



Lived Experience of Women in Response to Their Husband's Infidelity: A Descriptive Phenomenological Study

Abbas Amanelahi^{*1} Reza Sarvestani²

Zabihollah Abbaspour³ Hamid Farhadirad⁴

1. Associate Professor, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Ahvaz, Iran (Corresponding Author)
2. MA in Family Counseling, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Ahvaz, Iran
3. Associate Professor, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Ahvaz, Iran.
4. Associate Professor, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Ahvaz, Iran

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ABSTRACT

Infidelity is an important matter in marital relationships and it has undesired and deleterious outcomes for family institution. The aim of this study was to investigate the lived experience of women in response to their husband's. The qualitative design of descriptive-phenomenological method has been used to collect and evaluate the data on response to spouse's infidelity in marital life. Nine female participants were recruited using purposive sampling method and the data collecting was administered using semi-structured interviews until reaching to theoretical saturation. The data analysis showed 13 contributing components of women's lived experience in response to husband infidelity which include women's lived experience in response to husband infidelity which include: self-harm, deciding to end the relationship and separation, threatening husband to mutual infidelity, disruption of normal routines of everyday life, loss of belief in being unique, feeling inferior and humiliated, disbelief in religious beliefs and justice in the world, losing self-confidence, losing touch with the outside world, attributing to oneself, distrust of the world, losing the meaning of life, aggression and quarreling. The results showed that women who experience the infidelity of their spouse experience different reactions, these reactions are based on internal experiences and external reactions towards the spouse. Therefore, considering the effect of marital infidelity on the person and the relationship, it is necessary to know and understand these reactions.

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¹Correspondence: A.Amanelahi@scu.ac.ir

Introduction

Infidelity appears to be universal, and some people cheat on their partners in all cultures (Fisher, 2017; Josephs, 2018). However, unfaithful spouses do not always manage to hide and are often detected (Apostolou & Ioannidou, 2021; Apostolou & Demosthenous, 2021). Dealing with infidelity is an almost common phenomenon; the prevalence of these events in different studies has been reported from 26 to 92% for males and at a range of 17 to 87% for females (Norris, 1992). Reacting to stressors and traumatic factors to different issues in family is almost different. Each family therapist may encounter with the clients who want to cope with these stressful and unusual factors; the therapist who are dealt with couples and families affected by these psychological traumas have always been witnessed the penetration and influence of these traumatic events on the system of interpersonal relationships (Donald, 2004). For example, the women who were informed of their cancer were first shocked and then experienced anxiety and distress, and most of them developed severe mental disorders such as depression and psychiatric disorders (Donald, 2004). Infidelity can be a disruptive event in a romantic relationship with a devastating impact on both partners' well-being (Vowels et al., 2021).

The betrayed people showed reactions such as denial, rage, talkativeness, or emotions such as self-blame, guilt, and responsibility, as well as mental rumination about the loss (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Another traumatic and stressful phenomenon the family therapists are dealt with is the growing issue of infidelity. Although infidelity is a common problem for couples, dealing with that is one of the most difficult and challenging problems (Atwood & Seifer, 1997). Various causes can lead people to infidelity, including curiosity, variety-seeking, the motivation to experience, struggling with inefficiency and gaining self-confidence, entertainment, escaping from reality, revenge, and sexual curiosity (Glasser & Glasser, 2010). According to Glasser (Harris, 2003), couples begin their life with love, but gradually they realize that the initial intimacy is faded and the romantic life is ended or continues with blame and monotony. The couples turn to infidelity to experience intimacy and love again. According to Harris (Bird et al., 2007), women express a sense of



emotional disconnection from their partner and dissatisfaction with their relationship with partner as the main cause of infidelity while sexual attractions are the main cause of infidelity for men. After physical violence, infidelity is the most harmful and destructive event in marriage, which can lead to harm to both parties involved in the fidelity, and finally to separation (Lusterman, 2005). When the person is informed of her/his spouse's infidelity, s/he feels anger, shame, feelings of hurt and loss, jealousy, deception, fear, and mistrust (Humphrey, 2013).

