

Original Article

Explanation of Infidelity among Married Women in Tehran

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Abstract

Introduction: Considering the lack of knowledge in the field of infidelity and its consequences in the country and the insufficient familiarity with the expressions of infidelity behaviors, the present study aimed at investigating the phenomenological experience of infidelity in married women.

Methods: The present study used a qualitative method with a descriptive phenomenological approach. Population of the study included women engaged in infidelity visiting one of the consultation centers in the city of Tehran in the year 2017. Sampling of the population was carried out using the targeted snowball sampling method. Size of the sample was increased up to saturation point and, overall, 10 married women with the experience of infidelity were subjected to investigation. Semi-structured interview method was used to gather data and the data were analyzed through the Colaizzi's method.

Results: The results demonstrated that infidelity occurs due to several factors including deficiency needs, the perpetrators' psychological qualities, marital compatibility, consequences expected from infidelity, and etiology of starting infidelity.

Discussion: There are several factors involved in women's inclination to infidelity. Based on the findings of the present study, the practical proposition is to arrange therapy sessions and instructional manuals based on the concepts and axes extracted from the analysis of the interviews with people who have shared their phenomenological experience of infidelity with us.

Declaration of Interest: None.

Key words: Infidelity, Phenomenology, Married women.

Introduction

Popular culture promoted the casual sexual behavior. Not surprisingly, there is now a large scientific literature scattered across several disciplines on what is variously labeled, infidelity, extra-dyadic involvement, unfaithfulness, and affairs, stepping out, cheating, or some other synonym indicative of secret romantic activity with a secondary partner, while in an exclusive relationship such as marriage. This terminological diversity reflects diverse conceptualizations of the secret activity which can range from emotional involvement with another (online or in-person), through holding hands, cuddling,

kissing to penetrative vaginal and/or anal sex (1).

Infidelity is one of the most significant factors facing the health of families with a serious challenge nowadays; in other words, infidelity is the most important factor threatening the function, stability, and continuity of marital relationships (2). Infidelity refers to any type of sexual or emotional relationship beyond the limits of committed relations between a married couple (3); in other words, infidelity is the violation of the commitment in a two-person relationship which leads to various levels of emotional or physical intimacy with a person outside the relationship (4) and, from

another point of view, is of the four following types: sexual infidelity, emotional infidelity, compound infidelity (emotional and sexual), and virtual infidelity (including phone sex, sexual conversations, and watching porno movies); In fact, from flirting to sexual intercourse, there is a wide range of two-person behaviors which may have various levels of intensity (5), while the common conception of infidelity is having sexual intercourse with a third person (6). Although researches evaluating infidelity behaviors take a wide range of physical/sexual and romantic/emotional forms into consideration, it's necessary to consider online behaviors as well; with the quick development of new technologies in the last decade (7,8), new communication ways have been introduced which influence methods of communication with others (including relations with one's spouse) (9); furthermore, online behaviors related to infidelity such as searching in singles' web sites, sending explicitly sexual messages and/or photos for people other than the spouse, and internet pornography have become extensively common (10,11).

Several studies have carried out on the spread of sexual infidelity in the American society with the prevalence of 20-25 % (12). A wider definition of infidelity as well as emotional factors are also taken into consideration, the amount is estimated to be doubled (13); in fact, the wide variety of the estimation of this problem depends on the definition of infidelity provided by the scholars (14,15,16). It must be noted that, considering the researcher's investigations in the authentic domestic resources, no official statistics were found on the spread of infidelity among Iranian couples. There are only few studies pointing to the wide spread of sexual problems in the people wanting a divorce; for example, Rahmatollahi (17) has demonstrated sexual problems in 91% of damaged marriages.

Similar to many other social phenomena, infidelity is also a multi-dimensional, complex, and immense issue with several potential factors involved in its occurrence; Brown (18) proposed that the increase in secret relationships outside the limits of marital life is caused by the interaction of

several factors such as increased expectations for emotional satisfaction in marriage, lack of communication skills and close relations, as well as sexual revolution and changes in the structure of everyday life. Some experts have argued that personality and personal factors, dynamics related to marital relationship, satisfaction level with the relationship, and social, cultural, and environmental macro-factors are among the predictors of infidelity (19).

