

## Investigating the relationship between burnout, internalized shame and metacognitive beliefs on emotion regulation in women affected by marital infidelity

Tayebeh. Jafari<sup>1\*</sup>, Maryam. Zarei<sup>2</sup>, Mandana. Nazari Shahraki<sup>3</sup>, Omid. Amani<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> PhD student in psychology, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Humanities, Najaf Abad Branch, Azad University, Isfahan, Iran

<sup>2</sup> Master of General psychology, Islamshahr Branch, Payam Noor University, Tehran, Iran

<sup>3</sup> Master of General Psychology, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

<sup>4</sup> PhD in Clinical Psychology, Department of Psychology, Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran

\* Corresponding author email address: jafari6311@gmail.com

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This research investigated the relationship between boredom, internalized shame, and metacognitive beliefs on emotion regulation in women affected by marital infidelity.

**Method:** The research method was descriptive and correlational. The statistical population included all betrayed women in Tehran province in 2022; 242 were selected by snowball sampling method. Cook's (1988) Internalized Shame Scale (ISS), Garnefski, Kraaij & Spinhoven's (2001) Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ), Cartwright-Hatton, Wells' Meta-Cognitions Questionnaire (MCQ) and Pines' (1996) Couple Burnout Measure (CBM) were used to collect information. The data were analyzed with SMART-PLS and SPSS-22 software using SEM method.

**Results:** The findings showed a significant relationship between internalized shame, metacognitive belief, and fear with emotion regulation. The results show that betrayed women express their positive emotions less and express positive emotions less often.

**Conclusion:** Various factors are involved in controlling these women's feelings and emotions, which requires more consideration in examining these factors to help this vulnerable group.

**Keywords:** Burnout, internalized shame, metacognitive belief, emotion regulation, women affected by betrayal.

## 1 Introduction

Extramarital affairs, or in other words, marital infidelity, is not only one of the most hurtful issues

faced by couples but also one of the most resistant issues to treatment (Atkins et al., 2010). Marital intimacy and the lifestyle can play an important role in predicting attitudes toward marital infidelity. *Marital Infidelity* or breach of

marital covenant can be considered a hidden sexual or emotional relationship outside the family framework (Johnson, 2014). A survey shows that at least 45% of men and 26% of women are interested in extramarital relationships (Ignat, 2018). The research conducted in Iran shows that 30% of family murders related to women are due to infidelity or illicit relationships by men. On the other hand, 22% of men were killed by women, and in 40% of cases, these murders were committed (Khayat, Attari, & Koraei, 2018).

Disloyalty and betrayal have a harmful and harmful nature due to going out of the normal condition (Eltiaminia, 2020). One of the injuries caused by marital infidelity among couples, including women, is marital heartbreak (Sadeghi, Moheb, & Alivandi Vafa, 2021). Overtime and through the revelation of relationship problems, love and affection between couples decrease, and losing the magic of love and affection causes a decline in marital satisfaction (An et al., 2019). *Burnout* affects marital relationships and adversely affects social and professional relationships (Abbasi & Rostami, 2019).

Pines was the first to introduce *marital burnout* (MB) and published the first relative article in the mid-1970s (Pines, 2013). This factor is a combination of fatigue and exhaustion in the mental, emotional and physical aspects of married life, which manifests itself in the physical dimension with an increase in physical and sexual fatigue, and in the mental and emotional dimension with a decrease in self-confidence, disillusionment, and depression (Pines et al., 2011). In fact, heartbreak occurs due to a mismatch between expectations and current reality, as well as unreasonable expectations from the spouse and married life (Jafari et al., 2021). According to the mentioned features about marital burnout, it can be recognized that there is a direct relationship between *internalized shame* (IS) and burnout and they affect each other. Shame is a complex emotion as a person feels that his behaviors are evaluated negatively, attacked and rejected by others. Increased IS, a subcomponent of IS, is associated with the increased emotional experience of negative self-evaluation and is linked to self-related cognition and affect (Barta & Kiropoulos, 2023). In particular, the shame system is recognized as a transdiagnostic emotion related to psychological conditions (Ferreira et al., 2022). In IS, a person negatively focuses on his weaknesses and faults by evaluating his traits, emotions, and behavior (Barta & Kiropoulos, 2023).

