

Explaining Disclosed Marital Infidelity in Men Based on the Inter-Systemic Model

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to explain the phenomenon of disclosed marital infidelity in men through the lens of the inter-systemic model.

Methods and Materials: This qualitative study employed a multiple-stage design using semi-structured interviews. The participants were 15 men aged 30–45 who had engaged in marital infidelity, which had been disclosed either voluntarily or by their spouses, and who sought counseling services in Tehran. Participants were recruited through criterion-based purposive sampling, ensuring inclusion criteria such as having at least a high school diploma, no intellectual disabilities, no current psychological treatment, and no marital separation. Data were collected through in-depth, face-to-face interviews guided by a question framework developed and validated by family studies experts. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using qualitative content analysis to identify themes, categories, and systemic linkages. Ethical principles of voluntary participation and confidentiality were strictly observed throughout the study.

Findings: Analysis revealed that men's infidelity stemmed from complex interconnections among multiple systems. Individual factors included sexual dissatisfaction, egocentrism, sensation-seeking, and emotional distress. Relational factors encompassed emotional withdrawal, conflict avoidance, sexual monotony, and ambivalent attachment. Familial influences included dysfunctional parenting patterns, blurred boundaries, and in-law interference. Socio-cultural factors involved gendered double standards, economic stressors, and technological affordances that facilitated external relationships. These systems interacted dynamically, showing infidelity as a maladaptive coping strategy used to escape emotional stagnation rather than solely as a pursuit of sexual gratification.

Conclusion: Disclosed marital infidelity in men emerges from the cumulative interaction of individual, relational, familial, and socio-cultural systems. The inter-systemic model offers a comprehensive framework for understanding this phenomenon and can inform targeted, multi-level interventions for prevention and treatment.

Keywords: Disclosed infidelity, Inter-systemic model, Men, Couples

1. Introduction

Marital infidelity is one of the most disruptive phenomena in intimate relationships, representing a complex interplay of individual vulnerabilities, relational dynamics, and sociocultural influences. Defined as a breach of sexual or emotional exclusivity expectations within marriage, it often precipitates profound emotional, psychological, and relational consequences for couples, families, and the wider social network (Rokach & Chan, 2023). Empirical studies have shown that infidelity can erode trust, destabilize emotional bonds, and accelerate the dissolution of marital ties, making it one of the leading causes of marital breakdown across cultures (Grøntvedt et al., 2020; Luo & Yu, 2022). Despite its prevalence and significance, marital infidelity—particularly when disclosed—remains an underexplored area in psychological research, especially with respect to the lived experiences of men and the systemic contexts that shape their behavior (Choopani et al., 2021; Ghaem Mohammadi et al., 2023).

Understanding marital infidelity requires moving beyond purely individualistic explanations to incorporate relational and contextual factors. While traditional psychological models often locate the origins of infidelity in intrapsychic conflicts or personality traits, contemporary research underscores that it arises from the interaction between personal dispositions, couple dynamics, family processes, and sociocultural norms (Nasiri et al., 2022; Youngblood, 2022). From a relational perspective, diminished marital satisfaction, unresolved conflicts, and declining emotional intimacy are repeatedly cited as precursors of infidelity (Maryam Haghani et al., 2019; Qasemi et al., 2018). Furthermore, emotional disengagement, persistent resentment, and ineffective communication patterns have been identified as critical indicators of marital vulnerability to extradyadic involvement (Regas, 2019; Saniei, 2021). Such findings highlight the need for integrative frameworks that can capture the multifaceted etiology of infidelity.

The inter-systemic model provides a particularly suitable lens for this purpose because it conceptualizes marital behavior—including transgressions like infidelity—as emerging from the dynamic interplay of multiple nested systems. This model posits that individual functioning, dyadic interactions, family-of-origin patterns, and broader sociocultural forces are interconnected and collectively shape relationship outcomes (Regas, 2019; Zola, 2007). For instance, men's engagement in infidelity may be linked not only to personal characteristics such as impulsivity or

emotional dysregulation but also to systemic influences like marital conflict patterns, intergenerational models of intimacy, and cultural scripts surrounding masculinity and sexuality (Isa-Najad & Bagheri, 2017; Mahmud et al., 2024). This systemic view emphasizes that infidelity is rarely the result of a single cause but rather reflects cumulative stressors, maladaptive coping strategies, and relational vulnerabilities operating across multiple levels (Rokach & Chan, 2023; Youngblood, 2022).

