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EXPERIENCE AND PERCEPTION OF SELF, GENDER ROLES AND ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS AMONG INDIVIDUALS WITH PARENTAL INFIDELITY

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ABSTRACT

The study was conducted to investigate the impact of parental infidelity on an individual's self-perception, romantic relationships and gender roles. This was a qualitative study in which semi-structured interviews were conducted with six participants. The participants' information was analyzed through IPA method. The findings suggested that most of the participants had a strong impact on their self, romantic relationship, and their view on gender roles as a result of parental infidelity. The study illustrates that there is a direct correlation between parental infidelity and an individual's perception of self. The study further explains that individuals' romantic relationships are affected when they distress their potential partners. Moreover, some participants expressed how parental infidelity led them to have a shift in their view of gender roles.

These results help us understand that parental fidelity is not just a couple's matter; it also affects an individual and the entire family. The findings of the study show that most individuals have recovered from the trauma of past experiences due to parental infidelity. These experiences had a positive impact on some participants, making a path for them to have a better future.

Key words: *parental infidelity, self-worth, future relational dynamics, family roles, independence, secure attachments, romantic partners, core values, resilience*

1.INTRODUCTION

Family is often considered the foundational unit of emotional development, identity formation, and social learning in a child's life. While infidelity has primarily been examined within the context of romantic partnerships, its effects on children who witness or discover a parent's betrayal are only beginning to receive scholarly attention (Platt et al., 2008). In an era where early relational trauma is increasingly recognized for its intergenerational impact, it is essential to explore how parental infidelity shapes individuals' perceptions of self, internalized gender roles, and approaches to romantic relationships in adulthood (Londergan, n.d.)

PARENTAL INFIDELITY

Impact of infidelity extends far beyond the immediate dyad, seeping into the psychological and emotional lives of children who witness or become aware of a parent's unfaithfulness (Weiser & Weigel, 2017). As these children grow into adulthood, the emotional residue of that experience may subtly or overtly shape their sense of self, their understanding of gender roles, and the dynamics they form in romantic relationships (Miller et al, 2011; Platt et al, 2008). Infidelity encompasses a range of behaviors, including emotional intimacy, physical intimacy, and sexual activity with someone outside the committed relationship, violating relationship norms and

often causing psychological distress. (Drigotas et al,1999).Children who have faced parental infidelity at a very young age become the reflection of the disrupted family. According to Weeks et al (2003), infidelity is defined as "a violation of a couple's assumed or stated contract regarding emotional and/or sexual exclusivity."

Types of Parental Infidelity

Research indicates that infidelity can be both sexual and emotional (Feldman & Cauffman, 2000; Lishner, Nguyen, Stocks, & Zillmer, 2008; Thompson, 1983). Berman and Frazier (2005) define infidelity as engaging in romantic, sexual, or emotional involvement with someone outside one's primary committed relationship, highlighting how it can manifest in various hidden emotional or romantic entanglements.

Weiser and Weigel (2017) identify three primary modes of discovery: unintentional discovery, disclosure by a parent, and disclosure by a third party. Unintentional discovery is particularly distressing due to its sudden and unfiltered nature, often leaving the child feeling confused and unsupported (Weiser et al., 2018). In contrast, when a parent discloses the infidelity directly, the child might experience less immediate shock but can still be burdened with inappropriate emotional information or feel pressured to take sides (Afifi et al., 2007). The third mode, discovery through a third party (like another family member, friend, or community source), can induce feelings of betrayal and humiliation, especially if the information becomes public before being addressed within the family (Olson et al., 2002).

Prevalence

According to research, infidelity has a greater psychological and emotional impact in nuclear families, where the close-knit structure often amplifies the effects of relational disruptions. Estimates suggest that between 2% to 33% of married couples engage in infidelity, and it is recognized as one of the most frequently presented issues in couples therapy (Glass & Wright, 1992; Whisman, Gordon, & Chatav, 2007). The consequences of infidelity are far-reaching and can result in family disruption, interpersonal violence, and psychological distress (Afifi et al., 2016). Research indicates that approximately 11% to 21% of individuals who witness parental infidelity are more likely to engage in infidelity themselves during adulthood, suggesting a possible intergenerational transmission of relational patterns (Berger et al., 2012).

The impact of parental infidelity can be so profound that some researchers have found children's reactions to it mirror the psychological distress experienced during parental divorce (Duncombe & Marsden, 2004).

Psychological Implications for Children

Parental infidelity is a complex and multifaceted issue that has significant emotional, psychological, and sociocultural effects on children. The effects of infidelity on the child can extend far beyond the disruption in the family. It often reshapes an individual's sense of self, alters their understanding of gender roles and influences their expectations and behaviors in future or current romantic relationships (Afifi, 2003; Weiser & Weigel, 2017). To understand the consequences of parental infidelity, it is important to closely examine the emotional and cognitive responses it triggers in children, as well as the long-term impact on their lives.

Developmental Impact of Parental Infidelity

Pearman (2010) found that children and adolescents who were exposed to parental infidelity experienced both cognitive and emotional shifts (e.g. shame, guilt, sadness,etc) that eventually affected the development of abnormal and distorted sexual scripts and schemas as they got older.

Parents serve as role models, and their actions significantly shape how a child perceives relationships, love, and emotional security (Bandura, 1977; Amato & Afifi, 2006). Trust, loyalty, protection, and sincerity form the foundation of a healthy family dynamic, and when these are broken, children, despite not fully understanding the cause, can be deeply affected (Weiser & Weigel, 2017). They love their parents unconditionally and expect that love to be mutual and secure. This can foster unhealthy emotional patterns, such as people-pleasing, low self-worth, anxiety, or depression (Platt et al., 2008). Over time, these struggles may not only compromise their well-being but also disrupt their romantic relationships in adulthood, potentially perpetuating intergenerational cycles of emotional distress (Weiser et al., 2018).

Emotional Turmoil. One of the most immediate effects is the emotional turmoil it causes.
Children who experience parental infidelity often feel a deep sense of betrayal, confusion, and anger (Amato, 2010). This sense of betrayal is not only directed at the parent who engaged in the affair but also at the parent who was betrayed, as children often struggle with conflicting feelings of loyalty to both parents (Kelly & J. B, 2003).
According to Lusterman (2005), parental infidelity is a profound breach of trust because parents serve as role models for their children; when they fail to maintain loyalty to one another, the child's sense of moral and emotional stability is disrupted. As home is the primary source of comfort and security, disruption caused by parental infidelity can leave the child with a deep sense of emptiness and instability (Negash & Morgan, 2016; Platt et al., 2008).

Impact on the Nuclear Family System
Structural Family Therapy (SFT) states infidelity has the greatest impact on the nuclear family system, highlighting how interparental conflicts affect the parent–child dynamic (Negash & Morgan, 2016). Inter-parental conflicts are generally resolved, allowing the relationship to grow in a healthy direction. However, when conflicts remain unresolved, they may lead to one partner engaging in infidelity.

Modeling Conflict and Resolution Strategies. While conflicts within a family are normal such as those about finances, housework, or children, they must be resolved in a healthy manner (Orebin, Margolin, & John, 1995). Interparental conflict has a broad impact, as conflicts among parents may influence subsystems such as children (Minuchin, 1988).

