

Research Paper



The Role of Early Maladaptive Schemas in Predicting Legitimacy, Seduction, Normalization, Sexuality, Social Background, and Sensation Seeking in Marital Infidelity

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Marriage has been introduced as the most important and main communication factor between humans. Infidelity in marriage is one of the most damaging problems that affect commitment and marriage relationships. The present study investigated the role of early maladaptive schemas in predicting components of marital infidelity.

Methods: This study attempted to determine the role of early maladaptive schemas in predicting legitimacy, seduction, normalization, sexuality, social background, and sensation seeking in marital infidelity. The population comprised all the students of Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University, Iran, in the academic year 2019-2020. Considering the size of the population, 200 students were selected as a sample through stratified random sampling. Data were collected using an infidelity questionnaire (Yeniceri & Kökdemir, 2006) and Young's early maladaptive schemas questionnaire (Young, 1999).

Results: Pearson's correlation coefficient showed a significant negative correlation ($\beta=-0.15$) between the over-vigilance/inhibition and the legitimacy of infidelity ($P<0.01$). There was a significant positive correlation ($\beta=0.10$) between impaired autonomy and performance with normalization ($P<0.05$). Also, impaired limits had a significant positive correlation ($\beta=0.10$) with the social background in marital infidelity ($P<0.05$). Multiple regressions analysis showed that over-vigilance/inhibition ($\beta=-0.024$, $P>0.05$) and impaired limits ($\beta=0.15$, $P>0.05$) were predictors of legitimacy. Impaired autonomy and performance ($\beta=0.15$, $P>0.05$) and other-directedness ($\beta=-0.13$, $P>0.05$) were predictors of seduction. Impaired autonomy and performance were predictors of normalization ($\beta=0.06$, $P>0.05$). Over-vigilance/inhibition could predict sexuality ($\beta=-0.13$, $P>0.05$). Disconnection and rejection could predict sensation seeking ($\beta=0.016$, $P>0.05$).

Conclusion: The results indicated the predictive role of early maladaptive schemas on the tendency of marital infidelity. When couples become aware of negative initial maladaptive schemas, conflict and eventually marital discord may decrease.

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Highlights

- Early maladaptive schemas, had a significant relationship with the marital infidelity.
- Ver-vigilance/inhibition and impaired limits were predictors of legitimacy.
- Disconnection and rejection could predict sensation seeking.

Plain Language Summary

The type of relationship a person builds during childhood with his parents or those around him affects his attitudes, opinions, and even behavior in adulthood, which are called schemas. Schemas affect behavior throughout life and adulthood. We influence others and the reactions we show in situations. Studies have shown that schemas can also affect marriage, and if they are maladaptive, they can endanger the joint life and emotional relationship. For example, these schemas may be related to a person's loyalty to his wife, both emotionally and religiously, and sexually. Our study showed that people inhibited in childhood may show more unfaithful behaviors towards their spouses or romantic partners in adulthood than their peers. Also, more alert people show inhibition behaviors towards infidelity and betrayal and avoid it. The present study showed that, in general, the areas of early maladaptive schemas had a significant role in predicting the components of marital infidelity. This research was done considering the changes in marital relationships in contemporary Iranian society and the need to pay attention to the importance of the stability and durability of marriage for the advancement of society's goals and increasing the level of mental health. Intimate relationship training can prevent and improve relationships by increasing intimacy and communication beliefs.

1. Introduction

The family is the central nucleus of any society and the center for maintaining mental health. A healthy society depends on forming stable, dynamic, and lively families (Zandbergen & Brown, 2015). Achieving a healthy family depends on its members having mental health and a good relationship (Hedayati Dana & Saberi, 2014). Creating human relationships is one of the emotional needs of human beings, and marriage as the primary communication factor between human beings is the most intimate type of relationship in response to all needs, both physical and mental, which provides opportunities for emotional development between two people (Egan & Angus, 2004). Many couples face cheating in a relationship and infidelity, which is the most critical threat to the marriage's performance, stability, and continuity (Hosseini et al., 2020). Marital infidelity refers to any sexual or emotional relationship beyond a committed relationship between two spouses (Asadu & Egubuche, 2020). Marital infidelity is a threat to marriage and family because it leads to moral degeneration, lack of trust and respect for the spouse, divorce, and psychological damage to children (Bashirpour et al., 2020). The complexity of communication and the effects of infidelity on intimacy makes it necessary for therapists to

look at these effects from different perspectives (Taghi Pour et al., 2019). Marital infidelity is more common in men (Fincham & May, 2017; Munsch & Willer, 2012; Petersen & Hyde, 2010). Stefano and Oala found that 2% of men and 5% of women in the United States have committed adultery at least once in their marriage (De Stefano & Oala, 2008). A meta-analysis of 50 studies found that 34% of men and 24% of women engage in extramarital sex (Ledbetter, 2015).

