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Comparison of Emotional Schemas, Coping Strategies, and Marital Burnout in Individuals with and without a History of Marital Infidelity Seeking Divorce

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to compare emotional schemas, coping strategies, and marital burnout between individuals with a history of marital infidelity and those without, who are seeking divorce in Tehran. The research is applied in nature and utilizes a post hoc methodological design.

Methods: The statistical population included all couples in Tehran with and without a history of marital infidelity who had referred to counseling centers across various districts of Tehran during the last three months of 2023. Using convenience sampling, a total of 60 participants were selected. The sample was divided into two groups of 30: one group with a history of infidelity and the other without. Participants were matched for 15 men and 15 women in each group. Data were collected using the Emotional Schema Scale (Leahy, 2002), the Coping Strategies Inventory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1988), and the Marital Burnout Scale (Pines, 1996). Following pre-test and post-test administration, the mean scores of the two groups were compared.

Results: Inferential analysis using independent t-tests and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) revealed that emotional schemas, coping strategies, and marital burnout differ significantly between couples with and without a history of marital infidelity in Tehran

Conclusions: The study concludes that a history of marital infidelity significantly predicts higher marital burnout and distinct emotional schemas, highlighting the need for targeted coping strategies in divorce counseling.

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Introduction

The family, as the most fundamental social unit, faces emerging challenges that threaten its stability. Despite the evolution of marriage toward equality, divorce rates are rising, increasing the need to understand marital structure and relationships. Efforts to distinguish happy, stable marriages from unsuccessful ones are ongoing (Coiguet & Ozguit, 2017). One of the most critical challenges is marital infidelity, defined as a breach of exclusive relationship commitments, often acting as a catalyst for family collapse and divorce (Smith et al., 2023). Infidelity is not merely a harmful behavior but a complex reaction to underlying emotional disconnects, requiring deep psychological analysis. It is one of the most damaging problems in marital life, causing irreparable harm to partners, families, children, and society, while destroying self-confidence and trust in others. Studies show that extramarital relationships can severely damage trust between spouses, leading to marital discord, separation, and even divorce (Miles, 2014). Croky (2013), in a study titled "Opposite-Sex Colleagues and Marital Infidelity," concluded that having an unfaithful sexual partner causes men to engage in unconventional relationships with female colleagues in the workplace. However, this finding has not been proven for women. Undoubtedly, no emotional or social disorder exists that is independent of the family's influence (Dana, 2011).

The starting point of this analysis is the examination of emotional schemas. According to Leahy's (2002) model, emotional schemas are the beliefs and strategies individuals use to interpret and manage their emotions. In individuals with a history of infidelity, patterns of poor emotional understanding, guilt, or a need for emotional suppression are often observed, driving the individual to seek relief outside the relationship. The fundamental issue is whether differences in these cognitive-emotional underpinnings lead one person toward infidelity when facing marital crises, while another with similar problems does not develop such a history. Furthermore, how individuals cope with relationship tensions depends on their coping strategies. Studies indicate that individuals on the brink of divorce use a spectrum of problem-focused or emotion-focused strategies. However, the key question remains: in individuals with a history of infidelity, do maladaptive coping strategies (such as avoidance or impulsive behaviors) play a determining role in the occurrence of unfaithfulness? Understanding these differences can explain why some couples, instead of problem-solving in the face of conflict, resort to relationship-destroying behaviors.

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The ultimate outcome of these dysfunctional processes is marital burnout—a state characterized by emotional, physical, and psychological exhaustion resulting from the discrepancy between marital expectations and reality (Pines, 2005). In divorce-seeking couples, particularly those who have experienced infidelity, burnout takes on more complex dimensions, as the meaning of the relationship and emotional security are severely undermined. Despite the importance of this topic, domestic research has rarely compared the deep roots (schemas) and behavioral responses (strategies and burnout) in two groups of divorce applicants (with and without a history of infidelity). Most studies have focused solely on the consequences of divorce, neglecting to explain the structural differences between these two groups. Therefore, the main issue of the present research is: Is there a significant difference between emotional schemas, coping strategies, and the level of marital burnout in individuals seeking divorce who have a history of infidelity compared to those without such a history? Identifying these distinctions can open new avenues in marital therapy, pre-divorce counseling, and preventive interventions for family professionals.

