

Interactive Pathology of the Spousal Relationship Before and After Husbands' Infidelity

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ABSTRACT

The current research was conducted with the aim of examining the interactive pathology of the spousal relationship before and after the infidelity of husbands among affected women in Isfahan in the year it was carried out. The methodology of the present study was qualitative, employing thematic analysis. The population of this research consisted of women harmed by their husbands' infidelity in the city of Isfahan. For sample selection, purposive sampling was used, and ten women affected by their husbands' infidelity were chosen. The instrument of this research included semi-structured interviews, the questions of which were prepared based on the information obtained from the review of texts and sources to identify the interactive damages in the spousal relationship. The interviewing process with participants continued until thematic saturation was achieved. For data analysis, qualitative analysis was performed using thematic analysis method (Clarke & Braun, 2006). The findings of the research indicated that the interactive damages of spouses before and after infidelity encompass twenty-one main categories, which are situated in four domains: intrapersonal damages, interpersonal damages, extra-personal damages, and specific extra-personal damages. Given these results, it can be said that prior to infidelity, damages facilitate the prerequisites for betrayal, and afterwards, they lead to the weakening of the marital relationship.

Keywords: Interactive pathology of the spousal relationship, Infidelity, Affected women

1. Introduction

Infidelity, a complex and multifaceted issue, has profound implications on relationships, mental health, and societal norms. The exploration of its psychological dimensions reveals a tangled web of emotional, cultural, and interpersonal factors that challenge conventional understandings of marital fidelity and betrayal. Grounded in a diverse array of scholarly perspectives, this article delves

into the intricacies of infidelity, scrutinizing its causes, consequences, and the psychological mechanisms at play.

The interplay between culture and human rights offers a foundational context for understanding the multifaceted nature of infidelity (Ebrahimi et al., 2023). Cultural norms and values significantly influence perceptions of fidelity, shaping the moral and ethical frameworks within which infidelity is interpreted. This backdrop is crucial for

examining the cognitive dissonance experienced by perpetrators of infidelity, as highlighted by Alexopoulos (2021), which underscores the psychological conflict arising from violating personal and societal expectations (Alexopoulos, 2021).

The prevalence and impact of intimate partner violence in contexts like Pakistan, as discussed by Ali, Naylor, Croot, and O’Cathain (2014), further complicate the narrative around infidelity, linking it to broader issues of gender dynamics and power imbalances (Ali et al., 2014). Similarly, Allen and Atkins (2012) shed light on the association between divorce, extramarital sex, and the societal fabric of the U.S., revealing the complex interconnections between personal actions and social outcomes (Allen & Atkins, 2012).

Research on HIV risk among married couples in Malawi by Anglewicz et al. (2008) and the study on attitudes towards infidelity and its correlation with mental health issues by Anwar (2022) contribute to a nuanced understanding of the health and psychological ramifications of infidelity (Anglewicz et al., 2008; Anwar, 2022). These studies, together with investigations into forgiveness and recovery processes (Chi et al., 2019), the constructions of infidelity (Clarke et al., 2014), and the economic repercussions of marital betrayal (Crouch & Dickes, 2016), provide a comprehensive overview of the diverse aspects of infidelity.

This article aims to synthesize these findings, presenting a coherent narrative that navigates the delicate balance between individual behaviors, psychological responses, and the broader societal context. By weaving together insights from various disciplines, it seeks to offer a multidimensional perspective on infidelity, illuminating the complexities of human relationships and the enduring quest for understanding and healing in the aftermath of betrayal.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

Considering that the subject of this research was the examination of interactive damages in couples before and after infidelity in Isfahan, this study was qualitative in nature and employed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research field and participation in the current study comprised all women in the city of Isfahan in 2021 who had experienced infidelity from their husbands at some point in their married life. Entry criteria for the study included women who were harmed by their husband's infidelity, still living with their spouse, willing to participate in the study,