Shame is also associated with poor physical health outcomes. For example, experiences of shame have shown

physiological consequences through increased inflammatory activities and cortisol responses (Johnson, 2020). Among the components that play an important role in marital infidelity are cognitive and metacognitive functions (Karbasion et al., 2020). *Metacognition* is a high-level cognitive structure that controls, organizes, and evaluates cognitions. It involves awareness of the person's cognition and cognitive processes, estimating, monitoring, and organizing cognitions (Balıkcı et al., 2020). Beliefs that people have about their cognitive systems and coping ways are called *metacognitive beliefs* (MCB) (Mansueto et al., 2019). An important point that can be considered positive or negative is that metacognition has been identified with worry, rumination, threat monitoring, and emotional avoidance (Kannis-Dymand et al., 2020).

It is thought that there are two types of MCB: positive MCB that increase focus and self-control and avoidant coping (for example, worrying helps me cope). On the other hand, negative MCB emphasize the uncontrollability and dangerousness of thoughts (for example: if I cannot control my thoughts, I cannot do anything). This negative internal experience causes problems and is considered uncomfortable (Clauss et al., 2020).

When people face emotional situations, they need to use their best cognitive function to regulate their emotions and try to control them (Nejati et al., 2017). *Emotion regulation* (ER) refers to the activities in which people can engage with how they feel, when they feel those emotions, and how to express them (Roth, Vansteenkiste, & Ryan, 2019). ER is a social-emotional skill that provides flexibility in exciting situations. Developmental changes in managing emotional responses are evident (Young, Sandman, & Craske, 2019). The ER model that describes ER as a multi-component process and the dynamic process between the individual and its concept is the most influential and widely known (Cai et al., 2018). In this regard, Ghobadi et al. (2021) conducted a study to create a causal model of marital burnout based on the degree of differentiation and resilience through the emotional self-regulation of couples. Marital burnout and its components, including resilience and emotional self-regulation, play an important role in the emotional level of the family (Ghobadi et al., 2021).

The family is the most important unit of society and marriage is the primary core of establishing and expanding the family relationship (Aghili, Shakoobi, & Asghari, 2021). Women, like the pillars of a house, play an important role in the family, and their lack of mental health causes serious damage to the family and society. Therefore, there is a need to conduct research that deals with women's psychological

issues. It is felt more than before, and according to the topics raised in the research background, it can be found that until now, no study has been conducted to investigate the relationship between burnout, IS, cognitive beliefs, and ER and has been published in the domestic scientific environment. Therefore, considering the lack of research on women's psychological issues, the present research studies the relationship between infatuation, IS, MCB, and ER in women affected by marital infidelity.

## 2 Methods

### 2.1 Study design and Participant

The current research was descriptive and correlational. The statistical population is all women affected by betrayal in Tehran. Due to the taboo issue of marital infidelity, it was impossible to accurately determine the statistical population of the present study in 2022. To carry out the research, due to the non-cooperation of the people involved in these relationships, a sample of 242 people with marital infidelity was selected by snowball sampling method. The sampling method was that volunteer participants suggested other people for the study. The inclusion criteria included the diagnosis of marital infidelity based on the confession of the people themselves or the witnessing of their close people and the willingness of the participants to participate in the study for at least six months of their life together. The researcher tried to achieve the minimum required sample by distributing a more significant number of questionnaires, so 242 questionnaires were distributed and collected.

### 2.2 Measurements

The data were collected using *Cook's (1988) Internalized Shame Scale (ISS)*, *Garnefski, Kraaij & Spinhoven's (2001) Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ)*, *Cartwright-Hatton, Wells' Meta-Cognitions Questionnaire (MCQ)* and *Pines' (1996) Couple Burnout Measure (CBM)*.