Scholars have demonstrated that a large number of perpetrators of infidelity experience cognitive conflicts in their self-concept and behaviors at the same time; the conflict lies in the fact that these people consider themselves faithful and blame infidelity, while their behaviors are unfaithful in nature. Theoretically speaking, these conflicting understandings lead to the experience of cognitive dissonance (20,21); therefore, perpetrators of infidelity must report psychological experiences indicating cognitive dissonance such as dissonance in the self-concept; psychological affliction and weak general emotions, for example, low levels of positive emotions and high levels of negative emotions (22,23); briefly speaking, the way perpetrators of infidelity think and act may conceptualize in the form of the cognitive dissonance process defining as the conflict between infidelity behaviors and the self-concept leads to cognitive dissonance in the perpetrators and, as a result, they reduce it through dissonance reduction strategies (24).

Infidelity may be experienced by some people at different stages and its continuity may lead to unhealthy lifestyles and major psychological issues such depression, addiction and even suicide to the victim of infidelity. Infidelity is reliably associated with poorer mental health particularly depression/anxiety and PTSD (25), and relationship dissolution/divorce (26, 27), which has been shown to adversely impact offspring (28). Indeed, across 160 societies infidelity is the single most common cause of marital dissolution (29).

Infidelity always leads to extreme emotional blows to both parties and disrupts the foundation of family. Also, infidelity can lead

to other serious emotional consequences among couples. For instance, scientific studies have shown that the disclosure of infidelity has a destructive and painful effect on couples. Additionally, experts have reported that victim of infidelity experience, extreme emotions such as anger towards the spouse and internal feelings of shame, depression, helplessness, and exclusion (30). Furthermore, other reactions after the disclosure of infidelity include violence and revenge towards the infidelity person, fatigue, boredom, aimlessness, feeling like a victim or feeling abandoned (31) feeling of shock, disbelief and denial (32), beating, murdering the spouse or committing suicide (33). Thus, conducting studies related to this field that can help improve the couples' knowledge with regard to the underlying factors for the occurrence of infidelity is necessary.

Considering what was mentioned above, the most significant objective of the present study is to investigate the factors leading people to violate marital commitment and perpetrate infidelity. Most of the studies related to the causes of infidelity have been of a quantitative type and have only referred to one level of factors. Thus, among the qualities distinguishing the present research from the previous works are the adoption of a phenomenological approach, investigation of the subject from the point of view of the people involved, and identification and classification of reasons on various levels. Thus, considering what was mentioned earlier as well as the lack of knowledge with regard to infidelity and the phenomenological experience of infidelity people in the country, the present research aimed to investigate the phenomenological experience of infidelity in Iranian women.

Method

The present research employed a qualitative method and a phenomenological approach in order to investigate the experiences of infidelity women regarding the phenomenon of infidelity. The statistical population of the study included all the women engaged in infidelity who visited the consultation centers in the city of Tehran for receiving consultation

services in the year 1396. Using the targeted snowball sampling method, the sample was selected from among the infidelity married women visiting one of the consultation centers in the city of Tehran; in a targeted sampling, considering the objectives of the study, the researcher chooses samples with positive or negative experiences related to the subject of the study. The researcher interviews people who have a rich experience of the phenomenon under study and are also willing and able to provide a clear explanation of it. Furthermore, in this method, the size of the sample does not follow any specific formula and information collection is continued until the data has reached the saturation point .

In this research, semi-structured interview was the main method of data collection; receiving informed consent from the interviewees and guaranteeing that the interviews would remain confidential, the women who were ready to take part in the program were evaluated through the semi-structured interview method; the interview sessions lasted from an hour to an hour and a half and they were held privately with only one person being interviewed. The sessions were held in an isolated room and an environment in which the participants felt secure. The 10th version of the software MAXQDA was used in order to analyze the data resulted from the interviews. During the implementation, genetic notes, and the constant study of the data, the constant inter-data comparison technique was also utilized. Once the codes were extracted, the extracted codes were put at the experts' disposal so that the congruity of the codes with the participants' opinions could be investigated. After the opinions were received, the proposed corrections of the experts were applied.

