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Introduction

The most important function of the family is to create security and psychological comfort for its members. Therefore, the family can be considered a protective factor against various hardships and dangers, acting as a constant source of support and refuge in all circumstances (Alitabar et al., 2014; Emami Khotbesara et al., 2024; Razazan, 2025). However, like other social institutions, the family is not immune to various risks and may face numerous challenges and difficulties throughout its existence (Warach & Josephs, 2019).

Alexithymia and Marital Relationship Quality as Predictors of Infidelity Tendency: A Correlational Study

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to investigate the predictive roles of alexithymia and marital relationship quality in marital infidelity tendency among couples seeking counseling.

Methods and Materials: This applied, correlational study involved 800 participants (400 men, 400 women) who had experienced some form of infidelity (e.g., virtual, emotional, sexual) and were referred to counseling centers in District 22 of Tehran. Participants completed three validated self-report instruments: the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20), the Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS), and the Marital Infidelity Questionnaire. Data were analyzed using Pearson and Spearman correlation coefficients and multiple regression analysis via SPSS 22.

Findings: Significant negative correlations were observed between alexithymia and marital infidelity tendency ($r = -0.385$, $p < .001$), and between marital relationship quality and infidelity tendency ($r = -0.56$, $p < .05$). These findings suggest that higher levels of alexithymia and lower relationship quality are associated with increased risk of infidelity tendencies. However, due to the study's correlational design, causal inferences cannot be drawn.

Conclusion: The results underscore the relevance of emotional awareness and relational satisfaction in understanding infidelity risk. Clinical interventions aimed at enhancing emotional expression and improving relationship quality may reduce the likelihood of infidelity among distressed couples.

Keywords: Marital Infidelity Tendency, Alexithymia, Marital Relationship Quality, Emotional Awareness.

Among these challenges, betrayal is one of the most serious threats couples encounter in their marriage (Shroud & Weigel, 2018, 2020).

Although many couples consider themselves committed to their marital relationship at the beginning of their journey, their level of commitment may not always be sufficient to withstand the storms brought by life's adversities (Safitri & Supratman, 2022). Commitment in marital relationships has become one of the most critical issues among couples today. Partners enter marriage with high hopes and expectations, forming families with optimism about the success of

their union (Dehghani et al., 2019; Dortaj et al., 2018). Moreover, couples often view marriage as a path to personal growth, fulfillment, prosperity, happiness, and stability for both themselves and their children (Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Cano & O'Leary, 2000; Malek Asgar et al., 2020)..

However, some marriages inevitably encounter difficulties that result in divorce and separation. One of these difficulties is infidelity, which poses the greatest threat to the functionality, stability, and continuity of marital relationships (Malek Asgar et al., 2020; Malekzadeh Tarkamani et al., 2018). Infidelity erodes trust between partners, ultimately leading to complete mistrust (Fincham & May, 2017). Field studies indicate that marital infidelity is a leading cause of divorce, as it significantly contributes to distrust in relationships (Basharpoor & Miri, 2018). Infidelity is a behavioral disorder that carries severe and undesirable consequences, creating substantial challenges for both unfaithful spouses and their partners. It can lead to shock, disbelief, denial, domestic violence, homicide, suicide, marital crises, parenting role dysfunctions, occupational issues, family breakdown, and eventual separation (Bakhtiari et al., 2021; Shrout & Weigel, 2020; Sultani Zadeh & Bajalani, 2020; Vahedi & Moheb, 2020; Zal et al., 2020).

Tsapelas, Fisher, and Aron (2010) reported that 85-90% of participants endorsed monogamy and exclusivity in emotional and sexual relationships with their spouses. However, 70% expressed constant concerns about their spouse's potential infidelity, and many admitted to experiencing marital infidelity at least once. Clinical experience and research indicate that, in contemporary societies, couples face widespread and severe difficulties in establishing and maintaining intimate relationships and achieving compatibility (Ghezelieflo et al., 2023). In a study of 147 married couples, Das and Christensen (2010) found that one of the primary reasons couples seek psychotherapy at clinics is the lack of intimacy in their relationships. Additionally, studies highlight that intimacy between married couples is a crucial factor in sustaining stable marriages (Bakhtiari et al., 2021; Ghasedi et al., 2018; Habibi et al., 2017; Hadadnia et al., 2018), and avoidance of intimate relationships is one of the leading causes of marital failure (Mohammadi et al., 2017; Montesi et al., 2013).