Identity Development and Gender Role Perception. When a child experiences parental infidelity, it results in them having to reflect on the situation. Personal identity is something that develops throughout a child's life, and parents play a powerful role in shaping it by teaching the child how to interact with societal relationships and by instilling important values and goals (Afifi,2003).
Redefining the Family Narrative. Many people believe that infidelity is only a couple's matter, but it is a family matter, as children absorb the information provided to the especially when it comes to their parents. A child has many expectations from their parents, as they are the only figures they truly trust and rely on. They expect to be protected, loved, and cared for, and when these expectations are not met, they feel betrayed. This betrayal may lead the child to question how they can expect love and care from the external world if their own family has failed to provide it (Lusterman,2005)

PERCEPTION OF SELF
Self-perception is the reflexive perspective from which an individual encounters themselves (Harre, 1997; Leary, 2004). Self-perception is a profound concept that begins shaping an individual's identity long before they consciously understand the world around them. Children naturally form connections with everything they observe and interact with, interpreting experiences in their own unique way. This process involves absorbing external influences and applying them to their own sense of self. Therefore, regardless of the nature of an activity, a child will interpret and internalize the information.
Impact of early family experiences on Identity FormationWhen a child experiences parental infidelity, it often prompts deep self-reflection and emotional conflict. The child may internalize the event in various ways, but existing research suggests that most children experience this situation negatively (Afifi et al., 2016). Parental infidelity affects not only the couple but also disrupts the parent–child relationship, often diminishing the sense of safety and trust within the home (Morrissette, 2013). Personal identity develops throughout a child's life, and parents play a crucial role in that process. They are the first individuals to guide the child in understanding social relationships, as well as the values and goals that shape moral and emotional development (Bandura, 1977).

Role of betrayal in self-worth and Emotional regulation. A child has many expectations of their parents, expecting to be protected, loved, and cared for. When these expectations are not met, they feel betrayed. According to Afifi et al. (2006), children who witness parental infidelity often feel a deep emotional rupture in the family bond, leading to confusion and mistrust. The experience can undermine a child's core beliefs about relationships and emotional safety (Morrissette,

2013), potentially resulting in difficulty forming secure attachments later in life (Bowlby, 1979).

Identity Confusion and Emotional Insecurity in Offspring. According to studies by Weiner (2006), individuals who experience betrayal often exhibit lower self-esteem due to the breakdown of trust in significant relationships, such as parents exhibit their lower self-esteem into their children as they are a result with the betrayal partner's intimacy. Children may feel rejected, leading to an insecure attachment style that may influence their self-identity. As they mature, these individuals may carry the emotional scars of infidelity into adulthood, affecting their ability to form healthy relationships and to maintain a positive self-concept.

Altered Relational Expectations and Self-Identity. Moreover, parental infidelity may contribute to an altered sense of self, particularly with respect to relational roles and expectations. For instance, a child witnessing one parent's infidelity may come to view relationships through a distorted lens, where loyalty and commitment may no longer seem as inherent values (Weiser & Weigel, 2015). Research suggests that children of unfaithful parents may internalize maladaptive beliefs about intimacy and often struggle with forming stable, trusting romantic connections (Mark, Janssen, & Milhausen, 2011). For these individuals, personal growth may involve not only rebuilding their self-esteem but also redefining their understanding of love, trust, and self-worth in the face of the emotional turmoil caused by parental infidelity (Morrissette, 2013)

Self-esteem. It is defined as an individual's overall subjective emotional evaluation of their own worth. It is a judgment of oneself as well as an attitude toward the self (Rosenberg,
1965). Research indicates that children often struggle with confusion and divided loyalties during parental conflict, which can lead to misplaced anger or unrealistic expectations (Afifi,
2003). This inter-generational transmission of attitudes towards infidelity has been documented in studies showing that children exposed to parental affairs are more likely to engage in infidelity themselves in adulthood (Weiser & Weigel, 2015).

Brown (2001) highlights some long-term consequences, including "diminished self-esteem and problems with trust and intimacy, which can extend for generations". This means that individuals who witness infidelity at a young age may struggle to fully trust or be satisfied with their future partners, as they have seen their own parents fail to maintain loyalty to one another.

GENDER ROLES AND IDENTITY

Gender roles refer to the socially constructed expectations and behaviors considered appropriate for individuals based on their gender (Bem, 1981). Research shows that exposure to parental infidelity is linked to long-term relational insecurities and altered gender perceptions in children (Weiser & Weigel, 2015; Amato & Afifi, 2006; Markham & Miller, 2011). Moreover, studies highlight that early family dynamics play a crucial role in shaping gender attitudes and emotional regulation, especially in response to trauma and conflict (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Lamb, 2010).

Parental Influence on the Formation of Gender Role Attitudes

Parental infidelity also plays a crucial role in shaping a child's perception of gender roles and expectations in relationships. According to a study by Salo and Roth (2012), children exposed to parental infidelity often develop distorted views of gender dynamics in intimate partnerships. This can reinforce traditional gender roles, where one partner is expected to be passive or forgiving, while the other may act in a way that disrupts the relationship's trust (LaFontana & Cummings, 2008).

Exposure to a parent's unfaithfulness may lead children to internalize beliefs that romantic relationships are inherently untrustworthy, fostering skepticism and wariness in their interactions with the opposite sex. Research indicates that such experiences can diminish an individual's ability to trust, potentially influencing their own romantic relationships in adulthood (Weiser & Weigel, 2015; Markham & Miller, 2011; Afifi et al., 2007).

Gender related interpretations of Infidelity and Loyalty

Children internalize early experiences with their caregivers and construct attachment models that influence their beliefs and behaviors throughout life (Bowlby, 1988). A child who lacks a healthy model of love may struggle to form trusting or secure romantic bonds in adulthood (Weiser &

Weigel, 2015). Furthermore, the child may develop rigid or unrealistic expectations of a potential partner or carry emotional flaws into future relationships due to the absence of an ideal example during formative years.

Parental infidelity can cause children to question whether specific negative behaviors are tied to the gender of the parent who was unfaithful, potentially generalizing these traits to that entire gender. This may alter how the child engages with others, particularly those of the same or opposite gender, based on the betrayal they witnessed (Markham & Miller, 2011).

Betrayal by a primary caregiver may lead to confusion about self-worth, sexual orientation, and one's capacity to trust or be loved (perel, 2017). When the source of love and moral guidance becomes the source of pain, the child may have internal conflict that can lead to long-term emotional detachment, relational dysfunction, or identity struggles. Romantic relationships of the individuals who faced parental infidelity

Those who experienced infidelity in their childhood, trust issues often remain central to their adult relationships. A study by Pines (1997) highlighted that individuals who witnessed parental infidelity are more likely to develop trust issues, anxiety, and a fear of commitment in their own relationships. They may be more likely to engage in unhealthy relational patterns, such as avoidance of intimacy or a tendency to remain emotionally distant to protect themselves from potential betrayal. Alternatively, some may attempt to "fix" the trauma of parental infidelity by becoming overly dependent on romantic partners or idealizing love to an unrealistic degree (Lammers et al., 2011).

Trust

Understanding the implications of parental infidelity requires a comprehensive examination of how these experiences shape emotional attachment, gender expectations, and relational patterns over time (Weiser & Weigel, 2015; Markham & Miller, 2011). When this foundation is violated, many of the core values and beliefs a child holds are shattered, which can result in emotional confusion and identity disruption (Bowlby, 1988). The child may react with anger or generalize the betrayal, assuming that all members of that gender are untrustworthy or emotionally harmful. This perception may ultimately diminish the child's respect or openness toward forming future relationships with the opposite gender (Afifi et al., 2007).

Theoretical Framework of Parental Infidelity

Family System Theory. Family Systems Theory views each family member as part of the living system hierarchy, thereby making the concept of family system apply to social interactions beyond the family (Bowen,1978). According to family systems theory, families work as a system where the well-being and behaviors of each family member affect every other member and the system. It means that conflict in parents' relationships also affects parent-child relationships and the family's dynamics. (Fiona,2025)

Triangle. According to Bowen (1978), when tension arises between two people in a family, triangling occurs when this said tension is passed on to a third person in the family. Triangles were formed between parents and children during the time of discovery of infidelity. (Siguan,2021)

Differentiation of self. An individual's ability to balance emotional and intellectual functioning, and to maintain a sense of self even in emotionally charged situations (Bowen,1978).In the research by Siguan (2021), most of the participants were able to differentiate themselves from the situation they were in. The participants were able to separate their negative feelings and emotions toward infidelity from other interpersonal relationships.

