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Comparison of emotional schemas and personality traits based on DSM-5 in couples with extramarital affairs and couples without extramarital affairs

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Abstract

Introduction: Marital infidelity is an issue many couples' therapists face and is one of the most important reasons for getting divorced. The factors related to infidelity can be included in three domains: individual differences, the nature of the relationship, and environmental conditions. This study investigated the role of emotional schemas and personality traits (as individual differences) in infidelity.

Materials and Methods: In the present study conducted in Mashhad, Iran, 320 individuals were selected by the convenience sampling method (including 160 individuals with infidelity experience and 160 individuals without experience of infidelity as controls). They fulfilled the Leahy Emotional Schema Scale and Personality Inventory for DSM-5. The data were analyzed by Multivariable Analyze of Variance and SPSS-26 software.

Results: The results showed that the lack of inhibition personality traits in individuals with the experience of infidelity were higher than in the control group. The "guilt and blame" emotional schemas were higher in group with infidelity experience than in the controls ($P= 0.012$, $P= 0.025$). The "validating" emotional schema in individuals with infidelity was lower than in the control group ($P= 0.011$). No significant differences were found between the other emotional schemas.

Conclusion: According to the results, infidelity prevention can be done by modifying personality traits and emotional schemas through schema therapy and emotional schema therapy.

Keywords: Emotional schema, Extramarital, Personality traits

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Introduction

Undoubtedly, marriage is one of the biggest and most important events in the life of every human being (1). Marriage is a relatively stable relationship and a social, religious, and legal bond accompanied by obligations between the couple (2). Commitment is the strongest and most stable predictor of marital relationship continuity and relationship quality. Research has shown that the greater commitment is related to more negative attitude toward infidelity (3).

Marital infidelity is an emotional or sexual relationship outside of the marital, which is considered a serious threat to everyday life (4). Any sexual and social intimacy outside the marital relationship that involves a person's emotions is also included in this definition. Research shows that several factors are important in infidelity, including personality traits (5) and emotional issues (6).

Personality traits are relatively stable and fundamental tendencies of people. These characteristics have a wide influence on the behavioral experiences and tendencies of people (7). The five main areas of maladaptive personality based on the dimensional model of personality include negative affect (intensity and frequency of experiencing high levels of negative emotions in a wide range), detachment (avoidance of emotional and social experiences), antagonism (behaviors that put a person in confrontation with others), lack of inhibition (direction towards impulsive behavior and immediate gratification) and psychosis (cognitions and behaviors that are culturally considered unusual, strange and unusual) (8). The couple's personality traits can play a major role in their relationship's stability and level of satisfaction due to its effect on the individual's tendencies and behaviors. For example, it has been shown that high scores in narcissism, experimentalism, and neuroticism can predict infidelity in marriage. The role of impulsivity and inhibition has also been investigated as another stable personality trait in couples' relationships; on the other hand, the couple's personality traits are directly related to their emotions (9).

One of the important models in the field of emotion is the model of emotional schemas. The emotional schema model is a social cognitive model of how people understand, interpret, evaluate and respond to their own

and others' emotions. Everyone experiences a wide range of "negative emotions," including anger, anxiety, sadness, frustration, and jealousy, but not everyone has a psychiatric disorder. The emotional schema model states that people's opinions about and regulating emotions are different. This creates complex solutions to emotions such as suppression, rumination, avoidance, blame, and substance abuse (10).

Leahy introduced 14 emotional schemas, including blame, approval of others, guilt, comprehensibility, simplistic view of emotion, uncontrollability, superior values, emotional numbness, the cycle of emotions, rationalization, acceptance, rumination, consensus, and expressed feelings (11). Emotional schemas express the position that people have differences in conceptualizing emotions (12). Emotional schemas are important in the marital relationship and affect the function and nature of the marital relationship. In order to create and maintain a good relationship, in addition to knowing our own emotions and expressing them, we must also understand our partner's emotions (13).

