

Reaction to Infidelity in Iranian couples: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

Introduction: Infidelity can have devastating effects on the couple and other important people in the couple's life. Many researches are dedicated to examine the predictors of infidelity, however reaction to the infidelity is still an unknown issue. Hence, this study was conducted with the purpose of examining people's reaction to the infidelity in Iranian couples.

Methods: The present study was a qualitative research with a phenomenology approach. People with the experience of spouse's infidelity were invited to participate in a psychological research through public notice. Purposive sampling continued till the saturation of data was achieved. Through this procedure, 16 people were interviewed. The in-depth semi structured interview was used to explore participant's reactions to the infidelity.

Results: In this research, the Colaizzi's method was used to analyze the data. After transcribing the interviews, formulated meanings were extracted. Within the analyzing process, these formulated meanings were classified in 12 theme clusters. Finally 5 major themes were emerged: reactions to oneself, reactions to spouse, reactions to spouse's family of origin, reactions to third person, and reactions to others (own family, children and friends).

Conclusions: The findings of this study were consistent with theories which conceptualize reaction to infidelity as a traumatic response. This is while the clusters of reactions to the spouse's family of origin and physiological reactions are the specific outcomes of this research.

Keywords: Couple, Infidelity, Iranian Sample, Phenomenology, Qualitative Research

Introduction

Each person has a unique understanding of marital infidelity. In order to improve consistency across studies on marital infidelity, Blow and Hartnett [1] defined this phenomena as a sexual and/or emotional activity committed by a person who is in an exclusive relationship. The activities are conducted outside of the primary relationship, including breach of trust and/or violation of the agreed-upon norms (explicit and implicit) of the emotional and/or sexual exclusivity of the primary relationship. In America, surveys estimated the prevalence of sexual infidelity during lifetime as almost 21 percent among men and 11 percent among women [2]. With the inclusion of emotional infidelity in the scope of betrayal, that figure mounts to 44 percent for men and 25 percent for women [3].

Infidelity can have devastating effects on the individual involved in betrayal, the betrayed person, their family and extended family. Following the exposure of infidelity, many couples experience emotional turmoil. Unfaithful partners often deal with feelings such as shame, guilt, doubt, anger, frustration and negative feelings about themselves. Partners who are betrayed often experience feelings like anger, low self-esteem, depression, hopelessness, helplessness, shock, confusion, sense of being a victim and jealousy [3-6]. In fact, many studies have shown that reaction to the betrayal of spouse is similar to the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) [3, 8]. The risk of clinical depression in women who

have recently been exposed to husband betrayal is six times greater than the normal population [9, 10]. These people also significantly report more symptoms of depression and anxiety [10] and are at a high risk of suicide attempts [11].

Betrayal plays an important role in the destruction of the marital relationship. About 40 percent of divorced people in America have reported that they have been involved in extramarital relationships, at least once during their marriage [12]. Betrayal is not limited to America or even western societies. A study investigated 160 different cultures and remarked infidelity as the biggest reason for divorce [13].

Marital infidelity can impose many negative consequences on the family. Various researches have shown that after exposing the treachery of spouse, families face problems such as marital crisis, weakened parenting performance in and job problems [14]. Other consequences include issues such as spouse battering and murder [11]. Betrayal intensifies the negative effects of divorce on children; for example, the idea among teens that their parents are divorced because of infidelity is the strongest predictor of insecure attachment [15].

According to the opinion of couple therapists, infidelity is the third problem among the most difficult marital problems to treat [16, 17]. A number of therapists have proposed guidelines for the treatment of couples engaged in betrayal in the form of books and articles [18-20]. This is while most approaches that target treating marriage after infidelity are not based on empirical research findings; but these therapists mainly share their clinical experiences. In fact, few studies have examined the aftermath of the betrayal. Response to infidelity is an important area of research that remains uncertain in light of the large volume of research that focuses on predictors of infidelity.

In addition, the studies that have addressed the problem of betrayal are few in Iran. It seems that people's attitude to infidelity is different because of its extensive interaction with different variables. The values of a society that a person lives in are fundamental variables. Given the lack of studies that investigate the reaction to infidelity among Iranians, it was not clear whether there are any responses specific to the Iranian society. Hence, it was necessary to conduct a qualitative research to explore this issue deeply.

