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Effective Factors in Staying in the Relationship Following Marital Infidelity Disclosure: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Abstract

Marital infidelity is considered one of the most important risk factors of marital relationships, the disclosure of which puts the betrayed individual in a dilemma of staying or leaving the relationship. The current research aimed to investigate the factors that made women who were betrayed decide to continue their relationship with their husbands despite disclosing their husbands' infidelity. The statistical population of this study included all the betrayed women of Kerman who remained in the relationship despite the disclosure of their husbands' betrayal. The sample included 16 women who were betrayed in Kerman. They were selected purposively using theoretical and snowball sampling methods. The data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. In addition, the data was analyzed through the qualitative method of Grounded Theory and the systematic analysis approach of Strauss and Corbin. The analysis of the obtained data led to the identification of 38 concepts and 12 axial codes, which were categorized into three general conditions: causal conditions, contextual conditions, and intervening conditions, all centered around the main theme of "staying after spousal infidelity disclosure." The results of this study indicated that the betrayed women continued to live with their spouses under causal conditions (i.e., the presence of children, affection for the spouse, spouse's trust-building behaviors, lack of family support, mutual infidelity, and attitudes and beliefs), contextual conditions (i.e., social and cultural pressures, personal and psychological characteristics, and legal constraints on women), and intervening conditions (i.e., financial and economic issues, the type of spouse' betrayal, and the support of the spouse's family).

Introduction

Extramarital relationships are one of the main risk factors in the structure and stability of the family. They can have many harmful personal, family, and social consequences (Tajbakhsh, 2021). Different definitions of an extramarital relationship or marital infidelity have been presented. Some researchers consider it as establishing a sexual relationship and others believe it as establishing an emotional relationship (Guitar et al., 2017). Leeker and Carlozzi (2014) considered marital infidelity as any sexual or emotional affair with a third person other than the spouse. This type of relationship can have different and significant consequences, including emotional, psychological, and personal consequences (Wilkinson et al., 2012). Beyond the various consequences of marital infidelity, people's reactions to their spouse's infidelity can be divided into five general categories of reaction to self, reaction to spouse, reaction to spouse's family, reaction to the third party, and reaction to others (e.g., one's family, children, and friends) (Salavati et al., 2018). Afshari et al. (2019) also found that people generally show three types of responses to their spouses after the disclosure of infidelity, including filing for divorce, repairing the relationship, and enduring psychological pressure. Therefore, after the disclosure of infidelity, the betrayed spouse must finally decide whether to stay in the relationship or leave it (Aminiha et al., 2015).

Although extramarital relationships have been reported as one of the most common causes of divorce (Amato & Previti, 2003), this does not mean that all relationships with infidelity end in divorce (Allen et al., 2005). Charny and Parnass (1995) showed that a significant number of betrayed people remain in the relationship despite disclosing their spouse's infidelity and experiencing an unpleasant or pleasant life. Reviewing the literature shows that there is a gap in investigating the factors in staying in a relationship after the disclosure of the infidelity of the spouse. Thus, the objective of the present study was to investigate the reasons and factors for staying in the relationship by interviewing the betrayed women who decided to stay in the relationship despite the disclosure of the marital infidelity.

Methodology

The current study is a qualitative study based on the Grounded Theory. The statistical population included all the married women of Kerman who stayed in their marital relationships despite the disclosure of their husband's infidelity. Among them, 16 participants were selected using theoretical and snowball sampling methods. The data saturation criterion was used to determine the sample size. The inclusion criteria were willingness to cooperate in the research study, having the experience of infidelity, being between 18 and 50 years old, being married, not getting divorced, staying in the relationship with the spouse at least two years after the disclosure of the spouse's infidelity, and having a minimum educational level of diploma. In the present study, data were collected using in-depth interviews in a semi-structured manner. Moreover, the systematic analysis method of Strauss and Corbin (1998) was used to analyze the data. More specifically, the extracted data were analyzed using a systematic process and constant comparisons. Thus, a three-step process of open, axial, and selective coding was used. In the process of coding, each sentence of the interviews was carefully examined after transcribing and coding. The concepts were classified according to their similarities and differences. Then, categories emerged. In this qualitative research study, three methods of member check, analytical comparisons, and audit trail were used to check the validity of the findings (Creswell, 2012).

