

Model for predicting attitude towards infidelity based on the quality of marital relations, sexual functioning in married women: the mediating role of the empathy model

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This research was conducted to predict the attitude towards infidelity based on the quality of marital relations and sexual functioning in married women: the mediating role of empathy.

Methods and Materials: The descriptive research method was correlation type. The statistical population of the present study included all married women in Najaf Abad city in 2020, and 225 of these women were selected by random cluster sampling and the Whatley Attitude Toward Infidelity Scale (ATIS; 2006), Busby's Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS; 1995), Rosen et al.'s Female Sexual Function Index (FSFI; 2000), and Jolliffe and Farrington's Basic Empathy Scale (BES; 2006) were completed. Data analysis was done by structural equation modeling, and SPSS version 25 and Amos version 23 software were used for this purpose.

Findings: Data analysis showed a negative and significant relationship ($p < 0.01$) between the quality of marital relations, sexual functioning and empathy with the attitude towards marital infidelity. Also, the results showed an indirect and significant relationship between the quality of marital relations and sexual functioning with attitude through empathy ($p < 0.01$).

Conclusion: This research showed that the quality of marital relations and sexual functioning explains the attitude towards cheating based on the mediating role of empathy, and the research model has a favorable fit. The findings of this research can be used by experts in mental health to improve couples' relationships.

Keywords: *Quality of marital relations, sexual functioning, attitude towards betrayal, empathy.*

1. Introduction

The family's most important function is to create security and mental peace for the family members. Therefore, it can be said that the family is a protective factor against all kinds of hardships and dangers and is a supporter and a haven for its members in any situation (Aman et al.,

2021; Pirzadeh & Parsakia, 2023). However, the family, like other social institutions, is not immune from various damages and may face various problems and hardships during its lifetime (Weiser et al., 2023). Meanwhile, breach of contract is one of the most serious harms that couples face in their marriage (Swets & Cox, 2023). Although some

couples consider themselves committed to the marital relationship at the beginning of their life together, their commitment may not be enough to withstand the storms caused by life's adversities (Safitri & Supratman, 2022). The *attitude towards marital infidelity* can be defined as a relatively stable set of beliefs, feelings and behavioral tendencies towards establishing a physical or emotional relationship or a combination of the two with someone outside the marital relationship (Brewer, Guothova, & Tsivilis, 2023). In other words, the person has a favorable evaluation of marital infidelity. Therefore, people with a positive attitude towards marital infidelity consider this issue favorable and are more inclined to commit marital infidelity. As a result, they are more likely to be involved in extramarital relationships (Luo & Yu, 2022).

One of the main factors that play a significant role in the success or failure of a marriage is the *quality of the marital relationship* (Viegas, D'Silva, & Henriques, 2023). The quality of marital relations is essential to life and expresses well-being, health and stability in marriage (Chiang & Bai, 2022). The quality of marital relations is a multidimensional concept and includes positive aspects such as support and satisfaction, negative aspects such as conflicts and the possibility of marital separation (Barton et al., 2022). According to the theory of Fincham and Bradbury (2000), the quality of marital relations and the level of happiness depends on how husband and wife interact and how they deal with stressful life situations (Fincham & May, 2017). In general, studies have shown that various factors affect the quality of marital relationships (Wang & Zhao, 2023).

Research conducted on the factors related to marital infidelity shows that sexual issues are among the most important issues of couples in terms of importance (Ferreira et al., 2023). One factor influencing infidelity is *sexual functioning* between couples (Wiese & Emmers-Sommer, 2023). Sexual functioning is one of the most critical issues that affects a person's individual and social life before anything else (Vowels, Vowels, & Mark, 2022). The cause of many mental disturbances, moral slips and extramarital relationships is related to sexual mixing (Pavarini et al., 2023). Peri-Rotem et al. (2023) concluded that there is a two-way relationship between sexual satisfaction and marital satisfaction, in such a way that couples who have a good sexual relationship and are satisfied with their sexual relationship with their spouse have higher satisfaction with their lives (Peri-Rotem & Skirbekk, 2023). *Empathy* is another influential factor in cheating (Peng et al., 2023). Empathy is a multidimensional construct for which