#### 2.2.1 Internalized Shame

ISS was prepared by Cook in 1993, which includes 13 items and two subscales of shyness and self-esteem. The response to each item of this scale is in the form of a 5-point Likert scale (never = 3, very little = 3, sometimes = 2, often = 1, always = 4). High scores in this scale indicate worthlessness, incompetence, feelings of inferiority, emptiness and loneliness. A low score indicates high self-confidence. Cook (1993) obtained Cronbach's alpha

reliability coefficient of shyness and self-esteem subscales of internalized shame scale of 94.3 and 93.3, respectively (Cook, 1987).

#### 2.2.2 Emotion Regulation

CERQ was developed by Garnefski et al. (2001) in the Netherlands and has two English and Dutch versions. This questionnaire evaluates a person's thoughts after facing a negative experience or traumatic events. This questionnaire is a self-report tool and has 36 items and can be used for people 12 years old and above. The cognitive regulation of emotion has a solid empirical and theoretical basis, and out of 9 subscales, the mentioned subscales are: cognitive strategy of self-blame, acceptance, rumination, positive refocusing, refocusing, re-evaluation of a non-positive plan, underestimating, catastrophizing. And other blame is the range of scale scores from (1 almost always to 5 almost never). Each subscale of the item contains 4 scores. The total of each subscale of the item is obtained by adding up the scores. Therefore, the range of scores of each scale will be between 20 and 4. High scores in each subscale indicate the greater use of the mentioned strategy in dealing with stressful and negative events (Garnefski, Kraaij, & Spinhoven, 2001).

#### 2.2.3 Metacognitive beliefs

MCQ is a 54-item self-report scale, developed by Cartwright-Hatton and Wells in 1997, measures people's beliefs about their thinking. Answers are calculated based on a four-point Likert scale (1: disagree, 2: somewhat agree, 5: somewhat agree, 0: completely agree). The said questionnaire has 3 subscales. The creators of the questionnaire have reported the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the total scale and subscales from 4.95 to 4.70 and the retest reliability as 4.73 and for the subscales from 4.37 to 4.39. (Cartwright-Hatton & Wells, 1997).

#### 2.2.4 Burnout

CBM is created by Pines in 1996. This questionnaire has 20 items, which include 3 main components of physical fatigue (such as feeling tired, weak, and having sleep disorders), emotional exhaustion (feelings of depression, despair, being trapped) and psychological exhaustion (such as feelings of worthlessness, frustration, and anger). All these items are answered on a seven-point scale. The evaluation of the validity coefficient of marital burnout scale

showed that it has an internal consistency between the variables in the range of 0.84 and 0.90. Validity has been confirmed by negative correlations with positive relational characteristics such as: positive opinion about communication, quality of conversation, feeling of security, self-fulfillment, sense of purpose, pull and emotional attraction towards spouse and the quality of their sexual relationship. Translated versions of the CBM have been successfully used in cross-cultural studies in Norway, Hungary, Mexico, Spain, Portugal, Finland, and Israel. The test-retest reliability coefficient was 0.89 for a one-month period, 0.76 for a two-month period, and 0.66 for a four-month period. Internal consistency for most of the subjects was measured by constant alpha coefficient, which was between 0.91 and 0.93 (Pines, 2013).

### 2.3 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed with SMART-PLS and SPSS-22 software using SEM method.

## 3 Findings and Results

The mean±SD of participant's age was 35.15 ± 2.07 years. The descriptive indexes for burnout, internalized shame, MCB and emotion regulation are shown in Table 1. The results indicate that the mean of the burnout was 77.66, internalized shame was 65.48, MCB was 78.10, and emotion regulation was 35.65.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive findings*

| Variable | Mean  | SD    | Min | Max | Skewness | Kurtosis |
|----------|-------|-------|-----|-----|----------|----------|
| MB       | 77.76 | 11.68 | 41  | 116 | 0.100    | -0.222   |
| IS       | 65.48 | 26.31 | 26  | 120 | -0.048   | 1.325    |
| MCB      | 78.10 | 22.84 | 29  | 108 | -0.433   | 1.393    |
| ER       | 35.65 | 12.15 | 10  | 66  | 0.123    | -0.776   |

According to Table 2 below, the results indicate that the relationship between burnout and internalized shame with emotion regulation is negative and significant, and the relationship between MCB with emotion regulation is positive and significant.