Moreover, cultural expectations about gender roles play a pivotal role in shaping men's attitudes and behaviors concerning fidelity. In many sociocultural contexts, male infidelity is tacitly normalized or viewed as less morally reprehensible than female infidelity, which contributes to the minimization and concealment of such behavior (Luo & Yu, 2022; Wróblewska-Skrzek, 2021). These gendered double standards can distort men's perceptions of responsibility and commitment, allowing infidelity to be rationalized as a response to unmet needs or marital dissatisfaction (Kato & Okubo, 2023). Additionally, weak religious or moral commitments have been associated with higher tolerance for extramarital involvement, suggesting that moral education and ethical frameworks in the family context may function as protective factors (Ghasemi et al., 2017; Mahmud et al., 2024). Therefore, studying men's infidelity within its cultural and moral contexts is essential to understanding its underlying mechanisms.

Psychological studies also highlight the profound emotional and identity-related consequences of infidelity for men. Engaging in extramarital relationships can elicit cognitive dissonance, guilt, and self-concept disruption, leading to emotional turbulence and existential questioning (Choopani et al., 2021; Najjar et al., 2024). Some men justify their behavior through rationalization strategies to cope with the dissonance between their moral standards and their actions, a process that can perpetuate the behavior and inhibit reconciliation (Isa-Najad & Bagheri, 2017). Others experience ambivalent attachment patterns—oscillating between emotional closeness and withdrawal—which sustain relational dissatisfaction and increase vulnerability to seeking intimacy outside the marriage (Regas, 2019; Wróblewska-Skrzek, 2021). Such emotional ambivalence reinforces the notion that infidelity is not simply an impulsive act but often a symptom of deeper emotional and relational fractures.

From a family-systems perspective, infidelity can be seen as a maladaptive attempt to regulate emotional homeostasis within a distressed marital system. Dysfunctional family

dynamics—such as enmeshment, rigid boundaries, or unresolved intergenerational conflicts—can weaken spousal bonds and make the marital relationship more susceptible to external intrusions (Saniei, 2021; Zola, 2007). In this sense, men's infidelity may serve as an avoidant coping strategy to escape chronic marital tension rather than confront underlying issues directly (Rokach & Chan, 2023; Youngblood, 2022). This systemic lens underscores that marital betrayal is both shaped by and reinforces dysfunctional relational patterns, which in turn affect the psychological well-being of both partners and their children (Ghaem Mohammadi et al., 2023; Nasiri et al., 2022).

Despite the growing body of literature, several gaps remain. Much existing research on infidelity is conducted from a quantitative standpoint, focusing on prevalence rates, demographic predictors, or individual traits, while overlooking the lived experiences and subjective meanings ascribed by those involved (Choopani et al., 2021; Ghaem Mohammadi et al., 2023). Furthermore, studies often generalize findings across genders, failing to recognize that men's experiences of infidelity may differ from women's in terms of motives, emotional responses, and cultural judgments (Kato & Okubo, 2023; Wróblewska-Skrzek, 2021). Limited attention has been paid to how men perceive and interpret their own infidelity after disclosure, and how they understand its roots within the broader relational and cultural systems they inhabit. Exploring these subjective experiences can offer a more nuanced and holistic understanding of infidelity and inform targeted therapeutic interventions for couples and families affected by it.

Given these gaps, qualitative inquiry grounded in the inter-systemic model is particularly valuable. By focusing on men who have disclosed their infidelity, it becomes possible to explore how individual, relational, familial, and sociocultural systems converge in the genesis and maintenance of this behavior. Such an approach can illuminate the complex processes underlying infidelity, moving beyond simplistic notions of personal weakness or moral failure and instead framing it as an emergent outcome of systemic dysfunction (Regas, 2019; Zola, 2007).