researchers have used several definitions. Researchers have a relative agreement about its two dimensions (Hittner & Haase, 2021); "cognitive dimension", the ability to understand and understand the feelings of others and "emotional dimension", sharing in the feelings of others and experiencing them (Gazder & Stanton, 2023). Empathy with the spouse is understanding the spouse's heart feelings so that internal emotions and feelings are understood (Castro Jaramillo & Panhofer, 2022). Empathy helps a person to accept and respect other people even when they are different from him, and it is one of the important emotional abilities whose signs and manifestations begin in early childhood (Hollan, 2023). Empathy, as a personality trait and ability, provides the necessary conditions to pay attention to many phenomena and has lasting effects on marital relationships (Brassard et al., 2022). The results of many studies show the relationship between empathy and the quality of marital relationships and the relationship between empathy and sexual functioning. Also, the relationship between empathy and attitude toward marital infidelity has been proven in other studies and the relationship between sexual functioning and attitude towards cheating has also been confirmed (Besharat et al., 2011; Dalokay & Aydin, 2023; Darwiche et al., 2022; Ferdosi, 2019; Hittner & Haase, 2021; Kyranides, Lu, & Ten Seldam, 2023; Luo & Yu, 2022; Pavarini et al., 2023; Peng, Patterson, & Wang, 2023; Peri-Rotem & Skirbekk, 2023; Şerban, Salvati, & Enea, 2022; Vowels, Vowels, & Mark, 2022; Wang, Zou, & Liu, 2023).

Considering that few studies have examined the role of marital relationship quality, sexual functioning and empathy in predicting the attitude toward infidelity, it is vital to investigate the factors and solutions that affect the attitude toward marital infidelity in couples. Undoubtedly, any action to improve married life must know the factors affecting it. In general, the importance of the current research can be summarized in the following points: So far, no research has focused on modeling the structural equations of the attitude towards infidelity based on the quality of marital relations and sexual functioning with the mediation of empathy in women. The results of this research can be used to use the educational framework to increase the quality of married life. Conducting this research can be an effective step toward conducting more research in this field. Therefore, the current research aims to predict the attitude towards cheating based on the quality of marital relations and sexual functioning in married women: the mediating role of empathy.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This descriptive research was correlational type and cross-sectional in terms of data collection time. Its statistical population included all married women in Najaf Abad city in 2020. In this research, an available sampling method was used. The target sample was calculated based on the opinion of Kline (2011) who considers the number of samples based on the sample size ratio to the parameter, which is considered at least 20 to 1 in the structural equations (Kline, 2011). Accordingly, 225 people were selected as a sample. The inclusion criteria were the age range of 25 to 45 years, having an education level of at least a diploma, not applying for a divorce, and being willing to participate in the research. The exclusion criterion was leaving 5% of the questions unanswered. At the beginning of each questionnaire, a complete description of how to answer the questions was given, and the confidentiality of the results and the lack of influence of the information on the personal and social lives of the participants were confirmed.

2.2. Measures

The Whatley Attitude Toward Infidelity Scale (ATIS; 2006), Busby's Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS; 1995), Rosen et al.'s Female Sexual Function Index (FSFI; 2000), and Jolliffe and Farrington's Basic Empathy Scale (BES; 2006) were used to collect data.

2.2.1. Attitude toward infidelity

ATIS was compiled by Whatley in 2008. It has 12 items and is scored on a 7-point Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The psychometric analysis of Whatley (2008) on the participants showed that the internal consistency of this questionnaire is 0.89 using Cronbach's alpha method. Also, the validity of the questionnaire was checked with the correlation method of the total score question, and the correlation coefficients between 0.075 and 0.78 were positive and significant at the 0.05 level, indicating the questionnaire's validity (Whatley, 2008). Cronbach's alpha reported in the present study is also 0.96.

2.2.2. Quality of marital relationship

RDAS was created by Busby et al. in 1995 and includes 14 items and three subscales that are scored on a 6-point Likert scale. Examining the psychometric properties of this

scale, its high internal consistency evaluated by Cronbach's alpha has been shown between 0.80 and 0.90. The retest reliability after 2 weeks was 0.795 and for three years it was 0.81, which shows that this questionnaire has good reliability. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis was used to check the validity of the scale (Busby et al., 1995). Iranian researchers showed that this test consists of three dimensions and the factor load of each question on the relevant factor is higher than 0.40. Also, Cronbach's alpha was reported as 0.86 (Isanezhad, 2010). Cronbach's alpha reported in the present study was also reported as 0.91.