Results

The analysis of the data obtained from the interviews led to the identification of 38 concepts and 12 axial codes, which were placed in three general categories of causal conditions, contextual conditions, and intervening conditions.

Table 1. *Classification of the findings of the current study*

Main theme	General category	Axial codes	Concepts
Staying in the relationship following the disclosure of the marital infidelity	Causal conditions	The presence of children	Maternal affection The age of the child Worrying about the future of the child Staying at the child's request Fearing of a child growing up by a stepparent
		Affection for the spouse	Experiencing a pleasant relationship before revealing the infidelity of the spouse A marriage based on love
		Spouse's trust-building behaviors	Expressing regret to the wife Termination of the relationship of the spouse with the third person Spouse confidence building through behavior change Spouse trust building through changing the betrayal context
		Lack of family support	Parents' death Opposition and blame of parents for separation Fear of returning to one's father's house Lack of family finances
		Mutual infidelity	The experience of undisclosed betrayal
		Attitudes and beliefs	Blaming oneself and justifying one's husband Permissive attitudes toward sexual affairs Belief in the ability to change the spouse and the repairability of the relationship Belief in the superiority of environmental conditions over the spouse in case of infidelity Religious beliefs
	Contextual conditions	Social and cultural pressures	Fear of judgments of others Fear of the label of divorced Maintaining the family's reputation Patriarchal ideas of society
		Personal and psychological characteristics	Fear of abandonment and being alone Low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy Dependence on spouse
		Legal constraints on women	Difficulty in proving the husband's betrayal in court Not having the right to divorce Legal obstacles to getting custody of a child
	Intervening conditions	Financial and economic issues	Financial dependence on spouse Inability to afford life expenses after divorce
		Type of spouse's betrayal	The asexuality of infidelity Superficial and overnight betrayal
		The support of the spouse's family	The sympathy of the spouse's family Feelings of belonging to the spouse's family The intervention of the spouse's family

1. *Causal conditions*

1.1. The presence of children

Most of the participants who had children mentioned the presence of children as one of the most important factors in staying in the relationship after the disclosure of their spouse's infidelity. The presence of a child can force women who were betrayed to stay in a relationship in various ways, including maternal affection, the age of the child,

worrying about the future of the child, staying at the child's request, and fearing of a child growing up by a stepparent

1.2. Affection for the spouse

The analysis of the data showed that another factor in deciding to stay after the disclosure of the infidelity of the spouse was affection for the spouse. In describing their reasons for staying, some participants mentioned concepts such as experiencing a pleasant relationship before revealing the infidelity of the spouse, and a marriage based on love.

1.3. Spouse's trust-building behaviors

The findings showed that one of the reasons for staying in the relationship was that they realized that their husbands wanted to continue the relationship and regret about what they did. The manifestation of this desire could be seen in trust-building and compensatory behaviors, including verbal and non-verbal expressions of regret and apology to the spouse, termination of the relationship of the spouse with the third person, spouse confidence building through behavior change, and spouse trust building through changing the betrayal context.

1.4. Lack of family support

One of the important functions of any family is its support function. In fact, families as an important source of support protect their members (i.e., emotional and financial support) against problems and hardships. Some participants mentioned the lack of support from their family through concepts such as parents' death, opposition and blame of parents for separation, fear of returning to one's father's house, and lack of family finances.

1.5. Mutual infidelity

The findings showed that one of the reasons which forced women to decide to stay in a relationship could be the experience of unrevealed infidelity which they had before.

1.6. Attitudes and beliefs

The findings showed that one of the strongest factors that played a significant role in betrayed women's staying in a relationship was the type of beliefs and attitudes they had toward their spouse's behaviors. Beliefs and attitudes that the participants mentioned in their statements were blaming one-self and justifying one's husband, permissive attitudes toward sexual affairs, belief in the ability to change the spouse and repairability of the relationship, belief in the superiority of environmental conditions over the spouse in case of infidelity, and religious beliefs.

