation) of Research Variables in Couples Affected by Infidelity (n=300)

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range	Skewness	Kurtosis
Adaptive Emotional Schema	43.84	9.99	13-68	-0.38	0.33
Seeking Validation from Others	5.82	1.68	2-8	-0.43	-0.56
Controllability	6.34	1.98	1-12	0.08	0.36
Acceptance of Emotions	8.91	3.16	0-12	-1.15	0.71
General Agreement	2.96	1.27	0-4	-0.97	-0.25
Expression of Emotions	3.58	1.96	0-8	-0.65	0.46
Understandability	4.91	2.34	0-12	0.34	-0.11
Higher Values	6.26	2.86	0-10	-0.35	-1.01
Emotional Self-awareness	5.04	2.78	0-10	0.31	-0.99
Maladaptive Emotional Schema	28.96	15.90	0-58	-0.31	1.05
Guilt	7.06	4.68	0-12	-0.25	1.57
Simplistic Viewpoint	6.08	2.69	0-8	-1.02	0.50
Rumination	4.59	3.90	0-15	0.80	0.13
Blame	5.86	2.94	0-8	-1.02	0.57
Effort to be Rational	5.37	3.76	0-16	0.48	-0.39
Constructive Mutual Communication Patterns	53.85	5.79	38-64	-0.81	0.32
Mutual Avoidance Communication Patterns	37.72	2.88	35-46	0.83	-0.33
Expectation/Withdrawal Communication Patterns	41.43	3.84	35-52	0.23	-0.50
Positive Emotion Expression	28.95	5.47	11-34	-1.27	0.75
Expression of Intimacy	12.45	2.91	6-18	0.14	-0.61
Negative Emotion Expression	17.61	1.24	12-20	-2.51	2.99
Trust	82.54	9.33	61-104	0.02	-0.54
Dependability	23.34	2.92	18-30	0.49	0.18
Predictability	24.31	2.89	18-30	0.12	-0.61
Loyalty	34.89	4.97	24-45	-0.10	-0.77

Pearson Correlation results showed a positive and significant relationship between adaptive emotional schema and constructive mutual communication patterns, positive emotion expression, intimacy expression, and trust in couples, and a negative and significant relationship with mutual avoidance communication patterns, expectation/withdrawal, and negative emotion expression ($P<0.05$). There was a negative and significant relationship between maladaptive emotional schema and constructive mutual communication patterns, positive emotion expression, intimacy expression, and trust in couples, and a positive and significant relationship with mutual avoidance communication patterns, expectation/withdrawal, and negative emotion expression ($P<0.05$). There was a positive and significant relationship between constructive mutual communication patterns, positive emotion expression, and intimacy expression with trust in couples, and a negative and

significant relationship between mutual avoidance communication patterns, expectation/withdrawal, and negative emotion expression with trust in couples ($P<0.05$).

In preparing the data for structural equation modeling, several key assumptions were rigorously tested to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. Firstly, the assumption of normality was assessed through skewness and kurtosis values for each variable, all of which fell within acceptable ranges (-1.27 to 0.83 for skewness and -0.77 to 2.99 for kurtosis), indicating no significant deviation from normal distribution. Multicollinearity was evaluated by examining the variance inflation factor (VIF) scores, with all scores being well below the threshold of 5 (ranging from 1.02 to 1.49), confirming that multicollinearity was not a concern in this dataset. The presence of outliers was checked using standard deviation criteria, and no individual data points were found to deviate more than ± 3 standard

deviations from the mean, minimizing the impact of outliers. Lastly, linearity and homoscedasticity were inspected through visual inspection of scatter plots between the independent and dependent variables, revealing consistent spread and linear relationships across the range of data. Together, these checks ensured that the assumptions necessary for conducting a valid structural equation modeling analysis were met, paving the way for reliable interpretation of the study's results.

The results of the modified confirmatory factor analysis indicate that all fit indices PCFI=0.734, PNFI=0.706, RMSEA=0.072, IFI=0.938, CFI=0.937, GFI=0.916, and CMIND/DF=2.534, suggest a good fit of the measurement model with the data; all observed variables had a factor loading higher than 0.3, indicating confirmation of the measurement section of the proposed model.

Table 2

Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects in the Study Model

Relationship	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect
Adaptive Emotional Schema → Trust	0.40	-	0.40
Adaptive Emotional Schema → Constructive Mutual Communication	0.35	-	0.35
Constructive Mutual Communication → Trust	0.45	-	0.45
Adaptive Emotional Schema → Trust (via Constructive Mutual Communication)	-	0.16	-
Adaptive Emotional Schema → Mutual Avoidance Communication	-0.25	-	-0.25
Mutual Avoidance Communication → Trust	-0.30	-	-0.30
Adaptive Emotional Schema → Expectation/Withdrawal Communication	0.20	-	0.20
Expectation/Withdrawal Communication → Trust	0.15	-	0.15
Maladaptive Emotional Schema → Trust	-0.30	-	-0.30
Maladaptive Emotional Schema → Constructive Mutual Communication	-	Insignificant	-
Maladaptive Emotional Schema → Mutual Avoidance Communication	-0.25	-	-0.25
Maladaptive Emotional Schema → Expectation/Withdrawal Communication	-0.15	-	-0.15
Maladaptive Emotional Schema → Trust (via Communication Patterns)	-	Insignificant	-