2.2.3. Sexual Functioning

FFSI was created by Rosen and his colleagues in 2000 and has 19 items and 6 subscales. This tool is graded using a 6-point Likert scale from 0 to five. Investigating the psychometric properties of this scale, its high internal consistency evaluated by Cronbach's alpha has been shown between 0.80 and 0.90. Retest reliability after 3 months was 0.71, which shows that this questionnaire has good reliability. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis was used to check the validity of the scale. The research results showed that this test consists of 6 dimensions and the factor loading of each question on the relevant factor is higher than 0.43 (Rosen, 2000). Cronbach's alpha reported in the present study was also reported as 0.836.

2.2.4. Empathy

BES has 20 items that are scored on a 5-point Likert scale. This scale has two factors, cognitive empathy and emotional empathy. In Jolliffe and Farrington's (2006) study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the empathy scale was 0.66 for the whole scale and 0.79 and 0.85 for the cognitive and emotional subscales, respectively. They used the method of exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis to check the validity of the scale. The results of their research showed that this test consists of two dimensions and the factor loading of each question on the relevant factor is higher than 0.45 (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006). Cronbach's alpha reported in the present study is also 0.92.

2.3. Data analysis

Data analysis was done by structural equation modeling, and SPSS version 25 and Amos version 23 software were used for this purpose.

3. Findings and Results

In this research, the sample size was 225 people. The mean±standard deviation of the participant's age was 39.8 ±

5.15. The results of descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlations are presented in [Table 1](#).

Table 1

Results of Pearson correlation test and descriptive statistics

| Var. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 |
|------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|---------|---------|--------|------|
| 1 | 1 | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2 | 0.20** | 1 | | | | | | | | | |
| 3 | 0.24** | 0.097 | 1 | | | | | | | | |
| 4 | 0.24** | 0.193** | 0.102 | 1 | | | | | | | |
| 5 | -0.28** | -0.196** | -0.19** | -0.37** | 1 | | | | | | |
| 6 | 0.39** | 0.29** | 0.36** | -0.32** | -0.32** | 1 | | | | | |
| 7 | 0.43** | 0.22** | 0.30** | 0.48** | -0.41** | 0.34** | 1 | | | | |
| 8 | 0.25** | 0.24** | 0.23** | 0.20** | -0.33** | 0.19** | 0.23** | 1 | | | |
| 9 | -0.12** | -0.19** | -0.21** | -0.17** | -0.20** | -0.44** | -0.25** | -0.30** | 1 | | |
| 10 | 0.31** | 0.34** | 0.41** | 0.48** | 0.30** | 0.28** | 0.31** | 0.25** | -0.33** | 1 | |
| 11 | 0.26** | 0.23** | 0.23** | 0.192** | 0.33** | 0.20** | 0.23** | 0.24** | -0.25** | 0.26** | 1 |
| 12 | -0.436** | -0.342** | -0.419** | -0.482** | -0.302** | -0.228** | -0.436** | 0.23** | -0.33** | | |
| M | 20.5 | 26.8 | 29.6 | 34.1 | 45.6 | 25.5 | 23.8 | 9.33 | 31.7 | 35.8 | 33.2 |
| SD | 3.01 | 3.95 | 4.21 | 3.65 | 6.78 | 3.39 | 3.56 | 2.22 | 4.53 | 4.61 | 4.34 |
| K | 0.32 | 0.45 | -0.73 | 0.65 | 0.83 | 1.13 | -0.15 | -0.43 | -0.51 | 0.65 | 0.59 |
| S | 0.81 | 0.69 | -0.24 | 0.80 | 1.23 | 0.86 | -0.68 | 0.21 | 0.42 | 0.44 | 0.81 |

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; 1= Consensus; 2= Satisfaction; 3= Cohesion; 4= Desire; 5= Arousal; 6= Lubrication; 7= Orgasm; 8= Satisfaction (Sexual); 9= Pain; 10= Cognitive empathy; 11= Emotional empathy; 12= Attitude toward infidelity; M= Mean; SD= Standard Deviation; K= Kurtosis; S= Skewness

The results of the correlation matrix show that there is a significant correlation between the variables of the model. For example, the relationship between observability and death anxiety (0.20) is negative and significant at 0.01. This finding shows that with decreasing observability scores, death anxiety increases and vice versa; other relationships can also be interpreted in this way. Also, the mean and standard deviation indices to check the assumption of normality of one variable indicate the proper dispersion of the data and the skewness and elongation indices, which are in the range of ±1.96 indicate the normal distribution of the

data ([Table 1](#)). Also, Durbin-Watson's test was used to check the assumption of independence of errors, and its value was 2.04, which was in the acceptable range of 1.5 to 2.5. Also, the tolerance coefficient and variance inflation factor were used to check the non-collinearity between the predictor variables of the research. The results showed no tolerance less than 0.10 and VIF greater than 10 for the predictor variables, which indicates that the assumption of non-collinearity between the variables is met. According to the validity of the presuppositions, the research model was examined, presented in [Figure 1](#).

