https://doi.org/10.62663/pjpprp.v15i2.182

Lived Experiences of Women Living with Husband's Infidelity: A Pilot Study

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In Pakistan, some women continue their marriages after experiencing their husbands' infidelity despite the increasing divorce rate and women's empowerment. This qualitative study focused on how these women manage their marital relationships knowing the infidelity of their husbands. Five women were selected using the purposive sampling technique and were interviewed. Through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), three superordinate themes emerged; personal strength, surpassing the betrayal, and relational strategies. The findings indicated the posttraumatic growth in women enabled them to survive and make their marriages work by making necessary changes. The findings would be helpful to family therapists in comprehending and dealing with women experiencing this issue.

Keywords: infidelity; marriage continuation; qualitative study; marital relationship management; posttraumatic growth

Family is the salient and fundamental social institution in a society which shapes an individual's personality, transfers norms and values, and plays a crucial role in one's psychological health (Ramzan et al., 2018). Marriage or mate selection is the first step and critical decision of an individual's life for starting one's own family with some expectations of emotional, sexual, and legal commitment to another individual (Latifzadeh et al., 2015).

Having different backgrounds and distinct mindsets, certain common elements are valued by both marital partners, and are responsible for increasing and maintaining attraction in marriage. One of them is intimacy which is linked with a couple's quality of life. On the other hand, even though relationships outside of a couples' relationship add additional excitement, this is often limited to a certain intimacy type. On the other hand, a marital relationship allows the enjoyment of different types of intimacy i.e., emotional, sexual, physical without sexual closeness, spiritual and psychological, etc. (Kardan-Souraki et al., 2016). The second desirable factor is communication, an essential aspect of a relationship which plays an important role in marital satisfaction (Vazhappilly & Reyes, 2016). Spouses expect freedom to express themselves openly to increase their mutual understanding and help in resolving conflicts. The third important factor is spousal commitment and fidelity, which makes partners feel secure, open, and honest with each other. At the same time, it also makes the partners vulnerable on account of the exposure of their real selves in response to the sense of not being left over for acting the way they actually are (Burgoyne et al., 2010).

In Pakistani society, fidelity holds great importance for women because they start their marital life by leaving their parents' house, and are expected to form a loyal relationship with their husbands. In such a situation, it becomes a traumatic for women when their husbands become romantically and/or sexually involved with persons outside of the marriage. A partner's infidelity is considered an interpersonal trauma and the symptoms resemble those of posttraumatic disorder such as hyper-arousal, obsessive rumination, depression, elevated anxiety, emotional numbness, and flashbacks (Warach & Josephs, 2019). However, with time, women start to experience positive changes. According to posttraumatic growth theory (Calhoun &

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Tedeschi, 1995), these positive changes consist of positive modifications in the perception of themselves, the world, and others, enhanced spirituality, and personal strength.

In various societies, infidelity is labeled as an affair, betrayal, unfaithfulness, cheating, extramarital involvement, extra-dyadic involvement, and adultery, etc. because of its subjective nature (Munsch, 2015; Norona et al., 2018; Russell et al., 2013). Similarly, diversity also exists in the definition of infidelity. With time, a relationship expands from sexual component to the acts of kissing, watching pornography, cyber-sex, holding hands, etc. (Hertlein et al., 2008). According to Blow and Hartnett (2005), infidelity is defined as "A sexual and/or emotional act engaged in by one person within a committed relationship, where such an act occurs outside of the primary relationship and constitutes a breach of trust and/or violation of agreed-upon norms (overt and covert) by one or both individuals in that relationship concerning romantic, emotional or sexual exclusivity" (p. 191). For the current study, infidelity is considered as a subjective term that entails sexual infidelity (sexual intercourse, sex chat, etc.) committed by the husband with a woman outside of marriage.

The reaction to infidelity differs from person to person. For some individuals it is a traumatic experience because it is a threat to the reliability or decency of the couple's relationship. They may experience symptoms such as flashbacks and face difficulty in concentration on account of thoughts about the betrayal, low self-esteem, and reduced interest in sexual or personal matters (Warach & Josephs, 2019). Grieving is another response that an individual who has been betrayed experiences because of the loss of relationship integrity. The individual also may experience denial of the betrayal, show anger towards the partner or may bargain with the partner (Dean, 2011). Paramount researchers (Azhar et al., 2018; Snyder et al., 2012) studied the devastating consequences of infidelity such as depression, marital dissatisfaction, anxiety, relationship dissolution, etc. Such negative aftermaths of infidelity highlight its importance for the physical and psychological health of the partners. On a broader level, we also can't ignore its effects on the social structure since it results in changing values regarding marriage, increasing the numbers of divorced individuals and leading to children with single parents.

