

The Effect of Early Maladaptive Schemas on the Tendency to Cheat Based on Attachment Behavior in Married Women

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the direct effect of primary incompatible schemas on the tendency to cheat based on attachment behavior in married women. The method of the present research is a correlational description. The statistical population consisted of all married female students of Islamic Azad University, in the academic year of 2023- 2024. The random sampling method was a multi-stage cluster and the sample size was 200 people. To collect data, the ATIS attitude questionnaire (Whatley, 2008), Collins and Reed (1990) adult attachment style questionnaire, and Yang schema questionnaire (Calvete et al., 2005) were used. To analyze the data, descriptive statistics (mean and median, dispersion index from the center (standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis), and correlation test were used. The results showed that attachment behavior in marital relationships and primary incompatible schemas are directly related to each other. Infidelity is predicted in married women. The primary maladaptive schemas have a direct effect on the tendency to infidelity based on attachment behavior.

Keywords: Infidelity tendency, attachment behavior, marital relations, primary maladaptive schemas

Introduction

The family serves as a fundamental building block of society and is central to human growth and development. This sacred institution originates from the marital union between a man and a woman (Jiao et al., 2023). An individual's contentment with their marriage reflects their overall satisfaction with their family; conversely, satisfaction within the family context enhances marital contentment and contributes to stability in marital interactions (Wróblewska-Skrzek, 2021). Life course theory posits that each stage of life presents distinct conditions that couples must evaluate appropriately to adapt effectively. For instance, young couples without children face unique circumstances that evolve with the birth of a child. The dynamics within the family further change as additional children are born or as existing children reach maturity. Understanding this progression and ensuring that family members adapt to new circumstances is essential. For example, during adolescence, a teenager may require support in achieving a balance between freedom and responsibility; at another developmental stage, they may need financial assistance. A healthy family is attentive to the responsibilities and expectations associated with each developmental phase and successfully navigates these transitions. Thus, roles within a healthy family evolve according to varying life stages.

Critics argue that some theorists overly emphasize familial life cycles—such as becoming parents or grandparents or children leaving home—while neglecting external factors influencing families. This critique suggests that life

course theories tend to focus narrowly on intra-familial dynamics without considering broader contextual influences. Nevertheless, scholars in family theory assert that the primary focus of this framework should be on changes occurring within families over time rather than solely on individual experiences (Samiei et al., 2020).

Infidelity within marriage denotes disloyalty and a lack of commitment involving emotional or sexual connections with individuals outside the marriage (Azari & Alinia, 2019). Marital infidelity significantly contributes to dissatisfaction within marriages and serves as a leading cause of conflicts and incompatibilities in both marital relations and sexual intimacy; it is recognized as one of the most pressing issues linked to marital discord and divorce among couples (Pourhamidi et al., 2019). Infidelity has been identified as a factor that exacerbates marital conflicts and increases divorce rates among women (Selterman et al., 2019). Furthermore, women who experience infidelity often internalize blame for their partner's betrayal, leading to a self-reproach that undermines their self-esteem and fosters negative self-perceptions. Consequently, feelings of rejection from their partners combined with diminished self-worth can result in loneliness for these women (Cirhinlioğlu, 2020). Reports regarding the proportion of relationships ending due to extramarital affairs vary widely; some researchers estimate this figure ranges from 45% to 77% (Moshrefi et al., 2022). Factors such as financial irresponsibility, alcohol abuse, poor communication, and anger have been identified as contributors to divorce; however, it is crucial to recognize that the influence of infidelity on relationship dissolution or transformation hinges on factors like gender dynamics, power relations, and cultural contexts. Moreover, research conducted by Schneider, Irons & Corley (1999) found that among 350 participating couples, 27% chose divorce when husbands were unfaithful compared to 35% when wives were unfaithful. Psychologists assert that attachment behaviors within marital relationships can mitigate instances of infidelity as well as reduce divorce rates (Ahromian et al., 2021).

Attachment styles represent significant intrapersonal resources capable of modulating levels of arousal and feelings of helplessness in challenging situations; they may also serve as predictors of mental health outcomes. John Bowlby's theory posits that attachment constitutes an emotional connection formed between a child and their primary caregiver during infancy, profoundly affecting the child's social development and emotional well-being throughout their lifespan. The characteristics of interpersonal relationships—both normative and atypical—are significantly shaped by individuals' attachment styles. Secure attachment correlates with positive relational attributes such as intimacy and satisfaction; conversely, avoidant attachment tends to be associated with diminished intimacy and commitment levels. Ambivalent attachment is marked by tension and low satisfaction within relational engagements (Bayati et al., 2022).