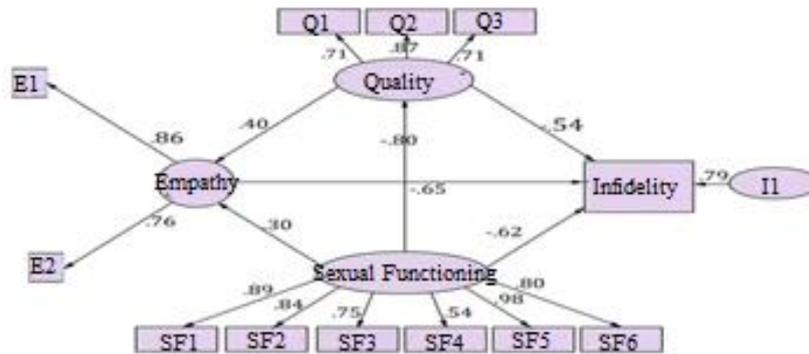


Figure 1

Final model with path coefficients

Table 2

Direct Effects

| Path | Non-standard coefficient | | t | p |
|--|--------------------------|---------|-------|-------|
| | b | β | | |
| Sexual functioning ---> Relationship quality | -0.414 | -0.80 | -11.7 | 0.001 |
| Relationship quality ---> Empathy | 0.398 | 0.40 | 5.61 | 0.001 |
| Sexual functioning ---> Empathy | 0.433 | 0.30 | 3.45 | 0.001 |
| Sexual functioning ---> Infidelity | -0.402 | -0.62 | -10.8 | 0.001 |
| Empathy ---> Infidelity | -0.370 | -0.65 | -11.2 | 0.001 |
| Relationship quality ---> Infidelity | -0.220 | -0.54 | -9.83 | 0.001 |

The quality of marital relationships has a negative effect on the attitude towards infidelity with the coefficient (-0.54), the sexual functioning of women with the attitude towards marital infidelity with the coefficient (-0.62) and empathy with the attitude towards marital infidelity (-0.65); Also, sexual functioning directly affects the quality of marital relations (-0.80), women's sexual functioning has a positive effect on empathy (0.30). The quality of marital relations positively affects empathy (0.40). The value of the coefficient of determination shows that the paths of women's sexual functioning, marital empathy and the quality of marital relations to the attitude towards infidelity simultaneously explain 69.3% of the variable variance of the attitude towards infidelity (Figure 1). In the Table 2 and Table 3, direct and indirect routes are reported.

Table 2 shows that the direct effect of the quality of marital relations, women's sexual functioning and empathy on the attitude towards marital infidelity is significant and negative ($p < 0.05$). Also, the direct effect of sexual functioning on marital relationship quality is negative and significant, and sexual functioning and marital relationship quality on empathy is also significant and positive ($p < 0.05$).

Table 3

Indirect effects

| Mediator: Empathy | Functioning | Quality | |
|-------------------|--------------|---------|--------|
| Infidelity | Non-standard | -0.551 | -1.373 |
| | Standard | -0.489 | -1.362 |

The results of investigating the indirect effects (Table 3) also show that women's sexual functioning and the quality of marital relationships indirectly affect the attitude towards marital infidelity. This finding shows that empathy mediates the relationship between women's sexual functioning and the quality of marital relationships with attitudes toward infidelity.

Table 4

The result of fit model tests

| Index | X ² /df | RMSEA | GFI | CFI | NFI | AGFI |
|----------|--------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Value | 2.86 | 0.061 | 0.91 | 0.97 | 0.94 | 0.88 |
| Approval | < 3 | < 0.80 | > 0.90 | > 0.90 | > 0.90 | > 0.85 |