and also capable of providing the required information. The selection of research participants was purposive and homogeneous among women affected by spousal infidelity who had visited counseling centers in Isfahan during May and June of 2021. The homogeneous method aims for a detailed and deep examination of individuals with significant common characteristics, focusing on the selection of individuals within a subculture (women harmed by infidelity).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Since this research was conducted using a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were utilized for data collection. The interview questions were prepared based on the experiences of family experts in the field of infidelity regarding interactive damages. These questions generally evaluated the individual's interactions and the nature of their communications throughout different stages of married life and its various dimensions. On average, 40 questions were asked, but depending on the participant and their responses, some questions were omitted or added. Data collection continued until data saturation was achieved, at which point the number of participants reached ten. The in-depth interviews, with open-ended questions, took place in a quiet environment, lasting an average of four hours. All interviews were recorded on an audio device with the participants' permission and then transcribed verbatim. The reliability and validity of the extracted findings were achieved by revisiting the participants, presenting comprehensive descriptions, and making necessary adjustments as needed. Ethical considerations of this research included obtaining informed consent from participants, anonymizing interviewees, faithfully transferring interview texts from recording to transcription, ensuring confidentiality and privacy of information, and preserving the right to withdraw at any stage of the research.

2.3. Data analysis

For data analysis and to address the research question "What are the interactive damages in women before and after their husbands' infidelity?", the six-phase method by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used, given the research method was thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3. Findings and Results

Participants in the study included ten women harmed by their husband's infidelity, with an age range of 23 to 50 years. Among the participants, four were employed and six were homemakers. Educational backgrounds included one with a master's degree, three with bachelor's degrees, one with an associate degree, four with high school diplomas, and one with middle school education. Among the interviewees, one had been exposed to her husband's infidelity for thirteen years, one for ten years, two for five

years, two for four years, three for two years, and one for one year.

Ultimately, regarding the damages after infidelity, 451 conceptual codes and 21 organizing categories were extracted, which were placed into four overarching themes. Additionally, 208 conceptual codes and 21 organizing categories from the damages before infidelity were extracted, which were also summarized into four overarching categories. Table 1 shows the extracted codes and the sub-categories of each domain.

Table 1

Concepts Extracted from Interview Analysis with Participants in the Research Before and After Husband's Infidelity

Overarching Categories	Organizing Categories	Before Infidelity	After Infidelity
Intrapersonal Damages	Physical and Psychological Problems	✓	✓
	Substance Abuse	✓	✓
	Sexual Problems	✓	✓
	Communication Problems with Spouse	✓	✓
	Inappropriate Communication Patterns	✓	✓
	Issues Related to Household Management	✓	✓
	Emotional Problems	✓	✓
	Behavioral Problems with Spouse	✓	✓
	Incompatible Interpersonal Thoughts and Beliefs	✓	✓
	Annoying Habits and Traits	✓	✓
	Pre-marital Issues	✓	✓
	Differences in Personality Traits of Spouses	✓	✓
	Religious Differences	✓	✓
	Issues Related to Childbearing	✓	✓
	Infidelity	✓	✓
Dependency on Others	✓	✓	
Interpersonal Damages	Leisure Time Problems	✓	✓
	Cultural Differences	✓	✓
	Economic and Occupational Problems	✓	✓
	Issues Related to Paternal Family, Relatives, and Friends	✓	✓
Extra-Personal Damages	Stressful Situations		✓
Specific Extra-Personal Damages	Problems Related to Appearance		✓
	Problems Related to Children		✓

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine the interactive pathology of spousal relationships before and after husbands' infidelity among affected women in Isfahan. The findings revealed that the interactive damages encompass twenty-one main categories situated in four domains: intrapersonal damages, interpersonal damages, extra-personal damages, and specific extra-personal damages, highlighting the extensive impact of infidelity on affected spouses.

The conceptual map presented in this study includes four main concepts and twenty-one sub-concepts related to identifying the interactive damages in couples' relationships before and after the husband's infidelity. The most significant issues reported by women affected by their husbands' infidelity in this study were interpersonal damages, with communication problems with the spouse being the most damaging in this area.

In the category of extrapersonal damages, economic and occupational issues were given the highest priority. Occupational factors covered unemployment, bankruptcy, job instability, poor working conditions, workload, fatigue

resulting from it, job stress, job laziness, and the wife's occupation. The findings of this study are consistent with other studies.

In the category of intrapersonal damages, sexual problems were given the highest priority. In this study, sexual problems before and after infidelity included: lack of desirable emotional relationships before and after sexual intercourse; sexual harassment by the husband due to unconventional marital relations; premature or delayed ejaculation in men; women's frigidity; men's sexual dysfunction; having monotonous and dull sexual relations; disputes over the frequency of sexual intercourse.