Accordingly, the present study aimed to explain disclosed marital infidelity in men based on the inter-systemic model.

2. Methods and Materials

Since the present study sought to explain the process of the emergence of marital infidelity in unfaithful men with an emphasis on the inter-systemic model, its orientation was

applied. On the other hand, this study aimed to investigate the contexts and factors related to the phenomenon of marital infidelity in men. Accordingly, this study was fundamental in purpose and implemented in multiple stages.

In this study, the researcher acted as the interviewer, conducting in-person interviews and subsequently performing qualitative content analysis of the interviews to achieve the final model. Through reviewing theoretical sources and relevant content, the researcher gained sufficient preliminary understanding of family structure, the destructive phenomena within family systems, and particularly marital infidelity.

The participants and research setting included all men with marital infidelity who had sought counseling services in Tehran. Efforts were made to interview participants whose infidelity had been disclosed either spontaneously or by their spouses, and who possessed adequate experience and understanding of the studied phenomenon as well as awareness of the shortcomings and challenges related to it. It should be noted that the duration of the extramarital relationship was not considered by the researcher.

The sample consisted of 15 individuals selected through criterion-based purposive sampling from among participants in the research setting who met the inclusion criteria. Criterion-based purposive sampling was used, meaning specific characteristics were considered for selecting individuals to participate in the study.

The inclusion criteria were being aged 30 to 45 years, having no intellectual disabilities, not having divorced or separated from their spouses, possessing at least a high school diploma, not having substance abuse issues, not currently receiving psychological treatment, and having had at least one month pass since their last psychological treatment.

The exclusion criteria were having a diagnosed psychological disorder that could affect the research process, being outside the specified age range, unwillingness to participate, incomplete completion of forms and questionnaires, and occurrence of any separation or divorce between the spouses during the study.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview questions were developed under the supervision and approval of experts and specialists in the field of family studies. This part of the study sought, based on the lived experiences of men with a history of marital infidelity and their understanding of the challenges within the family system, to achieve a deep description and understanding of the process of the emergence of marital

infidelity in men. The researcher adhered to the principle of voluntary participation and ensured the anonymity of the participants.

3. Findings and Results

Couple Relationship Category:

