Original Article

Identifying Common Elements of Evidence – Based Psychological Treatments for Females with Extramarital Experience

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Abstract

Introduction: The therapeutic consequences of extramarital relationships is a difficult issue among therapists, so majority of clinicians are faced with several challenges. Although, they are not able to conceptualize and modify these issues with a suitable and recognized approach, the purpose of this study was to identify common elements of psychological evidence-based therapies in order to develop multi-dimensional intervention for females involved in extramarital relationships.

Method: This study was conducted in two phases. The first phase was a qualitative content analysis to identify factors influencing the extramarital relations in three steps. The second phase aimed to design and develop multi-dimensional treatments using common elements identified in the first study. This procedure conducted according to Garland et al., method.

Result: Sixty-four effective factors identified in four categories: individual's personality, family-educational, cultural-social and religious-beliefs. In the second phase , 13 effective therapeutic approaches in the treatment of extramarital relationships were selected. Finally, 10 common therapeutic elements were developed to design a protocol for extramarital relationships involved females.

Conclusion: This treatment emphasized on helping women with the experience of extramarital relationship who want to save their marital commitment and family.

Declaration of Interest: None

Keywords Common elements, Multi-dimensional treatment, Extramarital relationships, Women.

Introduction

Nowadays, spouse infidelity is one of the common cases that is frequently seen among clients receiving marriage therapy. . Approximately 50% to 65% of couple therapies are related to extramarital affairs consequences (1). Infidelity is confusing and painful experience for all those involved. Also, it is considered as one of the common reasons leading to divorce.(2). Some studies have reported that men are more likely to engage in martial infidelity than women. (3). However, women under the age of 40, the statistics of women's extramarital affairs are getting close to the men (4). More importantly, for many of women who engage in extramarital affairs, because of emotional involvement, stopping relationship is not easy (5). The causes of infidelity shows obvious differences in men and women(6). This implies if the reasons are different, the treatment methods and protocols should also be different. While, common protocols are mainly focused on spouse therapy or relieving women affected by infidelity of husband (7). In general, the findings confirmed the role of individual, family, and social factors, as well as the weakness of religious beliefs in the emergence of extramarital relationships among couples (3, 8-12). Although the causes for females in the same dimensions are different as the social pressure, mental need, physiology, religious rules and family expectations are different (13-15)

In fact the partner who committed infidelity also needs help while mostly in clinics individual or couple, therapies focused to heal the spouse who does not have active role in extramarital relationship (8, 16). Gender differences, does not considered in treatment protocols while the problems and consequences is different for male and females (17). The needs of women engaged in a infidelity experiences- who want to return and repair their relationship – is neglected (18).

In case of woman marital maladjustment, irrational belief, anxiety and fear is common symptoms among women who committed the infidelity. (19) (20, 21). While men mostly involve in extramarital relationship as a sexual experiment or fun (22). On the other hand marital interaction and dealing with infidelity is a strongly cultural related issue (23). In the social and therapy context, the extramarital relationship among Iranian females are rarely discussed due to patriarchal culture and taboos revolving around this issue. (24). Mainly people avoid to disclose extramarital affairs as in Iranian society since the legal punishments are much harder for females than males (10). The clinicians and studies have employed western counseling methods for woman with extra marital affair while this issue is involved in fundamentally different culture (25). As extramarital relationships filed is a sensitive counseling experience for psychologist and client, there is a need for integration of protocol based on societal and cultural changes (26). Although, authors could not found a comprehensive specialized protocol for Iranian females with extramarital relationship committing experiences including social, psychological, and cultural needs (27).

Since 1980s, psychotherapy has begun to the integration of theories and therapies (28). The aim of this movement was to create a conjunction in different approaches in order to develop therapies with higher effectiveness (29). Infidelity is a most likely growing social issue among women than before (30). Therefore, it is not clear exactly what kind of treatment approach has a positive effect on which dimensions of problem in Iranian woman (27). Therefore, considering the existing gaps in the treatment of extramarital relationships among women with this experience, the researcher aimed to develop a therapy program for women with experience of extramarital relationships who could not take couple

therapy as they are afraid to lose their marital life. In general, identifying and studying the roots of problem and planning to prevent, reduce, and eliminate factors affecting the extramarital relationships leads to promote health and balance among families. In the present study, we intend to introduce the common therapeutic elements that have proven their efficacy in this field, in order to develop a protocol specialized for Iranian woman with extra marital relationship experiences.