The ambiguous loss resulting from a partner's infidelity evokes feelings of frustration in the betrayed individual. These feelings cluster out with the time and motivate the individual to make a decision about his/her relationship; either work it out or dissolve it (Dean, 2011). Some circumstances don't let the individual end the relationship such as the presence of children, reduced chances of partner's infidelity in the future, and burden on parents (Apostolou & Demosthenous, 2021; Latifzadeh et al., 2015). Therefore, working out their relationship, couples may consult with a family therapist which is considered beneficial (Marín et al., 2014). Forgiveness has also been studied as useful emotion for rebuilding the relationship by helping the betrayed individual to overcome intense emotional pain (Timm & Hertlein, 2020). The study by Mitchell et al. (2020) highlighted three crucial factors necessary for the recovery: intentional bids for closeness, ongoing communication, and commitment to the healing process.

Conclusively, the paradoxical nature of a partner's infidelity increased the interest of researchers in studying this phenomenon. However, most of the research conducted on infidelity used white, heterosexual partners from Canada or the United States (Weiser et al., 2022). So, it has raised the need for a multicultural study of infidelity. Moreover, most of the previous research (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Mitchell et al., 2020) studied couples who rebuilt their relationship after an incident of one partner's infidelity, but the current research has focused on women who have faced multiple infidelity occurrences in their relationships with their husbands.

Therefore, the current study was conducted to answer the research question of "How do women manage their marital relationship following their husbands' infidelity?". Through in-depth analysis of the real experiences of women, we can highlight the struggles which are crucial in helping other women avoid facing a similar situation.

Method

The qualitative research method has been used for the current research as it provides a rich description and in-depth insight into a social phenomenon through the perspective of individuals (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Through the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) the subjective, lived experiences of women choosing to stay in the marriage to their husbands who have committed infidelity were explored, as it is considered best for exploring novel experiences (Smith et al., 2009). The IPA is a dynamic process in which researchers actively study the subjective lived experiences of individuals by focusing on how they perceive or experience the world around them, draw meaning from it, and then make those meanings comprehensible to others. This method is based on three theoretical underpinnings: Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, and Idiography (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Participants

Using the purposive sampling, the study included five married women from Lahore, Pakistan, who had experienced infidelity from their husbands. The sample size was determined by feasibility concerning time constraints and recruitment. Only those women were selected for the current study who were in jobs, knew about their husbands' extramarital relationships, and at least six months have been passed after the disclosure of their husbands' infidelity. The study excluded the women who were living in separation from their husbands, who had applied for divorce, or who had been divorced.

Participant A was a 34 year old educated working woman. Eighteen years had passed since her marriage and she had four kids. She was living in a nuclear family system, and her husband was still involved in multiple affairs.

Participant B was a 31-year-old working woman who had married to her beloved. One and a half years had passed since her marriage, and they had one child. She was living in a joint family system. After two months of her marriage, she came to know about her husband's infidelity. Since then, she had caught her husband in numerous affairs.

Twenty-eight-year-old participant C was an educated working woman. Four years had passed since their marriage and they had two kids. She was living in a nuclear family system. Her husband had started an affair outside of their marriage when she was pregnant with the second child.

Participant D was 31 years old and a working woman. 4.5 years had passed since her marriage and she had one child. She was also living in a nuclear family system. She was concerned about her husband's behavior from the beginning of her marriage and caught his sexual chat with another woman through a mobile phone a few months into her marriage.

Thirty-five-year-old participant E was working as a doctor. She was living in a nuclear family system. Twelve years had passed since her marriage and she had two children. She had caught her husband three times in cheating incidents.

Materials

An initial interview schedule was developed by consulting the relevant literature for conducting the semi-structured interviews. After multiple revisions, the final interview schedule was composed of nine open-ended questions which covered the experiences of marriage, disclosure, and post-disclosure. The analysis of all interviews was done in the original first language (Urdu) to maintain the exact semantics of the interviews. Only significant statements were translated into English language later on.