1. Financial Provision as Care: Monetary caregiving substitutes for emotional availability. Financial stress exacerbates marital conflicts. Substituting financial for emotional care and resource constraints reflects how economic factors mediate parenting in distressed marriages (Ghaem Mohammadi et al., 2023; Nasiri et al., 2022; Rokach & Chan, 2023).
2. Emotional Withdrawal from Children: Parental separation predicts children's adjustment problems. Strategic distancing prevents escalation of conflict. Calculated distancing reflects supportive parenting strategies that may inadvertently neglect children's emotional needs (Ghaem Mohammadi et al., 2023; Nasiri et al., 2022; Youngblood, 2022).
3. Shortening Conflicts: The aim of preemptively ending conflict is to prevent tension from escalating, but it may suppress necessary discussions. Evidence indicates this strategy offers short-term relief but long-term dissatisfaction. Strategic withdrawal and preventive termination illustrate conflict-minimization tactics that may secure temporary peace at the expense of resolution (Qasemi et al., 2018; Rokach & Chan, 2023; Youngblood, 2022).
4. Non-Interference: Deliberate separation of partners' domains reduces conflict frequency but increases emotional distance, reflecting "emotional triage" in distressed relationships. Segmentation and boundary-setting show how partners create psychological safe spaces through non-interference, potentially at the cost of intimacy (Regas, 2019; Saniei, 2021; Zola, 2007).
5. The Unsaid and Resentment Toward the Spouse: Unvoiced grievances create emotional distance and relational stagnation. Suppressed communication predicts relationship deterioration. Communication breakdown, unmet needs for explanation, and conflicted affection exemplify the "emotional gridlock" typical of distressed couples (Nasiri et al., 2022; Qasemi et al., 2018; Rokach & Chan, 2023).
6. Disappointment with the Spouse's Behavior: Chronic frustration is linked with dismissing negative feelings, where positive perceptions are overwritten by accumulated negatives. Candid disappointment and a lack of public couple identity reflect advanced relational erosion in which despair overwhelms bonding mechanisms (Regas, 2019; Rokach & Chan, 2023; Saniei, 2021).
7. Reduced Influence of the Spouse: Non-investment in the relationship functions as protection against relational pain and aligns with marital drift. Strategic avoidance and meticulous self-regulation indicate conscious minimization of the spouse's impact, characteristic of emotionally exiting relationships (Regas, 2019; Youngblood, 2022; Zola, 2007).
8. Internalized Anger Toward the Spouse: Suppressed hostility predicts health problems and relational aggression and requires substantial emotional labor. Contained violence and inhibited aggression indicate risky anger-management patterns that often precede relational crises (Nasiri et al., 2022; Regas, 2019; Rokach & Chan, 2023).
9. Rumination and Suspicion: 9.1 Preserving Family Honor: Honor-related preoccupations in collectivist contexts are tied to intense distress; reputation management becomes a cognitive burden. Ongoing vigilance over reputation reflects cultural scripts where family honor intertwines with self-esteem, producing chronic stress (Choopani et al., 2021; Mahmud et al., 2024; Rokach & Chan, 2023).
- 9.2 Suspicion of the Spouse: Pathological jealousy involves cognitive distortions about a partner's behavior and is associated with attachment anxiety. Revenge fantasies and toxic fear illustrate how mistrust, in severe marital distress, can evolve into paranoid ideation (Grøntvedt et al., 2020; Kato & Okubo, 2023; Wróblewska-Skrzek, 2021).
10. Affective Changes: 10.1 Maladaptive Emotional Reactions: Emotional numbing operates as protection but undermines intimacy; chronic emotional withdrawal predicts dissolution. Prolonged flattening of affect reflects what has been described as a stage in marital decay where positive affect is extinguished (Regas, 2019; Rokach & Chan, 2023; Youngblood, 2022).
- 10.2 Low Physical Attraction: Reduced physical attraction often mirrors emotional disconnection; negative

partner focus intensifies dissatisfaction. Explicit devaluation of physical traits shows how emotional distress manifests as perceptual shifts toward one's partner (Grøntvedt et al., 2020; Kato & Okubo, 2023; Rokach & Chan, 2023).

11. Attachment and Desire: 11.1 Spouse's Reluctance to Have Children: Fertility conflicts are major marital stressors; discrepant childbearing intentions relate to instability. A mismatch in core values around childbearing represents a "deal-breaker" that challenges relationship durability (Nasiri et al., 2022; Rokach & Chan, 2023; Youngblood, 2022).

- 11.2 Attachment to the Spouse: Ambivalent attachment reflects coexisting love and distress; this push-pull dynamic sustains unhappy relationships. Cognitive dissonance between affection and distress exemplifies the approach-avoidance conflict characteristic of ambivalent attachment (Regas, 2019; Wróblewska-Skrzek, 2021; Youngblood, 2022).

12. Relationship Turmoil: Extramarital relationships as escape correlate with poor conflict-resolution skills; avoidance via affairs exacerbates problems. Using affairs as conflict avoidance and as emotional flight reflects an "emotional escape" from marital distress rather than constructive engagement (Ghaem Mohammadi et al., 2023; Nasiri et al., 2022; Rokach & Chan, 2023).

13. Sexual Dissatisfaction: 13.1 Decline in Sexual Quality: Sexual dissatisfaction is a key trigger for affairs; monotony predicts infidelity. Compensatory sexual satisfaction and explicit dissatisfaction mirror the "erotic gap" often reported in long-term relationships (Grøntvedt et al., 2020; Luo & Yu, 2022; Rokach & Chan, 2023).

- 13.2 Sexual Dysfunction: Medical factors affecting intimacy are often overlooked; partners misinterpret health-related sexual changes. Emphasizing sexual outcomes over health concerns indicates poor illness adjustment and limited sexual communication (Nasiri et al., 2022; Rokach & Chan, 2023; Youngblood, 2022).

