

Marital Infidelity: Cognitive, Behavioral, Emotional Reactions, and Coping Strategies among Afghan women

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ABSTRACT

Marital infidelity is a deeply damaging interpersonal event that triggers cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses in the affected spouse. This study aimed to examine the reactions and cognitive-behavioral-emotional coping mechanisms of women facing marital infidelity. The research methodology employed was applied both in its objective and qualitatively in its execution. The study sample comprised 18 women residing in Herat City, Afghanistan, who had experienced spousal infidelity and sought counseling in the year 2021. They were purposively selected and interviewed using a semi-structured approach. The interviews were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) thematic analysis method which resulted in the identification of three main themes chaos (initial reactions), involvement (secondary reactions), and revival, 11 subthemes (behavioral, psychological-emotional, mental, and psychosomatic response, changing circumstances, involvement in activities, companionship, adaptation, seeking therapy, self-care, and coerced continuation of the relationship) and 114 primary codes. The research findings indicated that the cognitive-behavioral-emotional process of Afghan women facing marital infidelity unfolds in three stages: chaos (initial reactions), involvement (secondary reactions), and revival. Furthermore, it was observed that affected women exhibit varied behaviors at each stage and undergo different emotions and thoughts. Factors such as the manner of infidelity disclosure, quality of marital relationship, religious beliefs, social and familial support, societal perspectives, limitations in choice, lifestyle, and the presence of children play significant roles in shaping their cognitive-behavioral-emotional responses. The practical implications of this research finding can be beneficial for counselors working with Afghan couples dealing with marital infidelity.

Introduction

Marital infidelity encompasses a wide range of conceptual and theoretical interpretations which poses a challenge in achieving a unified and universally accepted definition across all societies and cultures (Navabinejad et al., 2023). Nonetheless, Weiser and Weigel generally define infidelity as engaging in any intimate relationship with a third party (both sexually and emotionally) which violates the commitment to the marital relationship and is accompanied by emotional distress in the betrayed spouse (Choupani et al., 2021). Bakhtyari et al. adopt a broader scope for the concept of infidelity and consider it as engaging in sexual, emotional, or virtual relationships or a combination thereof (Bakhtyari et al., 2021). In other words, in the classification of infidelity, it can be stated that while sexual infidelity involves physical sexual acts with a third party, emotional infidelity involves emotional connections outside the primary partnership and virtual infidelity involves elements of both emotional and sexual infidelity in the virtual space (Labrecque & Whisman, 2017).

It seems that the relationship between some spouses in current families and societies is very fragile and vulnerable. As a result, the prevalence of infidelity can be observed in many communities (Gholipour Firozjaei et al., 2023). Despite cultural differences among human societies, the issue of infidelity in marital relationships is generally perceived as condemnable and unethical in most societies (Samadi Kashan et al., 2019). Marital infidelity is a multidimensional harmful phenomenon that in addition to affecting the spouses, can endanger other family members and even the community. Among these, the spouse who has been betrayed usually experiences the greatest harm (Amani et al., 2020). Both clinical observations and empirical research confirm that the discovery and disclosure of infidelity typically have detrimental consequences and disrupt the behavioral and emotional functioning of both partners (Shivarani et al., 2017). Marital infidelity can result in emotional outcomes like aggression, revenge, depression, feelings of victimization, shock, denial, and even spousal homicide or suicide (Bashirpour et al., 2020). Generally, in such circumstances, the mental health of the betrayed spouses tends to decline (Dehghani & Dehghani, 2023).

According to studies, individuals may seek extramarital relationships to fill existing gaps in their marital relationships (Fincham & Mary, 2017). Importantly, it's not only individuals experiencing deficiencies in their marital life who seek such relationships; rather, those who already have satisfactory marital relationships could also be impacted by factors to engage in these relationships (Nasiri et al., 2022; Rasheed et al., 2021). The predisposing factors that contribute to engaging in an extramarital relationship are discussed in four main areas. The first domain (intrapersonal) includes personal characteristics such as cognitive or psychological issues. The second domain relates to the characteristics of the spouse or primary partner. The third domain focuses on marital/initial relationship aspects and features that may play a role in forming a relationship such as low sexual satisfaction. The final domain pertains to contextual factors and external influences (outside the primary

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relationship) such as culture, work environment, peer networks, or the behavior of external partners. These domains are crucial for pinpointing particular risk factors in marital relationships that may increase an individual's potential for involvement in an extramarital relationship (Afshari Kashanian et al., 2019).