Initial reactions to disclosure of infidelity include trauma (shock), anger, and denial (Spring, 2012). The studies showed that the people affected by marital infidelity often have strong emotions ranging from anger towards the infidel spouse and inner feelings of embarrassment, depression, and a sense of victimhood (Aminiha et al., 2015; Brown, 2013; Gordon et al., 2004). Men are more upset over a mate's sexual infidelity than women, whereas women are more upset over a mate's emotional infidelity than men (Buss, 2018). Men are more likely to engage in sexual infidelity (Labrecque & Whisman (2017) whereas women may be more likely to engage in emotional infidelity (Selterman, et al., 2019).

The high costs of infidelity cause women to show strong anger and jealousy in response to infidelity, and ultimately these reactions lead to the use of physical violence or ending the relationship (Buss, 2021). Infidelity can be one of the most important factors that lead women to divorce (Apostolou et al., 2019).

The couples use different strategies and reactions after that the spouse's infidelity is discovered. The studies have shown that both parties show a wide range of negative emotions such as rage, frustration, guilt, and inefficiency after the revelation of spouse's infidelity, and some spouses turn to Allah (Drigotas et al., 1999). Shackelford et al. (2000) identified 15 emotional reactions to infidelity: Undesirable/Insecure, Hostile/Vengeful, Depressed, Helpless/Abandoned, Happy, Shocked, Nauseated/Repulsed, Blameworthy, Content/Relieved, Humiliated, sexually aroused, Tired, Homicidal/Suicidal, Anxious, Forgiving.

The revelation of spousal infidelity threatens the physical, psychological, and emotional well-being of both spouses, and violence, murder, and suicide have been reported in these cases (Momeni Javid & Shoakazemi, 2011b).

Answering to the questions of the betrayed spouse and discussing the details of the matter and paying attention to the betrayed spouse's reactions to the infidelity increases the likelihood of recovering and preventing the possible dangers of re-infidelity. The more responsive the unfaithful spouse is, the better the quality of the marital relationship will be and the sooner the betrayed spouse will be recovered (Allen & Baucom, 2004). In different types of extramarital relationships (sexual-emotional), men and women react differently (Spring, 2012). In general, women try more to recover their relationship while men tend to end it and look for a replacement; women attribute their husbands' illegitimate relationship to their own incompetence and men to their sexual incompetence (Nadler & Dotan, 1992). When a woman is betrayed, she is more likely to strive to recover the relationship, partly due to this fact that she has been learned in the community to make others pleased and deprive herself. Another reason women try to save their relationships is that they think the only option they will have is living lonely, and this is what they are afraid of (McGrathEllen 1990). According to the National Working Group of the American Association (DePaulo et al., 1993), women are twice as likely as men to suffer from clinical depression after discovering their husbands' affairs; because, first, they tend to criticize themselves more than others, second, women define themselves based on their relationship with others and equate their worth with being loved. Women are more likely than men to become obsessed with their husbands' illegitimate relationship and focus on their husbands' deception and lies, and recall the details of their husbands' infidelity, and thus, the pain of mistrust never goes away (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Apostolou et al (2022) employed quantitative research methods on a sample of 757 Greek-speaking participants, and classified these reactions into 17 broad factors. Among the most probable reactions, were experiencing negative emotions, terminating the relationship, keeping physical distance from the unfaithful partner, and getting more information about the incident.



Amani et al. (2020) examined the experience of women affected by infidelity, and reported three main themes: increased life problems, psychological distress, and disrupted communication functions. Rasoulzadeh Aghdam et al. (2021) reported two themes of destructive behaviors and corrective behaviors of spouses reported by betrayed women. Morsali et al. (2018) reported four main themes in women's forgiveness of spouse infidelity: self-focused factors, spouse-focused factors, relationship-focused factors, and external-focused factors. Accordingly, spousal infidelity is a traumatic experience for women and can cause many problems for them. After experiencing infidelity, women report different inner experiences and engage in different behaviors.

Given cultural issues, Iranian women's internal experiences and external behaviors in response to their husband's infidelity can be different from the experiences of women in other cultures. Moreover, the studies conducted in Iran have less focused on women's deep inner experiences and their psychological reactions. These inner experiences and behaviors based on them play a major role in women's adaptation after trauma. To this end, this study seeks to deeply investigate women's inner experiences and behaviors in response to their husband's infidelity. Thus, the following question is addressed in this study what is the experience of women affected by husband's infidelity and how do they express their experiences?