Nuclear Family Emotional Process. The patterns of emotional interactions within the nuclear family (parents and children). It looks at how families handle conflict, stress, and other emotional challenges. (Bowen,1978) Infidelity has a permeating impact on social systems, but no system is more impacted by infidelity than the nuclear family. (Negash,2016)

Family Projection Process. The way parents' unresolved emotional issues are projected onto their children often causes the child to be seen as the problem. (Bowen,1978) Due to the overwhelming emotional trauma and pain, most often than not, most betrayed parents overlook the fact that they sometimes project their anger and frustration towards the children rather than the unfaithful spouse.(Siguan,2021)

Multi-generational Transmission Process. The transmission of emotional patterns, such as

reactivity, and family dysfunction, across generations. These patterns transmit to next generations and cause the same negative outcomes. Mostly the children who experience parental infidelity , their emotions , thoughts somehow transmit to their children as well.(Bowen,1978) .Dysfunction in one spouse can be considered as an affecting factor in the possibility of the family experiencing parental infidelity (Siguan,2021).

Research investigated the effects of a father's infidelity on his adult daughter's experience of family and romantic relationships. The analysis revealed that the daughters tended to replicate the same patterns in their romantic relationships as those in their family of origin. Having experienced parental infidelity during their childhood, the daughters model their mothers and form relationships with partners like their fathers. That is, their fathers' affairs lead to intergenerational trauma transmission for these women. (Akcan,2023)

Emotional Cutoff. A person's conscious or unconscious distancing from their family of origin due to emotional discomfort or unresolved issues. There may be children who face parental infidelity. They may start to have emotional avoidance. (Bowen,1978) The majority of the children facing parental infidelity emotionally cut themselves off from any contact with their family members to manage their familial problem. (Siguan,2021)

Sibling Position. The dynamics and roles that emerge within the families based on each child's position in the sibling order (oldest, middle, youngest). Such as the eldest sibling will be affected more if the tension arises among the parents as compared to the younger siblings due to lack of emotional intelligence. (Bowen,1978) In the case of sibling positions, most of the participants were able to uphold the expected roles and traits that the family systems assigned them to. (Siguan,2021)

Societal emotional process. According to the research by Siguan (2021), societal emotional process was categorized into two parts, one for friends and another for romantic relationships. In case of friends, participants were able to interact positively with them. They treat their friends as their

family. In the category of romantic relationships, they could not cope with them positively. They see them as a potential risk.

According to family systems theory, families work as a system where the well-being and behaviours of each family member affect every other member and the system. It means that conflict in parents' relationships also affects parent-child relationships and the family's dynamics. (Fiona,2025)

Existing focus on Couples and Marital Dynamics

While infidelity has been a widely explored topic in the fields of psychology and family studies, the predominant focus has remained on the couple involved in the betrayal, particularly examining emotional responses, marital satisfaction, and reconciliation between spouses (Atkins, Eldridge, Baucom, & Christensen, 2005; Blow & Hartnett, 2005). These studies typically center around the marital dyad, emphasizing therapeutic interventions to restore relational stability and trust. However, such a narrow scope often overlooks the experiences of children within these families, who are not passive bystanders, but emotionally vulnerable individuals directly impacted by the disruption.

Research indicates that children who witness parental infidelity may internalize this betrayal in ways that profoundly influence their development, particularly in terms of self-perception, emotional security, and interpersonal relationships (Afifi, Joseph, & Aldeis, 2008). This gap in literature necessitates a shift in focus—from merely understanding infidelity as a marital issue to exploring its psychological and relational implications for the next generation. The current study aims to address this overlooked dimension by investigating how individuals who have experienced parental infidelity perceive themselves, form romantic relationships, and relate to gender roles.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Parental infidelity portrays a significant relational trauma that has its impact beyond the marital dyad. Emerging scholarship suggest that experiences may affect the child's view of self and their romantic relationships as well as their internalized concepts of gender roles. A study showing the Impact of Parental infidelity discovered in childhood and adolescence on Afro-Caribbean individuals' experiences in adulthood by Paul (2024) was conducted to study the impacts of infidelity on adults who experienced parental infidelity in their childhood specifically Afro Caribbean adults. They conducted semi-structured interviews between 8

afro Caribbean participants, exploring the impact of infidelity when discovering it in their youth. The results indicated that there were 5 themes to be found namely, bring awareness of infidelity, reaction, impact on romantic relationships, expectation of infidelity and moving forward process.The research by Schmidt (2015) on effects of parental infidelity on adult's children's ethics with their partners explored the impact of parental infidelity on the children perspective of relational ethics using contextual therapy. It was qualitative research. The sample included 411 participants, and they were asked to fill out a self-reporting survey which measured their perceptions of trust, fairness and loyalty. Their experience on parental infidelity and history. The results concluded that infidelity from the fathers' side reduced the level of fairness, loyalty and trust among children. There is a potential link between parental infidelity and a child's personal involvement in infidelity. (Schimdt et al.,2015) The research by De Castro-Bofill (2016) explored how living within a broken vow among late adolescents in establishing romantic relationships aimed to learn the possible impact of infidelity on the establishment of romantic relationship of the children was employed through qualitative research. The sample consists of 12 participants ages 15-19 years from university of East Manila from the Year 2014-2015.Participant's analyses were interpreted through thematic analysis and collaizis procedure. The result showed that infidelity is best explained through a C.R.O.S.S, which are the five themes a child goes through when they come to know a parent performed infidelity. The themes were namely circumspection; reaction; overturn; stagnation; and self-recognition.Thorson (2014) undertook a study about the emotional aspect and the dynamics involving communication, specifically involving how the children feel caught after knowing about parental infidelity. In his research, he investigated the emotional distress and communication patterns among children who experienced parental infidelity. The methodology was qualitative approach utilizing semi-structured one on one interviews, mostly in person and some via digital platforms. The sample for this research were 7 adult children whose parents experienced infidelity but did not choose divorce. No psychometric scales or standardised questionnaires were used. Data analysis was done employing thematic analysis strategy in which themes were identified.

The results indicated several themes such as normalization of infidelity, communication withdrawal, and avoidance behaviors among participants. According to a research by Lusterman (2005), the expectations children have with their parents who are involved in parental infidelity is destroyed, as it once was a place of trust, safety, loyalty and protection. This was conducted between 4 case studies which showed how children are impacted by parental infidelity and provided them with therapeutic techniques to help them process this betrayal. The conclusion indicated that the damage caused by secrecy and the boundary violations that occur when children become emotionally or practically involved in their parents' infidelity should be directly addressed through effective therapy Salih and Chaudry (2021) conducted research whose aim was to explore the lived experiences of the adults who had experienced parental infidelity and their sense of experiences and its implications for their psychological and relational lives. This research was conducted using a qualitative design method through semi structured interviews, using 6 adult participants. The analysis was done through interpretative phenomenological analysis and critical realist epistemology. In conclusion of this research, there were 4 main themes such as adultification, challenges and romantic relationship, psychological experiences, and the pathway to healing between children who experienced parental infidelity. Siguan et al (2021) also examined the impact of parental infidelity on the self-perception of the children of a Filipino family. This research focused on understanding that it was affecting the children in the relationship as well. The research was conducted using purposive sampling where 14 adults were interviewed out of which 7 were males and 7 were females. These participants were aware of their parents' infidelity. A thematic semi-structured interview was conducted. The results were interpreted through the framework of Bowen's family system theory and Roger's self-concept theory. The analysis concluded that there were 2 main things naming pre-infidelity family dynamics, which meant how the family functioned before parental infidelity had occurred, and the other impacts of parental infidelity, which showcased how parental infidelity had influenced the self-concept and perceived family roles of the children. The quantitative study by Gangamma (2019)

aimed to understand parental infidelity through the lens of contextual theory of the adult children's RE (relational ethics), especially the quality of their relationship of romantic partners as well as their family origin. To understand this objective the researchers had employed a relational ethics scale to assess among 195 adult participants and used repeated measures ANOVA to study the RE scores of the participants who knew about parental infidelity. The result concluded that individuals who are aware about parental infidelity and had a lower RE scale had more problematic relations in their romantic relation as well as their family origin. (Kawar et al.,2019).