The reactions and coping strategies of individuals facing marital infidelity have been examined in multiple studies. In a study conducted by Amani et al. (2020), findings indicated that marital infidelity leads to damage across various personal (physical and psychological), familial, social, and spiritual aspects. In the personal dimension, disturbances in sleep and eating patterns, anxiety, depression, and declined trust are observed. In the familial dimension, reduced emotional connections, family tension, decline in familial intimacy, and disruption in parental duties are reported. In the social dimension, loss of reputation, job problems, and financial issues are prevalent. In the spiritual dimension, feelings of guilt and conscience torment are the most significant consequences of marital infidelity. According to Amani et al. (2020), the experiences of women influenced by extramarital relationships indicate three main themes: increased life problems, mental turmoil, and disruption in communication functions. Atapour et al. (2021) revealed that marital infidelity results in profound shock to the partner and family breakdown. A study by Soufy et al. (2021) demonstrated that in response to a partner's infidelity, men tend to express more anger and a strong inclination towards violence (particularly directed at the other party), while women show more feelings of sorrow and grief and have a greater inclination to seek social support resources (particularly from current friendships). The impact on the betrayed spouse in the study by Izadi et al. (2022) included intense emotions like anger, shame, depression, disability, and abandonment which may replace severe states such as shock, bewilderment, and denial. Another investigation by Movahedrad et al. (2023) found that the betrayed spouse experienced feelings of anger, shame, confusion, loss of identity, guilt, reduced self-esteem, and insecurity after the revelation of infidelity.

Previous studies have also indicated that women's coping strategies and responses to infidelity as well as the improvement of marital relationships and the likelihood of returning to shared life are related to factors such as marital quality (Tavallaei et al., 2018), spirituality and belief systems (Ariapooran & Hajimoradi, 2021; Tavallaei et al., 2018), management of intense emotions and the emotional state of the affected spouse (Johnson, 2019; Roohi Karimi et al., 2021), extramarital relationship facilitating factors (Ahmadiardakani, 2022), emotional and sexual intimacy of betrayed couples (Salari Feizabad et al., 2021), marital infidelity and mental health (Talaeezadeh et al., 2023), reasons and inhibiting factors for extramarital relationships (Choupani et al., 2021), marital infidelity, social and familial support and the existence of children (Tavallaei et al., 2018), use of secure couple interaction strategies (Roohi Karimi et al., 2021) and disclosure of the betraying spouse and forgiveness factor (Morsali et al., 2018).

The report of the Afghanistan Human Rights Commission in 2016 indicates that over 38% of Afghan women have been coerced into marriage and more than 50% express dissatisfaction with their lives (Askari et al., 2019). Based on this report, Afghan women dissatisfied with their married life persist in their lives despite negative experiences such as domestic violence or infidelity, often because of factors such as gender stereotypes (Baldry et al., 2013), negative attitudes towards divorce in this society, dread of losing their children and lack of financial independence (Askari et al., 2019). However, according to Afghan civil law, women can only seek divorce in four cases which include the prolonged husband's absence, the husband's failure to provide alimony, the husband's contracting of an untreatable illness, and the husband's defect (Baldry et al., 2013). Considering the increase in marital infidelity across different cultures and their outcomes, it should also be noted that infidelity is a distinct cultural phenomenon that should be studied and intervened within the cultural context. Therefore, the overlooked issue by researchers is the real-life reactions of Afghan women facing marital infidelity which is highlighted in this study.

This study aims to examine the reactions and cognitive-behavioral-emotional coping strategies of women facing marital infidelity. Therefore, the present study can fill this significant research gap and be considered a valuable resource for counselors and mental health professionals. Furthermore, this research can contribute to enhancing the research literature in the field of marital infidelity.