Procedure

Data collection was started after getting the study approval from the Departmental Graduate Committee (DGC) of the School of Professional Psychology, UMT. After that, individuals in the researchers' circle were asked about potential participants for data collection. Their recommended individuals were screened through the inclusion and exclusion criteria of the study. After screening, eight participants were contacted and given an information sheet and informed consent. Five participants (N = 5) agreed, with whom the interview's date, time, and location were set, considering mutual feasibility. At the time of the interview, the participants were briefed in detail, and informed consent was obtained. Before starting the interview, demographic data (i.e., age, education, etc.) was elicited, and they were asked if any question was bothering them. The interview's time duration ranged between 50 to 90 minutes which was enough time for building rapport, and gaining insight into the participant's experience without making the participants feel overwhelmed (Smith et al., 2009). After conducting the interview, the participants were debriefed, thanked, and offered professional help if they had felt any distress. Even those participants who refused at that time were asked to contact the researcher afterward if they felt the need to consult with a psychologist.

The data was analyzed by following the steps recommended by Smith et al. (2009) for an IPA study in which analysis of the first case was completed before moving on to the next one. After conducting the interviews, they were transcribed, during which non-verbal expressions were also noted down. After that, the first transcribed interview was read and re-read, and then initial notes were taken. In the next step, emergent themes were identified by bracketing the researcher's biases or judgments and noted on the left-hand side margin. Then, emergent themes were clustered, based on conceptual similarities or connections. Once the clusters were finalized, each cluster was named to cover all the emergent themes in the particular cluster. During this process, some themes were discarded because they were out of the scope of the research question. The above-mentioned steps were repeated for the following transcript, and so on. After forming the subthemes for each case, a pattern was identified across cases to develop superordinate themes. Once the sub-themes were clustered, each cluster was named to cover all the sub-themes in it. During this step, the author revisited the transcripts and discussed with the second author to seek agreement on identified themes, subthemes, and superordinate themes.

Results

The study was conducted to explore the experience of women living with their husbands who had committed infidelity. The analysis of in-depth interviews revealed three superordinate themes: personal strength, surpassing the betrayal, and relational strategies.

Personal Strength

Being betrayed by the husband was a painful experience for all the women, leaving them feeling helpless. Passing through this interpersonal trauma required a lot of strength. This theme

explained the source of their strength, which further helped the participants in remaining positive. Such as, by putting the matter in God's hand relieved them of burden to rectify the deeds of their husbands. It relaxed them to believe that there is a higher power to which their husbands would be accountable for their sufferings. Their comments include: "You (husband) who were cheating on me, your deeds will go with you into the afterlife, not with me. You will answer to Allah" (Participant C); "I have left everything to Allah" (Participant D).

In this way, they didn't feel alone and mustered up enough strength to pass through their difficult time. Moreover, praying to God also brought the hope to women that over time, their husbands would see the error of their ways and would make amends for their misconduct. This indicates the role of religion in times of interpersonal trauma.

Moreover, two participants reported the healing effect of time in gaining back their sense of strength. With the passage of time, the intensity of trauma decreased for the participants, and they become stronger in dealing with the situation. It was found that time functioned as a curing agent in this situation. "Then the passage of time makes you stronger" (Participant B); "I will get out of this thing with time" (Participant D). It might also be possible that experiencing the husband's infidelity repeatedly decreases its intensity and makes the participants immune to it with time.

Surpassing the Betrayal

This theme pointed towards overcoming interpersonal trauma as participants shifted their focus to the things that could be beneficial to them and directed their attention toward other important matters in their lives. With this shift in perspective, their concerns regarding husbands' infidelity decreased. All the participants indicated that they gave up on correcting the character of their husbands and separated themselves from this matter: "I have now stopped saying anything to him (about his infidelity), he may do outside whatever he pleases" (Participant A)

This shows that the participant herself allowed her heart to let go of the desire to hold on to her husband for fear of being hurt. After distancing themselves from their husbands' infidelity, they were able to focus on other essential things in their lives. They rearranged their lives by planning a future which would bring happiness for them and make their life purposeful. They also started to consider themselves responsible for their happiness instead of linking it to their husbands, which showed that they moved forward in their lives by surpassing interpersonal trauma.