The studies show that marital satisfaction has a positive relationship with positive emotion and a negative relationship with negative emotion (14). Also, people with positive emotions experience a more successful and stable married life (15).

In the context of the relationship between personality variables and marital infidelity, researchers have focused on the role of the dark triangle of personality (the three traits of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy) in the level of marital intimacy and attitude towards infidelity. The results of these studies show an inverse relationship between the dimensions of the dark triangle of personality and intimacy. Also, the quality of life mediates between the dark dimensions of personality and the stability of life (16).

Other researchers have studied the role of personality traits on marital relationships using the big five personality factor model. Among the big five personality factors, high levels of neuroticism correlate with life satisfaction, betrayal, conflicts, and disconnection (17). These results are in line with research that showed that neuroticism and self-awareness are the best predictors of a couple's attitude toward infidelity (18).

In the field of emotions and their relationship with married life, meta-analytical research investigated the factors involved in extramarital relationships. It showed that the need for emotions and thrill-seeking play an important role in establishing an extramarital relationship (19). Those who do not know their emotions and cannot express them have less marital satisfaction and sexual satisfaction, and the quality of their marital relationship is also reduced; all of them can be the underlying factors of marital infidelity (20). The present study aims to determine whether or not the personality traits and emotional schemas of people with a history of extramarital relationship and those without this experience are different.

Materials and Methods

The present research method is descriptive and comparative. In the present study conducted in Mashhad, Iran, The sample size was calculated based on G-Power software. So, 320 individuals were selected by the convenience sampling method (including 160 individuals with infidelity experience and 160 individuals without experience of infidelity as controls). The participants were selected among people referred to Bina Ophthalmology Hospital of Mashhad. The researcher conducted a short interview and checked the exclusion and inclusion criteria. People were asked to put a mark on the top of their questionnaire if they had sexual or emotional infidelity; if they did not, they did not put any mark on the top. Moreover, the reason for choosing this method was that people seemed to avoid saying that they had committed cheating on their partners, so we replaced this method with direct questions in the interview. The inclusion criteria included being married, living in Mashhad city, and aged 20-40 years, and having an extramarital relationship for at least one month for the group with infidelity experience. The exclusion criteria included incorrect answers, not completed questionnaires, unwillingness to continue cooperation, and having mental disorders.

Research instruments

A) *Personality Dimensions Interview for DSM-5 (PDI-5)*: This questionnaire examines 25 personality aspects in 5 personality dimensions. It has 25 items that are scored based on a 4-point Likert scale (from 0 for completely or most of the time wrong to 3 for completely or most of the time right). The five

main dimensions of maladaptive personality include negative affect (the frequency and intensity of experiencing high levels of negative emotions in a wide range), detachment (avoidance of social and emotional experiences), antagonism (behaviors that put a person in confrontation with others), lack of inhibition (directing towards immediate gratification and impulsive behavior) and psychosis (behaviors and cognitions that are culturally abnormal, strange and unusual) (8). This questionnaire has been standardized in Iran, and Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the 5 dimensions are 0.82, 0.75, 0.74, 0.77, and 0.68, respectively. Also, the data of all the retest coefficients and bisections were significant in this research, which indicates the good internal consistency of this questionnaire (21).

B) *Leahy Emotional Schemas Scale (LESS)*: This questionnaire was developed to determine people's beliefs and strategies against emotions and to identify people's emotional schemas. This questionnaire has 50 items that, on a 6-point scale from completely false to completely true, evaluate people's beliefs about their emotions in 14 dimensions, validation, comprehensibility, guilt, simplistic view of emotions, superior values, uncontrollability, numbness, the need to be rational, durability, consensus, acceptance of emotions, rumination, expression, and blame (11). The investigation of this questionnaire in Iran showed that its retest reliability for the whole scale is 0.78, and its internal consistency coefficient is 0.82 (22).