14. Emotional Disconnection: 14.1 Emotional Communication Breakdown: A lack of emotional engagement often precedes physical infidelity. The "walking marriage" phenomenon reflects cohabitation amid emotional detachment and maps onto a phase of "emotional divorce" prior to legal dissolution (Nasiri et al., 2022; Qasemi et al., 2018; Rokach & Chan, 2023).

- 14.2 Feelings of Rejection: Perceived rejection activates attachment injuries; family estrangement compounds marital distress. Profound isolation echoes descriptions of "emotional homelessness" in highly anxious families (Rokach & Chan, 2023; Wróblewska-Skrzek, 2021; Zola, 2007).

15. Contempt and Insult: Contempt and insult during conflicts involve verbal attacks that erode self-worth and produce lasting psychological harm, undermining the foundations of the relationship. Such behaviors are especially damaging because they target core identity. Persistent patterns of contempt align with findings on emotional abuse and cyclical toxicity in relationships (Nasiri et al., 2022; Regas, 2019; Rokach & Chan, 2023).

16. Blaming the In-Laws: Externalizing conflict onto the spouse's family indicates displacement of marital tension and reflects boundary and cultural constraints in collectivist contexts. These accounts illustrate triangulation dynamics wherein third parties become proxies in the conflict (Mahmud et al., 2024; Saniei, 2021; Zola, 2007).

17. Child Mediation Between Parents: Parentification occurs when children mediate parental conflicts, disrupting normative development and producing anxiety and boundary confusion with long-term effects on emotion regulation. Preventive child mediation reflects role reversal consistent with Bowen family systems theory, showing how children stabilize dysfunctional systems (Regas, 2019; Saniei, 2021; Zola, 2007).

18. Mutual Mistrust: Digital monitoring represents a modern manifestation of jealousy, associated with lower satisfaction and cyclical conflict by amplifying suspicion. Compulsive checking and ensuing disputes show how surveillance becomes both a cause and a symptom of mistrust; demands for transparency mask deeper insecurity about autonomy (Grøntvedt et al., 2020; Kato & Okubo, 2023; Rokach & Chan, 2023).

- 18.1 Distrust of Personal Hobbies: Social isolation tactics align with intimate partner risk factors; healthy relationships maintain a balance of separateness and togetherness. Interrogation rituals and mandated disclosure show how distrust constrains normal social functioning and aligns with coercive-control frameworks (Regas, 2019; Rokach & Chan, 2023; Saniei, 2021).

18.2 Distrust in Financial Matters: Financial surveillance disproportionately affects women and reflects patriarchal control patterns; economic decision autonomy predicts relationship health. Minute financial monitoring and real-time expense auditing indicate economic-control mechanisms that undermine personal agency (Ghasemi et al., 2017; Nasiri et al., 2022; Rokach & Chan, 2023).

19. Avoidance Strategies: 19.1 Ignoring the Partner's Complaints: Emotional non-engagement serves as protection from chronic criticism but predicts deterioration. Cognitive disengagement and deliberate detachment exemplify "emotional shutdown," a last-resort coping strategy when other methods fail (Regas, 2019; Rokach & Chan, 2023; Youngblood, 2022).

19.2 Maintaining Silence: Strategic silence reduces tension, though prolonged use links to emotional suppression. Instrumental silence can mirror learned helplessness, whereas controlled narratives suggest adaptive use in escape situations (Regas, 2019; Rokach & Chan, 2023; Youngblood, 2022).

19.3 Leaving the Scene: Physical withdrawal provides space for emotion regulation but can become an entrenched avoidance pattern. Severe retreat and strategic time-outs highlight spatial boundary-setting as an emotional survival tactic (Regas, 2019; Youngblood, 2022; Zola, 2007).

20. Failure to Recognize Individual Freedoms: Suppression of autonomy is linked with partner depression, while psychological control damages self-concept. Perceived restriction and neutralized wishes mirror autonomy-thwarting "restrictive parenting," associated with child anxiety (Mahmud et al., 2024; Regas, 2019; Saniei, 2021).