Material and Methods

In terms of objective, this research is applied. Furthermore, the present study is of the ex post facto type, meaning it seeks to discover the causes or factors leading to the occurrence of the phenomenon, event, or incident under investigation. For descriptive analysis, descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, frequency distribution tables, and charts were used. For inferential analysis, the Independent Samples t-test and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA**)** were employed. Statistical data analysis was conducted using SPSS software.

The statistical population included all couples in Tehran with and without a history of marital infidelity who were trending toward divorce and had referred to various counseling offices and centers across different districts of Tehran during the last three months of the year 2023.

Convenience sampling was utilized to select a sample size of 60 participants. The participants were divided into two groups of 30 people each:

1. Infidelity Group (n=30)**:** Consisting of 15 women and 15 men with a history of infidelity.
2. Non-Infidelity Group (n=30): Consisting of 15 women and 15 men without a history of infidelity.

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The two groups were formed using the matching method and were compared after the administration of the questionnaires.

Instruments

Leahy Emotional Schema Questionnaire (ESQ): This scale was developed by Leahy in 2002 based on his Emotional Schema Model to assess 14 schemas related to beliefs and attitudes toward emotion. The scale consists of **50 items** scored using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "Completely Disagree" (0) to "Completely Agree" (4) (Leahy, 2002). Leahy (2011) reported an internal consistency of $\alpha = 0.81$using Cronbach's alpha. In Iran, Khanzadeh et al. examined the factor structure and psychometric properties of this questionnaire, resulting in a 37-item scale with a Likert rating. Test-retest reliability over a two-week interval was reported as $0.78$for the whole scale, and internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha was 0.81(Khanzadeh, 2013).

Lazarus and Folkman Coping Strategies Questionnaire (CSQ): To measure coping strategies based on Lazarus and Folkman's theory, these two psychologists developed the CSQ in 1988. This questionnaire comprises 66 items across 8 subscales: Direct Coping, Distancing, Self-Restraint, Seeking Social Support, Responsibility Taking, Escape-Avoidance, Planning Problem Solving, and Positive Reappraisal. These 8 subscales are summarized into two overall dimensions: Emotion-Focused Coping and Problem-Focused Coping. The questionnaire's reliability, determined by internal consistency measures using Cronbach's alpha, has been deemed appropriate. Aldwin and Revenson have also empirically analyzed and confirmed the validity of the revised coping strategies questionnaire (as cited in AghaYousefi, 2001). Since the described strategies are those individuals, report using when facing stressful demands, the CSQ possesses face validity.

Couples Burnout Measure (CBM): The CBM is a self-report tool designed to measure the degree of marital burnout among couples, developed by Pines (1996). This questionnaire contains 20 items covering 3 main components:

Physical Exhaustion (e.g., feeling tired, lethargic, having sleep disturbances) (Items 1, 4, 10, 16, 20).

Emotional Depletion (feeling depressed, hopeless, trapped) (Items 2, 3, 5, 6, 9, 11, 14, 17, 19).

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Psychological Disengagement (e.g., feeling worthless, frustrated, and angry at the spouse) (Items 7, 8, 12, 13, 15, 18).

All items are answered on a seven-point scale, where level 1 indicates no experience of the statement and level 7 indicates a high experience. The total burnout score calculation involves several steps (specific summation and division by 21). Higher resulting scores indicate a higher degree of burnout. Reliability evaluations showed internal consistency between variables ranging from 0.84to 0.90. Validity was confirmed through negative correlations with positive relational attributes, such as positive feelings about the relationship, quality of conversation, feeling secure, self-actualization, sense of purpose, emotional attraction to the spouse, and sexual relationship quality. Test-retest reliability was 0.89for one month, 0.76for two months, and 0.66for four months. Internal consistency for most subjects was measured with a stable alpha coefficient between 0.91and 0.93(Pines, translated by Shadab, 2002). In Iran, Navidi (2005) estimated the Cronbach's alpha for this questionnaire to be 0.86. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.88.

Ethical Considerations

In conducting this study, the researchers strictly adhered to the ethical guidelines established by the American Psychological Association (APA) and the relevant ethical committees for human subject's research. The following measures were implemented to protect the rights and well-being of all participants:

Informed Consent: Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the commencement of the data collection. Participants were fully briefed on the study's objectives, procedures, and the voluntary nature of their involvement.