Chuick (2009) conducted qualitative research on Gender and Infidelity. The research aimed to explore how adult children came to know about parental infidelity and how they developed a typology of the discovery process. The researcher used qualitative coding of these stories to identify patterns. The sample size consisted of 125 adult participants that shared narratives about how they discovered 149 incidents of parental infidelity. The results showcase that the analysis produced 5 categories that highlight that there are different ways in which a child becomes aware of infidelity. The study also focuses on understanding family privacy boundaries, family identity, and how uncertainty is managed within a family.

Pearman (2010) aimed to understand the lasting effects of parental infidelity combining it with the current literature and trans-generational theory. The research consisted of a sample of students who were 18 plus and were aware of the infidelity that had occurred. Regression analyses were applied to the participants using a moderator model. The results indicated that those who had high levels of negative schematic views of self-tended to have bad and conservative attitudes towards sex.

Research by Rungduin (2023) investigated the lived experiences of children whose parents were engaged in parental infidelity examining their psychological and emotional well-being. The research sample size was of 10 participants on which a qualitative phenomenological approach was used, focusing on capturing participants subjective experiences, thematic analysis was used to identify

the major themes as well as sub themes. The key findings of the research suggested that young adults who were the victims of parental infidelity experienced emotional distress, insecurity and mistrust in their own romantic relationships.

The qualitative research by Muscat (2023) explored how parental infidelity impacted the children when they experienced it during adolescence. A sample of 6 participants who fit the criteria was gathered. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was applied. The results explained how the entire family was affected because the parents were unable to keep it between themselves. The children experienced triangulation, parentification, neglect and pressure to keep family secrets.

The research by Dindoost and Cheraghi (2024) on children's lived experiences of parental extramarital relationship aimed in understanding how children experience the idea of their parents being involved in an extra marital affair. The research was based on a qualitative method where 10 participants in between the ages 18 and 25 were interviewed and the sample was collected using snowball sampling. The interviews were semi structured interviews and the data was analyzed through Smith and Osborne method. The findings suggested that there are 6 themes such as children being exposed to extra marital relationships, child's own interpretation of extra marital affairs, changes made for the child in the family, personal injuries on a child, interpersonal injuries on a child and post- traumatic growth of the child after extramarital affair.

Kawar (2019) conducted qualitative research that explored relational ethics and the relationship between parental infidelity as well as participants' own infidelity and relationship satisfaction. The method of dyadic quantitative study was used. There was a total of 160 participants, out of which 80 were heterosexual couples. The ages ranged between 18 to 70 years. The results concluded that knowledge of parental infidelity was linked to lower relational ethics, especially when it came down to women.

The research by Koski (2001) investigated how parental infidelity impacts an adult child's perception of marriage, love and intimate relationships. The research was also used to investigate whether the impacts could vary by gender of the unfaithful parent and the gender of the adult child. This was a qualitative study where the method that was used was ethnographic. The sample size consisted of 5 adult participants from West central Wisconsin and the data collected in fall 2001. It was a confidential in-depth interview

where the hypothesis was tested, a relationship between gender of the unfaithful parent and the stress in the adult child, a relationship between parental infidelity and adult child's perception of the previously mentioned variables, a relationship between gender of the adult child and degree of distress. The research concluded that there is a relationship between parental infidelity and how a child views his perception of love, marriage and intimate relationships.

RATIONALE

The way families shape individuals is crucial for understanding human development. Within the broader family system, discovering parental infidelity can be a deeply upsetting and often devastating experience. It can severely impact a child's sense of safety, their ability to trust, and their fundamental understanding of how a family operates (Amato & Rogers, 1997; Drigotas et al., 1999). The effects of such an event don't just fade quickly. Instead, they can subtly influence key parts of a person's life as they mature, including how they see themselves and their self-worth, what they learn about gender roles, and how they navigate romantic relationships (Bowlby, 1969; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995).

Although the significant impact of infidelity on individual well-being is widely acknowledged, relatively little qualitative research examines the personal experiences and how individuals make sense of having lived through such an event. Specifically within Pakistani culture, where strong societal values regarding family honor, collective identity, and traditional marital structures may intensify the impact and complexities of processing such a betrayal, there is a recognized need for deeper exploration. Previous research suggests a lack of extensive inquiry into how parental infidelity shapes subjective perceptions of self-worth, influences the adoption or rejection of gender roles within intimate contexts, and fundamentally changes approaches to and experiences within romantic partnerships (Amato & Rogers, 1997; Drigotas et al., 1999).

By focusing on the direct insights of those who have lived through parental infidelity, this research intends to offer a thorough understanding of how this experience is perceived in terms of its impact on self-perception, gender role understanding, and the formation of romantic relationships, especially within a cultural framework where familial reputation and gendered expectations hold significant weight.

Parental infidelity carries several potential implications for an individual's psychological landscape. This might include challenges in forming secure attachments, a heightened sense of vigilance or mistrust in relationships, and a potential questioning of one's own identity and worth in the context of broken trust (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995).

Exposure to parental infidelity can influence an individual's understanding of gender roles within relationships; specific beliefs might develop about how men or women behave in partnerships. This can potentially lead to skepticism or rigid expectations regarding fidelity and commitment, often based on the gender of the unfaithful or betrayed parent. These beliefs are frequently shaped by prevailing cultural norms regarding male and female roles in marriage and family.

Consequently, an individual's approach to romantic relationships may be profoundly affected, ranging from difficulties with intimacy and trust to patterns of hyper-vigilance or avoidance, as they navigate the complexities of forming healthy bonds while carrying the shadow of past betrayal. These experiences are further shaped by the specific socio-cultural dynamics of Pakistani society, where discussions of marital discord or infidelity may be heavily stigmatized, influencing how individuals process and articulate their experiences, and shaping their views on relationships and gender roles within their cultural setting.

Furthermore, this research aims to contribute to the wider discussion about family trauma and its long-term psychological effects by offering practical insights that can guide future research and clinical support. By capturing the real-world experiences of individuals who have dealt with the challenges of parental infidelity, this study provides valuable information. This information can help develop more tailored therapeutic methods, educational programs, and support systems designed to address the specific needs arising from such experiences within the Pakistani cultural context. These insights are not only useful for current practices but also for envisioning how mental health support can evolve for people impacted by early family trauma.

In short, this research addresses an important area by exploring the deep and personal effects of parental infidelity directly from those who have

lived through it. By examining their views on its effects on their self-perception, understanding of gender roles, and the nature of their romantic relationships, the study aims to provide a comprehensive picture of how this early life event shapes fundamental aspects of an individual's psychological growth and their relationships, particularly within the Pakistani cultural landscape. The findings are expected to help guide the future development of therapeutic strategies and support mechanisms, making them more suitable for the complex and distinct needs of this group.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To explore how parental infidelity disrupts the perception of self of the individuals with parental infidelity.

2. To identify the perception of romantic relationships among individuals who have faced parental infidelity.

3. To find out if parental infidelity causes gender-based mistrust among the individuals whose perception is affected due to parental infidelity.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does infidelity influence the way a person perceives self-perception?

2. How does parental infidelity relate to the perception and experience of a person's romantic relationship?

3. How does parental infidelity influence an individual's understanding of gender roles?

Methodology

Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design, using semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection. This study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the qualitative approach to explore participants lived experiences of parental infidelity and its influence on their perceptions of self, romantic relationships, and gender trust.