In the category of extrapersonal damages specific to after infidelity, there were issues related to children, which covered 10 codes and included children's academic, behavioral, and ethical problems (7 cases), mental illness (obsessive-compulsive disorder in a child) (one case), children's conflicts with mother and father (one case), and the father siding with the child against the mother (one case).

In the category of extrapersonal damages specific to after infidelity, there were stressful incidents that in the current study included situations associated with acute psychological stress, such as severe financial failures, the birth of an unwanted child, acute illness of relatives, death of a parent, and migration due to employment.

Overall, in the current study, intrapersonal damages refer to damages influenced by personality traits, psychological problems, and the physical structure and function of one or both spouses. The interpersonal factor refers to damages that occur in the relationship between spouses. The extrapersonal factor refers to damages caused by environmental factors and external to the couple's relationship, but directly or indirectly affecting their relationship. The specific extrapersonal factor refers to extrapersonal damages that affect specific individuals or families.

These results, in light of the extensive literature on marital infidelity, underscores the multifaceted nature of infidelity and its profound impact on individuals and relationships. Shackelford et al. (2000) and Osuchukwu et al. (2023) highlight the emotional turmoil and health risks associated with infidelity, respectively, while Hall & Fincham (2009) and Roos et al. (2019) focus on the psychological distress and health effects experienced by individuals (Hall & Fincham, 2009; Osuchukwu et al., 2023; Roos et al., 2019; Shackelford et al., 2000). The role of attachment insecurity (Russell et al., 2013) and the link between infidelity and intimate partner violence (Conroy,

2014) further elucidate the complex dynamics at play in relationships affected by infidelity.

Furthermore, research has examined the impact of divorce and extramarital affairs on marital relationships (Allen & Atkins, 2012), as well as the post-traumatic stress and psychological health effects of infidelity in unmarried young adults (Roos et al., 2019). Studies have also looked into phenomena like delusional jealousy in elderly patients with dementia Hashimoto et al. (2015) and decision-making strategies in response to different types of infidelity (Schützwohl, 2004).

Cognitive dissonance reduction among perpetrators of infidelity has been studied (Alexopoulos, 2021), along with sex differences in jealousy and the evolutionary perspective on online infidelity (Guadagno & Sagarin, 2010). Additionally, research has focused on the knowledge spouses have about each other's HIV risk in the context of infidelity (Anglewicz et al., 2008) and the consequences of suspecting a partner's infidelity (Weigel & Shrout, 2020).

Moreover, studies have investigated the mediating role of sociosexual orientation in the association between relationship quality and infidelity intentions (Urganci et al., 2021), as well as perceptions of infidelity in same-sex and different-sex relationships (Chi et al., 2019). The economic repercussions of marital infidelity have been explored (Crouch & Dickes, 2016), along with the prevalence of sexual infidelity among married individuals in China (Luo & Yu, 2022). Additionally, research has explored the relationship between attitude towards infidelity, emotion regulation, and mental health issues among married individuals (Anwar, 2022).

Our study contributes to this body of knowledge by providing insights into the interactive damages experienced by spouses before and after infidelity, emphasizing the need for comprehensive approaches to address the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and extra-personal damages identified. By integrating findings from diverse disciplines, our research underscores the importance of considering the broader socio-cultural and psychological contexts in understanding and addressing the consequences of infidelity. Moreover, these findings underscore the complex aftermath of infidelity, requiring multifaceted therapeutic approaches to address the comprehensive needs of those affected. The study highlights the importance of considering the individual's emotional well-being, the couple's relationship dynamics, and broader societal influences when addressing the consequences of infidelity.

One limitation of this study is its focus on a specific demographic and geographic location, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data might introduce bias, as participants may underreport or overreport their experiences due to social desirability or recall bias.

Future research should aim to include a more diverse sample to explore the universality or variability of these findings across different cultures and populations. Longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into the long-term effects of infidelity and the recovery process. Investigating the perspectives of the partners who committed infidelity would also add depth to the understanding of these dynamics.

For practitioners, these findings highlight the importance of a holistic approach to therapy that addresses the wide range of damages caused by infidelity. Interventions should be tailored to address not only the emotional and psychological impact on the individual but also the relational and societal dimensions of infidelity. Encouraging open communication, rebuilding trust, and fostering forgiveness could be pivotal in the healing process for couples navigating the aftermath of infidelity.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

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Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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