Blow and Hartnett [1] in their review on the researches in the area of infidelity, mentioned the major help of the qualitative researches to better understand the processes in infidelity and emphasis on the importance of conducting qualitative researches in examining it. Even in western societies, the number of qualitative researches which investigate reactions to infidelity are limited in number. Olson, Russell, Higgings-kessler and miller [21] examined the emotional processes following disclosure of an extramarital affair by conducting in-depth interviews. After coding and content analysis of the interviews' transcripts, they identified a three-stage process. The process begins with an "emotional roller coaster" and moves through a "moratorium" before efforts at trust building are recognized. They discuss the implications of

their study for the literature on forgiveness and the process of change in couple therapy.

It seems that identifying and managing what a betrayed person feels can be helpful for preventing more damages to the person, spouse, relationship, and the family. For this reason, in order to effectively help the Iranian couples dealing with infidelity, this research was essential.

The aim of the current study was to describe reaction to the infidelity in Iranian married people who are being exposed to their spouses' betrayal.

Methods

This study was a qualitative research using the phenomenological approach. Phenomenological researches are designed to examine and describe a phenomenon, such as betrayal of spouse, from the perspective of the people who are closely engaged with the target phenomena.

The statistical population included married people in Tehran who experienced spouse infidelity. The criterion for participation was that the time of betrayal was not over 5 years. The targeted sampling lasted for 8 months and 16 interviews were conducted until data saturation. Sixteen participants (11 women, 5 men, $M_{age} = 37$, age range: 27-61) who had experienced marital infidelity were interviewed. At the time of the interview, four of the interviewees were still married, ten were divorced and two were living separated. Nine of the participants had children (maximum of two). The average of months since the disclosure of the infidelity was 19 months (ranging from 2 to 60 months). Four of the marital infidelities were sexual, seven were emotional and the other five were a mixture of the two types.

In order to study the reaction of people to the betrayal, a semi-structured interview was used, that its initial plan was formulated by the researcher under the supervision of couple therapy experts.

Reaction to The Infidelity Interview: To evaluate the response of individuals to betrayal, semi-structured interview was used. Interview is known as the main method of collecting data in phenomenological study, since it provides an opportunity for the participants to explain their vision of the world, as they experienced it using their own language and words. These interviews first start with general questions that allow people to freely express their experiences and continue by explorative statements and probing, these lead to deepening the interviews to access rich data based on the responses of participants [22]. In order to determine the initial scope, the literature on the reaction to betrayal was reviewed and primary questions that must be addressed in an interview were extracted under the supervision of couples therapists and qualitative researchers. The main topics that were answered during the interview included information on the betrayal incident (when, how and type of extramarital relationship); when the doubt in spouse started; how the betrayal was exposed; feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of the betrayed person when faced with cues, immediately after exposing the betrayal, the reaction over time up to the present moment; and finally

the relationship with the spouse before and after the betrayal. Therefore, in each interview according to the responses, more specific questions were asked from the interviewee in order to accurately understand the individual reactions. After each interview, it was transcribed and analyzed to identify the new areas which should be considered in subsequent interviews. Each interview lasted one hour on average.

A public notice was distributed in the crowded areas of Tehran and people who experienced marital infidelity were invited to participate in a research in Shahid Beheshti University. Also, some couple therapists were asked to introduce from among their clients with the needed criteria with their consent. Finally, invitations were sent to eligible individuals through social networks. Interviews were conducted in the counseling center of the University. After introduction, the purpose of the study and the issue of informed consent were discussed with the participants and then the person was asked to complete a form on demographic information. Then, the interview of response to betrayal was conducted.