The existing literature on motives for infidelity has considered age, education, opportunities, duration of a relationship, history of divorce, religiosity, relationship satisfaction, personality traits, and early maladaptive schemas to be effective (Altgelt et al., 2017; Porjorat, 2016). Early maladaptive schemas are a pervasive pattern of memories, emotions, cognitions, and bodily feelings related to oneself and others (Altgelt et al., 2018). Maladaptive schemas can be described as inappropriate pathways resulting from frequent and undesirable interpersonal relationships with others, which are very important during childhood and adolescence (Yousefi et al., 2010). In other words, schemas lead to bias in our interpretations of events. In interpersonal psychopathology, these biases manifest in misunderstandings, distorted attitudes, misconceptions, unrealistic goals, and expectations (Young, 1999). Young and Klosko (Young

& Klosko, 1994) believe that schemas are formed and perpetuated in three situations: Emotional needs, early childhood experiences, and emotional mood. These schemas, which are formed in childhood and adolescence, appear in adulthood in marital relationships. The more inconsistent the schemas, the more detrimental effect on marital satisfaction as well as marital commitment (Bakhtiari et al., 2019). In a study by Stiles (Stiles, 2004), the early maladaptive schema of emotional deprivation and impairment predicts less intimate and romantic relationships in couples. Mohammadi and Salimi showed a significant negative relationship between early maladaptive schemas and marital commitment (Mohammadi & Soleymani, 2017). The results of another study showed that there is a significant relationship between marital conflicts and early schemas (Vaziri & Nezhadmohamad Namaghi, 2020). Due to the prevalence of various types of infidelity, such as online infidelity and love messages, and their effect on increasing the divorce rate, it is necessary to conduct extensive research to prevent or reduce the damage done to the family in this field (Askari et al., 2017). Since infidelity is an immoral act and leads to a decrease in the level of disclosure in individuals, research in this field is associated with difficulty. Undoubtedly, recognizing and examining the roots of the problem and planning to prevent, and eliminate the causes of marital infidelity, society to improve health, leads to maintaining social order and balance.

This study attempted to determine the role of early maladaptive schemas in predicting legitimacy, seduction, normalization, sexuality, social background, and sensation seeking in marital infidelity.

2. Materials and Methods

The present cross-sectional study was done on all married students of the Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University. The available sampling method was used to select the sample. G*Power software was used to calculate the sample size. Considering the effect size of the predicted variable (0.15), a power of 0.99, five predictor variables, and an alpha of 0.05, 184 samples were considered. To reduce the effect of sample loss on the results, a sample size of 200 people was considered. Of these, 118 were women and 82 men with a mean age of 23.4 ± 3.55 years. The number of single people was 178, and the number of married people was 22, (89% and 11%, respectively).

Data were collected by an online questionnaire including demographic and quantitative information infidelity questionnaire (Yeniceri & Kökdemir, 2006), and Young's early maladaptive schemas questionnaire (Young, 1999).

Eligibility criteria

Married students who have filled out the consent form to participate in the research and no participation in psychological interventions simultaneously.

Exclusion criteria: Lack of informed consent and incomplete questionnaires.

Questionnaires

Early maladaptive schemas scale: The original version of the schema questionnaire (YSQ) was developed by Young (Young, 1999) to measure early maladaptive schemas. Its long form has 205 questions, and the short form has 75 questions. Each question is scored on a 6-point scale (completely false: 1, almost false: 2, more true to false: 3, slightly true: 4, almost true: 5, absolutely true: 6). In the present study, to assess the initial maladaptive schemas, the short form was used. The standardization of this questionnaire in Iran was done by Divandari et al. Its internal consistency was based on Cronbach's α coefficient for females and males, respectively as 0.97 and 0.98 (Divandari et al., 2009). In a study to examine the factor structure of the Young schema questionnaire, Cronbach's α for 75 items was obtained as 0.94.

Infidelity questionnaire (INFQ)

INFQ was developed by Yeniceri and Kökdemir (Yeniceri & Kökdemir, 2006) in 2006. The questionnaire contains 24 phrases scored on a 5-point Likert scale. These options are strongly agreed, agree, have no opinion, disagree, and strongly disagree. This questionnaire consists of six factors: Legitimacy, seduction, normalization, sexuality, social background, and sensation seeking.