"My priorities are my child only, his wellbeing, and my own wellbeing, that's what I have to be there for him (son), I don't care about this relationship (marriage) anymore." (Participant D)

It might be possible that participants got tired of expecting a positive change in their husbands. Therefore, they attempted to save their energy by becoming indifferent to their husbands. They focused more on fulfilling personal gains such as Participant C became dedicated towards becoming financially independent instead of economically relying on her husband:

"I have become very serious that I have to make myself financially strong." (Participant C)

The result also points to a shift to the importance of other things in the participants' lives, other than their husbands, which helped them in struggling for betterment in their lives. For that, they showed self-care and belief in themselves. They began to comprehend knew their value and importance, which showed that they didn't define themselves by the relationship with their husbands and had a sense of their individuality. "I am good with the work, I am unbeatable, I am

in a better stage in a way of education and job" (Participant D). The participant showed the development of strong self-esteem which would be helpful for her psychological wellbeing.

Relational Strategies

This theme explained the participants' efforts by using different strategies with other people to work out their relationships. Living in a collectivistic culture where relationships are valued, people are more inclined to use relational strategies for their happiness and to control other lives. To keep their husbands away from infidelity, two participants used to act hostile by showing aggressiveness, physically abusing their husbands, and framing them in a manipulative case. "I so wish to…(desire to inflict violence upon husband), I rough him up too, punch him around, and also, beat him up too" (Participant B); "I deliberately complicated the case and said (to the police) to make it a case of sexual harassment" (Participant E).

These actions might have provided them a sense of relief that they had made their husbands accountable for betraying them and that they had taught him a lesson to quit his extramarital relationship. Participant D also confronted extra-marital partners and accounted them for misguiding her husband: "I used to confront all the women he used to be with, to be a bit more shameful, remorse, and to be a (decent) human".

Furthermore, all the participants tried to resolve this issue by having a discussion with their husbands or family members with the expecting positive outcomes. They countered and held their husbands accountable for committing marital infidelity. Through discussion, they also heard the husbands' points of view and judged the sincerity towards the relationship:

"Then when he came at night, I opened up the issue and resolved the issue by talking about it. I also involved the children. The children also started telling him that baba (father) you shouldn't do such things" (Participant E). As a result of the marital infidelity, the women in this study lost respect for their husbands: "It means that you have not kept your character (honor), so how can you be respected?" (Participant E)

These comments establish a link between respect and the character of a husband. It might also be possible that women tried to evoke a sense of inferiority in their husbands by showing their character as more powerful than their husbands. Besides this, women also attempted to work out their marriages by using defensive strategies. Such as participant B used this strategy to prevent her husband from future involvement in infidelity by stressing the sinful nature of infidelity.

"Many times I scold him too by narrating Holy Scripture that relationship between the husband's brother and husband's wife is non-Mahram (can legally marry). This way slowly and gradually he has come to understand that I do not like these things (being too friendly/flirtatious to other women in the family)" (Participant B). However, Participant A, in order to prevent her marital relationship from breaking up, remained silent: "The day I will speak up, it (relationship) will come to an end, he will not consider that he has children, there is something (family), and he will not consider anything because men are like this. Therefore, I am quiet." (Participant A). Her comment shows that she has internalized that husbands are intolerable to wives' freedom of speech which might result in divorce. Therefore, another participant tried to please her husband through thoughtful analysis and modified her physical appearance to please her husband:

“Outside, he likes the girls in jeans and tops (revealing/seductive) very much. I wear the same clothes now too.” (Participant C). This showed that participants tried their best to prevent their husbands from committing infidelity and regain their interest back in their marital relationships.

Discussion

The acceptance of initiating the end of a marriage by women in Pakistan is gaining ground. However, despite the strides in women's empowerment, education, and overall political atmosphere allowing more liberty to women to choose the course of their lives for themselves, several women, owing to some factors, decide not to end their marriage after the revelation of spousal infidelity. The findings of the current study shed light on the survival experience of women in such marriages.

Personal strength gained from different sources (religious coping, time) helped the participants to deal with the situation. Various studies (Jeanfreau & Mong, 2019; Rayesh & Kalantar, 2020; Subchi et al., 2019) supported the finding revealing a negative association between religiosity and infidelity. It has indicated the participants’ religious beliefs, that if they pray for their husbands' strong faith, it will automatically cease their husbands' infidel behavior. Another research (Russano et al., 2017) also showed religiosity as a growth facilitator after interpersonal trauma. It revealed that a higher level of religiosity becomes a source of strength for women to emerge from interpersonal trauma by becoming optimistic and believing that the guilty will face consequences. Religiosity was also found to be linked with satisfaction with life in the research of Abu-Raiya et al. (2019) which supported the current finding of religiosity as a strength-enhancing factor. Furthermore, time was also found to be a crucial factor in strengthening women as posttraumatic growth occurred with the time in which the person went through many changes and regained control over the situation (O’Connor & Canevello, 2019).