Sampling

A purposive sampling technique was utilized to select participants. Participants were deliberately chosen based on their exposure to parental infidelity during their early developmental years. The final sample consisted of 6 participants, which aligned with research objectives that prioritize depth of insight over breadth.

Inclusion Criteria

Participants were selected based on the following inclusion criteria:

- Participants were at least 18 years of age.
- Participants had experienced parental infidelity during childhood or adolescence, making their experiences directly relevant to the research questions.
- Participants could communicate their thoughts and experiences effectively during the interviews.

Exclusion Criteria

The following exclusion criteria were applied to protect participant well-being and maintain data quality:

- Individuals experiencing severe mental health issues at the time of data collection—such as Active suicidal ideation, psychosis, or acute emotional distress—were excluded.
- Participants who had previously taken part in similar studies on parental infidelity were also excluded to minimize response bias.

Potential participants were first contacted and screened through a short pre-interview or questionnaire to ensure they meet the selection criteria. All participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point during the research process without any negative consequences.

Demographic Characteristics

The demographic characteristics of the participants include age, gender, education, occupation, and family system. The sample for this research consisted of 6 participants, comprising 4 females and 2 males. The mean age of the participants was approximately 22.7 years, with all individuals holding a bachelor's degree. Notably, every participant in the sample belonged to a nuclear family system. Additionally, the contextual data revealed that 4 out of 6 participants had divorced parents, while half of the participants identified their current relationship status as single

Table 3.1
Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N = 6)

Sr.	Age	Gender	Education	Occupation	Birth order	Family system
1.	21	F	Bachelors	Entrepreneur	1	Nuclear
2.	23	F	Bachelors	Self employed	1	nuclear
3.	25	M	Bachelors	Manager	2 (twin)	Nuclear
4.	22	F	Bachelors	Student	5	Nuclear
5.	23	M	Bachelor	Entrepreneur	3	Nuclear
6.	22	F	Bachelors	Writer	4	Nuclear

Table 3.2
Contextual data of Parental Infedilty (N=6)

Sr.	Marital status (parents)	Relationship/ Marital status (participant)	Age of discovery	Mode of discovery	Time span in years
1.	Divorced	Single	8	Unintentional	9
2.	Divorced	Single	17	Disclosed	6
3.	Divorced	Married	14	Unintentional	6
4.	Together	In relationship	13	Unintentional	9
5.	Together	Married	14	Disclosed	9
6.	Divorced	Single	6	Disclosed	16

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection method, allowing for a balance between structure and flexibility. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions designed to explore participants' experiences and perceptions of facing parental infidelity. The interview guide included questions on the perception of self, gender roles and romantic relationships after facing parental infidelity within Pakistan. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Interviews were conducted in a private, secure setting—either in person or via an encrypted video conferencing platform—based on participant preference. Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes.

Procedure

The research process began with the approval of the topic by the Board of Studies at the Psychology Department, GCU Lahore. The first step involved developing an interview protocol and a semi-structured questionnaire tailored to the research objectives. Participant recruitment then commenced using purposive sampling. Potential participants were initially contacted via google form and through social media, where a detailed

message outlining the research purpose and participant requirements was distributed. We were able to get contact with 12 individuals meeting the inclusion criteria, however, only 6 were able to participate in the interview process. Interviews were conducted primarily via phone calls, with 2 individuals meeting in person, accommodating participants' preferences and availability. The duration of the interviews varied, on
average, the interviews were 45-60 minutes long. After each interview, participants were debriefed, where they were given a thorough explanation of the research objectives and the broader implications of their contributions. Upon completion of the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and
The data were analyzed using IPA.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical procedures adhered to the standards outlined by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2020). Participants were fully informed about the aims, nature, and voluntary nature of the study. Informed consent was obtained after explaining all potential risks and benefits. Confidentiality and anonymity weremaintained. Only the primary researcher had access to identifiable information. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any
point without penalty. Given the potentially distressing nature of discussing parental infidelity, steps were taken to safeguard the emotional well-being of participants. These included offering information about psychological support services and pausing or discontinuing interviews if participants showed signs of discomfort or distress.

Results and Analysis

Results

A total of 5 major themes had simply evolved through the coding process namely as Emotional and Psychological Impact, Attitudes and Expectations towards Romantic Partner, Gender Roles and Independence, Coping Mechanisms and Growth, and Family roles and Parental Roles Post Parental Infidelity. The details of the results is given below in the table

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Table 4.2

Recurrent Codes Across All Interviews (N = 6)

Super-ordinate themes	Sub-ordinate themes	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	Percentage %
1 Emotional and Psychological Impact	1.1 Self worth and identity	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100%
	1.2 Trust and Betrayal		✓	✓	✓			50%
	1.3 Fear	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	83%
	1.4 Emotional Regulation	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	83%
	1.5 Burden	✓	✓		✓			50%
2 Attitudes and Expectations towards Romantic Partners	2.1 Cautious towards/ Aversion to Relationships	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100%
	2.2 Core Values in Partners	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100%
	2.3 Avoidant Parental Patterns	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100%
	2.4 Intimacy and Vulnerability	✓			✓		✓	50%
	2.5 Avoiding Conflicts	✓	✓			✓	✓	66%
3 Gender Roles and Independence	3.1 Shift in family Roles/ Responsibilities	✓	✓	✓				50%
	3.2 Drive for Independance	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		83%
	3.3 Perception of Gender Roles	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100%
	3.4 Rejection of Societal Norms	✓	✓			✓	✓	66%
4 Coping Mechanisms and Growth	4.1 Personal Transformation of	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	83%

	Growth							
	4.2 Processing and Acceptance		✓	✓		✓	✓	66%
	4.3 Support Systems		✓				✓	33%
5 Family Dynamics and Parental Roles Post-Infidelity	5.1 Context of Infidelity and Separation	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	83%
	5.2 Impact of Parental Neglect/Absence	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100%
	5.3 Mother/s Redfined Role and Sacrifices	✓	✓			✓	✓	66%
	5.4 Siblings Dynamics		✓	✓			✓	50%

Analysis

The 'emotional and psychological impact' is a central theme in understanding the aftermath of parental infidelity. This profound experience significantly molds an individual's perceptions of love, commitment, and self-worth, often lead to substantial psychological consequences. It explores how the experience leads to an initial perceived absence of self, necessitating a process of re-evaluation and, for some, eventual strengthening of their self-concept.

Self-Worth and Identity

It explores how the experience leads to an initial perceived absence of self, necessitating a process of re-evaluation and, for some, eventual strengthening of their self-concept. The foundational questions regarding relational capacity, spurred by the infidelity, can subsequently emphasize the critical importance of self-control. As one participant has explained, “Was I not enough reason for him not to perform these things?” (Participant 1)The participant offers a revealing glimpse into the internal conflict regarding honesty, disclosure, and emotional regulation which are a question in their mind about choosing their romantic partner. The admission, "I've never thought about it from that perspective," suggests a moment of new insight or self-reflection prompted by the conversation. This indicates a willingness to explore previously in-examined facets of their experience.The long discussion about self is incomplete without considering self-doubt. Self-doubt is often reflecting an individual’s insecurities. They reflect the external situation and internalize these concepts leading them to evaluate their own self-identity. This increases the doubt within themselves and can result in devastating impacts in an individual’s life. The initial breach of trust, occurring within the foundational relational unit of the family, can shatter a child's nascent sense of security. This early experience of profound betrayal often leads to a future inability to trust others in intimate contexts, manifesting as heightened vigilance, skepticism, or a reluctance to form deep emotional bonds. This is explained by participant as, “I must struggle with it a lot because it’s like you are telling the other person you like care a lot and now the other person can manipulate your caring and I am very scared of that, so I think I am going to struggle with that a lot.” (Participant 6) This statement of the participant reflects a deep-seated apprehension of vulnerability and fear of being manipulated. This fear often stemming from a familial bond of trust that has been shattered and the individual is scared for repeating such patterns. She has developed a coping mechanism from witnessing a profound betrayal in their past. Thus, distrust from the familial unit can lead to the destructive perceptions for marriage, specifically arrange marriages. Participant stated as, ‘And as a