Reliability and validity of INFQ

Cronbach's α of legitimacy, seduction, normalization, sexuality, social background, and sensation seeking is respectively 0.83, 0.80, 0.74, 0.84, 0.73, and 0.83, and the defined variance of these factors is 11.33, 9.43, 9.28, 8.22, 3.92, and 2.93, respectively. The Cronbach's α of this questionnaire in Iran and the present study is 0.91 and for the components of legitimacy, seduction, normalization, sexuality, social background, and sensations seeking is 0.79, 0.75, 0.51, 0.80, 0.71, and 0.79 respectively.

Data analysis

A multivariate regression analysis was also used to determine the predictor of marital infidelity. Data analysis was performed using SPSS software, version 24.

3. Results

Demographic characteristics:

A total of 200 students participated in the present study, of whom 118 cases (0.59) were women and 82 cases (0.41) were men. Among women, 198 cases (85.71) had

Table 1. Mean±SD of predictor and criterion variables (n=200)

Variables		Mean±SD	
Criterion	Marital identity	Legitimacy	10.93±4.08
		Seduction	11.15±3.92
		Normalization	10.97±3.35
		Sexuality	12.42±4.05
		Social background	12.54±3.77
		Sensation seeking	12.56±3.99
Predictor	Early maladaptive schemas	Disconnection/Rejection	54.83±16.14
		Impaired autonomy and performance	37.23±12.69
		Other-directedness	24.33±6.60
		Over-vigilance/Inhibition	27.10±7.38
		Impaired limits	25.94±6.78

Table 2. A correlation coefficient of early maladaptive schemas with components of marital infidelity

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Legitimacy	1										
2. Seduction	0.55**	1									
3. Normalization	0.40**	0.55**	1								
4. Sexuality	0.49**	0.55**	0.48**	1							
5. Social Background	0.39**	0.50**	0.46**	0.55**	1						
6. Sensation seeking	0.34**	0.52**	0.46**	0.45**	0.61**	1					
7. Rejection/ Disconnection	-0.01	0.06	0.05	0.02	0.08	0.15**	1				
8. Impaired Autonomy/ Performance	0.05	0.09	0.10*	0.01	0.02	0.10*	0.66**	1			
9. Other Directedness	-0.02	-0.03	0.00	-0.00	0.00	0.07	0.51**	0.60**	1		
10. Over-vigilance/ inhibition	-0.15**	-0.01	-0.06	-0.05	0.01	0.04	0.43**	0.33**	0.44**	1	
11. Impaired limits	0.00	-0.01	-0.02	0.04	0.10*	0.08	0.52**	0.37**	0.43**	0.59**	1

***P<0.000, **P<0.01, *P<0.05

Table 3. Multiple regression predicts the legitimacy of infidelity through domains of early maladaptive schemas

Predictor Variables	Criterion Variables	P	T	Beta	Std. Error	R ²	R	P	F
Disconnection/Rejection		0.42	-0.80	-0.05	0.01				
Impaired autonomy and performance		0.06	1.87	0.13	0.02				
Other-directedness	Legitimacy	0.59	-0.53	-0.03	0.04	0.04	0.22	0.00	4.00
Over-vigilance/Inhibition		0.00	-3.89	-0.24	0.03				
Impaired limits		0.02	2.31	-0.15	0.04				

a bachelor's degree, 30 cases (12.98) had a master's degree, and 3 cases (1.29) had a PhD. In men, 145 cases (85.79) had a bachelor's degree, 22 cases (13.01) had a master's degree, and 2 cases (1.18) had a PhD.

According to [Table 1](#), among the components of the criterion variables, the highest and lowest mean values were related to sensation seeking and legitimacy, respectively (12.56 and 10.93), and among the components of the predictor variables, the highest and lowest mean values were related to rejection/disconnection and impaired limits (54.83 and 25.94).

[Table 2](#) shows a significant negative correlation ($r=-0.15$) between over-vigilance/inhibition and the legitimacy of infidelity ($P<0.01$). There was a significant positive correlation ($r=0.10$) between impaired autonomy and performance with normalization ($P<0.05$). Also, impaired limits had a significant positive correlation ($r=0.10$) with the social background in marital infidelity ($P<0.05$).

Multiple simultaneous regression was used to predict the components of marital infidelity through initial maladaptive schemas. The results are shown in [Tables 3](#) to 8.