Methods

a. First study: Identifying the Effective Factor (a qualitative study)

1- Reviewing the documents and texts related to the extramarital relationships.
2- Extracting common elements in views of women with experience of extramarital relationships through interview
3- Extracting common elements in views professionals and therapists of the couple and family therapy regarding effective factors of extra marital relationships

The statistical population in the first step consisted of all published documents and texts related to the factors affecting the extramarital relationships between (1997-2020) included Iranian participants. Iranian data bases has been searched including: Journal of Medical Sciences (Irandoc); Magiran Database, SID, Google Scholar, Science direct .A systematic review was used to review the content of these articles. In the process of searching the articles, the key words of "extramarital relationships" and the synonyms of that "treachery", "infidelity", "marital commitment", "betrayal" used in Persian and English. Out of 32 articles, 28 papers met inclusion criteria and associated factors with extramarital relationship extracted from these documents. The criteria were included Persian and English articles published studies with an Iranian sample, the full text of which was available, 2- Articles related to woman extramarital affairs experiences, 3- Articles were approved in research team,4- availibility of full text. Criteria for excluding articles were duplicate articles in searched databases 2- Unscientific and invalid methodology 3- Articles in the waiting list for publication 8- Invalid journals, dissertations, conferences articles.

In the second step, the statistical population consisted married women with a extramarital experience who referred to counseling clinics of Mashhad city during March-September 2017. Fourteen subjects selected and interviewed using a semi-structured interview method. Three others interviewed to ensure theoretical saturation. So, at the end, 17 subjects included in study. The data of interviews in this section analyzed by qualitative content analysis method.

Inclusion criteria's were married for more than one year, age range of 19 to 50 years, educated at least up to high school. The participants signed the consent form, informed about privacy and allowed to leave study in any time they will.

In the third step, fifteen professionals and therapist in the field of couples and families selected through purposive sampling and interviewed regarding extramarital relationships effective factors.

The results of these three steps indicated 64 effective factors related to extramarital relationships of females, which categorized in four areas of individual-personality, family-educational, socio-cultural, and religious-belief. The results checked by 10 psychologists and therapists (including five researcher and five therapists). The validity of content approved by professionals. The detailed results of this step published in another manuscript (31).

b. Second study: Designing and development of multi-dimensional treatment

The second stage of the research involved designing and development of a multi-dimensional intervention package. At this

stage, the common elements of common interventions adopted by Garland et al. (32)method in three steps.

Step I: Identify and select evidence-based therapeutic interventions packages

The process of identifying and selecting effective treatments conducted based on meta-analysis, systematic reviews, and valid scientific articles that examine the effectiveness of common interventions in this field. In this stage, researchers reviewed all valid scientific papers, Meta-analyzes and systematic reviews published between 1997-2020 and included extramarital related interventions.

Step II: Review and analyze the content of texts in order to achieve common therapeutic elements.

The content analysis of all reliable sources related to the 13 selected couple therapy packages included in this part. All elements of each treatment approaches extracted and coded. In order to prevent coding bias and to achieve convergence, three expert, and active members of the research team monitored the whole process (33). It noted that in the process of coding, extensive definitions of elements considered to cover all related concepts and elements. The final list led to ten common therapeutic elements that divided into two general sections, including what transmitted to the client during therapy, and therapy process includes methods for predicting content transfer and related descriptions.

Step III, using the Delphi modified method to obtain expert evidence-based opinions and reach a consensus.

The statistical population of this stage included all psychologists who had published research included at least one of 13 extramarital related therapy approaches. Therefore, five authors of the articles related to these therapies identified using purposive method. Subsequently, the content validity of the extracted elements measured using a content Validity Ratio (34). The original list of common elements of treatment, with a brief explanation of each element, was sent to 10 family and couple therapists and they were asked to submit their comments and suggestions regarding each element. Multi-dimensional intervention package developed in the form of individualized 12 sessions (each session 60 minutes) aimed of helping volunteered woman involved in extramarital relationship.