To achieve the objectives of the research, the primary focus of this study is to examine Afghan women's reactions toward marital infidelity and investigate the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional coping strategies they employ.

Method

The method employed in this research utilized thematic analysis which is one of the most commonly used and prevalent methods for uncovering themes in qualitative data analysis derived from interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Participants were purposefully selected from among women with experience of marital infidelity by their spouses in the city of Herat adhering to the criteria for entry into the study. Entry criteria included informed consent and willingness to participate in the research, experience of spousal infidelity within the past year, absence of physical or mobility impairments, literacy, and an age range of 20 to 45 years.

A semi-structured interview method was employed because of the exploratory nature of the research. Interviews were conducted with 18 women until data saturation was reached. Researchers continuously sought to explore the process and behavioral and emotional reactions in confronting marital infidelity among the participants to complete the interview process. Hence, interviews with women employed open-ended questioning and exploration to examine the behavioral and emotional processes of women impacted by marital infidelity. The interviews with women varied in duration, ranging from 45 to 75 minutes per session to multiple sessions. All interviews were conducted by the first author, who is of Afghan nationality, in the city of Herat. The content of the interviews was recorded with participants' permission, and then transcribed and typed by the interviewer. To ensure unity in interpretation, the interview transcripts and audio files were re-evaluated by two additional authors.

Research Tool

In this research, a semi-structured interview method with open-ended questions was utilized to explore women's experiences in coping with marital infidelity. The interview framework was developed based on issues raised in the literature, relevant texts, and previous research. After reviewing the content of the questions, some were revised or omitted and then validated for formal and logical validity by counseling professors at the University of Isfahan. Interviews were conducted with women who had experienced spousal infidelity and met the study's entry criteria. The questions were categorized into general, specific, direct, and indirect categories regarding marital infidelity and their experiences to obtain deeper and more comprehensive information. The research aimed to explore the following inquiries: Could you please share your experience with marital infidelity or your spouse's betrayal? How is your psychological state following this event? How did you become aware of your spouse's infidelity? What feelings did you experience? How did you behave towards your spouse? What prompted you to continue your life together?

The research methodology involved conducting interviews using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Analysis and information were classified into three categories: initial codes, categories, and themes. According to this approach, initial codes were first extracted from the interview transcripts. The interview text was scrutinized sentence by sentence alongside connection between sentences, extracting and recording codes and key points that suggest the phenomenon under study. In the next stage, the codes were reviewed, and based

on their coherence with each other and grounded in a central subject, they were classified into sub-themes. Subsequently, the sub-themes were revisited based on their initial codes, and the main themes were recognized. Then, a network of themes was drawn, resembling a web and floating to eliminate any hierarchical perception (Mousavi Davoudi et al., 2016). To validate the developed model (the network of themes), the method by Holloway and Freshwater (2007) was utilized. Employing this method, the proposed model (the network of themes) was examined along four axes: 1) real value, 2) applicability, 3) continuity, and 4) reality-based.

Findings

As depicted in Table 1, this study involved 18 women who had experienced marital infidelity by their spouses. All the women were residents of Herat City with marriage durations ranging from 2 to 9 years and ages between 23 and 45 years. Their educational levels ranged from below high school diploma to bachelor's degree with 8 of them having one child and the rest having between two to four children. All participants were housewives and did not have an independent source of income.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

Code	Age	Marriage duration	Education Level	Number of children	Perceived type of infidelity
1	32	7	Bachelor's degree	3	Emotional - virtual
2	45	10	Below high school diploma	4	Mixed - in-person
3	23	2	high school diploma	0	Sexual - in-person
4	25	5	high school diploma	2	Sexual - in-person
5	28	6	Bachelor's degree	2	Mixed - in-person
6	27	3	Below high school diploma	0	Emotional - virtual
7	37	9	Bachelor's degree	3	Sexual - in-person
8	33	8	high school diploma	2	Mixed - in-person
9	29	3	Post-diploma	1	Mixed - in-person
10	31	2	Below high school diploma	0	Sexual - in-person
11	27	6	Below high school diploma	2	Sexual - in-person
12	38	10	high school diploma	3	Mixed - in-person
13	26	5	Below high school diploma	2	Mixed - in-person
14	33	5	Post-diploma	1	Sexual - in-person
15	34	9	Bachelor's degree	3	Sexual - in-person
16	24	2	high school diploma	0	Mixed - in-person
17	30	5	high school diploma	2	Sexual - in-person
18	36	7	Below high school diploma	2	Mixed - in-person

