

## A qualitative study of the experience of touching betrayal and the strategies chosen by the betrayed person

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### Abstract

**Background:** When there is betrayal and disloyalty in a family, the betrayed spouse suffers the most, resulting in mental health disorders and a loss of emotional and behavioral balance. The purpose of this study was to explain the divorce crisis in betrayed spouses.

**Method:** This qualitative research was conducted as a content analysis method in Ahvaz, Iran. Data was gathered through 18 semi-structured interviews with 14 betrayed participants chosen using purposeful sampling. The data was analyzed using the traditional content analysis method.

**Results:** After analyzing the data, three main themes and seven subcategories were identified. Among the themes were divorce issues, with subcategories such as "fear of disclosure," "moving towards divorce," and "fear of consequences, lack of support, and parent household problems."

**Conclusion:** According to the findings, some of the study participants had not forgiven their spouse after discovering their betrayal and had broken up, but others had to ignore their partner's flaws and carry on with their lives for a variety of reasons, including a fear of losing their children, loneliness, and a lack of support. More research in this area is recommended.

**Keywords:** Spouses' experiences, Divorce crisis, Marital infidelity, Qualitative content analysis

## Introduction

Humans require satisfaction of their needs in social situations, particularly within the family. Life is constantly changing because no one lives in a vacuum, and communication with other people, particularly family members, is an important part of human behavior (1, 2). In such circumstances, everyone needs to achieve a satisfactory adaptation to family and society members, which is why the problems and obstacles to human adaptation stem from their social and family lives (1).

The family is the most fundamental pillar of any society and, without a doubt, the most important social institution because it plays a larger role than other social institutions such as the government and educational and cultural institutions in the formation of an individual's personality and the transmission of social values and norms (3). In fact, the family is one of society's most important institutions, shaping the human personality and leading to the development of feelings and values, evolution, self-confidence and socialization, the power of choice, and, ultimately, rational decision-making (4). Marital satisfaction is a critical and complicated aspect of any marriage. In other words, one of the most important aspects of a marital system is the level of satisfaction that the spouses have in their relationship (5, 6, 7). Today's communities are concerned about the chaos and failure of the family as the most original and sacred social institution (8). Conflicts and disagreements between spouses are entirely natural. Conflicts arise due to the nature of their interactions when there are disagreements or needs are not met; as a result, the spouses feel anger, frustration, and discontent towards each other (9). According to marital relationship research, many emotional and mental problems have social psychological roots (10). Marital infidelity is defined as an individual crossing the border of a marital relationship and establishing physical or emotional intimacy with someone outside the relationship (11). This is a shocking and traumatic interpersonal damage incident for the broken life partner (12). Infidelity and betrayal are considered behavioral disorders because their abnormal and unfavorable effects cause a variety of problems and harm to others (13, 14). Individuals' reactions to their spouse's infidelity are similar to posttraumatic stress symptoms, including shock, confusion, anger, depression, self-esteem damage, and a variety of physical symptoms (15). In his study, Basset discovered that men reported more anger and damage in response to sexual infidelity than emotional infidelity (16).

According to studies, disloyalty is one of the leading causes of divorce, spousal abuse, and spouse murder

in various cultures (17, 18). On the other hand, marriage failure is increasing in tandem with the increasing trend of relationships with the opposite sex prior to marriage (18). Infidelity was one of the most common reasons for divorce applications (19), and in a study of 160 different cultures, it was the most common reason for divorce (20). In terms of the divorce-to-marriage ratio, Iran has been ranked fourth in the world (21). If a society's divorce rate is rising, it is almost certainly on the verge of a crisis (22). As a result, it is possible to say that infidelity is increasing, but it is difficult to quantify (23). Unfortunately, no actual data on couples experiencing an illicit relationship crisis and the related issues is available (24). Nonetheless, it has been estimated that the rate of infidelity among married couples in the United States ranges from 26 to 75%. (25).

Because the number of visitors to the judicial authority to submit a petition for family dispute and demand for divorce (25) is increasing every day, and because most studies on infidelity are done quantitatively and have mainly investigated the individuals attitude towards infidelity or its consequences and definitions, and have less considered the issue qualitatively, this study was carried out in order to explain divorce crisis experience in betrayed spouses in Ahvaz.