Attachment is characterized as a stable emotional bond that involves seeking proximity to a specific individual at particular times. Frequent interactions with primary caregivers within this framework contribute to shaping beliefs, expectations, rules, mindsets, and behaviors (Guo et al., 2023). Attachment theory asserts that this bond is universal among all individuals; humans are inherently influenced by their attachment relationships. Bowlby emphasized that an individual requires these emotional connections for healthy psychological development (Maghfira et al., 2023). Parents who exhibit sensitivity foster feelings of security within their children, thereby establishing a foundation for mental health; the resulting attachments can significantly influence either happiness or its antithesis for couples navigating marital life (Ma et al., 2023).

Early maladaptive schemas refer to self-defeating emotional and cognitive patterns developed during early stages of growth that persist throughout an individual's life. These schemas encapsulate beliefs about oneself, others, and one's environment (Kunst et al., 2020) and typically arise from unmet fundamental needs—particularly emotional needs—during childhood (Arpaci, 2021). While individuals may acknowledge that these schemas contribute to their distress, they often find comfort in them; this sense of comfort reinforces their belief in the validity of these schemas. Consequently, individuals tend to gravitate toward experiences consistent with their existing schemas, complicating efforts to modify them (Efrati et al., 2021). This perspective suggests that schemas significantly influence how subsequent experiences are processed. They play critical roles in shaping thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and interpersonal relations; paradoxically and inevitably drawing adult experiences back into adverse childhood conditions that can be detrimental (Kaya & Aydin, 2021).

In conducting research aimed at exploring the impact of Early Maladaptive Schemas on tendencies toward infidelity through the lens of attachment behavior in married women, no relevant studies were identified. Thus,

this research seeks to address the essential inquiry: Do Early Maladaptive Schemas exert an influence on tendencies toward infidelity based on attachment behavior among married women?

Research Methodology

This study employs a descriptive correlational design and focuses on the statistical population comprising all married female students at the Islamic Azad University Organization for the academic year 2023-2024. To establish an appropriate sample size based on regression analysis, a minimum of 200 participants was calculated. Taking into account a projected 10% attrition rate, this estimate was adjusted accordingly, leading to a final sample size of 220 participants determined through a multi-stage cluster random sampling technique. Initially, four faculties were randomly selected from those available at the university. Subsequently, two groups were randomly chosen from each faculty, followed by the random selection of four classes from each group, with 20 participants randomly selected from each class. Given that this research utilizes structural equation modeling, a questionnaire was employed to gather the necessary data for hypothesis testing, consistent with methodologies used in many comparable studies.

Attitudes Toward Infidelity Scale (ATIS) (Whatley, 2008): The Attitudes Toward Infidelity Scale, developed and validated by Whatley in 2008, comprises 12 closed-ended items formatted on a five-point Likert scale. This instrument underwent validation by Seyyed Ali Tabar et al. (2015). The scale is designed to assess attitudes using a five-point Likert response format. To derive the total score from the questionnaire, one must sum all individual item scores. The scoring range for this instrument extends from a minimum of 12 to a maximum of 84. A higher total score signifies increased acceptance of infidelity and a more favorable attitude toward it, whereas a lower score indicates lesser acceptance. In Abdollahzadeh's study conducted in 2010, Cronbach's alpha for this scale was reported at 0.84, affirming its reliability. Whatley's findings from 2006 further support the scale's credibility, showing an internal consistency coefficient of 0.80 based on Cronbach's alpha calculations. To assess the reliability of this measure, both Cronbach's alpha and test-retest methods were utilized; the estimated Cronbach's alpha for the marital infidelity attitude scale was found to be 0.71, while the test-retest reliability coefficient reached 0.87 following administration of the assessment (Seyyed Ali Tabar et al., 2015).