Data Analysis Method

The research findings were analyzed through Colaizzi's 7-step method. In the first step, the participants' statements were listened several times and the contents were transcribed word by word. In the second step, the researcher extracted the significant meanings and concepts, and so, after studying the interview scripts, the necessary tools were determined. In the third step, the significant meanings were

formulated; during this step, the researcher attempted to choose a corresponding concept for each of the extracted significant sentences. In the fourth step, the formulated meanings were clustered; in this step, the researcher studied the written concepts in details in order to classify them in subject classes or main concepts according to their similarities. The fifth step: in this step, the results were integrated in the form of an inclusive description of the subject under study. The sixth step: "Describing the Inherent Structure of the Phenomenon": in this step, the inclusive description of the phenomenon under study was provided in the form of a clear and explicit statement of the essential structure of the phenomenon under study. The seventh step: "Final Validation of the Findings": in this step, referring again to each of the participants and conducting a single interview (or several sessions of interviewing), the researcher can ask the participants' opinion with regard to the findings and attempt at the final validation of

the findings. In this research, however, due to the impossibility of further access to the participants, the method of reviewing the interviews was used instead.

Findings

The average age of the women in this study was 37.8 years, and their average marriage span was 16 years. 50% had a high school diploma, 40 % a B.A., and 10% MA. 60% had married in the traditional style and the other 40% in a non-traditional (friendship, etc). 40% were housewives and the remaining 60% were employed.

This part is devoted to a review of the research findings resulted from data analysis during the two steps of open coding and axial coding, and the overall paradigm of the theory is stated based on the research findings and the relation among its components.

Table 1: Results from the Analysis of Interviews; basic, theoretical, and core codes

Quotations	Basic Codes	Theoretical Codes	Core Codes
Having a suitable job, continuing education, success in the career, having financial independence, having peace in the family, having a suitable social position, receiving attention from the spouse, emotional intimacy with the spouse, regret about the past	Interests, wishes, deficiencies	Deficiency needs	Deficiency needs
Sociable and friendly, proud, responsible, supportive, honest Patient, kind, confident, wanting so much excitement, self-giving	Positive description of the self	Description of the self	Perpetrators' psychological qualities
Too emotional, credulous, depressed, dependent, irritable, self-critical, lacking perseverance, low self-confidence	Negative description of the self		
Erasing the problem (avoiding style), sulking (avoiding style), arguing (negative style), screaming and shouting (negative style), fighting (negative style)	Incompatible methods for solving problems	Methods of solving problems	Marital compatibility (underlying factors)
Unreasonable requests by the spouse (unreasonable expectations), low quality of sexual relationship, dependency of the spouse to sexual subjects on the satellite or cyberspace, spouse's premature ejaculation, inattention to the sexual needs of the spouse, spouse's lack of sexual knowledge, not experiencing orgasms in sexual relationship with the spouse	Sexual relationship	Inter-personal relations	
Spouse's addiction, spouse's unemployment, spouse's lack of cooperation in the raising of the children, low responsibility, not giving priority to the family, not paying financial attention to the family, infidelity, lack of common hobbies	Commitment and responsibility		