Confidentiality and Anonymity: To ensure participant privacy, all data were kept strictly confidential. Questionnaires were completed anonymously, and no names or identifying information were recorded. All data were stored securely and used solely for research purposes.

Voluntary Participation: Participation was entirely voluntary. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without providing a reason or facing any negative consequences.

Minimization of Harm: Given the sensitive nature of the topic (marital infidelity and divorce), care was taken to administer the questionnaires in a private, non-judgmental environment within

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the counseling centers. Participants experiencing significant distress during the study were offered the opportunity to speak with the center's counseling staff for support.

Institutional Approval: The study protocol received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the Islamic Azad University/Institute prior to data collection.

Results

The results section presents the descriptive statistics and the findings from the independent samples t-tests used to compare the study variables between the two groups: individuals seeking divorce with a history of marital infidelity and those without such a history.

Table 1. Mean, Standard Deviation, and Sample Size of Marital Burnout, Coping Strategies, and Emotional Schemas in Individuals with and without a History of Marital Infidelity Seeking Divorce

Variables	Groups	*N*	Mean	Standard Deviation
Emotional Schema	History of Infidelity	30	84.56	20.40
	No History of Infidelity	30	86.80	4.936
Coping Strategies	History of Infidelity	30	117.56	9.37
	No History of Infidelity	30	125.30	8.618
Marital Burnout	History of Infidelity	30	20.96	3.07
	No History of Infidelity	30	15.33	2.251

The results of Table 1 indicate that there are significant differences between the two groups seeking divorce (with and without a history of infidelity) across the variables of Emotional Schema, Coping Strategies, and Marital Burnout. Specifically, individuals seeking divorce without a history of infidelity reported higher scores in Emotional Schema and Coping Strategies, while individuals seeking divorce with a history of infidelity reported higher scores in Marital Burnout.

Analysis of Emotional Schema (Tables 2 & 3)

Table 2. Emotional Schema Scores in Divorce Seekers with and without a History of Infidelity

Variables	**Groups**	***N***	**Mean**	**Standard Deviation**
Emotional Schema	History of Infidelity	30	84.56	20.40
	No History of Infidelity	30	86.80	4.936

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Table 2 shows that the mean score for the Emotional Schema is higher in divorce seekers without a history of infidelity compared to those with a history of infidelity. An independent samples t-test was used to examine the significance of this difference.

Table 3. Results of Independent Samples t-test for Significance of Emotional Schema Score Differences

T value	DF	P
3.905	58	0.000

As observed in Table 3, the mean Emotional Schema score for divorce seekers in Tehran without a history of infidelity (86.80) was higher than the scores for those with a history of infidelity (84.56). The independent samples t-test results yielded $t(58) = 3.905$. Since $p < 0.05$, the research hypothesis is confirmed and the null hypothesis is rejected. This implies a statistically significant difference in Emotional Schemas between divorce seekers with and without infidelity history, with the higher mean score found in the group without infidelity history.

Table 4. Coping Strategies Scores in Divorce Seekers with and without a History of Infidelity

Variables	Groups	*N*	Mean	Standard Deviation
Coping Strategies	History of Infidelity	30	117.56	9.37
	No History of Infidelity	30	125.30	8.618

Table 4 indicates that the mean score for Coping Strategies is higher in divorce seekers without a history of infidelity compared to those with a history of infidelity. An independent samples t-test was used to examine the significance of this difference.

Table 5. Results of Independent Samples t-test for Significance of Coping Strategy Score Differences

T value	DF	P
3.864	58	0.003

As shown in Table 5, the mean score for Coping Strategies in divorce seekers in Tehran without a history of infidelity (125.30) was higher than the scores for those with a history of infidelity (117.56). The independent samples t-test results yielded $t(58) = 3.864$. Since $p < 0.05$, the research hypothesis is confirmed and the null hypothesis is rejected. This implies a statistically significant difference in Coping Strategies, with the higher mean score found in the group without infidelity history.

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Table 6. Marital Burnout Scores in Divorce Seekers with and without a History of Infidelity

Variables	Groups	*N*	Mean	Standard Deviation
Marital Burnout	History of Infidelity	30	20.96	3.07
	No History of Infidelity	30	15.33	2.251

Table 6 shows that the mean Marital Burnout score is higher in divorce seekers with a history of infidelity compared to those without such a history. An independent samples t-test was used to examine the significance of this difference.