Results

a. *First study*

The results of analysis process, revealed for categories of personal-personality, family-educational, sociocultural, and religious-beliefs. Elements extracted from the interviews also examined from two angles: related to woman who committed extramarital relationship and related to her husband. The effective factors included 64 items categorized in four domains, considering these factors existed before the occurrence of extramarital relationship (**Table 1**).

Table1. Factors related to the extramarital relationship of woman according preference

No	Domain	Category
1	Personal-personality	Intimacy Recovery
2	related woman	Conflict and disagreement
3		Early maladaptive schemas
4		Insecure attachment style
5		Low marital commitment
6		Lack of sex pleasure
7		Mental health disorder
8		Diversification and excitement
9		Power seeking inferior

10		Being rude and assertiveness
11		Need for fun
12		Young age at marriage
13		Permissive attitude
14		Lack of knowledge and weakness in life skills
15		Revenge
16		Sexual experience before marriage
17		Need for husband attention
18		Encounter with unrequited love
19		Midlife crisis
20	Personal-personality	Husband infidelity
21	related to man	Mental disorders
22		Sexual addiction
23		Stinginess
24		Lying and secrecy
25		Bad temper
26		Over control
27		Infertility and sexual disorders
28		Having severe physical or contagious disease
29		Over trust
30		Taboo of divorce
31		Difficulties of divorce
32	Family-educational	Parental infidelity
33	related to woman	Nervouse environment in parents house
34		Parental divorce
35		No family emotional support
36	Family-educational	Husband Remarriage
37	related to man	Intervention of the husband's family
38		Living with the husband’s family in the same house(under the same roof)
39		Disrespect of the spouse's family
40	Sociocultural	social media abuse
41	related to woman	Financial Problems
42		Forced marriage
43		The attraction of the third party
44		Third party availability (opportunity)
45		Risky friends
46		Low ethical values
48		Financial level upgrade after marriage
49		Belief in equality of social rights
50		Skipping marriage responsibilities
51		Education level upgrade after marriage
52		Work environment with Heterosexual colleague
53		Cultural differences
54		Lack of charm
55	Sociocultural	Unemployment
56	related to man	Over involved with occupation
57		Unusual socialization with others
58		Addiction (drug and alcohol)
59		Low social responsibility
60		Abnormal job
61	Religious-beliefs	Low conscience and morality
62	related woman	Lack of guilt
63	Religious-beliefs	Belief in gendered religious rights
64	related man	Over religious adherence

Comparison of the mean of the factors in these four domains showed respectively the significance of individual-personality (μ = 108.57), social-cultural (μ = 69.14), family (n = 56.02) and religious-Belief (μ = 17.66) has a role in extramarital relationship of women. In other words, intimacy recovery, incompatibility, early maladaptive schemas, insecure attachment style, low marital commitment, lack of sexual pleasure, misuse of virtual and media networks, poverty and financial problems, forced marriage, family divorce taboo, divorce problems, and religious beliefs related to other identified factors relating for woman.

Stage II: A review of 13 evidence-based therapeutic approaches extracted 10 common therapeutic elements (**Table 2**). These elements included acceptance and change, cognitive challenge and mind-consciousness, problem and conflict solving, empathy and destruction of negative emotions and emotional control, emphasis on present time, communication components, behavioral reinforcement, self-differentiation, and attachment which protocol developed based on these factors.

Table 2: Treatment Components and goals of Multidimensional Intervention Package for the Treatment of Women's with extramarital Relationships.

Treatment goal	Therapeutic components
Flexible based on factors	At least 12 sessions
Reduction of damage and disconnection	Maximum 60 minutes for each session of relationship
Improvement and maintenance of marital relationship with the spouse	At least once a week

A married woman with extramarital relationship engages to sessions individually

Comparison of the mean of the factors in these four domains showed respectively the significance of individual-personality (μ= 108.57), social-cultural (μ = 69.14), family (n = 56.02) and religious-Belief (μ = 17.66) has a role in extramarital relationship of women.

Stage II: A review of 13 evidence-based therapeutic approaches extracted 10 common therapeutic elements (**Table 2**). In next table the therapy methods and techniques presented (**Table 3**).