Adult Attachment Style Questionnaire (Collins and Reed, 1990): The Adult Attachment Style Questionnaire comprises 18 items with five response options and evaluates three dimensions: secure attachment, avoidant attachment, and anxious/ambivalent attachment. This questionnaire can be administered either individually or in group settings; detailed administration instructions are included within the questionnaire provided to participants. The test must be conducted in a tranquil environment along with other necessary conditions that facilitate participant comfort. Individuals are instructed to record their personal information at the top of their answer sheets. According to the guidelines outlined in the questionnaire, six items corresponding to each subscale are specified. The participant's score for each subscale is determined based on their selected response for each statement on the answer sheet. Responses are scored from 0 to 4 for options ranging from 1 to 5, respectively. Specifically, questions numbered 1, 6*, 8*, 12, 13, and 17 pertain to secure attachment; questions numbered 2, 5*, 7, 14, 16*, and 18 assess avoidant attachment; and questions numbered 3, 4, 9, 10, 11, and 15 evaluate anxious/ambivalent attachment. For items requiring reverse scoring (marked with an asterisk in the scoring instructions), scores of 4 through 0 should be assigned to options ranging from 1 to 5 accordingly. Items marked with an asterisk must be reverse-scored before calculating totals. The scores from each subscale are aggregated to yield a final subscale score. The reliability of this questionnaire was reported by Rafiei et al. (2011) as having a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.83.

Young Schema Questionnaire (Calvete et al., 2005): The Young Schema Questionnaire Short Form serves as a self-report instrument aimed at evaluating schemas. Participants assess their alignment with each statement using a six-point Likert scale based on its description. The items in the questionnaire are organized into categories according to schemas. It is available in both short and long formats; the long version contains 205 questions. The short form consists of 75 statements, which are derived from the five questions that exhibit the highest analytical significance in the long version. This shorter format is more frequently utilized in research due to its efficiency in terms of time required for completion. The Young Schema Questionnaire Short Form (SQ-SF) was specifically designed to assess 15 early maladaptive schemas, which include: emotional deprivation (items 1-5),

abandonment/instability (items 6-10), mistrust/abuse (items 11-15), social isolation (items 16-20), defectiveness/shame (items 21-25), failure (items 26-30), dependence/incompetence (items 31-35), vulnerability to harm (items 36-40), enmeshment/undue influence (items 41-45), subjugation (items 46-50), self-sacrifice (items 51-55), emotional inhibition (items 56-60), unrelenting standards/perfectionism (items 61-65), entitlement/grandiosity (items 66-70), and insufficient self-control/self-discipline (items 71-75). Each of these 75 items is rated using a five-point Likert scale that ranges from "not at all true of me" to "describes me perfectly." An individual's score for each schema is calculated by summing the scores of its corresponding five questions. Each schema comprises five questions, and participants evaluate themselves on a six-point Likert scale that includes options such as completely true, mostly true, somewhat true, mostly false, and completely false, which correspond to scores of 1 through 6. Therefore, since each question offers six response options, scores can range from a minimum of 75 to a maximum of 450.

For each domain, the minimum and maximum scores have been established as follows: The first domain, which encompasses questions 1 to 25, has a maximum score set at 150 points. The second domain includes questions 26 to 45, with a minimum score of 20 and a maximum score of 120 points. The third domain comprises questions 66 to 75, where the minimum score is set at 10 and the maximum at 60 points. The fourth domain contains questions 46 to 55, also with a minimum score of 10 and a maximum score of 60 points; similarly, the fifth domain consisting of questions 56 to 65, both a minimum score of 10 and a maximum score of 60 are designated. Additionally, if an individual achieves three or four high scores (5 or 6) within a schema, it typically indicates clinically that this schema is present in their cognitive framework.

The initial comprehensive investigation into the psychometric properties of the Young Schema Questionnaire was conducted by Schmidt, Joines, Young, and Telch in 1995. In non-clinical populations, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the subscales of this instrument ranged from 0.50 to 0.82. Moreover, these researchers demonstrated a strong correlation between the Young Schema Questionnaire and measures related to psychological distress as well as personality disorders, thereby affirming its satisfactory validity (Schmidt et al., 1995).

The normative assessment of this questionnaire in Iran was executed by Ahi in 2005 on a sample of 387 university students from Tehran—comprising 252 females and 135 males—who were selected through multi-stage random sampling from Allameh Tabatabai University, Shahid Beheshti University, Tarbiat Modares University, and Islamic Azad University. The internal consistency coefficients determined via Cronbach's alpha were found to be 0.97 for females and 0.98 for males within this population sample. Consequently, reliability estimates for various schemas were reported as follows: emotional deprivation at 0.87, abandonment at 0.78, mistrust/abuse at 0.83, social isolation at 0.87, defectiveness/shame at 0.90, failure at 0.90, dependence/incompetence at 0.86, vulnerability to harm at 0.90, enmeshment/undue influence at 0.79, subjugation at 0.83, self-sacrifice at 0.82, emotional inhibition at 0.86, unrelenting standards/perfectionism at 0.72, and insufficient self-control/self-discipline at 0.87 (Lotfi, 2006).