[Table 3](#) shows that over-vigilance/inhibition ($\beta=-0.024$, $P>0.05$) and impaired limits ($\beta=0.15$, $P>0.05$) had a significant role in the legitimacy of marital infidelity. The results of [Table 4](#) show that impaired autonomy and performance ($\beta=0.15$, $P>0.05$) and other-directedness ($\beta=-0.13$, $P>0.05$) had a significant role in predicting seduction in marital infidelity. The results of [Table 5](#) show that impaired autonomy and performance had a significant role in predicting normalization in marital infidelity ($\beta=0.06$, $P>0.05$). [Table 6](#) shows that over-vigilance/inhibition had a significant role in predicting sexuality in marital infidelity ($\beta=-0.13$, $P>0.05$). The results of [Table 7](#) show that none of the early maladaptive schemas could play a significant role in predicting the social context component of marital infidelity. Disconnection and rejection ($\beta=0.016$, $P>0.05$) had a significant role in predicting sensation seeking in marital infidelity ([Table 8](#)).

4. Discussion

This study aimed to identify the relationship between early maladaptive schemas and the components of marital infidelity. The results showed that early maladaptive schemas (rejection and disconnection, impaired autonomy and performance, over-vigilance) had a significant relationship with the components of marital infidelity. This is in line with the

Table 4. Multiple regression predicts the seduction of infidelity through domains of early maladaptive schemas

Predictor Variables	Criterion Variables	P	T	Beta	Std. Error	R ²	R	P	F
Disconnection/Rejection		0.47	0.72	0.05	0.01				
Impaired autonomy and performance		0.03	2.14	0.15	0.02				
Other-directedness	Seduction	0.04	-1.98	-0.13	0.04	0.02	0.15	0.09	1.87
Over-vigilance/Inhibition		0.91	-1.10	0.00	0.03				
Impaired limits		0.52	-0.63	-0.04	0.03				

Table 5. Multiple regression predicts the normalization in infidelity through domains of early maladaptive schemas

Predictor Variables	Criterion Variables	P	T	Beta	Std. Error	R ²	R	P	F
Disconnection/Rejection		0.72	0.34	0.02	0.01				
Impaired autonomy and performance		0.02	2.24	0.16	0.01				
Other-directedness	Normalization	0.33	-0.96	0.06	0.03	0.02	0.15	0.07	2.00
Over-vigilance/Inhibition		0.15	-1.43	-0.09	0.02				
Impaired limits		0.87	-0.15	-0.01	0.03				

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Table 6. Multiple regression predicts the sexuality in infidelity through domains of early maladaptive schemas

Predictor Variables	Criterion Variables	P	T	Beta	Std. Error	R ²	R	P	F
Disconnection/Rejection		0.79	0.25	0.01	0.01				
Impaired autonomy and performance		0.85	0.18	0.01	0.02				
Other-directedness	Sexuality	0.85	-0.18	-0.01	0.04	0.01	0.11	0.34	1.13
Over-vigilance/Inhibition		0.03	-2.09	-0.13	0.03				
Impaired limits		0.07	1.76	0.11	0.04				

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results of Andooz and Hamidpour (Andooz & Hamidpour, 2006) who stated that the more maladaptive the schemas, the lower the marital satisfaction. Shahabi et al. (2021) showed a moderating role of marital commitment in the inverse relationship between maladaptive schemas of three areas of cuts/exclusion, impaired performance, and emotional inhibition with distress tolerance. It can be concluded that although the areas of early maladaptive schemas reduce distress tolerance and commitment of women, the high level of communication commitment among couples can increase distress tolerance in them. Yousefi et al. also concluded in a study entitled “comparison of early maladaptive schemas in divorced and normal spouses as predictors of divorce” and reported that

divorce could be predicted with early maladaptive schemas (Yousefi et al., 2010). In explaining the relationship between early maladaptive schemas and marital infidelity, it can be said that early maladaptive schemas are a pervasive pattern with oneself and others that are formed in childhood and carefully constructed throughout life (Pellerone et al., 2016). Maladaptive schemas lead to bias in the interpretation of events affecting cohabitation and dissatisfaction in marital relationships due to inefficiency (Rafiee et al., 2011). Our results are consistent with those of Zolfaghari et al., who assessed the relationship between early maladaptive schemas and the dimensions of marital intimacy among 70 participants (35 couples) in Isfahan.