Methods

Study Design and participants

This research was a phenomenological research design. The participants in the research were selected from among the betrayed women who had referred to Ahvaz city counseling centers and those who responded positively to the research call after conducting the initial interview. The criteria for entering the research include 1- Marriage, 2- Experience of emotional and sexual infidelity of the spouse in the last 1 year, 3- Living in Ahvaz city, Education at least diploma and 5- Willingness to participate in the research. The exclusion criteria were: 1- Having psychological disorders

The researcher interviewed with women with experience of husband's infidelity, and the interviews continued until reaching data saturation. It should be noted that all interviews were recorded on tape, then carefully transcribed on paper and matched with the recorded information. The research design was qualitative. According to Husserl's phenomenological views, Giorgi (Giorgi, 2009) determined the analytical stages used in this study to investigate the experience of betrayed women. These stages included exact transcription of the interviews and reading the texts of the interviews for several times to gain the meaning of the whole, identifying the semantic units with a phenomenological attitude, transferring the meanings from the participants' natural language to psychological meaning. Finally, the researcher used the imagination-based change technique to combine the

Table 1. the participants' demographic information

NO	AGE	Education	Duration of marriage	Occupation	Number of children
1	40	Bachelor's degree	19	Housewife	2
2	37	Master's degree	14	Employed	3
3	29	Master's degree	6	Employed	-
4	25	Diploma	4	Housewife	1
5	32	Diploma	8	Housewife	1
6	36	Diploma	7	Employed	-
7	43	Bachelor's degree	17	Employed	2
8	34	Bachelor's degree	9	Housewife	-
9	35	Bachelor's degree	16	Housewife	1

semantic units into a whole (Cano & O'Leary, 2000), indicating the final structure of the participants' experience of husband's infidelity. The participants in the present study were women with the experience of husband's



infidelity, who participated in this study at the invitation of the researcher. The sampling method was purposeful. The participants were 9 women, as determined based on data saturation criteria. The participants' mean age and marital life duration was 33.7 years old and 10.6 years, respectively. The interviewed were performed using semi-structured interviews. The interview time for each participant was about 1 hour.

Data Analysis

The researcher attempted to analyze the data obtained from the interviews with the participants on their experience of husband's infidelity according to the descriptive phenomenological stages proposed by Giorgi.(2009) To this end, the researcher carefully transcribed the recorded interviews. Then, the transcriptions were read for many times to get a meaning of the whole. In this point, the researcher attempted to avoid the influence of the assumptions on the participants' descriptions, and constantly used the process of bracketing. Reading the interviews helped the researcher to recognize the moment of data saturation; so that no duplicate information was obtained. Then, the researcher extracted the semantic unit of each interview on the reaction to husband's infidelity, and put a slash to divide the semantic unit for each participant. In this point, the researcher had descriptive phenomenological attitude and tried to consider the influence of assumptions and remain more faithful to the participants' natural language in reacting to husband's infidelity. In the next stage, the researcher used imagination-based change technique to transfer the semantic units of the reaction to husband's infidelity from the participants' natural language to the researcher's psychological language and combine the semantic units and express them in form of meaningful phrases of the reaction to husband's infidelity in wives with the experience of husband's infidelity. In the final stage of the study, the researcher tries to combine the meaningful phrases into an integrated structure and express then as the nature of the reaction to husband's infidelity in the context of marital life.

After coding the content of the interviews by the researcher, the extracted codes were given to three subject-matter experts and they were asked to independently determine the semantic units of the interviews. The semantic

units extracted by the researcher and three experts had a good agreement, confirming the validity of the coding scheme used in this study.

To ensure the credibility of the findings, the data collection and analysis procedures were performed accurately so that the readers can get a real understanding of the subject when reading the article. Moreover, the story notes were sent to the participants to read them and comment on the degree to which each story/narrative matched their case. The participants stated that they can recognize themselves in the story presented. Finally, with the progress of the research procedure, theoretical sampling was used. The extracted codes and categories were named based on the expressions or words used by the participants if they were adequately representative of the underlying themes.