Table 3: Common elements of therapies used in designing a multidimensional intervention package for women with extramarital affairs

Context	**Therapies**										**Indexes**
	Schema therapy	Acceptance [illegible]	Compassion therapy	CBT	Couple CBT	Family therapy	Spirituality therapy	Forgiveness therapy	Attachment based [illegible]	Solution Focused [illegible]	Emotion focused [illegible]	Multi-dimensional [illegible]	Imago therapy	Techniques	Common element

		*	*	*	*	*		*					Behavioral principles include flexibility / self-observation and committed action to acknowledge acceptance and change	Acceptance &commitm ent
		*	*	*	*	*		*			*	*	Understanding the meaning of extramarital affairs in the light of present experiences / stage of life / external factors and stressors	Living in the moment
		*	*	*	*	*			*			*	Thoughts and emotions before and after infidelity / Identifying crisis levels / Examining mental health levels / Cognitive principles including focusing on dysfunctional thoughts for cognitive reconstruction	Challenge mindfulness
Cognitive re-framing					*	*					*	*	Methods for reshaping solutions and evaluating ideas and considering the consequences of each idea and resolving conflict	Conflict resolution
& Empathy Reduce		*	*	*	*			*	*		*	*	Kindness and non-judgment / Reducing the level of emotional damage and achieving the opposite understanding / Accepting the flaw by empathizing and rebuilding emotions	Empathy &emotion acceptance
Relational Systematic	Re-	*	*		*	*	*		*	*		*	*	communication patterns of the individual, family and spouse / emphasis on relationship reconstruction Reinforcement of positive behavior / reconstruction of emotional boundaries / reconstruction of communication and behavioral patterns
Attachment Building	Re-	*		*			*			*		*	*	Rebuilding intellectual, behavioral, and attachment security / Creating a new pattern of interaction and communication while creating boundaries to reduce the risk of recurrence of injury
Spiritual structuring	Re-							*	*			*		Strengthen new communication patterns / use new patterns to express harm, forgiveness and rebuild the new concept of attachment / security Strengthening the relationship with God, resurrection and strengthening the spiritual dimension, helping to develop rationality and morality

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify common elements of evidence-based psychological therapies in order to design and develop a multi-dimensional treatment model based on identified factors for women engaged in extramarital relationships. The findings showed 64 factors affected the extramarital relationships of women in four category of individual-personality, family-educational, socio-cultural and religious-beliefs. In general, the findings from the four domains were in line with the results of

previous studies which confirmed the role of individual, family, and social factors, as well as the weakness of religious beliefs in the emergence of extramarital relationships (3, 8-12).

In development and designing a multi-dimensional intervention package the combination of integrated approaches was used (35). The common elements based on potential of the key mechanisms of treatment identified (36). In the present study the therapeutic techniques used in each multi-dimensional treatment session have been adapted depending on the effectiveness on the identified factors related to the women's extra marital relationship, however, sessions are flexible depending on the client priority and conditions. Some criteria considered in selection of techniques for example, some of the factors such as personality disorders or sexual dysfunction requires specialized therapies.

Structure: Regarding the structure of the session, the common elements of treatment evidence-based therapies were extracted in this study and the final list of effective therapeutic elements was developed considering needs of women with extra marital relationships (see table 2). These common elements of therapy included acceptance, cognitive challenge, mindfulness, problem solving, empathy and destruction of negative emotions, living in the moments, communicative skills, strengthening of behavior, self-differential and attachment (see table 3). In order to achieve these common elements, we first identified effective treatment-based therapeutic approaches in the treatment of extra marital relationships. In first step authors aimed at ensuring that all aspects of treatment taken into account and the collection of all theoretical concepts and effective therapeutic techniques in this field included. In the development of intervention package the common elements introduced through evidence(35).

Many individual/couple therapy and family therapy are developed and examined in order to solving marital conflicts, especially extra marital relationships (**Table 2**). Most of approaches employed challenging inefficient thoughts, evaluation of wrong choices, identify emotions and thoughts, using more adaptive ways to deal with issues; such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, imago therapy, emotional-based couples therapy, and schema therapy(37, 38).