result, koi bhi proposal ata tha.... jitne bhi mere life me aye hian.....ya koi form of relationship, I would try to find out the qualities jo mere father k andar thin so that wo cheez dubara na ho....." (Participant 1)The concept of getting a partner is something that individual looks down while considering the first relationship between both her parents. This could potentially reflect how the participant is trying to overcome the fear of repeating history. This fear can grow in the way of a person not wanting to repeat certain patterns. As they avoid hurting others, stated by a participant, "Not approaching bad things. Matters that could lead to disturbing someone else's life. Giving them any harm to their life." (Participant3) The individual has expressed that he had recognized the negative things in his life and have decided to not "approach bad things". These 'bad things' are specifically directed towards external relations expressing a sense of empathy. But at the same time, he has developed a fear of being taken for granted, explaining the distrust of others.The revelation of a parent'sinfidelity can profoundly burden an individual, inflicting significant psychological and emotional distress. The individual might feel an immense weight of obligation, believing they must either keep the secret, mediate between their parents, or compensate for the fractured family dynamic. This perceived responsibility can lead to chronic stress, resentment, and a suppression of their own emotional needs as they prioritize the perceived stability of the family unit over their own well-being. As participant said,"To be very honest, ik waqt esa tha k blkl dill nahi krta tha k ksi ko btaya jae ya discuss kia jae." (Participant 2) In the above statement, participant states that being the eldest it felt a forced obligation that she have a responsibility in protecting reality. It felt as a requirement to protect her flaws from the external world to be accepted by others instead of being judged particularly because of parental divorce. As participant explained,

"I had to keep it secret from outer world there is something wrong in the family and it has negative effects. I was always terrified of the people who are gonna know so it did shape and you know, how I view myself." (Participant 6) This shows that she had a need to protect their secret from the world as the secret had a negative consequences to her life. The fear of being viewed in an alternative way of who she is because of the result of someone else's actions. Further explained by a Participant, "Being a woman I have to do a lot of stuff because my father figure is no longer present... but I love to do that... I know my parents are divorced... sometimes I do get disappointed... I really do gettired of being the man in the house like I said... I have two brothers and I am the eldest one..." (Participant 1) The participant expresses how she has developed a love hate relationship with the ability to do things that she can do because of the absence of her father. This realization brings in a sense of disappointment as having two siblings there isn't seen to be an equal balance in responsibility.

Attitudes and expectations towards romantic partners

Parental infidelity can significantly shape an individual's attitudes and expectations towards romantic partners, usually leading to a few challenging situations in their romantic relationships. Children who experience parental infidelity often develop a guarded view of love and commitment. Parental infidelity seeks a heightened sense of caution. They might doubt their partner's intentions and fidelity even if they are loyal. This can also affect their intimacy. Cautious towards or aversion to relationships describes a general avoidance of making deep, committed romantic connections. As it is narrated by a participant as,"Abhi mene ik boundary set ki hoi hai, so not trusting in having relationships." (Participant 2)This shows the marital or relational disinterest, the way she has talked about the boundary creation about any commitment clearly explains how she avoids the proposals. It is crucial that a person should be with her every through thick and thin. It is important for her that no matter what situation in life, your partners doesn't leave you. For her it matters that a person respects her values and understands her life perspectives. As another participant stated,

"So for me I think the most important thing I will do with my partner would be respect that person and expect you respect me. Because if you respect someone you don't , you don't cheat on them so respect is very important." (Participant 6)

This statement of the participant offers a poignant insight into her perception of emotional involvement and its potential to alter her lived experience.

Individuals might see a relationship as a two-way process in which both partners are equal in putting energies. As participant explained,

" I act in a way I reciprocate things. I don't initiate things. If you are going to give me energy, I am going to give you energy. If you don't give me energy, (and it's not conscious) it's very unconscious....." (Participant 4)

Individuals may struggle to fully open up, fearing that their genuine care or affection could be manipulated or eventually lead to abandonment.This often results in emotional guarding, where the individual keeps a part of themselves shielded, making it challenging to form truly deep and trusting bonds. As participant described,

"Anytime I do sense that somebody has a tendency to form a romantic relationship with me... I immediately like avoid them....." (Participant 1)

As a result, avoiding intimacy becomes a defense mechanism for her as an attempt to prevent herself from future heartbreak by not being involved in intimacy. Likewise, a participant also said that,

For me I have lost my complete interest in today's relationship specially.....as intimacy....." (Participant 4)

Gender roles and independence

The disruption of traditional family structures often necessitates a shift in family roles, compelling individuals to assume responsibilities or adopt characteristics that may diverge from conventional gendered expectations. Consequently, this leads to a nuanced perception and avoidance of traditional gender roles, as they may associate rigid adherence to such roles with the vulnerabilities or dysfunctions observed in their parents' marriage. When a parent's actions lead to emotional or physical withdrawal, or even a complete departure, The remaining parent often steps into expanded roles. Simultaneously, children may experience early exposure to responsibilities, being compelled to assume adult-like roles such as emotional support for the remaining parent, caring for younger siblings, or contributing to household management. As participant said,

"Being a woman I have to do a lot of stuff because my father figure is no longer present... sometimes I do get disappointed.....But I enjoy it....I love it... Because I get to do it for myself and it reminds me that I don't actually need a person of such... of such... not of any provider...I don't need a man who has to tell me to live in a certain way..." (Participant 1)

The participant explains that inner rebellion where she decided to be independent. The rebellion nature in the girl shows that she wants to be independent because that is exactly what a man, THE MAN that she saw in her household wanted. As another participant elaborated the importance of independence in a marriage as,

"Until I am not financially independent, I am not going to consider anyone." (Participant 2)

This often leads to challenging traditional gender roles, with some developing increased masculine energy in the

absence of a strong father figure or actively resisting femininity if it's associated with vulnerability. This reevaluation extends to views on gender equity and how individuals approach roles like the male breadwinner and guardian in their own lives. However, if we talk about male perspective, one participant stated,

"My view is very simple, men and women are not equal with respect to religion. According to religion men and women are not equal. Men have their own rights and women have their own rights. But they should not misuse those rights. They should respect each other." (Participant 3) The turmoil stemming from parental infidelity often drives individuals to reject societal norms, particularly those concerning relationships and family structures. This rejection is a conscious choice to forge an autonomous identity, valuing personal authenticity and self-defined happiness over adherence to conventional pressures, ultimately seeking a life less susceptible to the disappointments of their past. It can be a clash for the participant if they should accept the societal norms specifically related to gender or if they should take stand against it, to avoid the consequences of what their mother had to go through just because she was a woman.

Coping mechanism and growth

Navigating parental infidelity involves developing crucial coping mechanisms to process distress. This journey often leads to significant personal growth, fostering resilience and self-awareness as individuals move towards acceptance of past events. Experiencing parental infidelity often acts as a catalyst for significant personal growth, accelerating the development of maturity and strength. This challenging period frequently

instigates a fundamental shift in perspectives regarding infidelity, moving from initial devastation to a more nuanced understanding that prioritizes personal well-being and proactive life choices.

The journey following parental infidelity often involves a complex and non-linear process of processing and acceptance. Individuals typically experience a gradual adjustment to the separation or family changes, adapting over time rather than through a sudden shift. This long-term engagement can lead to shift to a more objective understanding of events, moving beyond initial emotional turmoil to a clearer, less personalized view of the infidelity. However, the path is rarely straightforward, many report delayed processing, where the full emotional weight or implications of the infidelity surface years after the initial discovery. Consequently, this often results in an ongoing struggle, signifying that acceptance isn't a destination but a continuous process of managing the lingering psychological and emotional impact.