Finding

The findings of this study on the lived experience of wife's reaction to husband's infidelity included 13 components that formed the general and final structure of this phenomenon in the participants' experience.

The first component: self-harm: The participants in this study mentioned that the pain and grief they experienced because of their husbands' infidelity led them to commit suicide and harm themselves. The participants who experienced marital infidelity described the experience so horrific and catastrophic that they even decided to commit suicide. *"When I discovered my husband's affairs, I became very angry and tried to suicide two or three times, and once I went on a bridge to fall, but other people stopped me"* (Participant 1).

The second component: deciding to end the relationship and separation: The participants expressed that they decided to end their marital life and get divorced. They told that there was no reason or motive to continue living with their husbands after their husbands' infidelity and asked for separation, and the love and affection that were the cause of living together all were disappeared and the husband's repeated infidelity brought them to the point in their lives that they could not stand relationship and decided to separate and leave their husband. *"I told myself that I was ready to have my belongings on*



my shoulders and live in the street, but I could no longer live with such a person. I cannot stay here and so, I separated" (Participant 6).

The third component: threatening husband to mutual infidelity: The participants in this study expressed that revenge and retaliatory action and having relationship with a man other than their husband was another reaction and consequence of their husbands' infidelity. They described their experience of husband's infidelity that they tried to do a retaliatory action and threatened their husband to have relationship with another man to harm him. This component was repeated in the literature. *"The moment I found out, I told him I wanted to kill him and cut his penis with a knife or tore his belly"* (Participant 3).

The fourth component: disruption of normal routines of everyday life: These components included the disruption of normal routines of the participants' everyday life and the effects the husband's infidelity had on wives' sleep, nutrition, and weight. Describing their experience of their husbands' infidelity, these participants stated that they couldn't sleep most nights and thought of what happened. They said that thought they spent most of their time in bed, they rarely slept and most of their little sleep was nightmare, and they talked to themselves in their sleep. They also expressed that their husbands' infidelity had a severe effect on the amount of food they ate. *"I was very sleep deprived and could not sleep at all. I also am too much. I couldn't control myself to eat less, so I became overweight"* (Participant 7).

The fifth component: loss of belief in being unique: The participants believed that the infidelity of their husband destroyed their belief in their husbands' love and that no one could make the husbands happy except them. They expressed that after their husbands' infidelity, they felt that not only were they not unique, but they became a person who lost the charm and sense of being loved. *"I used to spent all my time for my husband with all my heart and said to myself that he loved me as I loved him, but I found out that it was not true"* (Participant 7).

The sixth component: feeling inferior and humiliated: In general, the participants in this study, after experiencing husband's infidelity, sometimes experienced a feeling of extreme humiliation, so they saw themselves

strangely inferior to others. When they were in a group, they felt that others were more valuable to their husband, and they thought everyone was superior and better than them. When the participants in this study realized their husbands', secret relationship felt inferior and worthless since they saw that their husband spent more time and money for the third party. They considered themselves too inferior and weak. *"The most painful part of my husband's infidelity was that I saw how much he was spending much money for that woman, but I was beside him but he paid no attention to me"* (Participant 4).

The seventh component: disbelief in in religious beliefs and justice in the world: The belief of the participants, in this study, in order and justice in the world collapsed after realizing their husbands' infidelity. In fact, the presumption that they were a good human being and the universe was a safe and meaningful place had become a source of doubt for them. The participants expressed that they used to perform all religious rites and rituals, but after revelation of their husbands' infidelity, they lost their relationship with Allah because they thought they were not worthy of such bad behavior. They believed that if Allah had cared of them, He would not have left them in such a cruel world. The literature indicated this fact, too. *"I always complained to Allah because He did not help me and destroyed my dreams and did not treat me fairly. I no longer believe in Allah"* (Participant 8).

The eighth component: losing self-confidence: Losing self-confidence in the participants of this study was defined as inability to perform normal daily tasks and inability to perform activities that they used to do before engaging in marital extramarital affairs and began to change their appearance and clothing style. The participants expressed they lost their self-confidence after realizing their husbands' infidelity and felt that their husband was attracted to other women because they were not beautiful and did not have a fit body. *"I lost my self-confidence and cannot do the activities I used to do. I feel very bad about myself and sometimes I change my clothing style"* (Participant 2).