This is result of persistence of the efforts of researchers to apply effective therapeutic elements in the form of a cohesive treatment, instead of using several therapeutic approaches or a single treatment for solving complex marital problems. Considering the major problems of couples in the field of extramarital relationship is related to cognition and thoughts. The selection of therapeutic approaches for development of the multi-dimensional therapies was conducted based on their effectiveness and evidence (20). In cognitive-behavioral therapies the intellectual and behavioral patterns changes to adaptive behaviors through CBT process (39). Previous researches have shown differences of the beliefs, emotional dissatisfaction, individual-social values, high interpersonal sensitivity and low responsibility in couples with experience of extra marital relationship (40, 41) .

All third-wave therapies including two components of acceptance and mindfulness showed effectiveness in extramarital involved cases (42, 43). Therefore, multi-dimensional treatment designed to address the common therapeutic elements such as acceptance, living in the moment, mindful living, no judgment, compassion, empathy, forgiveness. In addition, secure attachment requires the ability of emotion regulation and empathy. A secure relationship build through attachment based therapies in woman with extra marital relationships(44).

The theory of imago therapy, also is structured based on principles of the attachment theory, refers to the unmet needs, that all individuals are emotionally like the child who seek to meet the non-responded childhood needs. Therefore, if these needs are not conscious or not met, they are able to push couples toward deep divisions. This treatment is one of the effective therapies in the field of extramarital relationships (45). The emotional –focused couple therapy approach is also use attachment theory principles. The basic hypothesis in this approach is that marital conflicts begin to develop as long as each couple is not able to share their attachment needs in terms of satisfaction and security(46). Emotional – focused couple therapy emphasizes adaptive attachment through care, support, and mutual attention to the needs of the individual and the spouse. This approach emphasizes empathy, improving relationships, and emotions regulation(35). Therefore, in view of the multi-dimensional treatment goals of extramarital, all of the necessary features of the mentioned treatments considered in development of the treatment (47).

In this study also the common techniques of common approaches are presented. The main theme of the multi-dimensional approach is challenging with thoughts and convey the person to the argument that the extra marital relationship cannot be a good solution to resolve any problem in marital life(48). The use of forgiveness-based therapies in multi-dimensional treatment because of sense of regret and guilt cover all process elements (49).

It is also seen that all treatments selected during intervention in the context of extra marital relationships are intended to redefine behaviors and behavioral patterns in the treatment of this phenomenon. In general, some treatments such as cognitive-behavioral therapy and couples-based therapy have a strong emphasis on the positive role of client in the treatment of their problems, or some, such as family therapy, redefining the boundaries are highlighted (50). Forgives-based treatments, compassion therapy, and spirituality therapy also try to emphasize the positive effectiveness staying away from the wrong choices and avoiding negative emotions(51).

Multi-dimensional treatment approach in the treatment of women's extramarital relationships has several unique features that differentiate it from other treatments in the field of extramarital relationship: 1. This treatment is only for women based on the identified extramarital relationships tendency factors in the Iranian woman (31), the type of effective factor or the priority considered role of man and woman. This treatment emphasizes helping women with the experience of extramarital relationship who wants to save their marital life and family. Multi-dimensional treatment of female outspoken relationships by taking into account the common elements of effective therapies in this field.

Multi-dimensional intervention sessions designed to provide the necessary flexibility for all clients with different priorities in terms of the factors influencing their extra marital relationship. Multi-dimensional treatment of women's aimed to consider thirteen common therapeutic elements in the treatment of cognitive relationships simultaneously, relying on the principles of evidence-based therapies, rehabilitation, depression, and rebuilding the attachment of its clients.

As the multi-dimensional treatments designed to hold individually for woman it is not applicable to couples. This is a kind of limitation of this treatment, and one of its capabilities and innovations, which, along with this limitation, allows women to have the opportunity to save their marital relationship. Regarding the existence of strict enforcement laws in the face of the extra marital relationship in women, and since most men is easily go to divorce and formal and non-formal punishment in women have been reported

extremely higher (13), this could be a special therapeutic opportunity for woman with extramarital experiences and their children.

The present study also recommends to those therapists who intend to reduce the rate of women's extra marital relationships to use findings of the first study, which included comprehensive identification of the factors influencing the extramarital relationship by women who involved with extra marital relationship. Another suggestion is the introduction of multi-dimensional treatment for spouses of women who have experienced extramural relationships is an option to prevent divorce and, indirectly, to reduce the probability of divorce.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

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