**Table 2**

*The coefficients of correlations*

|     | MB       | IS       | MCB     | ER |
|-----|----------|----------|---------|----|
| MB  | 1        | 0.451    |         |    |
| IS  | 0.451**  | 1        |         |    |
| MCB | -0.507** | -0.899** | 1       |    |
| ER  | -0.149*  | -0.391   | 0.402** | 1  |

\*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01

A structural equation model (PLS software) has been used in order to simultaneously examine the relationships. The results of examining the hypotheses using the structural equation model are summarized in Figure 1 and Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Direct effects*

| Hypothesis | From | On | Sig.  | Regression coefficient | Result   |
|------------|------|----|-------|------------------------|----------|
| 1          | MB   | ER | 0.001 | -0.371                 | Approved |
| 2          | IS   | ER | 0.011 | -0.249                 | Approved |
| 3          | MCB  | ER | 0.038 | 0.208                  | Approved |

The investigation results of the first sub-hypothesis showed that the significance level was 0.01, and the significance number was 5.181 (Table 3). Therefore, H1 is confirmed. The coefficient of determination is 0.138, which shows that 13.8 per cent of the changes in the dependent variable are determined by the independent variable. The path coefficient of 0.542 indicates a negative and good influence. This means that with one unit increase in burnout style, emotion regulation should decrease by 0.371. The results of the investigation of the second sub-hypothesis showed that the significance level was 0.011, and the significance number was calculated as 2.553. Therefore, H1 is confirmed. The coefficient of determination is 0.062, which shows that the independent variable determines 6.2% of changes in the dependent variable. The coefficient of path - 0.249 indicates negative and significant effect. This means that with one unit increase in internalized shame, emotion regulation should decrease by 0.249. The results of the investigation of the second sub-hypothesis showed that the significance level was 0.038, and the significance number was 2.077. Therefore, H1 is confirmed. The coefficient of determination is 0.095, which shows that the independent variable determines 9.5% of changes in the dependent variable. The path coefficient of 0.208 indicates a positive and good influence. This means that with one unit increase in MCB, emotion regulation increases by 0.208. Construct validity (convergent and divergent validity) and Cronbach's alpha test, and composite reliability test are used to measure the reliability of research variables. The validity and

reliability results of the research variables are shown in Table 4:

**Table 4**

*Cronbach's Alpha, Combined Reliability and Validity tests*

| Variable | Alpha | Combined reliability | AVE   | Result   |
|----------|-------|----------------------|-------|----------|
| MCB      | 0.973 | 0.979                | 0.940 | Approved |
| ER       | 0.966 | 0.983                | 0.967 | Approved |
| MB       | 1     | 1                    | 1     | Approved |
| IS       | 1     | 1                    | 1     | Approved |