## Method

The current study is a qualitative study that was conducted using the traditional qualitative content analysis method. In 2019, a study was conducted in Ahvaz, Iran.

In the current study, data was gathered through semi-structured interviews. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The text was rewritten word for word on paper after each interview. Each interview's rewritten text was encoded, and the initial codes were extracted. The next participant was chosen after encoding each interview and considering the results. In total, 12 betrayed spouses were asked to participate in in-depth, semi-structured interviews. It was attempted during the interviews to provide an opportunity for the interviewees to express their own experiences by asking open-ended questions that were recorded by the voice recording device and the filed notes.

The data in this study were analyzed beginning with the first interviews and running concurrently with the interviews (simultaneous analysis). The interviews' transcripts were transcribed word for word. The interview tapes were then listened to several times, and the interview texts were reread, so that the researcher could gain an overall understanding of the

data. The inductive approach was then used to continue the analysis process. Primitive codes were identified and written in the interview text's margin. Following the extraction and identification of the original codes, those that were similar were grouped together. The features of the words content were used to name each group. The themes were formed by grouping categories with similar events. Finally, the summarization process was carried out as far as was feasible and reasonable.

To verify qualitative data, four criteria were used: reliability, capability of integrity or confidence, impartiality or approval, and capability of application or transmission. The current study employs a variety of methods to meet this standard, including attending interview locations, observing and discussing with participants, conducting deep interviews, and rechecking interviewees. After the interviews were completed, the texts were distributed to the participants to ensure the accuracy of the data, and the extracted data were used by other experts and researchers who were familiar with qualitative data. To ensure that the data collection and analysis process was correct and accurate, the researcher submitted the interviews, the initial codes extracted from the texts, and the code classification to the supervisor and advisor in this study. To allow external supervisors to investigate the data, the initial extracted codes, along with the obtained classes and themes, were sent to two qualitative research experts to benefit from their complementary ideas during the encoding process.

Researchers considered all ethical issues in medical research, including obtaining signed consent forms, when conducting this study.

### Results

In this study, 14 subjects participated who had experienced infidelity and were referred to counseling centers, courts, and attorney offices took part in this study, and 18 interviews were conducted with them. 78.57% of participants were female, while 21.42% were male.

The participants in the study were 34 years old on average, and their spouses were 39 years old on average. 80% of all marriages were non-family marriages. Friendship brought couples together in 20% of marriages, while traditional suiting brought couples together in 80%. 13% of marriages were performed without the consent of the individual. There were no children in 21% of the subjects studied. Thirty percent of the subjects studied were employed. When infidelity was discovered, 28% of the subjects were referred to counseling centers. 78% continued on with their lives, while 21% did not.

By conducting 18 deep and semi-structured individual interviews and rewriting them word for word, 520 initial codes were extracted from the texts. Following the classification of the codes based on similarities and conceptual contents, ten subcategories were obtained, which were then divided into four classes and finally summarized into two main themes. These themes include changing behavior (subcategory "initiating behavioral changes in the spouse"), the infidel's chosen strategies (subcategories "seeking infidelity," "trying to continue living," "seeking to solve a problem," "explicit response to infidelity," and "discovering the truth") (Table 1).

### Main theme 1: Behavior change

The same behaviors of the unfaithful spouse that have undergone a noticeable change and have been experienced by the betrayed spouse are referred to as behavior change. These behaviors are sometimes suspicious, and the partner can detect the betrayal by observing and following them.

#### Beginning of spouse's behavioral changes:

The appearance of previously unknown behaviors, followed by betrayer infidelity to play love and conceal it, marks the beginning of behavior change.

#### *First participant:*

"I didn't notice the change because I assumed he was looking for work and life, a source, because his father had kicked us out of the house, I assumed he was looking for work from morning to night, I didn't believe he was looking for pleasure, I truly believed "Well, when I found out and heard the alarm, I gave birth to my daughter."