2. Contextual conditions

2.1. Social and cultural pressures

Social and cultural pressures on betrayed women were among the most important underlying reasons which made the betrayed women decide to stay in the relationship. In their interviews, the participants mentioned pressures such as fear of judgments of others, fear of the label of divorce, maintaining the family's reputation, and patriarchal ideas of society.

2.2. Personality and psychological characteristics

The findings showed that the personality and psychological characteristics of the betrayed women could provide the basis for them to stay in the relationship. Among these characteristics, we can refer to the fear of abandonment and being alone, low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy, and dependence on a spouse.

2.3. Legal constraints on women

The findings showed that legal restrictions were one of the most important underlying reasons which made the betrayed women stay in the relationship with an unfaithful spouse despite their desires. The participants pointed out the limitations of separation, including the difficulty of proving the husband's betrayal in court, not having the right to divorce, and
legal obstacles to getting custody of a child.

3. Intervening conditions

3.1. Financial and economic issues

The results of the study showed that along with the causal and contextual conditions discussed, the financial and economic problems faced by betrayed women were among the most important factors which could increase the probability of betrayed women staying in the relationship. In other words, conditions such as financial dependence on one's spouse and the inability to afford life expenses after separation were among the facilitating factors which could increase the probability of the betrayed women's staying in a relationship.

3.2. Type of spouse's betrayal

The type of infidelity of the spouse was one of the other intervening conditions that affected the decision of the betrayed women to stay or leave the relationship.

3.3. The support of the spouse's family

The support provided by the husband's family was another facilitating factor that offered better conditions for the betrayed women to stay in the relationship after the disclosure of their husband's infidelity. Among these factors, we can refer to the sympathy of the spouse's family, feelings of belonging to the spouse's family, and the intervention of the spouse's family.

Conclusion

The findings of the current study, which was conducted to investigate the factors affecting staying in the relationship after the disclosure of the spouse's infidelity showed that the women who experienced infidelity were affected by the causal conditions such as the presence of children (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Rafeie et al., 2017; Shirzadeh & Kazemifar, 2005), affection for the spouse, spouse's trust-building behaviors (Marín et al., 2014; Olson et al., 2002), lack of family support (Dehle & Landers, 2005), mutual infidelity, and attitudes and beliefs (Bracher et al. al., 1993; Naidoo, 2013). In addition, the findings of the present study showed that social and cultural pressures (Yuan & Weiser, 2019), personality and psychological characteristics, and legal constraints on women were among the conditions that forced the betrayed women to stay in the relationship with an unfaithful spouse.

Moreover, the results showed that conditions such as financial and economic issues, the type of infidelity of the spouse, and the support of the spouse's family affected the causal conditions, and increased the probability of the main theme of " staying after spousal infidelity disclosure". With regard to the financial and economic issues, the participants referred to the financial dependence on the spouse and the inability to afford life expenses after separation. Alimondegari et al. (2016) also found that there was a direct relationship between women's financial independence and their willingness to divorce. Moreover, the current research is in line with the studies of Shackelford et al. (2002) and Gunderson and Ferrari (2008) which showed that if the spouse's infidelity was non-sexual or one-night stand, there was a greater possibility that the betrayed women stay in the relationship.

One of the limitations of this study was the reliance on the reports of women Who were betrayed; however, there was no interview with their husbands. This issue could affect the findings of the study. Furthermore, since the present research was conducted qualitatively in Kerman, its results cannot be generalized to other contexts. Therefore, it is suggested that future research studies examine both the betrayed women and their husbands. In addition, further studies can replicate this study in other contexts. In addition, it is suggested that further studies investigate the men who were betrayed and stayed in the relationship after the disclosure of their wives' infidelity. Finally, the results of this research and similar research studies can be used by counselors and psychologists to design infidelity intervention packages.

Conflict of interest

No conflicts of interest were declared by the authors.

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