Family Relationship Category:

1. Preserving Good Relations During Conflict: Parents' deliberate efforts to buffer children from conflict protect against attachment insecurity; however, this requires ongoing emotion regulation that is often compromised in high-conflict homes (Youngblood, 2022; Zola, 2007).
2. Patterns of Non-Objection: Children's quiet compliance can mask internal distress, indicating emotional withdrawal rather than true neutrality and linking to later passive-aggressive patterns. Strategic silence emerges as a salient survival mechanism (Ghaem Mohammadi et al., 2023; Nasiri et al., 2022; Regas, 2019).

3. Insensitivity to Children's Behaviors: Parental emotional depletion reduces responsiveness and can create "psychological orphans," predicting attachment disturbances and the consequences of emotional neglect. Metaphors of "gravity" indicate deep non-involvement; avoidance and compliant softness reflect forms of parental withdrawal under relational stress (Ghaem Mohammadi et al., 2023; Rokach & Chan, 2023; Youngblood, 2022).

4. Alliance-Building Behaviors: 4.1 Soothing Children: Spillover from parental conflict affects child adjustment, while protective parenting mitigates these effects. Harm control and emotional labor signal conscious efforts to shield children from marital discord (Ghaem Mohammadi et al., 2023; Nasiri et al., 2022; Regas, 2019).

4.2 Competing for Children's Affection: Concerns about parental alienation surface in high-conflict separations, though some alliance-building may be adaptive. Strategic relationships and compensatory efforts show both protective and potentially problematic dynamics (Rokach & Chan, 2023; Youngblood, 2022; Zola, 2007).

5. Spouse's Harsh Child-Rearing: Gender-differentiated harshness reflects cultural parenting norms; maternal gatekeeping often stems from marital dissatisfaction. Displacing marital conflict onto children and seeking external validation indicate role confusion between spouse and parent, aligning with the "spillover hypothesis" (Mahmud et al., 2024; Nasiri et al., 2022; Rokach & Chan, 2023).
6. Children's Autonomy: Granting autonomy predicts competence, yet disagreements generate inconsistency. Polarized parenting styles and mutual criticism reflect poor coparental alignment, linked to increased child behavior problems (Ghaem Mohammadi et al., 2023; Regas, 2019; Youngblood, 2022).
7. Corporal Punishment of Children: Despite documented harms, physical punishment persists; abuse stemming from post-conflict stress intensifies risk. The stress-to-violence pathway illustrates intergenerational transmission of aggression (Nasiri et al., 2022; Regas, 2019; Rokach & Chan, 2023).
8. Disrespect Toward Families: Marital conflict raises dissolution risk; family disrespect indicates boundary violations. Rhetorical questioning