Bagarozzi (2001) argues that intimacy is a fundamental human need. Intimacy refers to the closeness, similarity, and personal romantic relationship shared with another person. It requires awareness, deep understanding, acceptance, and the expression of thoughts and emotions. Intimacy is an interactive, dynamic, and multifaceted process. Bagarozzi (2001) categorizes intimacy into nine dimensions: emotional, psychological, intellectual, sexual, physical, spiritual, aesthetic, social, and recreational. Although intimacy is a complex construct that is difficult to define comprehensively, it is often emphasized in verbal communication, with much of its satisfaction stemming from intimate exchanges between married couples (Mohammadi et al., 2017; Montesi et al., 2013; Sultani Zadeh & Bajalani, 2020).

The verbal aspect of intimacy is particularly relevant to emotional intimacy. Cordova et al. (2007) found a positive correlation between emotional intimacy and the ability to share emotions and feelings with one's spouse, leading to higher marital satisfaction. Conversely, distressed couples generally express lower levels of intimacy, warmth, and affection toward one another (Holdsworth & McCabe, 2018). In the emotional dimension of intimacy, individuals desire to share all their positive and negative feelings with their spouse. Those who express their emotions positively experience better mental health and, consequently, higher marital satisfaction. Several factors contribute to the development of intimacy in relationships.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study is applied in nature and employs a correlational research design based on data collection methodology. The statistical population included all married couples who had been in their marriage for at least two years and had experienced infidelity at least once in the form of virtual relationships, text messages, phone calls, or sexual encounters. These individuals sought counseling at welfare centers in District 22 of Tehran to address their marital problems. The research sample consisted of couples who visited counseling clinics in District 22 of Tehran due to marital conflicts and dissatisfaction. A total of 800 individuals (400 men

and 400 women) were randomly selected as the study sample.

After obtaining approval from the university's research department, the questionnaires were formatted attractively and compiled into survey packages, each containing three questionnaires. Each package included a cover page introducing the research, explaining its importance, and collecting demographic data (age, marriage duration, number of children). Next, the research team visited welfare counseling centers in Tehran (District 22) to distribute 800 survey packages among the participating married couples.

Instruments

Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20): The Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20) was developed by Taylor (1986) (as cited in Afshari, 2008) and revised by Bagby, Parker, and Taylor (1994). Initially, the 26-item TAS-20 was widely accepted as the primary self-report measure for alexithymia, suitable for both research and clinical use. The original scale had a four-factor structure, but subsequent exploratory factor analyses supported a three-factor model. The revised 20-item version was introduced as an improvement over the original test. Bagby et al. (1994) confirmed that the TAS-20 comprised three structural factors that aligned with the alexithymia construct. Other studies have supported these findings. This scale assesses alexithymia through three subscales: difficulty in identifying feelings, difficulty in describing feelings and externally oriented thinking. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were reported as follows: total scale: 0.75, difficulty in identifying feelings: 0.72, difficulty in describing feelings: 0.72 and externally oriented thinking: 0.53. Afshari (2008) evaluated the concurrent validity of this scale by correlating TAS-20 scores with an emotional intelligence scale in a sample of 80 individuals. The results indicated a significant negative correlation between alexithymia and emotional intelligence ($r = -0.47$, $p < 0.001$) (Abbasi & Nejad, 2025).

Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS): The Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS) was developed by Busby, Crane, Larson, and Christensen (1995) to measure marital quality. This scale consists of 14 items and three subscales: consensus (6 items), satisfaction (5 items) and cohesion (3 items). Higher scores on the RDAS indicate higher marital quality. The original 32-item version was developed by Spanier based on Lewis

and Spanier's theory of marital quality (as cited in Holist, Cody, & Miller, 2005). Scoring is based on a 6-point Likert scale (0 = "We always disagree" to 5 = "We always agree"). The reliability of the RDAS was assessed in Holist, Cody, and Miller's (2005) study, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients reported as follows: Consensus: 0.79, Satisfaction: 0.80 and Cohesion: 0.90. In a study by Yousefi (2011), Cronbach's alpha and split-half reliability for the RDAS were above 0.70 for both the total scale and subscales, indicating high internal consistency. The subscales showed intercorrelations ranging from 0.49 to 0.71, all of which were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). The validity of the RDAS was examined concerning related constructs, such as marital satisfaction, couple bonding, and agreement, confirming statistically significant associations ($p < 0.0001$) (Khorasaniyan, 2022).