<p>Personality differences (introvert wife, extrovert husband), weak verbal communication with the spouse, foul mouth and violence, verbal and physical violence from the spouse, spouse's infidelity, spouse's suspicious mind</p> <p>Feeling weak, lack of trust in men, psychological damages, feeling of guilt</p> <p>Experience of intimate emotional-sexual relationship, obtaining positive view of men, satisfying financial needs, satisfying emotional-sexual needs, getting affection</p> <p>Increasing sexual desire, satisfying emotional-sexual needs, improving the level of mental energy, feeling of love and affection, emotional dependency, getting peace, increasing positive excitements</p> <p>Sense of guilt, going back to normal and lack of feelings of guilt in the long run</p>	<p>Psychological issues</p> <p>Negative consequences</p> <p>Positive consequences</p> <p>Person's feelings with regard to infidelity</p>	<p>Attitude towards the consequences of relationships beyond marriage</p>	<p>Consequences of infidelity</p>
<p>Spouse's addiction, loneliness (insignificant and ineffective presence of the spouse), lack of affection from the spouse, looking for a support, spouse's sexual problems, lack of financial support from the spouse, lack of attention to emotional needs from the spouse, inappropriate behaviors and lack of support from the spouse, constant quarrels and fights, lack of good verbal communication with the spouse, inattention from the spouse, lack of happy times with the spouse</p> <p>Constant quarrels and fights, lack of good verbal communication with the spouse, lack of understanding from the spouse</p> <p>Positive qualities of the sexual partner, good disposition, having low expectations, sexual partner's good social skills, being a good listener (sexual partner), devoting time to family by the sexual partner, high levels of attention by the sexual partner, giving priority to sexual needs by the partner, respectable and family loving</p> <p>Revenge from the spouse/retaliation, seeking excitement, sense of loneliness, lack of love, seeking for intimacy, lack of sexual satisfaction, emotional vulnerability, seeking a sympathizer, escape from the current problems of life, sense of guilt, emotional dependency</p> <p>Lack of father's support, lack of understanding from the spouse, lack of independence, security and peace, lack of mother's affection, need for support, need for respect and attention, need for acceptance, need for endorsement, need for progress, low intimacy, lack of love, lack of the sense of financial security, lack of attention, lack of affection</p> <p>Highly stressful conditions, problems with the spouse, spouse's absence, too much boredom</p> <p>Trips, cyberspace, loneliness, meeting on the streets, workplace</p> <p>Serious conflicts with step father, mother's marriage, father's death, emotional deficiencies</p> <p>Parents' divorce, father's addiction, parents' serious conflicts, history of sexual abuse</p>	<p>Issues related to the spouse</p> <p>Attractions of the sexual partner</p> <p>Psychological issues</p> <p>Deficiency needs</p> <p>Damaging situations</p> <p>-</p>	<p>Starting factors</p> <p>Factors intensifying inclination towards infidelity</p> <p>Growth period damages</p>	<p>Etiology of starting infidelity</p> <p>Underlying and interfering factors</p>

Considering the information in the table 1, 6 categories, 8 axes, and 15 basic codes were

resulted from the analysis of the interviews with the participants.

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the findings of the present research, inclination to infidelity is caused by several reasons which, according to the analyses, led to the following 6 core codes: deficiency needs, perpetrators' psychological qualities, marital compatibility, consequences expected from infidelity, and the etiology of starting infidelity including predisposing, starting, and intensifying factors.

As one of the core codes, deficiency needs, which include opportunities the person could have and right now wishes she could have them, play an essential role in inclining the person to engage in infidelity. A 46-year-old woman, who also has a son in law, says: "If it was not for my husband's going to his family and paying so much attention to them, and stopping to pay attention to me, I would not look for attention somewhere else. I was only looking for attention." Another woman, 39 years old, says: "I always wanted to be someone in the society; I wanted to have a high social standing." With regard to the subject of need, a number of factors including desire for financial independence, hope for an acceptable social position, and lack of the experience of emotional intimacy with the spouse, can be effective in the persons' inclination to infidelity. Scholars have investigated the ability of the couples' relations in satisfying their needs and their effects on infidelity; scholars argue that need-fulfillment has a high level of correlation with positive thrills, emotions, and well-being (34). In one of the related studies, Lewandowski Jr. and Ackerman (35) investigated the role of need-fulfillment and self-expansion in romantic relations, in the prediction of inclination to infidelity between 50 male and 59 female students; the information related to five types of needs including intimacy, companionship, sexual relationship, security, and emotional involvement, and three self-expansion styles including self-expansion, including others in oneself, and the ability to expand the self were evaluated. The results demonstrated that both variables of need-fulfillment and self-expansion significantly predict the inclination to infidelity. Finally, the scholars prove that when there is no possibility of need-fulfillment

or self-expansion for a person in a relationship, the sensitivity to commit infidelity is increased. Likewise, Maslow believes failure to fulfill the need for love is the main reason for emotional incompatibility, and this need can be satisfied through an intimate relationship with another person (36). Generally speaking, with regard to the effect of the lack of need-fulfillment in marital relationships, the findings of the present research are compatible with the equity theory, investment, and the models of need-fulfillment, self-expansion, and deficit. According to the theories and models mentioned earlier, inclination to infidelity is caused by problems and deficiencies in the marriage and, most probably, the new relationship is supposed to compensate for a part of the marriage which is not working; in other words, in case it is not possible to fulfill the needs in the marital relationship, it is possible that the partner whose needs are not fulfilled allows herself to fulfill them through a relationship with another partner outside the limits of marriage (37).