Family dynamics and Parental roles post-infidelity

Parental infidelity fundamentally reshapes the entire family system, altering established dynamics and redefining parental roles in profound ways. The initial betrayal creates a ripple effect, impacting every member and necessitating significant adjustments. The infidelity and subsequent separation of parents often force children to contend with forced family departure and experience the unfolding heated disputes at an early age. This difficult period can be further complicated by a parent's remarriage, introducing new dynamics. These early experiences profoundly impact a child's sense of family stability and security.

"The thing is that after this, my father got married. And my mother also got married. So they were both busy in their relationships and marriages." (Participant 3)

The participant explains both of their parents had remarried after their divorce, which was once a place, where he could share his emotions and thoughts with his parents and now it was the most difficult thing to talk about. This led him to face divided attention from both parents. This can manifest as an emotional void from parents, as their preoccupation with the marital crisis or new relationships leaves children feeling unseen and unheard. Mother being there for children as both parent, is something that has impacted the individual's affection for mother. The same way, it is described,

"And our mother is doing everything for us... she has been handling us and our expenses... and everything." (Participant 2)

Parental infidelity profoundly impacts sibling dynamics, often shaping their bonds and roles within the family. Initially, children might experience an initial weak bond with siblings as they each grapple with the trauma individually, or as parental preoccupation limits the capacity for family cohesion. The first-born child often experiences unique strain, frequently assuming additional responsibilities or emotional burdens as they try to support younger siblings or compensate for parental shortcomings. Despite the turmoil, the shared crisis can also foster a sense of gender neutrality in roles, as siblings of any gender might step into care giving or protective roles, blurring traditional expectations in their collective effort to cope with the fractured family unit. As one first born daughter has stated,

"I'm talking about emotions... I feel congested because I feel like I'm in a room — in a very congested room — and I have been told that I have to live in a certain way and that is the only way out — and that is the way... that is the way a man has told to me and I don't want that." (Participant 1)

Discussion

Parental infidelity has a deep-rooted impact on self-perception, romantic relationships and gender roles of children. The findings of this study suggest that parental infidelity shapes an individual's emotional and psychological landscape, which often leads to a significant reevaluation of Self-worth and identity. This sudden shock can make a person void within himself through which he compels a journey of self-discovery where early experiences of betrayal severely influence the ability to have trust in future relationships. The study focuses on the sense of fear, specifically concerning abandonment or the repetition of familial patterns which can become entrenched challenging the emotional regulation is associated with complex feelings. This finding aligns with another research by GurgaonMoms

(2017) which suggests that individuals facing parental infidelity frequently become burdensome. According to one of the participants, they experienced perceived absence of self, the initial exposure to infidelity at a young age lacked their cognitive capacity to fully comprehend the situation. This finding aligns with the prior research indicating that children particularly younger ones, often struggle to process the emotional dynamics of parental infidelity, which leads to confusion and an inability to articulate their feelings (Hertlein & Cooley, 2017). A recurrent distressing outcome is the normalization of repeated exposure to infidelity, as explained by a participant where repetitive behavior starts to feel normal because of its recurrence. As a result, they begin to seek external validation. This aligns with studies showing that the children of unfaithful parents usually experience lack of self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness and blame themselves internally (Amato & Keith, 1991; Platt et al., 2008). The emptiness which is a result of reduced self-esteem described by a participant further leaves a sense of something irreplaceable missing within the self which is a common manifestation of the psychological impact of such trauma (Brown, 2020). The need for self control can lead to uncertainty in romantic relationships, resulting in internal conflicts regarding honesty and emotional regulation, as the participant elaborated a perspective on being blunt and desiring openness to avoid future secrets. Despite these outcomes, the experience of parental infidelity can lead to positive strengthening of self for some individuals as the participant said that the scenario strengthened their relationship with themselves. This illustrates resilience, a capacity for positive adaptation because of adversity, where individuals can reframe traumatic experiences to improve personal growth (Masten, 2001). This study shows that the discussion of self worth and identity will remain incomplete without the acknowledgment of self doubt as some of the participants question theirself as they doubt their existence. This self doubt, fueled by internalized perceptions of inadequacy, reflects a classic psychological response to relational betrayal within the family unit (Sori, 2007). The study further illustrates that the individuals who experience parental infidelity, they start to distrust their future relationships. The common point of view of all the individuals was that they were scared to trust other people or the partners as parental infidelity made them too reluctantto choose partners. Some of the participants showed fear as a direct consequence of a shattered familial bondof trust and a perceived threat of repeating past patterns. This finding is consistent with research indicating thatchildren exposed to parental infidelity often develop distrust in relationships, anticipating betrayal (Plattet al., 2008). This impact on trust leads to significant life decisions, such as marriage. As one of the participantshad an immediate rejection of arranged marriage, especially from parents' side, directly links theirpast experiences of parental infidelity to a traditional structure of families. This aligns with studiesshowing that children who face parental infidelity usually view marriage as inclined to commit to long-term relationships (Hertlein & Cooley, 2017; Sori, 2007). Similarly, for one participant, honesty is a key trait while carrying out responsibilities of any kind even if these are related to partner or the family. The study aligns with the concept of family system theory. The impact through parental infidelity not only affected one individual but according to the participants, it's affects send ripples into the entire family, altering the roles, relationships, and overall stability of the family. Individuals have faced early childhood exposure to fights and disputes and even parental remarriage. The parents became entangled in their own crises, and as a result they begin to show emotional absence, leaving children unattended. This aligns with family systems theory's view of disrupted equilibrium within the system. The mother's role undergoes a significant shift, if the father committed the infidelity. Sibling dynamics also changed due to parental infidelity as illustrated by the participants. The first-born individuals mostly experienced immense strain of responsibilities irrespective of their age, which is an example of parentification.

One prominent result of parental infidelity upon children is the fear of abandonment. The idea of being alone in the aftermath of the family turmoil shows how betrayal shatters not only the image of their parents' relationship but also their fundamental sense of security and belonging. This aligns with the prior research which says that parental infidelity often develops intense separation anxieties and a heightened fear of loss (Amato & Keith, 1991). The participant said that the risk of being alone is more than the risk of