The seven-stage method of Colaizzi [23] was used to analyze the data: 1) first, all interviews were transcribed. Each transcript had been reviewed for several times by the researchers to become more engaged with the data; 2) significant statements in transcriptions which had a reference to subject's reaction to infidelity were extracted; 3) meanings were formulated from these significant statements, such as *reviewing betrayal evidence* or *feeling*

abandoned; 4) the relationships between formulated meanings were investigated and formulated meanings were organized into more abstract similar types i.e. theme clusters, such as *cognitive, emotional or behavioral reaction to self*; 5) theme clusters and associated formulated meanings were integrated into an comprehensive description of the phenomenon i.e. reaction to the infidelity; 6) the fundamental structure of the phenomenon were identified and described; 7) finally, for the purpose of validating the findings had been shared with participants, so they could compare the results with their experiences. Findings were modified if there were any inconsistencies between findings and the participants' experiences. In addition to member check, peer review method was used to evaluate the trustworthiness of the results. Two couple therapists who had experience in qualitative research double-checked the transcripts during all the steps of the analysis.

Results

The interviews were analyzed line by line or paragraph based on the purpose of research, i.e. the reaction to betrayal and the data were labeled and conceptualized. At this stage, the reactions of those interviewed suffering from betrayed spouse, was classified in the form of 94 formulated meanings. The examples of significant statements and extracted formulated meanings are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Examples of extracting formulated meanings from significant statements

Significant statements	Transcript No.	Formulated meanings
<i>"I knew that they were going to meet in the afternoon. Hence I asked my brother to chase them and take pictures of them together, so I can show to his family".</i>	12	Collecting evidence to prove the infidelity
<i>"Sometimes I think that it was better if I confronted him earlier. I just compromised for a long time".</i>	2	Ruminations about his/her reactions to the incident
<i>"It just feel awful. It seems that you have been played by these people".</i>	9	Feeling of being deceived
<i>"I was tired all the time. I used to be an active mother, but in those days I didn't want to do anything. I just wanted to sleep".</i>	8	Fatigue
<i>"I was completely dependent on him financially. But after the incident, I started to save money and now I am more independent. In the past he was my whole life. But now, he is just a part of it".</i>	1	Increasing autonomy in the relationship
<i>"I was crying and he was standing there staring at me. I was shocked that how she can be so apathetic".</i>	9	Dissatisfaction from spouse's reactions
<i>"Later I broke his car's windows".</i>	4	Engaging in an argument with the third person or hurting him/her
<i>"1 month later I called her sister and said you are doing nothing while my family is completely involved. I asked them to talk to my husband".</i>	6	Asking for support from spouse's family
<i>"They admitted to his fault to some degree. But generally, they supported him and that was really annoying".</i>	16	Dissatisfaction of spouse's family reactions
<i>"My son supported me a lot during this time. He lied to his father to cover up for me several times".</i>	5	Establishment of an alliance with children
<i>"I think that if my father supported me, my life would be better right now. He doesn't really care about his girls' and boys' lives".</i>	6	Annoyance because of lack of support from oneself family of origin

In the next step, the internal relationship between the obtained meanings was established, and they were placed under more abstract entities i.e. clusters. Formulated meanings of the first stage were classified into 12 major clusters according to the observed relationships between them. Finally,

the relations between clusters and certain central issues were determined and the integration process was done to develop the theme. Table 2-6 provide the formulated meanings, clusters and emergent themes from the text of the interviews about reactions to the infidelity of spouse.

Table 2. First theme: reactions to self

Formulated meanings	Theme Clusters	Emergent themes
Religious behavior		
Seeking for therapy and counseling		
Self-mutilation and committing suicide		
Avoiding incident signs		
Crying		
Reviewing incident evidences		
Engaging in an extra-marital relationship	Behavioral reactions to self	
Searching for data about the incident		
Collecting evidence to prove the infidelity		
Using Psychiatric medicines		
Smoking and substance abuse		
Engaging in personal promotion activities		
Impact of distress on professional and social functions		
Thought of causing damage to self		reactions to self
Ambivalent thinking		
Ruminations about his/her reactions to the incident		
Hopelessness about future		
Thinking about getting divorce		
Being regretful about the marriage		
Disbelief of the spouse's infidelity		
Feeling injustice about being betrayed	Cognitive reactions to self	
Self-esteem destruction		
Self-blame		
Denying		
Loss of trust in the opposite sex		
Flashbacks		
Preoccupation with thought of losing the spouse		
Identity confusion and trying to gain identity coherence		
Fear		
Hatred and disgust		
Feeling of helplessness		
Feeling of being abandoned		
Feeling of being rejected		
Anger		
Loneliness		
Feeling of being humiliated		
Anxiety		
Painfulness	Emotional reactions to self	
Shame		
Irritability		
Regret		
Feeling of being deceived		
Feeling guilty		reactions to self
Feeling hurt		
Jealousy		
Being shocked		
Sadness		
Weight loss		
Relapse of previous diseases		
Hair loss		
Appetite loss		
Fatigue	Physiological reactions	
Increased heart beat		
Nausea		
Headache		
Sleep disturbance		
Body tremor during disclosure		
pursiness		