The main focus of this study was to understand the process of emotional and behavioral coping of women with marital infidelity. Following the analysis of the interviews, three key themes were recognized: chaos (initial reactions), involvement (secondary reactions), and revival, each representing stages of this process.

Chaos Stage (initial reactions)

Chaos (initial reactions) is the initial stage that women face when confronting marital infidelity. Chaos is considered one of the main themes of this research and refers to an emotional state resulting from actions or initial reactions that Afghan women take or experience when confronted with the phenomenon of marital infidelity by their spouses. This theme consists of four categories: behavioral, psychological-emotional, psychosomatic, and mental response (Table 2).

Table 2. Chaos stage (initial reactions)

Main theme	Category	Initial code
Chaos (initial reactions)	Behavioral response	Crying, suicide attempts, threats to end the relationship, complaining, isolationism, self-destructive behaviors, ignoring, sulking, emotional encounter, cursing and swearing, aggression, arguing, blocking (on social media), sarcasm and mockery, disrespect, catch red-handed, lack of self-sacrifice, loss of intimacy, stubbornness, self-loathing, complaining, obedience, reaching out to relatives, avoidance, sulking
	Psychological-emotional response	Upset, feeling insecure, feeling rejected, feeling confused, emotional imbalance, loss of emotion, emotional numbness, loss of sense of belonging, feeling worthless, self-conflict, feeling hatred, disliking spouse, leaving to God, disruption of emotion regulation, emotional insecurity, discomfort with spouse, being confused
	Psychosomatic response	Decrease in blood pressure, increased heart rate, flushing, trembling, dry mouth, tongue-tie, dryness, agitation, weakness
	Mental response	Suicidal thoughts, mental preoccupation, homicidal thoughts, thinking of ending the relationship, divorce thoughts, insomnia, rumination, fear of judgment, self-labeling

Behavioral response

As seen in Table 2, women exhibit various responses ranging from crying and sulking to suicide attempts in response to marital infidelity. Participants' responses to research questions indicate that many initial behavioral reactions occur suddenly and differ from their responses to other life stresses. Responses that indicate the instability and lack of control in women's behavior when first confronted with and informed of their spouse's infidelity included:

Participant 5, aged 28: *I remember that first night, I was just crying until morning and could not sleep at all and my pressure had dropped.*

Participant 1, aged 32: *I felt so bad that I took five tablets of 'dopamine' (medication) and I think two tablets of 'avail', as well.*

Participant 15, aged 34: *I became very restless, cried a lot, felt very bad, lost control, behaved like crazy people, just screamed and shouted and attacked that woman and my husband, I was just hitting them so hard that even the neighbors upstairs came and everyone knew about the incident.*

Psychological-emotional response

Another reaction of interviewees when facing marital infidelity is encountering psychological and emotional pressures, especially during the challenging early stages of this experience. Facing marital infidelity can carry a significant negative emotional burden and can undermine emotional security, trust, and solidarity in the marital relationship. Participants shared different experiences, such as feeling upset and rejected to experiencing emotional insecurity and discomfort with their spouse. The statements of participants mentioned below formed the basis for extracting codes associated with women's emotional experiences after becoming aware of marital infidelity.

Participant 14, aged 33: *I feel like I am no longer valuable to him, and of course, his value to me has decreased, there is no respect left between us to maintain.*

Participant 9, aged 29: *It is like when he touches my hand, I feel violated and it gives me a bad feeling.*

Participant 6, aged 27: *I feel like I am in a big and crowded city where nothing and no one is familiar to me.*

These statements indicate that Afghan women undergo deep and detrimental psychological pressures and experience unpleasant emotions.