being abandoned. For these individuals, solitude becomes a known, manageable state, whereas abandonment carries the uncontrollable pain of rejection. This mirrors findings that individuals from such backgrounds may develop avoidant attachment styles as a protective mechanism (Bowlby, 1969). A profound consequence of this trauma is the emergence of a fear of repeating parental patterns in one's own relationships. Participant's active search for qualities "not" present in their father when considering proposals suggests a conscious effort to avoid
replicating the infidelity witnessed. The study says that the burden can also be internalized, as the participant belief that their parents stayed together for the sake of their children. This interpretation of themselves that parents are sacrificing for them adds a unique layer of guilt and responsibility to the child's emotional load (Amato & Keith, 1991). An individual's attitudes and expectations towards romantic relationships are shaped by parental infidelity leading to a complex array of challenges and protective strategies in their adult lives. Individuals frequently develop a guarded view of love and commitment, according to which they believe that even the strongest bonds can be broken (Hertlein & Cooley, 2017). This makes the individuals are more cautious and skeptical. As a result, they cannot trust easily on their partners from the fear of getting betrayed even in stable relationships (Platt et al., 2008). This behavior manifests as aversion, with some individuals actively avoiding marriage or forming strong boundaries against romantic proposals. Individuals who have witnessed parental infidelity often develop aversion to romantic relationships. This isn't just a simple dislike; it's a deep seated protective mechanism driven by fear of repeating past painful experiences like abandonment and betrayal. Participants often express a strong desire to control their relationship choices, preferring "love marriages "to avoid the perceived randomness and betrayal associated with their parents' union. Their immediate and strong aversion to anyone reminding them of their unfaithful parent is a visceral, almost instinctual defense mechanism (Herman, 1997), an unconscious effort to distance themselves from past trauma. This also manifests as a clear relational disinterest, with participants preferring independence and believing single life is better than one associated with betrayal. (Amato & Booth, 1991). In the wake of parental infidelity, selecting a romantic partner becomes a meticulous search for core values that directly counteract the perceived failings of their parents' relationship. These values are essential safeguards against future hurt. The emphasis on honesty, steadfast loyalty, and commitment directly addresses the breaches of trust witnessed in their formative years. They actively seek to cultivate the respect they observed lacking in their parents' dynamic, directly linking it to fidelity. Insisting on honesty is fundamental for a solid relationship stemming from its perceived absence in their parents' marriage. The emphasis on reciprocity ensures mutual effort and emotional investment, minimizing the risk of exploitation or abandonment. A compelling outcome of parental infidelity is a resolute commitment to avoiding parental patterns in one's own romantic relationships. This extends beyond merely not cheating; it encompasses consciously steering clear of dysfunctional behaviors like communication breakdowns, emotional distancing, and unresolved conflicts. Psycho dynamic theories suggest this is a powerful form of identification with the victimized parent and a rejection of the perpetrating parent's behaviors (Freud, 1923). Parental infidelity significantly impacts an individual's capacity for intimacy and vulnerability. Opening emotionally is perceived as inherently risky, stemming from the fear that affection could lead to manipulation or abandonment. A heightened sensitivity to relational instability, a direct consequence of parental infidelity, often leads to a strong inclination towards avoiding conflicts in romantic partnerships. The destructive nature of unresolved conflicts in their parents' marriage instills a fear of confrontation. This can lead individuals to suppress their own needs or grievances to maintain artificial peace, hindering authentic communication and preventing healthy resolution. This avoidance is a maladaptive coping strategy, where short term peace outweighs the long-term cost of unresolved issues (Patterson & Forgatch, 2005).

According to the study, some of the participants' concept of gender roles also got affected as a result of facing parental infidelity, fostering a strong drive for self reliance and often leading to a rejection of traditional gendered expectations. (Arditti et al., 1997; Cooney & Rothenberg, 2009). As a result, they reject the societal norms. Individuals consequently are compelled to take on adult roles

prematurely, offering emotional support, caring for younger siblings, or managing household chores. This experience fuels a continuous drive for financial independence, acting as a constant reminder of the unfaithful parent's failure to provide and
reinforcing the need for self sufficiency. Despite the challenges, some find empowerment in their newfound capabilities, viewing self reliance as a path to personal happiness and freedom from dependence, ultimately fostering personal growth and practicality (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

While some participants embrace a more fluid gender identity, rejecting superficial feminine expectations and asserting that confidence isn't tied to conventional appearances, others may interpret gender roles through religious or cultural lenses. The turmoil stemming from parental infidelity often drives individuals to reject societal norms, particularly those concerning relationships and family structures. This rejection is a conscious choice to forge an autonomous identity, valuing personal authenticity and self defined happiness over
adherence to conventional pressures, ultimately seeking a life less susceptible to past disappointments
(Giddens, 1991).

Some may even develop a conditioned belief that infidelity is inevitable, leading to a conscious disinterest in intimacy and a psychological distance from its potential pain. The findings of the study navigate that individuals primarily engage in processing and acceptance. This difficult experience frequently serves as a catalyst for significant personal growth, fostering resilience, self reliance, and a refined sense of self. This growth can lead to a positive reshaping of personality and a proactive approach to future relationships, often driven by a desire to avoid repeating past traumas. While individuals may develop strong coping traits like self reliance and the ability to survive independently, some ongoing struggles with self worth and dependency can persist. For some participants, parental infidelity acts as catalyst for personal growth, accelerating the development of maturity and resilience. Participants often reflect on how their parents' mistakes positively shaped their own personalities, making them more aware of behaviors to avoid in future relationships. For instance, some acknowledge that they wouldn't have achieved their current level of confidence if their unfaithful parent had remained present, recognizing that the adversity forced them to develop capabilities they wouldn't otherwise have known (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). However, acceptance isn't a destination but a continuous process of managing the lingering psychological and emotional impact. Participants often describe learning to survive by coping with isolation and self reliance, even while acknowledging the human need for connection and vulnerability to truly live. Navigating the aftermath of parental infidelity critically highlights the role of support systems in an individual's healing and growth.

Further, the study elucidates that family dynamics are drastically reshaped in the individuals facing parental infidelity. The individuals face parental neglect or emotional absence, as parents are preoccupied with their own crises. The study also suggests that parental infidelity also affects individual's sense of family stability,
usually forcing them to process heated disputes and even family departures at an early age. Parental infidelity significantly impacts sibling dynamics, often initially weakening bonds as each child grapples with the trauma individually. The first born child frequently experiences unique strain, assuming additional responsibilities or emotional burdens to support younger siblings or compensating for parental shortcomings. This can lead to feelings of suffocation and being confined by prescribed duties. However, this experience also broadens their perspective on infidelity, leading them to believe that unfaithfulness is not exclusive to one gender but can be committed by anyone, regardless of gender, reflecting a rejection of societal biases and a more nuanced understanding of individual actions.

Limitations

- A primary constraint is the small sample size, which, while enabling in-depth interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) of individual lived experiences, severely restricts the transferability of these findings to a broader Pakistani context. This limited and specific sample cannot adequately capture the intricate cultural, social, economic, religious, and familial complexities that shape the perception and experience of parental infidelity across diverse Pakistani households.

- Furthermore, a profound limitation arises from the predominantly Muslim participant pool, which prevents the generalization of findings to the broader Pakistani context. The interpretations are based solely on one religious perspective, thus failing to account for the diverse theological, cultural, and social interpretations of infidelity and its impact within other religious communities in Pakistan, such as Christians, Hindus, and other minorities.
- The profound influence of culture on the perception and impact of parental infidelity represents another significant limitation. Cultural norms, definitions of marriage, the importance of gender roles, acceptable emotional expression, and the preservation of family reputation can drastically alter how infidelity is experienced and its effects. For instance, infidelity committed by a mother may carry a more intense social stigma in many Pakistani cultural settings compared to an act by a father.

Future Recommendations

- Future research on parental infidelity should address these limitations by expanding the sample size to include greater diversity across gender, religious denominations, ethnicity, regions, socioeconomic backgrounds, and educational levels, thus enabling more generalizable and comprehensive findings.
- Additionally, it is crucial to develop culturally competent counseling approaches for individuals affected by parental infidelity in Pakistan, acknowledging specific societal stigmas and religious interpretations.
- Furthermore, implementing school and community-based psychoeducational programs is recommended to raise awareness among children about the impact of parental infidelity, provide healthy coping mechanisms, and foster open communication between parents and children to build trust and facilitate healing.
- Finally, research should explore the effectiveness of specific therapeutic interventions tailored to the unique cultural and religious contexts of Pakistan, aiming to develop evidence-based support systems for affected children and families.

Conclusion

The research focused on the profound impact on a child's self, romantic relationships and gender roles. Based on the semi-structured interviews that were taken by the participant who experienced parental infidelity, therehas been a deep seated scar on individuals and their views on self. Individuals had also experienced self-esteem issues. When looking through the lens of parental infidelity, it was viewed how majority of the participants had considered it as a situation that made them grow into a better person than they were.

A dominating theme among the participants was the struggle with trust, leading some to express reluctance or the idea of marriage, fearing how they will not be able to fully confide in a partner. Core values such as honesty, respect, and loyalty emerged as something which was non- negotiable for any successful romantic partnership in the future– reflecting the impact of parental infidelity on the child itself. There were no specific gender related perceptions based on parental infidelity, however, some individuals see it as a gender-neutral act and can be performed by anyone. However, there was a prominent effect on elder daughters, while dealing with the first-born strain as aftermath of parental infidelity.

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