This research was conducted under the supervision of Dr. Elham Taheri, assistant professor at Mashhad University of Medical Sciences. An effort was made to observe all ethical considerations, including confidentiality, non-disclosure of the names of the participants and their answers, and participants' willingness to participate in the research.

The data were statistically analyzed with the help of SPSS-26 software and the method of multivariate analysis of variance.

Results

Out of 320 participants in this research, 160 people have sexual or emotional extramarital relationships (80 men and 80 women), and 160 controls (80 men and 80 women) have no experience of an extramarital relationship. Most of the participants had the bachelor

degree (116 cases), while only two cases had the Ph.D. degree. In term of occupational status, 182 participants were employed and 138 participants were housewives.

Table 1 shows the descriptive indices of the subscales of emotional schemas and personality traits in the participants.

Table 1. Descriptive indices of emotional schemas and personality traits in two groups with betrayal experience and the controls

Components	Betrayal		Control	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Negative affect	6.09	3.23	6.28	3.40
Detachment	4.05	2.97	4.33	3.40
Antagonism	3.51	2.16	3.49	2.41
Lack of inhibition	6.94	3.45	5.84	2.86
Psychosis	4.24	3.19	4.20	2.99
Total score	24.85	9.55	24.16	10.87
Validation	10.35	3.02	11.23	3.08
Comprehensibility	18.28	4.39	19.13	3.96
Guilt	13.26	6.06	11.72	4.73
Simplicity	16.06	3.84	16.43	3.75
Acceptance	36.94	5.06	26.82	6.51
Rumination	15.73	3.68	16.15	3.60
Expression	7.33	2.37	7.70	2.56
Blame	7.73	2.25	7.10	2.72
Superior value	14.04	3.12	14.43	2.85
Uncontrollability	12.90	3.12	12.68	3.77
Numbing	5.20	2.26	5.19	2.41
Rationalism	12.64	2.83	12.06	3.37
Durability	5.80	2.10	6.12	2.15
Consensus	12.78	3.59	12.90	3.77

Multivariate analysis of variance was performed to compare the status of personality traits of the two groups. Before performing the analysis, the important assumptions of this test were examined. The results of the Kalmogorov-Smirnov test showed the normality of the distribution of scores for the personality traits of lack of inhibition, negative affect, detachment, antagonism, and psychosis ($P > 0.05$). The results of Levene's test to check the homogeneity of variances showed the homogeneity of variances for the personality trait of lack of inhibition ($F = 2.87$, $P = 0.091$), detachment ($F = 4.063$, $P = 0.055$), negative affect ($F = 0.133$, $P = 0.715$), antagonism ($F = 2.34$, $P = 0.126$) and psychosis ($F = 0.98$, $P = 0.322$) were present.

Regarding the assumption of homogeneity of variance matrices, the covariance of the M box value is 50.62, the F value is equal to 3.31, and the significance level of the Box test is 0.000. Considering that the significance level is smaller than 0.01 (according to the recommendation of Fidel and Tebachink, 2007), the assumption of homogeneity of the variance-covariance matrices was established. Variable and Wilks's Lambda test results showed that the difference between the mean scores of the two groups in the linear combination of variables ($F = 441.62$, $P = 0.000$) is different. This means a statistically significant difference between the two groups in at least one of the components entered into the model.

Table 2. Multivariate analysis of variance to compare personality traits in betrayal group and controls

Component	Sum of square	DF	Mean of squares	F	P
Negative affect	3.00	1	3.00	0.27	0.60
Detachment	6.61	1	6.61	0.64	0.42
Antagonism	0.050	1	0.050	0.000	0.92
Lack of inhibition	96.80	1	96.80	9.59	0.002
Psychosis	0.153	1	0.153	0.016	0.90

Examining the single variable comparisons in Table 2 shows that the two compared groups

differ from each other only in lack of inhibition ($P < 0.05$). According to Table 1 and

the comparison of the personality trait of lack of inhibition in two groups, the amount of personality traits of lack of inhibition in people with extramarital relationship is higher than controls.