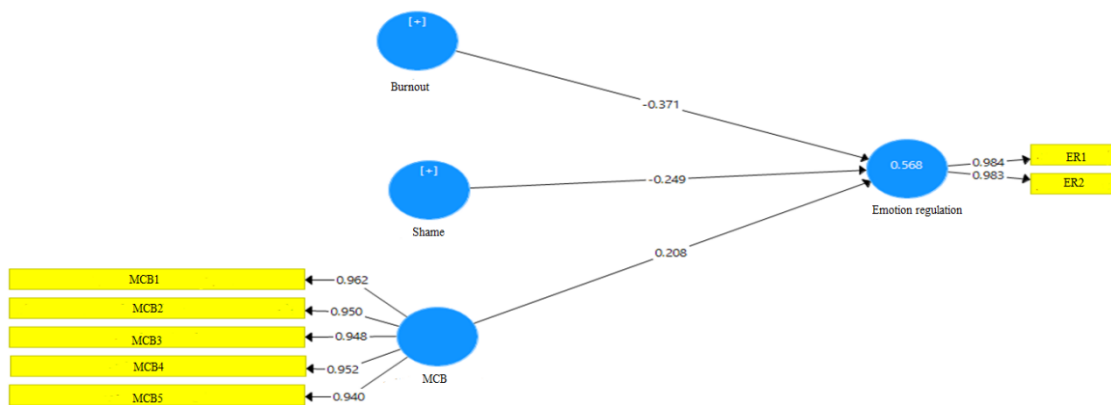
According to Table 4 it is clear that Cronbach's alpha of all constructs is higher than 0.70, which is the borderline value for accepting Cronbach's alpha, and it indicates the

appropriate reliability of the model. The combined reliability value for the appropriate fit of the model is above 0.7 for each structure, which according to the above table, this relationship is established for all structures. Convergent validity in this research, according to the above information, for all constructs has values above 0.5, which shows that the fit of the construct is favorable. However, the GOF value for this research model was calculated as 0.784. Considering that the obtained value is greater than 0.36. Therefore, the fit of the model is approved.

As it is shown in the Figure 2, at the 95% confidence level, the significant numbers are more than 1.96 so that the hypothesis is confirmed and, as a result, the significance of the effects of burnout, internalized shame and MCB on the emotion regulation of this variable is confirmed.

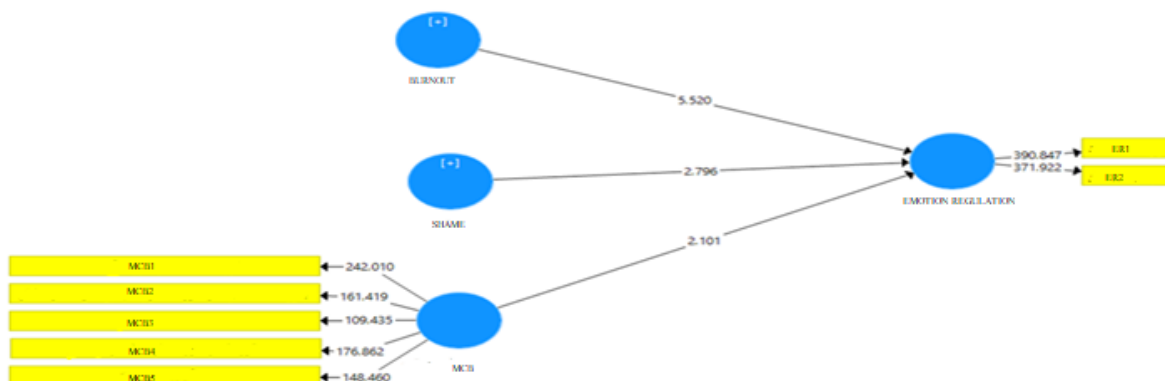
**Figure 1**

*Final model with direct effects*



**Figure 2**

*Final Model with t-values*



#### 4 Discussion and Conclusion

The present study was conducted to investigate the relationship between burnout, IS and MCB on ER in women affected by marital infidelity. The research results showed a

significant relationship between the three variables of disgust, IS, and MCB with the ER of women injured by infidelity. The results of this research were consistent with previous results (Fatolaahzadeh et al., 2017; Fazel Hamedani & Ghorban Jahromi, 2018; Ghim et al., 2015; Ghobadi et al., 2021; Hadian & Amini, 2019; Johnson, 2020; Johnson, 2014; Kargar, Davoodi, & Mozafari, 2019; Melo, Oliveira, & Ferreira, 2020; Trindade, Ferreira, & Pinto-Gouveia, 2020).