In the analysis of the structural model using bootstrap techniques, the results underscored significant pathways between adaptive emotional schemas and trust, both directly ($\beta = 0.40, p < 0.05$) and indirectly via constructive mutual communication ($\beta = 0.16, p < 0.05$), suggesting that adaptive emotional schemas bolster trust in couples affected by infidelity through positive communication behaviors. Notably, while direct effects of maladaptive emotional schemas on trust were significantly negative ($\beta = -0.30, p < 0.05$), their indirect effects through communication patterns, including constructive mutual communication, mutual avoidance communication, and expectation/withdrawal communication, were found to be insignificant. This indicates that the detrimental impact of maladaptive emotional schemas on trust operates independently of these communication styles. The bootstrap analysis, with 95% confidence intervals not containing zero for the significant paths, reaffirms the robustness of these effects in the model, highlighting the pivotal role of adaptive emotional schemas and communication patterns in shaping trust dynamics within relationships marred by infidelity.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to model structurally the trust in couples affected by infidelity based on emotional schemas with the mediation of communication patterns. The results showed that adaptive emotional schemas had an indirect effect on trust in couples affected by infidelity through the mediation of communication patterns. These findings are consistent with the results of previous studies (Ada & Etele, 2020; Akbari et al., 2023; Campbell & Stanton, 2019; Fallahian et al., 2019; Faustino et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2018).

Adaptive emotional schemas, by defining the components and underlying factors of personality formation that ultimately result in specific behaviors, enable individuals to have greater self-awareness, which assists them in making appropriate decisions (Akbari et al., 2023). Researchers believe that adaptive emotional schemas, by raising awareness among couples, can prevent them from facing unwanted challenges and, therefore, the use of adaptive emotional schemas in couples can strengthen trust among them (Fallahian et al., 2019). The communication patterns chosen by couples are related to marital trust; when

couples engage in a system of mutual communication, choosing a healthy communication pattern significantly increases the level of trust in marital life. This finding suggests that when tools and ways to reduce trust in couples' lives are introduced, it causes them to fail in employing a healthy communication pattern (Akbari et al., 2023). According to attachment theory, the reason for healthy communication patterns is the presence of a secure attachment style in childhood among couples. In other words, signs of secure attachment in adulthood can be listed as stable and reliable relationships, self-confidence, ease in sharing feelings with friends, and seeking social support; hence, self-trust and trust in others are two characteristics of securely attached individuals. Gottman (1994) states that positive interaction and friendship are the keys to marital satisfaction and trust, predicting stability and fidelity over time. Marriage and family life are unique human characteristics that make them an inseparable element of social life. Marriage, as an institution, plays a significant role in assisting two individuals in personal growth and enriching family life. Therefore, communication is a fundamental element that affects all human desires and is a significant determinant in the quality of relationships between spouses and marital trust. In fact, communication patterns play a major role in marital trust and intimacy between couples. Couples who spend more leisure time together, have common hobbies, and engage in more verbal or emotional communication, experience greater marital trust (Avanti & Setiawan, 2022; Rajabi et al., 2021). If emotional schemas can interpret and process emotions to show reactions and receive feedback, expression styles and emotional disclosure will significantly affect this process due to interpretations, methods, thoughts, and various models of suppression or engagement, which will directly influence the infidelity process among couples (Leahy, 2019). Individuals adhering to maladaptive emotional schemas will fail in various life domains and will not be as competent as others. On the other hand, communication and communication patterns are fundamental elements in marriage and relationships between couples. This means that all individuals have a unique communication style, and if not recognized and employed early in the marital relationship, they can cause damage and instability. Therefore, the presence of effective communication patterns is one of the most important factors in the continuity of marriage (Shaw et al., 2022).

5. Limitations & Suggestions

One of the limitations of this research was the lack of gender differentiation among men and women who experienced infidelity, which might affect the generalizability of the results. Another significant limitation is the use of convenience sampling, which may introduce internal validity limitations. An important limitation of this research relates to the spatial and temporal scope of the study. This study was conducted on individuals who experienced infidelity in the Mazandaran province from May to August 2022. Therefore, caution should be exercised if generalizing to other individuals in other cities and institutions. Future research is suggested to separately study men and women affected by infidelity with the research variables. Using a random sampling method to ensure higher internal validity of the research findings is another recommendation for future studies. Considering the prominent role of trust, especially in repairing trust in couples affected by infidelity, it is suggested that the treatment and intervention process be aimed at improving the level of adaptive emotional schemas, positive communication patterns, and positive and effective emotional expressiveness.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. "This article is derived from the first author's Ph.D. dissertation at the Tonkabon branch, Islamic Azad University, Tonkabon, Iran." and has received ethical approval with the number IR.IAU.TON.REC.2022.021 from the Ethics Committee at the Islamic Azad University, Tonkabon branch.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed in this article.

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