Table 3. Second theme: reactions to spouse

Formulated meanings	Theme Clusters	Emergent themes
Trying to attract the spouse to the relationship		
Asking spouse to compensate		
Asking spouse to end the extramarital relationship		
Trying to evoke jealousy in spouse		
Being in the position of power		
Withdrawal		
Trying to control spouse's behavior		
Humiliation, insulting and blaming		
Separation and divorce	Behavioral reactions to spouse	
Talking about infidelity directly		Reactions to spouse
Talking about infidelity indirectly		
Increasing autonomy in the relationship		
Threatening the spouse		
Causing injury		
Trying to make spouse feel guilty		
Bring a lawsuit against spouse		
Change the living place with spouse		
Thought of hurting spouse		
Loss of interest		
Dissatisfaction from spouse's reactions	Cognitive reactions to spouse	
Loss of trust		

Table 4. Third theme: reactions to third person

Formulated meanings	Theme Clusters	Emergent themes
Bring a lawsuit against the third person		
Engaging in an argument with the third person or hurting him/her	Behavioral reactions to the third person	Reactions to the third person
Threatening the third person		
Asking the third person to end the relationship with spouse		
Thought of hurting the third person	Cognitive reactions to the third person	
Comparing oneself with the third person		

Table 5. Fourth theme: Reactions to spouse's family of origin

Formulated meanings	Theme Clusters	Emergent themes
Physical and verbal argument with spouse's family	Behavioral reactions to spouse's family of origin	Reactions to spouse's family of origin
Asking for support		
Dissatisfaction of spouse's family reactions	Cognitive reactions to spouse's family of origin	

Table 6. Fifth theme: reactions to others

Formulated meanings	Theme Clusters	Emergent themes
Establishment of an alliance with children	Behavioral reactions to others (person's own family, children, friends)	reactions to others (person's own family, children, friends)
Disturbance in parent-child relationship		
Asking family for support		
Asking friends for support		
Annoyance because of lack of support from oneself family of origin	Cognitive reactions to others (person's own family, children, friends)	

Discussion

By comparing the results of previous research carried out in the field of spouse betrayal with the findings of the present study, some similarities and contrasts can be seen. Shackelford, LeBlanc and Drass [24] detected 15 feelings in their search for a variety of emotional reactions to infidelity. The 15 emotions included: undesirable/insecure, hostile/vengeful, depressed, helpless/abandoned, happy, shocked, nauseated/repulsed, blameworthy, content/relieved, humiliated, sexually aroused, tired, homicidal/suicidal, anxious, and forgiving. Similarities can be seen between these emotional

reactions and the emotional reactions of self-cluster. The lack of feelings of happiness, satisfaction and sexual arousal can be observed because of difference in samples. Shackelford, LeBlanc and Drass [25] have conducted their study among student population and asked them to imagine the person with whom they are in a romantic relationship has betrayed them, whereas the present study examined reactions in the people who actually experienced marital infidelity. Exploring the reactions to infidelity among people who did not really experience it is one of the limitations in previous studies.

Findings also can be conceptualized in the form of the

existing theories in this field. The recent theories consider the responses of the betrayed person similar to the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) [18], meaning that the reactions of the betrayed person is similar to the reactions of a person who has been exposed to traumatic events. Among the findings of this study, concepts in line with this theory can be found.