Table 7. Multiple regression predicts the social background in infidelity through domains of early maladaptive schemas

Predictor Variables	Criterion Variables	P	T	Beta	Std. Error	R ²	R	P	F
Disconnection/Rejection		0.30	1.02	0.07	0.01				
Impaired autonomy and performance		0.77	0.29	0.02	0.02				
Other-directedness	Social background	0.25	-1.13	0.07	0.03	0.01	0.13	0.18	1.52
Over-vigilance/Inhibition		0.34	0.95	-0.06	0.03				
Impaired limits		0.06	1.85	0.12	0.03				

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Table 8. Multiple regression predicts the sensation seeking in infidelity through early maladaptive schemas

Predictor Variables	Criterion Variables	P	T	Beta	Std.Error	R ²	R	P	F
Disconnection/Rejection		0.02	2.22	0.16	0.01				
Impaired autonomy and performance		0.98	-0.02	-0.00	0.02				
Other-directedness	Sensation seeking	0.94	0.07	0.00	0.04	0.02	0.16	0.06	2.08
Over-vigilance/Inhibition		0.51	-0.65	-0.04	0.03				
Impaired limits		0.71	0.36	0.02	0.03				

The results showed a significant negative correlation between early maladaptive schemas and the dimensions of marital intimacy. The more inconsistent the schemas become, the lower the marital intimacy (Zou Alfaghari et al., 2008). In general, rejection and disconnection were able to play a significant role in predicting sensation seeking of marital infidelity. People with schemas, including abandonment/instability, mistrust/abuse, emotional deprivation, defectiveness/shame, and social isolation/alienation schemas, often have difficult childhoods and in adulthood, they tend to seek refuge from one relationship to another. Those with an abandonment/instability schema are emotionally unpredictable and unstable, and also those with a release/instability scheme are emotionally unpredictable and unstable (Bamelis et al., 2014). Also, seeking sensation in identity means the search for arousal and excitement, new experiences, and the lack of enjoyment of the current life, which leads one to consider betrayal to be rational (Lalasz & Weigel, 2011).

Impaired limits could predict the overall score of the component of legitimacy in infidelity. It can be said that the person with this scheme has no obligation to observe the principles of mutual relations and accepts the legitimacy of infidelity (Young & Klosko, 1994). Early maladaptive schemas contributed to predicting marital satisfaction. This finding is consistent with the results of previous studies (Andooz & Hamidpour, 2006; Stiles, 2004) on the relationship between early maladaptive schemas and intimacy in romantic relationships and marital satisfaction. These findings and their alignment with other studies indicate the undoubted and decisive role of schemas in marital dissatisfaction and schemas in the context of marital relationships directly affect the behaviors of spouses (Schmidt et al., 1995). In this regard, a schema intervention was performed to promote couples' marital satisfaction, and the results showed the effectiveness of these interventions. The present study

showed that, in general, the areas of early maladaptive schemas (rejections and disconnection, over-vigilance, and impaired limits) had a significant role in predicting the components of marital infidelity. This research was done considering the changes in marital relationships in contemporary Iranian society and the need to pay attention to the importance of the stability and durability of marriage for the advancement of society's goals and increasing the level of mental health. The stability and durability of a particular marriage should be highly considered. The present study results have many benefits for family counselors in premarital and extramarital relationships that family therapists should not overlook the importance of early maladaptive schemas and essential personality traits. Couples' schemas should be evaluated, and corrections need to be made.

5. Conclusion

The present study only examined relationships and suggested that it is possible to examine the effects of independent variables such as relationship enrichment training. Intimate relationship training can prevent and improve relationships by increasing intimacy and communication beliefs. The commitment of marriage should be examined so that the result obtained is more reliable.

Limitation

One of the limitations of the present study is the difficulty in finding the target individuals due to the legal and social consequences of exposing marital infidelity, especially for women. Therefore, the researcher had to select a sample of university students. As the research is correlational, caution should be exercised in causal inference. It is suggested that this study be repeated on other samples and by other researchers. It is also suggested that other predictor variables (attachment styles, communication beliefs, couples' communication patterns) in marital infidelity be studied.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

The current research was confirmed by the Committee of Research, [Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences](#) (Code IR.SBMU.RETECH.REC.1399.1036). In this research, after presenting the administrative process and research content for the students participating, an attempt was made to keep the participants' information wholly confidential and collect information with informed consent and their consent based on participation in the research. This study did not cause any harm to the participants in the study. At the end of the research, the people's oral opinions and recommendations were taken into consideration, and they were thanked for their support in this project.

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Authors' contributions

Conceptualization: Sara Karimi and Farnaz Doostdari; Methodology: Amir Sam Kianimoghadam, Rahim Yosefi; Investigation: Farshid Safari and Mehran Soleymani; Writing: Farnaz Doostdari, Sara Karimi and Nahid Bahadoriyan Lotfabadi; Supervision: Amir Sam Kianimoghadam.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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