To compare the emotional schemas in two groups, a multivariate analysis of variance test was also performed. The results of the Kalmogorov-Smirnov test showed the normality of the distribution of scores for all emotional schemas ($P > 0.05$). Regarding the assumption of homogeneity of variance matrices, the covariance of the M box value is 468.86, and the F value is equal to 3.71. The significance level of the Box test is 0.000. Due to the significance level is smaller than 0.05 (as recommended by Fidel and Tebachink, 2007), the assumption of homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices was maintained.

The results of Leven's test to check the homogeneity of variances showed the homogeneity of variances for validation ($F=0.001$, $P=0.97$), comprehensibility ($F=1.47$,

$P=0.33$), guilt ($F=6.07$, $P=0.420$), simplicity ($F=0.18$, $P=0.66$), rumination ($F=0.79$, $P=0.37$), expression ($F=4.11$, $P=0.052$), superior value ($F=3.27$, $P=0.074$), numbness ($F=0.196$, $P=0.658$), rationalism ($F=8.92$, $P=0.05$), durability ($F=0.031$, $P=0.859$), and consensus ($F=0.128$, $P=0.721$) were maintained. It was not established to uncontrollability and acceptance the homogeneity of variances, but according to the confirmation of other test assumptions, a multivariate analysis of variance was performed. After making sure that the assumptions of multivariate analysis of variance were established, the results of multivariate analysis of variance and the results of the Wilkes Lambda test showed that the difference between the mean scores of the two groups in the linear combination of variables ($F=5500.18$, $P=0.00$) is different in this sense that there is a statistically significant difference between the two groups in at least one of the components entered into the model.

Table 3. Multivariate analysis of variance to compare emotional schemas in betrayal group and controls

Component	Sum of square	DF	Mean of squares	F	P
Validation	61.25	1	61.25	6.55	0.011
Comprehensibility	57.80	1	57.80	3.30	0.070
Guilt	189.11	1	189.11	6.38	0.012
Simplicity	11.25	1	11.25	0.78	0.378
Acceptance	1.12	1	1.12	0.03	0.856
Rumination	14.45	1	14.45	1.08	0.298
Expression	10.51	1	10.51	1.81	0.179
Blame	31.87	1	31.87	5.09	0.025
Superior value	12.01	1	12.01	1.30	0.254
Uncontrollability	3.82	1	3.82	0.32	0.572
Numbing	0.00	1	0.00	0.00	0.981
Rationalism	27.02	1	27.02	2.77	0.097
Durability	8.12	1	8.12	1.78	0.182
Consensus	1.01	1	1.01	0.07	0.785

Examining single-variable comparisons in Table 3 shows that the two compared groups

Discussion

This research aimed to determine the difference between emotional schemas and personality traits in people with a history of marital infidelity and people without this history. The results showed a significant difference in the personality trait of lack of inhibition between the two groups, and this trait is higher in people with extramarital relationship. This result is in line with the studies by Sevi et al., Alavi et al., and Derrick et al. (23-25).

differ from each other only in validation, guilt, and blame ($P < 0.05$).

In Sevi et al.'s study, 309 cases were analyzed using the correlation method to determine the personality relationship in marital infidelity. The results showed that impulsive behavior and violence between couples could predict marital infidelity (23). Alavi et al. studied 140 people and showed that marital infidelity is related to impulsivity and mental disorders. However, unlike previous studies, it showed no relationship with a narcissistic personality disorder (24). Derrick et al.'s study in America

on 560 cases, showed that impulsivity and neuroticism are related to infidelity (25).

Personality traits during life can be the basis of marital compatibility and satisfaction and also the basis of risk factors in marriage. The results of this research indirectly show that impulsivity is negatively related to relationship satisfaction (26).