The ninth component: losing touch with the outside world: The participants mentioned the adverse effects of their husbands' extramarital affairs on their outside world. They expressed that they had limited contact with those around them and had no motive to go out after they realized their husbands' infidelity. They stated that they did not like going out anymore and



even had no contact with their family. They preferred to be alone and have no contact with others. They often lock themselves at home. *"I do not call anymore. I do not answer if somebody calls me. I do not answer my intimate friends' calls, and even I do not open the door for them when they knock on the door"* (Participant 8).

The tenth component: attributing to oneself: The participants of this study blamed themselves for what happened when they realized their husbands' infidelity. They tried to make themselves more sexually and physically attractive by changing their appearance and clothing style because they blamed themselves and attributing the causes of their husbands' infidelity to themselves. They in fact wanted to compensate the shortcomings and unkindness they felt they had towards their husband. *"I told myself that I was ugly. I was not the string and useful person my husband liked. I thought I was overweight but my husband liked a slim woman"* (Participant 4).

The eleventh component: distrust of the world: This component indicated the participants' distrust of the world. They expressed that they not only lost their trust in their husband, but in all men, and unlike usual, there was no one and nothing reliable for them after they realized their husbands' infidelity. *"After my husband's infidelity, I cannot trust in anyone, and unlike in the past, I do not talk to anyone and I cannot trust in them"* (Participant 4).

The twelfth component: losing the meaning of life: This component included the loss of life and marital life meaning after the husband's infidelity. The participants stated that they felt emptiness and nihilism after their husbands' infidelity. In fact, they felt worthless. *"The worst feeling I had was that I became nothing and I was no longer valuable"* (Participant 9).

The thirteenth component: aggression and quarreling: This component refers to long-running quarrels and disputes after revelation of husband's infidelity. The participants expressed that they often quarreled and beat each other. Their husbands' infidelity, according to them, led them to break respect and dignity and start quarreling and aggression. There are lots of evidence in this regard in the literature. *"We had been arguing since then, and he broke*

my nose for many times. Once we quarreled from night until morning" (participant 6).

Discussion & Conclusion

Women's reaction to their husbands' infidelity were associated with self-harm, and rage and suicide attempts were reported as well. Discovering the husband's infidelity threatens the wife's psychological well-being and self-harm has been reported in this regard (Humphrey, 2013; Momeni Javid & Shoaakazemi, 2011b; Spring, 2012; Touesnard, 2009). immediately after the discovery of the husband's infidelity, many women seek to find out the cause of the infidelity and they ask "why did this happen to me". Furthermore, they tend to blame themselves or their husbands. Some women focus on their role in infidelity and some on the role of the husband. The participants in this study pointed out the role of their husbands in making them to decide about ending the relationship and separation. One of the most important threats to the stability of marital life and the most prevalent reason for divorce in different cultures is the issue of spouse's infidelity (Amato, 2004; Charny & Parnass, 1995; Hertlein et al., 2005; Knight, 2010; Young & DeBlasio, 1998).

Although ending the relationship and divorce is one of the women's reactions to infidelity, not all women seek to end the relationship after discovering the infidelity. Because several factors such as loving the spouse, children, financial support of the spouse, etc., make the person stay in the relationship. Mutual infidelity and threatening the spouse to have affairs is another reaction to and consequence of spouse's infidelity. The betrayed spouse feels rage and aggression to the cheating spouse and turns to extramarital affairs for revenge (Aminiha et al., 2015; Bird et al., 2007; Brown, 2013; Gordon et al., 2004). Most betrayed women in this study suffered from disruption of their every day and routine life, sleep and eating disorders, as well as changes in their weights. Discovering infidelity disrupts wives' normal activities and causes problems such as experiencing nightmares and sleep and eating disorders for betrayed wives (Azadnam & Nariman, 2013; Baucom et al., 2009).