Marital Infidelity Questionnaire by Yenisey & Kökdemir (2006): The Marital Infidelity Questionnaire was developed by Yenisey & Kökdemir (2006) to assess emotional and sexual infidelity. In Iran, this questionnaire was validated by Karimi et al. (2019) to measure trust among elementary school staff. This 24-item questionnaire consists of six dimensions: Legitimization, Seduction, Normalization, Sexual tendencies, Social context and Sensation-seeking. Responses are rated on a Likert scale, with items assessing marital infidelity through statements such as: "Being in a romantic relationship where one's spouse does not express affection or intimacy." The total score ranges from 24 to 120, where higher scores indicate a greater tendency toward marital infidelity. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this scale was above 0.70 in Karimi et al.'s (2019) study, confirming high reliability (Movahedrad et al., 2023).

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using SPSS 22 software. The study utilized: Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage) and Inferential statistics (Pearson correlation test and multiple regression analysis).

Findings and Results

The age distribution of the participants ranged between 30 to 40 years, with a mean age of 34.62 years

and a standard deviation of 4.96. The participants' educational levels were as follows: 380 individuals (47.5%) had a high school diploma, 95 individuals (11.9%) had a bachelor's degree, and 325 individuals (40.6%) had a master's degree. The highest percentage belonged to those with a high school diploma (47.5%). The distribution of marital duration among the participants was as follows: 1 to 10 years: 615

individuals (77%), 11 to 20 years: 140 individuals (17.4%), and 21 to 30 years: 45 individuals (5.6%). The highest frequency was among participants who had been married for 1 to 10 years (77%). The mean marital duration of the sample was 13.05 years, with a standard deviation of 6.3. The highest frequency for the number of children was found in participants with one child, accounting for 36.3%.

Table 1

Pearson and Spearman Correlation Coefficients for the Relationship Between Alexithymia and Marital Infidelity

| Variable | Test | Marital Infidelity |
|--------------|----------|--------------------|
| Alexithymia | Pearson | -0.385 (p = 0.000) |
| | Spearman | -0.381 (p = 0.000) |
| Sample Size | | 800 |
| Relationship | | Exists |
| Type | | Indirect |

The data analysis using Pearson and Spearman correlation tests shows that the correlation coefficients between alexithymia and marital infidelity were -0.385 and -0.381, respectively, with a p-value of 0.000, which is smaller than the significance level ($\alpha = 0.01$). Thus, at this level, the first hypothesis, which suggests a relationship between alexithymia and marital infidelity, is confirmed.

Additionally, the negative correlation coefficients and the slope of the fitted regression line indicate an indirect relationship between these two variables. This means that as alexithymia increases, marital infidelity decreases. This finding is further confirmed by the distribution of data points and the fitted regression line in the scatterplot.

Table 2

Correlation Between Marital Infidelity and Marital Relationship Quality Dimensions

| Variable | Marital Relationship Quality Dimensions |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Marital Infidelity Tendency | -0.56 |
| P-value | p < 0.05 |

Based on the correlation coefficients presented in Table 2, it can be concluded that there is a significant negative relationship ($p < 0.05$) between the tendency toward marital infidelity and the quality of women's marital life. Therefore, the second sub-hypothesis, which suggests a relationship between the tendency toward marital infidelity and marital relationship quality, is confirmed. This means that as marital life quality increases, the likelihood of marital infidelity decreases. It can be inferred that there is a significant negative relationship between alexithymia, the quality of marital relationship dimensions, and marital infidelity. In other words, as alexithymia and marital relationship quality increase, couples exhibit greater commitment and marital satisfaction, leading to a lower incidence of infidelity.