Psychosomatic response

Interviewees believed that awareness of their spouse's infidelity even affected their bodies. For example, many of them expressed experiences such as decreased or increased blood pressure, heart palpitations, trembling, and general weakness. Some statements from women included:

Participant 14, aged 33, experienced severe shock: *When I saw them, I could not bear it and lost consciousness.*

Participant 3, aged 23, felt as if her heart was separating from her body: *My hands and feet were completely dry, it felt like my heart was about to leave my body.*

Mental response

Mental responses included suicidal thoughts, mental preoccupation, homicidal thoughts, thoughts of ending the relationship, divorce thoughts, insomnia, rumination, fear of judgment, and self-labeling.

Participant 13, aged 26: *I would plan how I could murder that woman in front of my husband, for example, sometimes I thought about asking her to come home under the pretext of having a threesome relationship, then poisoning her or killing her.*

Participant 16, aged 24: *Honestly, I cannot take it anymore. For the past two weeks, I feel like I am having nightmares. I feel completely out of control.*

Participant 11, aged 27, like many participants, experienced rumination: *Wherever I go, my mind is always preoccupied with this issue.*

Involvement Stage (secondary reactions)

This stage is the second phase of the emotional-behavioral process of Afghan women when facing marital infidelity which is also considered the second theme extracted from the interviews. Involvement refers to the idea that the betrayed spouse after the chaos (initial reactions) phase enters a milder stage of psychological pressure. In this stage, the intensity of emotional pressure and behavioral reactions decreases. However, they are still engaged with the issue, and it does not necessarily mean they have come to terms with their marital infidelity. This theme includes changes in circumstances, engaging in activities and hobbies, and companionship (Table 3).

Table 3. Involvement stage (secondary reactions)

Main theme	Category	Initial code
Involvement (secondary reactions)	Changes in circumstances	Lifestyle changes, relocation, behavioral changes, appearance changes
	Engaging in activities and hobbies	Shopping, exercising, artistic activities, socializing with friends, reading, attending gatherings and parties, dancing, prayer and worship, household chores
	Companionship	Solitude and connection with God, talking to a counselor, confiding in friends

Change of Circumstances

One of the actions Afghan women take when faced with marital infidelity is to try to change certain factors to continue their lives in any way possible. Changing lifestyle, location, appearance, and behavior are among the things women mention to alter their life conditions. Participants' responses such as, *I am trying to figure out a way to be attractive to him again and make our relationship good again* (Participant 10, aged 31), indicate that despite the initial emotional reactions and intense behaviors exhibited by women after encountering marital infidelity, attempting to change circumstances is one of the first and perhaps most important steps they take to preserve their marital life.

Creating Activity and Hobby

Since divorce is legally possible but socially in Afghan society women are expected to salvage their marital life in any way possible; Therefore, to cope with daily life and escape from mental pressures and conflicts, they engage in activities and seek hobbies. Shopping, exercising, engaging in artistic activities, socializing with friends, reading, attending gatherings and parties, dancing, prayer and worship, and doing household chores are among the activities Afghan women engage in after encountering marital infidelity. They express:

Participant 6, aged 27: *I create activities for myself and make plans with my friends for sports activities and parties. Now, my friends' lives are my priority, not his.*

Participant 16, aged 24: *When I feel pressured, I listen to upbeat music and dance until I am tired.*

Companionship

Solitude and connection with God, talking to a counselor, and confiding in friends are among the topics some participants engaged in for tranquility while others did so to solve their problems. The following statements exemplify this: My whole life has become prayer, supplication, vows, and intentions. I ask God to give my life stability (Participant 2, aged 45), and Speaking with my counselor helps me relax and feel good (Participant 16, aged 24).

Revival Stage

The third stage of the emotional behavioral process of Afghan women facing marital infidelity is a revival or the revival of the relationship which is also the third theme extracted from the interviews. It was evident from the interviews that some women strive to revive their relationship while others do not wish to revive it. Because of factors like the cultural fabric, societal traditionalism, the taboo of divorce, economic poverty, financial dependence, etc., they are coerced to continue their relationship under any circumstances. This stage comprises four sub-themes: adaptation, seeking therapy, care, and coerced continuation of the relationship (Table 4).