Cheating challenged the belief and trust of women participating in this study, regarding the oneness and uniqueness of their marital relationships. A



study (Corsini & Wedding, 1989) showed that such relations cause emotions such as worthless and loss of identity. According to Adler's theory, feeling of humiliation arises from a sense of imperfection and defect in every aspect of life, and its extreme form involves negative attitudes towards oneself (Spring, 2012). The interviews with betrayed women revealed that they had experiences emotions such as humiliation, inferiority, foolishness, and weakness. The studies have indicated that spouse's infidelity challenges another party's religious beliefs, and people experience different religious behaviors after discovering the spouse's cheating (Atkins et al., 2001). In the present study, after discovering their husbands' infidelity, women lost their belief in the orderliness and justice of the universe and since they did not deserve such oppression, it led them to feel disconnected from Allah. A study (Knight, 2010) showed that the couples who deal with extramarital affairs experienced low self-confidence.

The participants in this study tried to regain their self-confidence by blaming themselves, criticizing their appearance, and changing their clothing style. People's negative reaction to spouse's infidelity includes isolation and feeling lonely, leading them to lose their contact with others (Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Brown, 2013; Olson et al., 2002). The betrayed women pointed out that their husbands' infidelity led them to lose their contact with the outside world. A study (DePaulo et al., 1993) indicated that dealing with the spouse's infidelity, women are more likely than men to attribute this issue to their own incompetence and inefficiency in marital life and criticize themselves. The interviews conducted in this study showed that women put the blame on themselves for their husbands' extramarital affairs by criticizing themselves, comparing themselves to their husbands' partner, and focusing on their weaknesses. One of the usual reactions of betrayed people to spouse's infidelity is denial of cheating (Wiederman, 1997; Young & DeBlasio, 1998). Justifying their husbands' behaviors, their job requirements, and denying the issue, the betrayed women try to convince themselves that their husbands had no extramarital affairs. The spouse's infidelity causes severe emotional turmoil in the couple (Azadnam & Nariman, 2013). The participants in this study, as they asserted, cried and felt misery. Mistrust and negative thinking of the world is another consequence of spouse's infidelity. Illegitimate

relationships questioned the spouse's trust and the betrayed spouse can never trust his/her partner as before (Humphrey, 2013; Knight, 2010). The literature showed that people lose their identity after their partner's betrayal (Donald, 2004).

Feeling nihilism, worthlessness, and having no motive to live have been reported in betrayed women. The participants in this study reported quarrel, beatings, anger and aggression. Long-running quarrels and feeling rage to the cheating husband have been observed in families dealing with extramarital affairs (Fairbrother et al., 2005; Momeni Javid & Shoaakazemi, 2011a; Wiederman, 1997; Young & DeBlasio, 1998). Some women react aggressively and tend to hurt their husbands after discovering their husband's infidelity. These reactions may vary from verbal aggression to spousal killing (Buss, 2021). They may also harm their husbands in various other ways, such as inciting their children against their husbands, seeking revenge against their spouses, and disgracing them. In this study, women also reported different reactions such as hitting their husbands, insulting their husbands, going to their husband's workplaces and fighting at their workplace, and frequent fights at home. Based on the betrayed women's experiences, the present study investigated the very important issue of marital infidelity on the part of husband in the cultural-social context of the country. As findings of this study showed, the betrayed women experienced cognitive, emotional, physical, and spiritual injuries. Women reacted inefficiently to their husbands' infidelity. Due to the important position of family in the Iranian culture, the results of this study indicated that the extent and severity of this harm is significant. Therefore, with emphasis on conducting further studies on spousal infidelity, the family counselors and psychologists are suggested to adopt preventive and interventional measurements to improve the interactions of couples. Since the main purpose of this study was to investigate the lived experiences of betrayed women in a specific context, it is limited to the participants and caution should be exercised in generalizing these results. It is suggested to conduct the same study in male community and other contexts.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval: The researchers informed all participants about the objectives of the study by telling them about the study design and assuring them of their anonymity and the confidentiality of their data, as well as their



ability to withdraw their participation at any time; following this, informed consent was obtained from all participants. The time of the interview were determined by the participants. This research was approved by the Ethics Committee of Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz (EE/99.3.02.24959/scu.ac.ir).

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