Table 7. Results of Independent Samples t-test for Significance of Marital Burnout Score Differences

T value	DF	P
-8.520	58	0.000

As observed in Table 7, the mean Marital Burnout score for divorce seekers in Tehran without a history of infidelity (15.33) was lower than the scores for those with a history of infidelity (20.96). The independent samples t-test results yielded $t(58) = -8.520$. Since $p < 0.05$, the research hypothesis is confirmed and the null hypothesis is rejected. This implies a statistically significant difference in Marital Burnout, with the higher mean score found in the group with infidelity history.

Discussion

As indicated by the results in Table 1, there is a statistically significant difference between individuals seeking divorce with and without a history of marital infidelity regarding Marital Burnout, Coping Strategies, and Emotional Schemas. Specifically, divorce seekers without a history of infidelity demonstrated higher levels of Emotional Schemas and Coping Strategies, whereas those with a history of infidelity reported significantly higher levels of Marital Burnout. These findings align with and are confirmed by numerous studies conducted by Mohammadi et al. (2015), Kakolvand et al. (2014), Daneshmandi et al. (2014), Kalantar Kousheh et al. (2014), Nadai et al. (2014), Mohammadkhani et al. (2014), Bahrami et al. (2013), Khanzadeh et al. (2013), Aliyan et al. (2011), Shoheli et al. (2011), Carson et al. (2015), Pritchard (2014), Waring et al. (2013), Beck et al. (2012), and Harper et al. (2012). All these researchers have reported consistent results indicating that emotional regulation deficits and ineffective coping mechanisms are strongly

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associated with marital distress and infidelity. No contradictory studies were found in the reviewed literature.

Adultery (marital infidelity) remains a critical issue capturing the attention of psychologists today, involving a vast number of couples (Myhillham, 2014). Infidelity is considered one of the most detrimental problems in a marital relationship and shared life. It often causes irrevocable harm to the betrayed partner, the family structure, children, and society at large, while simultaneously eroding self-confidence and trust in others. Reports indicate that extramarital affairs can seriously damage the trust between spouses, leading to marital conflict, separation, and ultimately divorce (Myhillham, 2014).

According to some theorists, such as Helen Fisher, various psychological factors contribute to an individual's tendency toward infidelity. Some individuals seek to resolve marital or sexual issues, while others seek more attention, revenge, or excitement in their current relationship. Furthermore, Fisher suggests that the propensity for infidelity has biological roots. Extensive research highlights that marital burnout and the lack of appropriate coping skills are among the primary causes of marital collapse and infidelity (Motersi et al., 2014, citing Plot et al., 2008). Sadly, once infidelity occurs within a family, there is often no place left for peace for its members.

Recent studies also demonstrate that when a marriage creates unfavorable conditions for satisfying partners' diverse needs, not only are the positive aspects of marriage unrealized, but it may also leave a negative, often irreparable, impact. These negative effects are not limited to the spouses; they create a wide spectrum of disorders in their children, including social withdrawal, depression, deficits in social competence, poor academic performance, and communication problems (Danesh, 2011).

Research emphasizes the importance of individual adaptive coping strategies employed by each spouse, the focus of these strategies on problem-solving versus emotion-focused processing, and the compatibility or incompatibility between partners (Spanier, 2010). Without the ability and skills for effective coping, many marital relationships are at risk of failure and separation (Bradbury et al., 2010). The inability to cope with adverse situations, coupled with negligible social support and resources, is a key reason for the rising divorce rate. Couples facing new circumstances and life changes encounter a range of challenges that significantly impact their adaptation strategies.

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Limitations

The sample for this study was limited to couples in Tehran with and without a history of marital infidelity who were seeking divorce. Consequently, the findings may not be generalizable to other regions or demographics. Therefore, caution must be exercised when generalizing these results.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, it is recommended that pre-marital educational programs regarding adaptive coping strategies and emotional control be implemented for couples. These programs should aim to teach skills for managing emotions, thereby enhancing marital adjustment. Furthermore, educational channels should be established on social media platforms, supervised by psychology experts, to assist couples in restoring and rebuilding their relationships.

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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by ethics committee of Islamic Azad University.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection and analysis. The author contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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