In general, lack of inhibition is broad and can target different dimensions of couples' behavior. For example, this lack of inhibition can be shown in the inability of spouses to prevent their physical desires, which causes their betrayal to satisfy their needs. Spouses with a high physical tendency and lack of inhibition cannot satisfy their needs through their spouse and they can be pushed towards extramarital relationships. In addition, the lack of inhibition can be seen in another dimension, such as feelings and emotions. In this way, spouses who cannot reduce their negative emotions and anger in tension and regularly experience family arguments try to escape from intimacy and marital relations and towards relationships outside the family (betrayal). If there is no inhibition in the discharge of negative emotions, intimacy and love between couples will decrease. In this situation, spouses take refuge in a third party to experience more love and escape from problems and face the issue of betrayal. This explanation is in line with the study by Khorramabadi et al. They predicted extramarital behaviors based on executive functions. One of the components of executive functions was inhibition. The results showed that the lack of proper functioning of the executive and inhibition functions causes problems in couples' communication and, eventually, marital behaviors and infidelity (27).

Regarding the emotional schemas between individuals with and without betrayal experiences, the emotional schema of feeling guilty and blame was more in the people with extramarital relationships, and the emotional schema of validation was less in these individuals than in the people without extramarital relationships. In this context, people aware of their emotions can accept their emotional experiences better and more easily. This action leads to better control and more rational expression of emotions. Past research has proven that a person who generally feels less guilty is more easily led to

cheating (28), but when cheating occurs, he/she experiences more guilt and shame (29).

Considering the unfortunate consequences of emotional schemas in using inconsistent emotion regulation strategies, the more negative beliefs about emotions are activated which lead to the more severe problems in regulating emotional experiences. Teaching people to manage, accept and tolerate unwanted emotions prevents the emergence of incompatible emotional regulation strategies (30). The formation of the belief that others understand one's emotions helps to find a logic for emotions and to strengthen the belief that one's emotions are understandable, which in itself can lead a person to re-experience intimacy in an external relationship (31).

Considering that emotional schema is one of the strong predictors of marital conflict and the probability of infidelity is high in those who have problems with their emotional schemas, increasing people's awareness and insight about schemas. Self-emotion and understanding their role in creating and maintaining problematic situations can be effective. In general, it can be said that self-blame and guilt are the basic components of infidelity. Spouses who feel less guilty for cheating on their spouses always blame their partners for justifying their cheating behaviors. This case increases the probability of betrayal in the future and the continuation of such behaviors. Also, in low self-blame, couples with extramarital relationship often take a right to themselves and try to make the undesirable act of infidelity look positive and pleasant. In this case, they do not need to create intimacy with their spouses and turn to extramarital relationships. This explanation is consistent with the research by Kaplanova and Gregor. The results showed that the feeling of guilt and shame causes an easier understanding of betrayal behavior and its acceptance, which causes the continuation of extramarital relations in spouses (32).

This research has some limitations. One of the most important limitations is the limited area of research in Mashhad city. In addition, only one personality questionnaire was used to measure personality variables. Finally, using the causal-comparative method makes it impossible to understand the causal-effect relationship between the variables. Therefore, it is suggested that this study be carried out in other cities of Iran with other cultural,

religious, and linguistic contexts. Also, clinical interviews and qualitative methods can bring us closer to more real and reliable answers. Finally, using experimental methods increases the possibility of discovering cause-effect relationships.

Conclusion

This research showed that emotional schemas and personality traits could play an important role in marital infidelity. In this research, the lack of inhibition component in the personality and the self-blame and guilt component in the emotional schemas differed in the two groups with and without extramarital affairs. So, by increasing awareness about the impact of emotional schemas and personality traits, it is

possible to inform the couples involved in infidelity and not look at betrayal as a problem that the unfaithful person commits consciously and intentionally. Moreover, many failed relationships and those involved were improved by providing appropriate and effective protocols on these issues. It is suggested for future research to consider providing psychotherapy sessions and counseling for couples involved in infidelity.

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