In explaining the role of burnout on the ER of women who have experienced betrayal, marital burnout leads to a decrease in marital quality and dissatisfaction with it, which increases the grounds for people's tendency to cheat. Marital burnout means a painful state of physical and emotional exhaustion. Therefore, there is a time when, due to the mismatch between expectations and reality and due to the accumulation of psychological pressures that weaken love, fatigue and monotony occur in the marital relationship, which ultimately leads to disrupting the relationship between the couple (Kargar, Davoodi, & Mozafari, 2019). Marital burnout is a painful state of mental exhaustion in which intimacy and love gradually fade, and love is a gradual process that rarely occurs suddenly, accompanied by a general feeling of fatigue (Aghili, Shakoori, & Asghari, 2021).

Betrayed women with emotional distress cannot control their emotions well in traumatic life situations and solve problems; this creates the ground for suffering from psychological disorders. Burnout is gradual and rarely happens suddenly. In fact, love and intimacy gradually fade and burnout begins. Marital burnout is a set of emotional, physical, and psychological fatigue symptoms significantly affecting couples' lives (Johnson, 2020). This phenomenon occurs when a couple realizes that their relationship cannot meet a series of basic needs, and the parties experience painful states of fatigue, monotony, depression, and a sense of failure in married life. Burnout is considered a state of mental, emotional and physical fatigue that occurs in a person in long-term conflict conditions, along with emotional demands.

One of the effective factors in the betrayal of this phenomenon are unfulfilled needs and deficiencies in empathic response and fatigue, all of which directly affect the reduction of marital satisfaction. ER is called regularization and regulation of emotional processes, so difficulty in regulation means irregular emotions. However, many betrayed women are willing to equate emotion dysregulation with a lack of control over emotional arousal

(Clauss et al., 2020). When these are adaptive, emotion dysregulation refers to deficits in the ability to experience, express, and use emotions. When people's emotions become dysregulated, they report feeling out of control. They are prone to do and say things that they would not normally do, and shame and guilt separate the spouses and damage their communication. In the experiences of shame, different aspects of the psyche conflict (Hadian & Amini, 2019). Susceptibility to shame arises from a discrepancy between self and self-ideal. Feelings of shame include feelings of inferiority, weakness, and the desire to hide defects, so these feelings can reduce satisfaction and, as a result, cheating on spouses.

All human beings experience emotions and feelings in their lives, and, naturally, they show different emotions and feelings when faced with various situations. However, extreme negative emotions and emotions are abnormal and not only unproductive. External shame promotes psychological distress that arises from unmet needs for social and desirable social spaces. Therefore, measuring IS alone may not capture its full impact (Trindade, Ferreira, & Pinto-Gouveia, 2020).

In explaining the role of MCB on ER in betrayed women, it can be acknowledged that MCB are effective factors in the ER of people. It improved the psychological vulnerability of betrayed women by changing metacognitions that address negative and maladaptive thinking patterns and general negative beliefs (Karbasion et al., 2020). Negative MCB of uncontrollability and danger may be common or universal predictors of anxiety and depression in women, but MCB specific to traumatic situations may also be important. Furthermore, the observed relationships are robust against controlling for a range of factors, including the influence of cognition. This is important when considering psychological interventions and suggests that interventions targeting MCB may be more beneficial than those targeting cognition. In other words, one's thoughts and cognitions can considerably manage and control one's emotions and feelings when faced with this traumatic situation. People who use weak cognitive strategies such as rumination, catastrophizing, and self-blame are more vulnerable to infidelity than others while people who use other strategies, like positive evaluation, are less vulnerable.

## 5 Limitations and Suggestions

In general, this research showed that betrayed women express their positive emotions less and express less positive

emotions. Moreover, various factors are involved in controlling their emotions and emotions, which requires more consideration in examining these factors to help this vulnerable group. One of the limitations of this research is that the number of samples could have been higher, and only a questionnaire was used to collect information, which can lead to limitations in generalizing the results. Caution should be observed in generalizing the results. However, it is hoped that this research can provide the basis for helping all couples, especially couples in crisis.

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## Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

## Ethics principles

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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