Discussion and Conclusion

The data analysis indicates that the correlation coefficients between alexithymia and marital infidelity were -0.385 and -0.381, respectively, with a p-value of 0.000. As a result, a significant relationship exists between alexithymia, marital commitment, and the absence of infidelity. Furthermore, the negative correlation coefficients suggest an indirect relationship between these two variables, meaning that as alexithymia in women increases, their likelihood of avoiding marital infidelity decreases. These findings align with the prior results (H. Ghasemi et al., 2023; Hamideh Ghasemi et al., 2023; Momeni et al., 2018; Seyed Mousavi & Moharami, 2019).

The results and analysis further reveal that as alexithymia and the quality of marital relationship dimensions increase, the likelihood of marital infidelity decreases. Alexithymia is one of the factors contributing to a spouse's inclination toward hidden relationships and extramarital affairs. Just as a higher level of satisfaction in sexual relationships strengthens love and affection between spouses, alexithymia can lead to deep-seated marital problems, including resentment, jealousy, competition, a desire for revenge, feelings of humiliation, and low self-confidence. These issues exacerbate marital tensions and disputes, further widening the emotional gap between partners (Seyed Mousavi & Moharami, 2019). Ultimately, a deep emotional and psychological distance between spouses can be a major factor driving individuals toward extramarital relationships (Momeni et al., 2018).

The study results also suggest that marital quality is a predictor of marital infidelity, a finding consistent with the prior research (Dehghani et al., 2019; Zal et al., 2020).

The quality of marital relationships predicts the tendency toward extramarital affairs, with most sexual dissatisfaction stemming from issues related to frequency, timing, and quality of sexual interactions. Lack of orgasm is a significant contributor to sexual dissatisfaction, which, in turn, negatively impacts spousal interactions. Recent findings suggest that in healthy and fulfilling marriages, emotional connection takes precedence over sexual interactions. Several real-life cases have shown that when one partner loses their sexual capability due to unforeseen circumstances, the marriage can still thrive as long as love, intimacy, and emotional support remain intact. Conversely, in marriages where sexual relations exist but intimacy and commitment are lacking, hidden infidelities often emerge (Rahmani et al., 2010; Razapour Faridian et al., 2019).

It can be inferred that there is a positive and significant relationship between love and the continuation of a romantic relationship, meaning that as love and affection between spouses increase, their commitment and marital satisfaction also rise. One of the limitations of the present study is that it employed a correlational research design. It is recommended that future studies use experimental research designs to replicate these findings. Therefore, generalizing and applying the results should be done cautiously. Another

limitation was that data collection relied on self-report measures. Since participants' perceptions may influence their responses, future studies should consider additional data collection methods where spousal influence is minimized, such as interviews conducted by expert observers.

Considering the findings of this study and the importance of fulfilling sexual needs in a healthy and rational manner, as well as the impact of marital satisfaction on reducing infidelity, the following recommendations are suggested for both policymakers and couples: Incorporate sex education into high school curricula, focusing on sexual needs and appropriate ways to fulfill them, particularly for young women. Introduce specialized university courses that explain sexual issues, marital intimacy, and the role of fulfilling sexual needs in a happy married life. Provide premarital counseling sessions where sexual expectations and their role in marital satisfaction are properly explained to couples. Use mass media to educate couples about the psychological and marital significance of fulfilling sexual rights. Educate men on the importance of meeting their spouse's sexual needs and how this affects marital stability. Develop educational programs for men and women at both high school and university levels to help them understand the sexual characteristics and expectations of the opposite gender. Ensure that family counseling centers employ specialists who possess comprehensive knowledge of sexual and emotional aspects of marriage. Encourage open discussions between spouses about sexual needs and expectations, fostering a more communicative and understanding marital environment. Raise awareness among men about the psychological consequences of neglecting their spouse's sexual needs, including its link to aggression and emotional distress. Expand counseling services for women who feel their sexual needs are not adequately met by their spouses, as a significant proportion of women report dissatisfaction in this area.

In sum, the results underscore the relevance of emotional awareness and relational satisfaction in understanding infidelity risk. Clinical interventions aimed at enhancing emotional expression and improving relationship quality may reduce the likelihood of infidelity among distressed couples.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Ethical considerations in this study were that participation was entirely optional.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contribute to this study.

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