In another study conducted by Zolfaghari, Fatehifar, and Abedi in 2008, the short form of the Young Schema Questionnaire was administered to a sample of 70 couples; their findings revealed an overall internal consistency coefficient calculated through Cronbach's alpha for the entire questionnaire at approximately 0.94, with specific values for its five domains as follows: cutting off and rejection scored approximately at 0.91, self-regulation and impaired functioning at approximately 0.90, impaired limitations at approximately 0.73, other-directedness at approximately 0.67, and excessive vigilance along with inhibition scored approximately at 0.78.

For data analysis and hypothesis testing in this research, structural equation modeling techniques were employed utilizing SPSS version 25 alongside SmartPLS software.

Results

In this research, a total of 220 married female students participated from the Islamic Azad University Organization. The findings reveal that 1.1% of the participants are under the age of 30, while 43.6% fall within the age range of 30 to 32, 14.5% are between 32 and 35, and 13.6% are over the age of 35. Furthermore, the demographic analysis indicates that 30.4% of the participants are from the Faculty of Literature and Humanities,

22.2% from the Faculty of Economics and Accounting, 27.2% from the Faculty of Basic Sciences, and 20% from the Faculty of Engineering.

Table 1: Descriptive Indices of the Research Variables

Variable	Dimensions/Subscales	Mean	Standard Deviation
Early Maladaptive Schema	Emotional Deprivation	23.1	5.2
	Abandonment/Instability	21.7	6.3
	Mistrust/Abuse	21.6	5.1
	Social Isolation	23.3	4.9
	Defectiveness/Shame	25.8	4.8
	Failure	26.2	4.5
	Dependence/Incompetence	23.4	3.2
	Vulnerability to Harm	23	4.7
	Enmeshment/Undue Influence	25.9	3.5
	Subjugation	24.8	3.6
	Self-Sacrifice	18	3.3
	Emotional Inhibition	23.1	5.05
	Unrelenting Standards/Perfectionism	15.7	4.5
	Entitlement/Grandiosity	16.2	4.3
	Insufficient Self-Control/Self-Discipline	19.8	5.7
	Total Score of Early Maladaptive Schema	326.2	63.7
Attachment Style	Secure Attachment	11.8	3.05
	Avoidant Attachment	8.3	2.4
	Ambivalent/Anxious Attachment	7.9	2.8
Tendency to Cheat		24.3	3.4

As indicated in Table 1, the overall mean score for early maladaptive schemas is reported as 326.2. In terms of attachment styles, the mean score for secure attachment is 11.8, for avoidant attachment it is 8.3, and for anxious attachment, it stands at 7.9. Additionally, the cumulative score reflecting the tendency toward betrayal is recorded as 24.3.

Table 2: Examining the Relationship Between Early Maladaptive Schemas and the Tendency Toward Betrayal Based on Attachment Behavior

Variable	Path	Variable	β	Significance Level (p)
Early Maladaptive Schemas	→	Tendency to Cheat	0.44	0.005
Early Maladaptive Schemas	→	Secure Attachment Behavior	0.44	0.005

Early Maladaptive Schemas	→	Avoidant Attachment Behavior	0.28	0.005
Early Maladaptive Schemas	→	Anxious Attachment Behavior	0.12	0.005
Secure Attachment Behavior	→	Tendency to Cheat	0.12	0.005
Avoidant Attachment Behavior	→	Tendency to Cheat	0.121	0.005
Anxious Attachment Behavior	→	Tendency to Cheat	0.9	0.005

Table 2 demonstrates a significant relationship between Early Maladaptive Schemas and the Tendency to Cheat, as influenced by attachment behavior. The coefficient indicating the effect of Early Maladaptive Schemas on the Tendency to Cheat is reported as 0.440. Furthermore, Early Maladaptive Schemas exert an influence on secure attachment behavior with a coefficient of 0.44, avoidant attachment behavior with a coefficient of 0.28, and anxious attachment behavior with a coefficient of 0.12.