The destruction of basic beliefs about self, spouse and the relationship which Baucom, Snyder and Gordon [18] consider it as the cause of PTSD-like symptoms in betrayed people was repeated in the findings of this study. The cognitive reactions such as the loss of trust or identity confusion and trying to gain identity coherence indicate questioning of the beliefs about oneself by which a person has lived many years. In addition, beliefs about the spouse are also severely damaged. The reactions including loss of interest in spouse, the loss of trust in him/her, and regret their marriage represent destruction of individual beliefs about marriage. The inconsistencies of spouse behavior in betrayal with the assumptions of the other party leads to shocking and disbelief in the betrayed person.

Similar to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms, beliefs about the world and people are questioned in the face of betrayal. Reactions such as desperate thoughts about the future and loss of trust in the opposite sex that were observed in the results, confirm the issue.

The other symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder is re-experiencing the event as images, thoughts and perceptions. Flashbacks were often reported by interviewees. Nightmares about what happened and avoiding the reminders of the event are other common elements between the findings of this study and response to trauma.

It should also be noted that some findings of this research are specific to this study. With putting the formulated meanings in major clusters, some areas became clear that had not been addressed in the literature. One of these areas refers to the meanings that have been placed in the cluster of reactions to spouse's family of origin. According to the interviews, families are often referred to in the case of betrayal for various reasons. In most cases, it was expected that the family of the betraying person would interfere. Sometimes the betrayed person asks for this intervention and the support of family (asking for support). In some cases, whether the betrayed person has discussed his/her expectations with the spouse's family or not, there is a dissatisfaction with the lack of family support that hurts the betrayed party. In some cases this dissatisfaction is increased to such an extent that leads to verbal and physical conflicts with his/her family. Often in the latter case, the betrayed person puts the blame on the other party's family for betrayal or the continuation of it. Several studies in Iran showed the importance of extended families in the lives of couples. Mazaheri et al. [25] aimed to provide solutions to reduce and control the divorce, and considered families' interferences as an important predictor of divorce. In another study, Mazaheri, Sadeghi, NasrAbadi,

Ansarinejad, and Abbasi, [26] examined the relationship between mate selection styles and the quality and sustainability of marriage. They noted the important role of extended families in mate selection and future marital satisfaction in Iran. In another study, Sadeghi, Mazaheri, and Mootabi [27] introduced the Iranian couples' interaction coding system, and found the interactive codes that do not exist in other studies. One of the most important and pervasive of these codes, was related to the extended family of couples.

All of these pioneering studies confirm the important role of family in the Iranian couple's interactions. But in this study, it can be seen that the betrayed party refers to the family of the betraying party, to the extent that it formed a separate cluster from the reaction toward his/her own family, children and friends.

The next finding is an abundant report of physiological responses towards spouse betrayal. Although the reaction of stress has been considered as an adaptive and logical response necessary for human survival, but long-term exposure to stress disrupts a person's physical and psychological balance [28]. Experiencing stress has many negative effects on the secretion of stress hormones, cardiovascular system, metabolic and digestive changes, immunity, pain, sleep and memory [29]. The body's physiological response to stress is releases energy and increases the rate of heartbeat, breathing and blood pressure so that the energy will be spread throughout the body [30]. This issue justifies symptoms such as sleep disorders, heart beating, nausea, heart failure, trembling, and difficulty of breath.

On the other hand, stress has a preventive effect on some physical systems. In response to the stress, the level of activity decreases in systems such as digestion, growth and reproduction and prolonged stress suppresses the immune system and increases the risk of relapse of previous diseases as well as the new ones [30]. According to what was said, it seems that the reported reactions such as loss of appetite, weight loss, and relapse of previous diseases are the body's response to prolonged exposure to stress. Lack of observed physiological reactions reported in the literature can be attributed to dealing with this issue through hypothetical scenarios of the betrayal by predecessors. It is less likely that a person mentions his/her physiological responses when he/she is imagining partner betrayal.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of interviews with 16 Iranian betrayed people showed that the responses to infidelity in the Iranian community were consistent with theories which conceptualize reaction to the infidelity as the traumatic response. In addition, the cluster of reactions to the spouse's family of origin implies that in the Iranian society and societies alike, the family of origin's role, specially the spouse's extended family can be a very determining factor in infidelity treatment. Whether they are being referenced for support or complaining, their impact cannot be underestimated.

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