According to Table 4, it can be concluded that the tested research model is a good fit.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of the present study was to predict the attitude towards infidelity based on the quality of marital relations and sexual functioning in married women: the mediating role of empathy. The findings of the present study showed that the quality of marital relations has a negative and significant relationship with the attitude towards infidelity in married women, which is in line with the findings of some previous studies (Barton et al., 2022; Swets & Cox, 2023). It can be acknowledged that if the quality of marital relations is at a desirable level and couples feel that they can rely on each other to satisfy their needs and enjoy their relationship, it will strengthen their physical and mental connection. When the need for intimacy and value between husband and wife is satisfied, they feel the need for each other, and couples support each other during their relationship and when problems arise. Couples always try to have a healthy relationship without discomfort. Due to a lack of necessary skills, they experience a relationship devoid of intimacy (Darwiche et al., 2022). If the quality of marital relations declines during the couple's communication, the energy of love turns into annoyance and anger and can cause the formation of marital infidelity among them (Viegas, D'Silva, & Henriques, 2023). To have a healthy relationship, it is very important to have high-quality marital relationships (Chiang & Bai, 2022). When positive emotions and affection are expressed between spouses, it leads to intimacy, and when the relationship is intimate, the relationship is strengthened; But when communication is defensive, cold and emotionless, the relationship weakens and the possibility of marital infidelity increases (Wang, Zou, & Liu, 2023; Wang & Zhao, 2023).

The findings of the research revealed that there is a negative and significant relationship between sexual functioning and attitude towards cheating. This finding is consistent with the results of some researchers (Brewer, Guothova, & Tsvivilis, 2023; Şerban, Salvati, & Enea, 2022; Vowels, Vowels, & Mark, 2022). In the current explanation, it can be said: sexual instinct is one of human needs, so that Maslow placed this need in the category of physical needs or basic vital needs. This instinct itself is a kind of pleasant pull that brings men and women to marriage and ensures the survival and continuity of the family (Pavarini et al., 2023). In addition to physical needs, a person can relax morally,

intellectually, and psychologically in the shadow of satisfying sexual desire. Therefore, having satisfaction with sexual life and sexual functioning in couples plays an important role in their lives (Ferreira et al., 2023). Women who are satisfied with their sexual life experience the satisfaction of their needs with their husbands, and their expectations of themselves and their husbands increase, and they have a positive evaluation of their sexual life. Such women who fully experience sexual satisfaction will not turn to the world outside the family to meet their needs and will not tend to commit marital infidelity (Peri-Rotem & Skirbekk, 2023). Therefore, on this basis, it is logical to say that sexual satisfaction and sexual functioning predict the attitude toward marital infidelity in married women.

Also, the results of this research showed that there is a negative and significant relationship between empathy and attitudes toward infidelity. This finding is in line with the results of some researchers (Dalokay & Aydin, 2023; Henderson et al., 2023; Kyranides, Lu, & Ten Seldam, 2023; Wen et al., 2022). In fact, high empathy in the relationship leads to high self-confidence, striving for excellence and victory in life, optimism, resilience and tolerance of problems and tribulations in married life (Gazder & Stanton, 2023). Also, empathy is considered as a protective factor against psychological distress (Hittner & Haase, 2021). Therefore, it is considered a strong protective shield in the relationship between couples, and its relationship with the attitude toward marital infidelity is negative (Peng, Patterson, & Wang, 2023).

Also, this research showed a significant relationship between the quality of marital relations and women's sexual functioning and the attitude towards infidelity among married women with the mediating role of marital empathy. The present study's results align with some previous studies (Luo & Yu, 2022; Navabinejad, Rostami, & Parsakia, 2023). In explaining the sexual functioning of women and the attitude towards cheating in married women, it can be said that love and affection, feelings and satisfaction from the relationships in life are necessary for the health of the family and satisfaction from sexual relationships brings warmth and passion to life for couples. Some state that dissatisfaction with sexual functioning is closely related to divorce and social problems such as crimes, sexual assaults, or mental illnesses (Safitri & Supratman, 2022). For a good married life, proper motivation and sexual tact are the main factors that turn couples into a unit in the form of a bond. Even if a couple has different or opposing opinions, they can have a stable life together by having sexual compatibility (Brewer,

Guothova, & Tsivilis, 2023). In fact, a sexual relationship should go beyond a physical one and become an emotional one. Therefore, satisfaction from sexual relations directly correlates with satisfaction from joint life, and failure in one will disrupt the other (Luo & Yu, 2022).

5. Limitations and Suggestions

This research has also been associated with limitations, which can be pointed out using the available sampling method. This method can influence the results and affect the external validity of the research. Therefore, the impact of this problem can be reduced by using random sampling methods. The current research was limited to married women, which makes it difficult to generalize it to other groups. Therefore, it is also suggested to conduct the present research on other groups. Also, this model can be examined

with other mediating variables to understand the attitude towards infidelity better.

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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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