Additionally, secure attachment behavior shows an influence on the Tendency to Cheat, reflected by a coefficient of 0.12; avoidant attachment behavior similarly exhibits an influence with a coefficient of 0.12, while anxious attachment behavior has a lesser effect, indicated by a coefficient of 0.09 on the Tendency to Cheat.

Discussion

This study investigates the impact of Early Maladaptive Schemas on the Tendency to Cheat, specifically through the lens of attachment behavior in married women. The research adopts a correlational approach utilizing structural equation modeling techniques. The findings reveal a significant relationship between Early Maladaptive Schemas and the Tendency to Cheat based on attachment behavior, with an influence coefficient for Early Maladaptive Schemas on the Tendency to Cheat measured at 0.440. Moreover, Early Maladaptive Schemas are shown to influence secure attachment behavior with a coefficient of 0.44, avoidant attachment behavior with a coefficient of 0.28, and anxious attachment behavior with a coefficient of 0.12.

Additionally, secure attachment behavior has an influence coefficient of 0.12 on the Tendency to Cheat; avoidant attachment behavior similarly shows an influence with a coefficient of 0.12, while anxious attachment behavior has a lesser impact, indicated by a coefficient of 0.09 regarding the Tendency to Cheat.

In comparative analysis related to the second sub-hypothesis, the findings from this study are consistent with results from both domestic and international researchers, including those reported by Fatehizadeh et al. (2022) and Leonidis et al. (2017). Fatehizadeh et al. (2022) investigated existential crises among unfaithful men and assessed the effectiveness of culturally tailored counseling interventions on their marital infidelity tendencies. The primary objective of their research was to explore these existential crises in unfaithful men and evaluate how culturally based counseling impacts their propensity to cheat in marriage. The methodology employed in this study was a mixed-methods approach that included both qualitative and quantitative phases.

In the qualitative phase of this study, an interpretative phenomenological approach was employed. Eighteen men who had engaged in infidelity in Shahin Deh were selected through purposive sampling for interviews. The data collected were analyzed according to Colaizzi's phenomenological methodology, which resulted in the identification of six key themes: (1) avoidance of reflection, (2) inevitability of fate, (3) struggle with existential loneliness, (4) hollow love and desire-centeredness, (5) pathological transformation of values, and (6) avoidance of emptiness. These identified crises served as the foundation for developing a preliminary counseling model.

To assess the theoretical validity of this model, a model-matching method was applied. For confirming face and content validity, the model was reviewed by twelve experts; following their approval, it was finalized into twelve distinct sessions. In the quantitative phase, a single-case methodology was utilized. Three participants were purposefully selected from among men who had committed infidelity for this phase. The model was implemented across three stages: baseline assessment, intervention, and follow-up evaluation.

Data were gathered using the Attitudes Toward Infertility Scale (ATIS) and analyzed through visual analysis alongside statistical and clinical significance assessments.

Findings: The results demonstrated that the model significantly contributed to reducing the Tendency to Cheat within marital relationships ($P < 0.01$).

Conclusion: Therapists may apply this model as an effective strategy for mitigating the Tendency to Cheat among individuals or couples involved in marital infidelity. Additionally, Leonids et al. (2017) found that both the duration of marriage and relationship status significantly influence control over infidelity behaviors.

This study encountered several limitations. It is specifically restricted to married female students enrolled at the Islamic Azad University Organization during the academic year 2023-2024. Therefore, caution must be exercised when attempting to generalize these findings to other student populations or cities. Additionally, due to the cross-sectional design of this research, follow-up with participants was not feasible. The results derived from this study are limited to the particular instruments (questionnaires) employed; thus, employing alternative but similar instruments may lead to different outcomes.

Given the significance and novelty of this research topic, it is recommended that similar studies be conducted across various demographic groups within society. Future research should also explore therapeutic methods pertinent to this area of study. Furthermore, it is advisable for upcoming investigations to conduct a more extensive review of existing literature and include a wider array of variables in their conceptual models, thereby enhancing the thoroughness of their assessments regarding relationships among variables.

In light of this study's findings, it is suggested that workshops be organized to improve attachment behaviors within marital relationships among students, which could facilitate enhancements in Early Maladaptive Schemas and address childhood trauma. The Ministry of Health and Medical Education should support the formulation of therapeutic protocols by encouraging individuals or working groups to develop culturally appropriate protocols tailored to meet the needs of patients within the country.

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