According to the study's findings, excessive going out, excessive use of mobile phones, phone encryption, changes in appearance, and increased personal costs are all considered behavioral changes. One of the participants in this regard stated:

#### *Seventh participant:*

"My husband lost his job. I was sewing for a living. My life was good, despite the fact that my husband was unemployed. "This side and that side took a lot of money from me so that I wouldn't doubt it," I would go to her ear and see what her sister's last call was, but she didn't call, so my husband called her.

The presence of a third person creates a mental conflict for the betrayer, which is a precursor to the beginning of behavior change, which manifests as

restlessness due to the excitement of a new relationship, the presence of obstacles to meeting each other, and the fear of being betrayed. According to one of the participants, it is a manifestation of betrayal:

*Fifth participant:*

"He'd walk around the yard with his earphones in, texting and ringing. For example, if he was awake one night, he would walk around the yard with his phone until 4 a.m. Then he came in, saying he needed to get gas." "I told him to go in the morning; he said I go whenever I want; it has nothing to do with you; then he left and did not return until 7 a.m.; when he returned, he changed his clothes and went to work."

*Second participant:*

"In that short time, I realized that there is a third person, because no one can provide for two people at the same time, sexually and emotionally, and he eventually shows himself somewhere."

### **Main them 2: Chosen strategies of the betrayed person**

Another major theme revealed in this study is the betrayed person's chosen strategies, which refer to the ways and means of realizing the betrayal of one's spouse and the response that the person gives to the betrayer.

#### **a) Searching for the cause of betrayal:**

In this regards a contributor says:

*Sixth participant:*

"I had previously spoken with one of my coworkers, and he had accepted my shift, so I ran out of the house under the guise of night work and sat in my car, and waiting. I had no desire to see anything."

*Eleventh participant:*

"When my husband left the house one day, I went after him and chased him." I noticed him going to the gold shop. 'Is it not appropriate for whom he wants to buy?' I asked myself. It was unbelievable to me. He wants to buy it for me because he hasn't received a gift from me during this time; I don't know what to buy, so he left the shop and went to the florist, bought flowers, and got back in the car; I followed him, hoping he'd go home, but he didn't and said, "Perhaps it was for his mother, but not for myself. When I

arrived, I saw him get out of the car. I quickly exited and followed him to his apartment. He walked into the house. I had no idea what had happened. I was perplexed and stunned. I waited for him for 5 hours and he never showed up. I went home and waited for him, when he arrived he was healthy, I didn't know what happened, I went to him at night when he slept, but he was tired, I felt full, but I did not want to accept, I went to the same address tomorrow, I called no one answered, iPhone I called the other one and he found out that he was not there, I also lied, my friend used to live here, he said that no, a woman lives here alone, "I walked upstairs and rang the doorbell. The door was opened by a young lady."

#### **b) Trying to continue living:**

Another sub-theme in this category is trying to live. Despite realizing infidelity, a number of people in this study were willing to ignore it and try to continue their lives by giving their spouse another chance. According to one participant:

*Fifth participant:*

"After coming out, we sat in the car, and he wanted to start talking about it, but I refused and told him I needed to talk to you. We keep going, we go on with our lives, just don't do it again."

*First participant:*

"Despite my desire, I gave him a chance because I told him that a 15-year-old's did not begin so easily that it would fall apart so easily." "Give me a chance," said everyone who came in any way. Attempts to solve a different sub-theme problem. In this study, a number of people sought a solution to improve their relationship and living conditions after discovering infidelity, and one of these solutions was to seek counseling. According to one participant:

*Fourth participant:*

"I saw someone knocking the door and the door opened and he went to the house. My heart sank. I could not lock my legs. A few minutes later, I came to myself. I went inside and looked for my son. I was afraid to open the door. I did not know what I was going to face. I opened the door. When I saw that scene, I lost consciousness. I went to the dead man and knocked on his door. I came and ran out of the house."