Table 4. Revival stage

Main theme	Category	Initial code
Revival	Adaptation	Self-care, active listening, forgiveness, giving chances, avoiding sarcasm
	Seeking therapy	Medication therapy, seeking a consultant, psychologist, and fortune teller
	Self-care	Spouse care, self-control, relationship care, getting closer to the spouse
	Coerced continuation of the relationship	Cultural poverty, social poverty, traditional cultural structure, fear of judgment, labeling, negative societal views, negative family attitudes, lack of prospects, fear of lifelong singledom, the taboo of divorce, social determinism, shame/disgrace, ethnic prejudices, granting rights to the husband, sexual demands (masculine), tribalism, financial incapability, unemployment, financial dependency, absence of primary family (lack of presence), economic poverty, traditional family structure, family finger-pointing, lack of family support

Adaptation

Analysis of the interviews revealed that some participants attempted to demonstrate flexibility and adaptability to their spouses to retain them. This theme included self-care, active listening, forgiveness, giving chances, and avoiding sarcasm which women utilized to revive their marital relationships. For example, some women expressed:

I really try to improve myself in every way possible so I can be attractive to him again and our relationship can get better. For instance, I have made lots of workout plans to improve my appearance and physical fitness and I am determined to take all the necessary steps to turn things around (Participant 10, aged 31).

I want to give him another chance and forgive him, hoping that he can rebuild our life together and prove himself again to earn back my trust and our children's trust, so he can become the same person he was before (Participant 12, aged 38).

I tried different things like wearing different clothes at home, going to the salon, keeping the house neat and clean, or behaving differently, anything I thought would help (Participant 16, aged 24).

Seeking therapy

Seeking therapy was another way women used to revive their marital relationships. Medication therapy along with seeking a consultant, psychologist, and fortune teller was among the strategies participants had in mind to improve the relationship and they utilized them accordingly.

Participant 1, aged 32: *I went to a fortune teller to nullify magic. I got a prayer from a fortune teller to get his attention, but it was useless.*

Self-care

Furthermore, another action Afghan women take when faced with marital infidelity is to care for their relationship more than ever before. Most of them try to nurture their spouses and marital relationships in various ways. Taking care of their spouse, self-control, caring for the relationship, and getting closer to their spouse were some of the approaches that participants used to revive their relationships.

Participant 17, aged 30: *My heart aches for him too and I tell myself that no one is infallible but I need to focus more to improve our relationship again. Actually, I want to help him.*

Participant 11, aged 27: *I read some books that help me understand myself better or understand my husband's needs.*

Coerced Continuation of the Relationship

Analysis of the interviews showed that some Afghan women must continue the relationship due to various reasons despite experiencing marital infidelity. These reasons include cultural poverty, social poverty, traditional cultural structure, fear of judgment, labeling, negative societal views, negative family attitudes, lack of prospects, fear of lifelong singledom, the taboo of divorce, social determinism, shame/disgrace, ethnic prejudices, granting rights to the husband, sexual demands (masculine), tribalism, financial incapability, unemployment, financial dependency, absence of primary family (lack of presence), economic poverty, traditional family structure, family finger-pointing, and lack of family support. For example, some of them expressed:

Participant 3, aged 23: *I cannot even mention the word 'divorce' because in our family no one has ever gotten a divorce and it would be a big disgrace.*

Participant 9, aged 29: *I am afraid of divorce and do not want to be finger-pointing in society, and I do not want others to look at me as a divorced woman.*

Participant 6, aged 27: *We do not have a dowry, and if I divorce, it will be a burden on my brothers and family and they all have their own problems.*

Considering the lack of employment among the participants, most of them expressed concerns like, 'If I get a divorce, who will provide for my livelihood expenses?'