A psychological quality of the perpetrators of infidelity was also another important core codes with a special position among the factors for inclination to infidelity for the women in this study. In this category, concepts such as sociable and friendly, proud, responsible, supportive, honest, patient, kind, highly confident, seeking much excitement, and self-giving were classified as "positive self-descriptions", while concepts such as being too emotional, credulous, depressed, dependent, irritable, self-critical, low perseverance, and low confidence were classified as "negative self-descriptions." A 33-year-old woman who works at a Photo shoot studio says: "I am a sociable and friendly person and make friends very easily." A 42-year-old woman working as a real estate agent says: "It may be that my honesty encourages people to want to take advantage of me." Furthermore, a 36-year-old woman says: "I am too kind, I mean if I think I can do someone a favor, I have to do it, even if it puts me in trouble." She continues: "I feel too supportive you cannot even imagine. I am so self-giving and supportive that I feel

responsible to do a lot of things, even if it means I have to break my back." Moreover, the negative self-description axis included concepts such as being too emotional, credulous, depressed, dependent, irritable, self-critical, low perseverance, and low confidence; for instance, a 33-year-old housewife says: "I was so dependent on the family, an 18 year-old in a family where nobody has any concerns." In order to clarify these findings, we can refer to studies devoted to the investigation of the role of personality traits in the inclination to and attempt at infidelity. With regard to the effect of seeking high levels of excitement on the inclination to infidelity, the findings of the present study are compatible with those of the study by Jayson (38) who argues that several personal tendencies are influential on the inclination to extra-marital relationships. Furthermore, the findings of the present study with regard to the effect of low confidence on the inclination to infidelity are compatible with those of the study by Touesnard (38); when the person suffers from low confidence, the attractions of extra-marital relationships increase and the obstacles and inhibiting factors are reduced. In fact, people try to increase their confidence through extra-marital relationships (39).

Another significant categories influencing the clarification of the inclination to infidelity in the sample under study in the present work was marriage compatibility; the axes of the incompatible methods of solving problems, quantity and quality of the sexual relationship, as well as commitment and responsibility were extracted from the results of the analyses. Quantity and quality of sexual satisfaction was one of the essential axes influencing the attempt to engage in infidelity among the sample of this study. Lack of sexual satisfaction in relationship with spouse, a 39-year-old woman says: "Generally, I do not like it at all but he loves it, we always have fights about it, whenever he comes to me all my muscles seem to contract, I have a morbid feeling, I do not like it at all." Regarding her husband's dependency on sexual contents in the cyberspace, a 33-year-old woman says: "For a while, my husband watched a lot of sexual contents on adults' channels, and I

always thought that he was aroused by them and if he came to me it was only to have an outlet, that I was nothing but a tool, it made feel so bad. Afterwards, whenever he would hold me in his arms I would feel disgusted." Moreover, regarding her husband's lack of attention to her needs, a 42-year-old woman says: "He knew that this had to be mutual. I was never ever comfortable and satisfied in bed with this man, because he only cared about himself. "These findings are compatible with the results of the studies by Allen & Atkins (39), Campbell (40), Zihelr & Masten (41), and Jefferson (41). Scholars have found out that lack of sexual satisfaction is a strong predictor of attempting infidelity in women. The results of the study by Campbell (42) demonstrated that sexual and emotional deficiencies or lack of sexual attraction on either side of the relationship are among the significant factors leading to infidelity. Moreover, low quality or scarcity of sexual intercourse in marital relationships is among the factors underlying infidelity.

Another axes that influence the infidelity was proved by the present study, is the use of incompatible problem-solving methods for handling marital problems and issues; a 33-year-old housewife says: "we tried not to argue much, in other words, to each their own. He felt he could never make me accept anything, but I am a very reasonable person and if he talked to me in the right way, I would accept it. We are better now than in those days, we talk more, but we do not have the energy for talking anymore and try to get it over with as soon as possible." In a study, Kriegelewise (42) demonstrated that happy couples often use compatible methods of problem-solving. Ahmadi et al (42) showed in the result of their study that problem-solving intervention significantly reduces marital discontent is considerably effective with regard to communication skills, resolving conflicts, sexual relationship, and connection with the family.