**Table 1.** Main themes revealed from participants' interviews

Main themes	Sub-themes	Concepts
Behavior change	Initiate Spouse Behavioral Changes	Going out too much, using too much cell phone, deleting contacts by the spouse, increasing the husband's expenses, hearing lies from the spouse, warning others about changing behavior, changing appearance, worsening behavior, making excuses to leave home, not paying for living expenses, mental conflict
Selected strategies of the betrayed person	Search for betrayal	
	Trying to survive	
	Looking to solve the problem	
	Explicit response to betrayal	
	Discover the truth	

**c) Seeking to solve the problem:**

In this study, each individual realized the betrayal in some way, some faced the scene of betrayal or were informed by others, so that one of the participants said:

*Third participant:*

"Until one day, a classmate from our neighborhood said, 'Come with me to see my girlfriend.'" "I accompanied her, and she was supposed to stand at a distance and stare at them." My classmate's girlfriend was my wife. That's how I learned about her betrayal."

*Twelfth participant:*

"When I went to drive him to the airport on the day he left, I saw a girl standing next to him and hid behind the gate. Then I thought to myself, perhaps I met and became acquainted there." And let us talk more to improve our lives. I went to her grandmother's house and waited for her to arrive. When she arrived, I noticed she wasn't alone, and one of them was holding hands.

**Discussion**

One of the characteristics of marriage is each spouse's commitment to one another and mutual rights, so that this commitment serves as the foundation of common life. Otherwise, spouses or family members will gradually lose trust in one another.

A family is a multi-structural unit with biological, mental, social, cultural, and economic components. When family functions such as biological, social, cognitive, and emotional functions are harmed one after the other, family members gradually lose satisfaction. The gradual loss of family members' satisfaction leads to failure, and then to legal dissociation, which is known as divorce. Divorce has a negative impact on the gradual appreciation of family members. The cause of the failure and ultimately breaking the law This is known as dissociation divorce.

Divorce is a life crisis (26). Indeed, marital discord and divorce are two of the most significant stressors following a sudden death in the family (26). Basically, when a third party enters a marital conflict (children, close family of both partners, and friends relationship network), the normal and daily relationships of the couples are harmed, and their cooperation and mutual assistance in matters related

to each other decreases because each partner reacts in some way to the opposing side coalitions and to their being marginalized due to ignoring the spouse's demands, negligence, delay in performing their tasks, aggravating the spouse, and so on. In this way, the feeling of insecurity casts a shadow on the relationships, and financial independence is discussed as a support in such circumstances (27). Divorce's effects and consequences on women have been widely reported, and they can be explained in three areas: individual, family, and social. According to Hafarian's research, divorced women are more vulnerable than other women (28). The women are under a lot of psychic and mental stresses. Fukuda also mentioned the low quality of life, financial problems, pressure, a negative moral attitude toward divorced women in society, social isolation, and damage to their social relationships as a result of the lack of social security (29). The findings are consistent with the research findings. Making the decision to end a close relationship is not a simple or unimportant task. It is accompanied by a sense of regret and self-blame. Women express their fear of loneliness after divorce more than men. This fear stems primarily from the uncertainty of whether they will find another partner. They are concerned that they will be unable to live without a man and care for their children alone, or to find work and manage their finances and those of their children. Real fears stem from factual concerns about financial issues, the labor market, the difficulties of raising children alone, and changes in individual and social life. The findings of a qualitative study on describing the divorce crises experienced by spouses who have been disloyal in Ahvaz revealed the positive and negative factors influencing the betrayed individual in making decisions, such that sometimes the betrayed persons had to continue their lives despite the existing problems, and sometimes they were forced to get divorced.

Specialists and experts have most likely encountered an illicit relationship crisis in society and in counseling sessions, and they understand how the crisis has disrupted the safe and warm environment of the home and household. It is possible to help couples solve the problem and experience more successful marital life and create a healthier social environment by having more knowledge about the factors that lead individuals to illicit relationships and more awareness about how to treat such a crisis.

### Conclusion

This study discovered that when the disclosure of infidelity increases the dispute and quarrel between the couples and the spouses do not come to an

agreement, some of the betrayed spouses, due to the nastiness and abnormal nature of the action in society, do not look for the reason, leave home, and prefer to get divorced than to continue their lives, and some others, due to some circumstances such as taking care of the children, prefer to be patient and wait. Many individual and marital problems have been solved through psychology and consultation. Public health comes after family health and individual health.

### Limitation

Because this is a qualitative study, the generalizability of the findings is limited. The study conducted in Iran and cultural issues should be taken into account when the results are used.

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