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the reactions and cognitive-behavioral-emotional coping mechanisms of women facing marital infidelity. To achieve this goal, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 Afghan women who had experienced infidelity by their spouses and chose to remain in the relationship despite their inclination. The research findings revealed that the reactions and cognitive-behavioral-emotional coping mechanisms of Afghan women confronting marital infidelity can be categorized into three stages: chaos (initial reactions), involvement (secondary reactions), and revival as outlined in the three main themes of the study. The first stage (chaos) demonstrated that women's initial responses to marital infidelity can manifest as psychological, emotional, behavioral, psychosomatic, or mental reactions. Regarding the cognitive-emotional reactions of women, the research findings align with the study conducted by Afshari Kashanian et al. (2019) which indicates that betrayed individuals experience intense emotions such as anger and shock toward the betraying spouse. Furthermore, the study revealed that women affected by infidelity exhibit various behavioral responses in coping with betrayal. This finding is consistent with previous research (Soufy et al., 2021) and (Izadi et al., 2022). Another finding of the research pertains to physical reactions which is in line with the results reported in the study by Fincham and May (2017). The consequences of infidelity can engage women for extended periods and preoccupy their thoughts. Most participants reported this issue. An additional significant finding of the research is the mental reactions of betrayed women, which aligns with the study by Atapour et al. (2021), indicating that seeking reasons behind the betrayal is one of their initial responses. In explaining the findings of this stage, it can be written that infidelity can lead to a wide range of conflicts, distress, and tensions in women which appear to be more extensive, and profound compared to other marital issues. Women who have faced infidelity have expressed that this revelation can exacerbate existing differences and provoke new reactions. Among these reactions, aggression, and impulsive experience towards the revelation of infidelity were commonly reported by many participants. Each individual adopts different coping mechanisms to deal with the distress arising from shared life experiences based on their personality and personal learning methods. Due to the intensely negative emotions that marital infidelity can evoke in women, many resort to ineffective coping strategies when confronted with this type of trauma driven by the complexity of emotional states (Afshari Kashanian et al., 2019).

Following the first stage, Afghan women affected by marital infidelity enter the second stage of involvement (secondary reactions) during which the intensity of emotional pressure and their behavioral reactions are reduced. However, they remain engaged with the issue. They attempt to overcome this stage by changing circumstances, engaging in activities, and seeking companionship. Analyzing the interviews showed that some women endeavored to continue their relationship by altering conditions which aligns with the research by Morsali et al. (2018) and Bakhtyari et al. (2021). Another finding of the research in this stage is creating activity and hobby which resonates with the findings of the study by Izadi et al. (2022), suggesting that individuals engage in various activities and create distractions for themselves when facing marital infidelity. The findings indicate that societal conditions and key figures in life, such as parents and children, act as barriers to divorce. Afghan women affected by infidelity perceive separation and divorce as costly, leading to rejection, economic issues, and social stigma. Consequently, they strive to maintain their relationships. To cope with the emotional pain of their spouse's betrayal, they engage in various activities and hobbies to improve their mental state and mitigate their suffering Izadi et al. (2022).

In the third stage (revival), the majority of women strive to revive their marital relationship. To this end, they utilize strategies such as adaptation, seeking therapy, and self-care to mend and revive their marital bond. The findings indicate that some participants used adaptation as a solution to improve their marital relationship. This finding is consistent with the research by Johnson (2019) which identifies adaptation and forgiveness as valuable aspects of intimate relationships. It considers adaptation essential to the process of healing in relationships following transgressions such as infidelity. Furthermore, it aligns with the findings of the research by Fincham and May (2017) which describe adaptation as a transitional process where improvement from previous transgressions occurs and is often a central feature of couples therapy.