Experiencing a husbands’ infidelity, didn’t kill the purpose of living for the participants. They moved ahead in their lives by redefining their goals i.e., working for their children’s brighter future which ultimately would be beneficial for them as in Pakistan, children take care of their parents in old age. The finding has been supported by the qualitative research which indicated that during the healing process of interpersonal violence, women tend to take up the freedom and power to control one's life and direct it in a more meaningful way (Flasch et al., 2017). The findings were also supported by the posttraumatic growth theory as the participants changed their view of themselves as victims or worthless to worthy human beings by adopting a meaningfulness and purpose in their lives. Moreover, participants showed strength through self-care and feelings of worthwhile which helped them in dealing with their situation. This finding is also been supported by the research of McLean et al. (2018) and Bistricky et al. (2017) which revealed a negative relationship between self-compassion and PTSD symptoms. A higher level of self-compassion enables the individual to react to internal threats, self-judgments, self-blame, and negative attributions by becoming psychologically flexible, which is necessary for overcoming interpersonal trauma.

Instead of behaving passively, the participants took a stand for themselves and strove hard to protect their marriages. By adopting a hostile attitude and degrading the husband, women tried to show their power in the relationship. The findings supported by the study of Abrahamson et al. (2012) found the changing power dynamics in couples who lived together after experiencing their partner's infidelity. They found that the betrayed person became more assertive and gained authority which indicated a role reversal in the relationship. A study by Conroy (2014) indicates the increased risk of intimate violence for those who have committed

infidelity. The women were financially independent, which otherwise is considered a major factor for women to bear the marital violence in Pakistan (Pereira et al., 2020).

Women's strategy of countering extramarital partners has been supported by the study of Ein-Dor et al. (2015), which indicates that more attention is paid by women to extramarital rivals instead of their own partner's intentions. Moreover, women's alertness to detect the cues to their partner's infidelity was compatible with the current study's findings in which women were able to detect the unfaithfulness of their husbands which resulted in attempts to prevent the husband from pursuing an affair. The qualitative study of Fye and Mims (2019) also supported the subtheme of defensive strategies by revealing the fostering of monogamy-supportive values and beliefs as the protective factors which were used by women in the current study as well.

Another element used by women with adulterous husbands in order to resolve the issues were discussions. The study of Umubyeyi and Mtapuri (2019) supports this subtheme by revealing negotiation as the most critical approach in resolving marital conflicts. By discussing the matter with the partner, women try to reach a mutual solution. Communication with the husband acts as a source of stress reliever and peace-building which helps in relationship continuation and becmes a barrier to infidelity (Jeanfreau & Mong, 2019). Another strategy used in such situation was found to be the act of pleasing the husband which can be explained by posttraumatic growth theory (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1995). The betrayed individual analyzes the relationship deficiencies which may have led to the partner's infidelity after deliberate ruminations. After that, they make the necessary changes to make their partners faithful to them, such as some women groomed themselves and some others adopted the husband's physical intimacy. The research of Urooj and Anjum (2015) indicates sexual and emotional dissatisfaction as a cause of infidelity which explains wives' physical and behavioral changes to please their husbands emotionally and sexually to regain back their attention. These findings support posttraumatic growth in women which enables them to survive and work out their marriages.

The current study had some limitations due to difficulty in sample recruitment which slightly compromised demographic homogeneity, which in turn might have impacted the findings slightly. However, the study's findings are helpful for women who have decided to give their marriage a chance by helping them use different strategies for working out their marital relationship without compromising their emotional and physical health. Moreover, based on the findings, relationship commitment enhancing factors i.e., love, relationship rebuilding attempts, etc. could be used by family therapists to deal with interpersonal issues of couples. Workshops can be conducted to promote the relationship commitment-enhancing factors in case of minor and resolvable marital issues.

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Received 07 Nov 2024
Revision Received 09 Jan 2025