Another category resulted from the analysis of the interviews with the participants was the etiology of starting infidelity; this category included two main classes of starting and intensifying factors; with regard to starting factors, axes such as starting factors related to

the spouse, attraction of the sexual partner, significant psychological matters, and deficiency needs were obtained. Regarding the concept of loneliness, a 37-year-old woman, who was a social worker, says: "I would go to sleep all alone and this man would send me messages at midnight. It filled the loneliness of my life in Sweden as my husband never cared about me." With regard to the significance of a man's role as a support, a 33-year-old woman, who has a BA in psychology, says: "I never had a man to rely on, maybe there were time when I wanted somebody to shout at me telling me not to do such and such or not to wear that dress." Moreover, a 37-year-old woman says: "He would reach an orgasm too fast that I was never satisfied. In the 4 years we had sexual intercourse maybe it was only four or five times that I had an orgasm." Moreover, regarding the attention to be paid to women's sexual needs in the relationship and the causes of inclination to have a relationship with a person other than the husband, a 37-year-old woman says: "I love him so much and everything is perfect, I love to have sexual intercourse with him, but when it comes to my husband, sometimes I am not willing at all." Regarding the intensifying factors, stressful conditions, the lack of spouse's effective presence, spouse's travelling, cyberspace, and loneliness were among the most important intensifying factors for inclination to infidelity. A 36-year-old woman says: "The worst happened after I found out my uncle had had sexual intercourse with me, it was a disaster; as far as I can remember, he only played with my body, but it was too bad for me, and for a while I thought maybe I was not a girl, and I did not say it to any other person, because we were relatives and I was afraid of the consequences." Another 39-year-old woman, who is a hair stylist, says: "Once I was sleeping over at my mother's aunt's. We were all sleeping next to each other, and her children were also there. By accident I noticed that her son came to sleep later than others and he lay down between me and one of his sisters. I do not know if his sister awoke or not, but I awoke at once and moved a little farther away, but he put his hand in my trousers and was massaging me. I was shaking with fear."

In order to clarify these findings, it can be argued that all these axes are explicit expressions of a hidden concept named need. In fact, need is the component shared by all the concepts found in all these axes. Need-fulfillment theory argues that the relationship between the couple is supplied through the possibility of the fulfillment of four needs other than the sexual need, which include intimacy, friendship, security, and emotional relationship. Drigotas & Rusbult (43) believe the origin of intimacy need to be self-disclosure, trust in the spouse, and knowledge of each other's secrets and emotions. Furthermore, they believe that the need for friendships is satisfied through common activities such as companionship in recreations and spending the leisure time with each other. This leads to a feeling of closeness in the couple. The ability to rely on the spouse in order to add to the content and richness of the relationship, as well as prediction of the spouse's behavior lead to the fulfillment of the feeling of need for security. In other words, having a relationship on which you can count and which can make your life peaceful is related to this need. The person's feelings towards the emotional bond with the spouse are significant in the fulfillment of emotional needs. According to this theory, it can be inferred that most of the time, when the five needs including sexual needs, friendship, intimacy, security, and emotional relationship are not satisfied in a marital relationship, problems such as lack of loyalty to the spouse will be resulted. In other words, if a relationship cannot fulfill a certain need, it is most probable that the person will seek to fulfill it through alternatives such as infidelity. Based on the deficit model, when a relationship faces deficiencies such as discontent with the relationship, lack of sexual satisfaction, etc. in some cases they will result in infidelity (43).

Each study has a number of limitations beyond the control of the researcher and this study was not an exception. Some limitations of this study included the participants' level of education, mental health status and religious beliefs. Also, given that the randomization has

not been completed and the initial selection has been screened, it is better to be cautious in generalizing the findings

The summary of the results of this study demonstrates that there are several factors involved in women's inclination to infidelity; however, the interaction of these factors in various people has different consequences. Based on the findings of the present study, the practical proposition is to arrange therapy sessions and instructional manuals based on the concepts and axes extracted from the analysis of the interviews with people who have shared their phenomenological experience of infidelity with us. Hopefully, the findings of the present research will serve as a starting point for further studies regarding this subject in order to improve the quality of marital life.

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