An important point to note is that some participants in the study did not desire to revive their relationship but felt compelled to continue it because of factors like cultural background, societal tradition, the taboo of divorce, economic poverty, and financial dependence. Most women felt coerced to remain in the relationship and preserve it and sometimes this compulsion resulted in emotional and even physical distancing from the betrayal spouse. This finding resonates with the research by Tavallaee et al. (2018) which suggests that individuals facing infidelity may employ inactive coping styles (including avoiding, submitting, and distracting) and choose to stay in the relationship because of the existence of children and the absence of a support base. Hence, one of the reported concerns regarding the coercion of Afghan women to continue their relationship was cultural taboos. The role of culture in society, where the family is also considered a part of it, was highly influential in the behavior of betrayed women. Cultural and ethnic taboos surrounding divorce in Afghan society remain powerful and societal stigma around divorce, the traditional nature of cultural fabric, negative societal attitudes, family disapproval, lack of prospects, remaining single for life, the taboo of divorce, social coercion, ethnic biases, granting rights to the spouse, demands for 'masculine' sexuality, and women's ethnic bias have deterred them from considering separation. Regarding cultural taboos, the research findings align with the findings of the study by Baldry et al. (2013) which indicate that Afghan women can only seek divorce in four cases (prolonged absence of the husband, husband's refusal to provide alimony, husband's contraction of a terminal illness, and husband's disability) but according to Afghan civil law, men can freely and without stating any reason initiate divorce and they can even verbally divorce their spouse.

Furthermore, the research findings continue to demonstrate that despite their desires and choices, economic factors force Afghan women to stay in relationships. A major concern among participants was the absence of economic support and uncertainty about financial stability to sustain life independently. Since Afghan society's tradition and cultural structure do not easily permit women to enter the workforce, women are hindered from attaining higher positions while men gain economic and status superiority. Therefore, women become dependent on their spouses due to their lesser access to economic resources and human capital. This finding aligns with the research by Askari et al. (2019). In explaining the findings of this stage, it can be stated that gender stereotypes, which delineate gender boundaries, are deeply rooted and powerful in Afghan society, and deviating from these norms leads to severe social repercussions. Patriarchal traditions and beliefs, which have become a sacred contract in Afghanistan, dictate the boundaries and ethical and personality standards of women and men according to biological differences. In the patriarchal system, women participate in production but are deprived of ownership rights because men are deemed superior. Collectivism is a prominent characteristic of such a system, and it weakens individual thinking and places individuals in conditions where they underutilize their capabilities. Thus, most Afghan women experience the three stages of chaos (initial reactions), involvement (secondary reactions), and revival after facing marital infidelity. However, in all stages, they prioritize communal life and cultural beliefs over their individual preferences and do not consider divorce due to its negative consequences (Askari et al., 2019).

However, what is crucial in this context is the absence of support systems and counseling services for victims of spousal infidelity in Afghanistan. Considering that most women who experience infidelity ultimately remain in their relationships, there is a demand for family counseling services that can support couples in transitioning from negative emotions and help them continue their lives after overcoming the issue of infidelity. Presently, Afghanistan is in urgent require of family counselors who can design and implement specialized counseling programs and protocols in various areas including the topic of infidelity. However, with the emergence of the Taliban government and the

prohibition of providing counseling services to the opposite gender, these services have not only stagnated but are likely to become even more restricted in the future. Possibly one useful solution in this regard could be the provision of online family counseling services by Persian-speaking counselors from other parts of the world.

Practical Recommendations

The results of this study represent a step towards enriching the literature on the limited scope of marital issues among couples in Afghanistan. Afghan society remains under-researched because of challenges in accessing sample populations which resulted in many social issues in the country remaining hidden. Consequently, one key difference between the current research and previous studies is the significant impact of societal culture on the reaction of women who face marital infidelity. This influence is so profound that, after experiencing marital infidelity, these women prioritize collective life and cultural beliefs over personal desires. They often avoid considering divorce due to the negative consequences associated with it.

However, this issue determines the clear need for culturally sensitive family counseling services within this community. Therefore, the results derived from this study can be used to design culturally tailored counseling interventions specifically for Afghan women who have experienced infidelity. At present, the authors of this research work are in the process of developing such interventions.

It is recommended that future research focus on investigating the experiences of men who have been affected by marital infidelity. Furthermore, it is suggested that future studies examine the differences in reactions between men and women to spousal infidelity. These studies can analyze the reasons behind individuals choosing to continue their shared lives after experiencing infidelity and it can be used in the design of counseling interventions. It is worth noting that understanding the experiences of individuals affected by marital infidelity within their cultural context can contribute to the success of counseling sessions and treatment outcomes.

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