- illustrates normalized breaches of family boundaries—known predictors of divorce (Rokach & Chan, 2023; Youngblood, 2022; Zola, 2007).
9. Interference in Children's Eyes: Parental-alienation strategies harm child adjustment; undermining credibility erodes parent-child bonds. Competitive expertise showcases destructive "knowledge contests" that confuse children (Ghaem Mohammadi et al., 2023; Rokach & Chan, 2023; Youngblood, 2022).
 10. Disregarding Family Priorities: Emotional withdrawal from family roles reflects protective disengagement; while briefly relieving, it predicts long-term harm. Re-prioritization and self-focused coping mark depleted emotional resources characteristic of chronic marital stress (Nasiri et al., 2022; Rokach & Chan, 2023; Youngblood, 2022).
 11. Disruption of Leisure Activities: Shared leisure buffers marriages; its disappearance signals escalating conflict. Avoiding trips and halting activities show how discord dismantles relationship-repair mechanisms (Qasemi et al., 2018; Regas, 2019; Youngblood, 2022).
 12. Limited Family Communication: Marital cutoffs correlate with distress; boundary shifts often precede divorce. Mutual cutoff and unilateral withdrawal show how marital conflict restructures extended family networks (Rokach & Chan, 2023; Youngblood, 2022; Zola, 2007).
 13. Drawing Children's Attention: Child-focused diversion is a compensatory strategy: it protects children from conflict but may impose emotional burdens. Preventive engagement shows how parents use child attention to avoid conflict and maintain the relationship, potentially overburdening the child (Ghaem Mohammadi et al., 2023; Nasiri et al., 2022; Youngblood, 2022).
 14. Managing Children's Behavior: Child mediation in parental conflict predicts adjustment problems; explanation may sometimes be necessary. Explanatory approaches and emotional translation walk a fine line between appropriate clarification and inappropriate loading (Ghaem Mohammadi et al., 2023; Nasiri et al., 2022; Youngblood, 2022).
 15. Tension Management: Conflict-containment strategies can preserve family functioning; effective mediation reduces child distress. Structured channels and observed de-escalation indicate strategic conflict management through family-system alignment (Regas, 2019; Saniei, 2021; Zola, 2007).
 16. Impact on Children: Parental conflict shapes development via modeling and threats to emotional security; role-model concerns affect identity formation. Communication control attempts and explicit child exclusion from parental modeling mark severe family dysfunction, predicting child adjustment problems (Ghaem Mohammadi et al., 2023; Nasiri et al., 2022; Rokach & Chan, 2023).
 17. Family-System Disruptions:
 - 17.1 Weakening Spousal Family Bonds: Marital conflict correlates with dissatisfaction; boundary violations create chronic stress. Complaints about enmeshment reveal weak generational boundaries, a known predictor of marital distress (Rokach & Chan, 2023; Youngblood, 2022; Zola, 2007).
 - 17.2 Weakening Core Family Bonds: Partner-driven family estrangement predicts poor coping; loss of familial support exacerbates marital problems. Family alienation and expectations of betrayal show how marital conflict reshapes wider support networks (Rokach & Chan, 2023; Youngblood, 2022; Zola, 2007).
- Individual Issues Category:
1. Violent Behaviors: Violence in conflicts—especially physical altercations—often emerges when verbal disagreements escalate uncontrollably. Physical aggression in intimate conflicts frequently results from intense emotional arousal and perceived threats, and it is associated with long-term psychological harm and relational decay. Normalizing violence indicates desensitization to aggression, aligning with cyclical abuse patterns (Nasiri et al., 2022; Regas, 2019; Rokach & Chan, 2023).
 2. Verbal Violence: Verbal violence—insults, derogation, hostile language—can escalate conflict and damage the relationship. Verbal aggression often precedes physical violence and indexes deteriorating communication, linking to emotional abuse and prolonged relational distress (Nasiri et al., 2022; Rokach & Chan, 2023; Youngblood, 2022).
 3. Throwing Objects: Throwing objects during conflict signals a transitional stage between verbal and physical aggression, functioning both as emotional release and warning of potential physical

violence. It often reflects frustration and impaired anger regulation and can act as a proxy for direct aggression (Nasiri et al., 2022; Rokach & Chan, 2023; Youngblood, 2022).

4. Noise and Shouting: Loud exchanges commonly signal escalation, loss of emotional control, and ineffective communication, and they often precede more severe aggression. Reliance on volume to express dominance or frustration aligns with research on communication breakdowns in high-conflict relationships (Nasiri et al., 2022; Rokach & Chan, 2023; Youngblood, 2022).
5. Inducing Feelings of Failure: This involves instilling a sense of inadequacy or lack of appreciation for a partner's efforts. Such tactics often arise from unresolved personal insecurities projected onto others and significantly affect mental health, leading to anxiety and withdrawal; repeated invalidation contributes to emotional disengagement consistent with "emotional silence" in dysfunctional relationships (Nasiri et al., 2022; Regas, 2019; Rokach & Chan, 2023).
6. Being Compared: Unfavorable comparisons undermine self-confidence and generate resentment, reflecting unrealistic expectations and poor conflict skills and sometimes co-occurring with narcissistic traits. Such standards corrode intimacy by reinforcing insecurity (Grøntvedt et al., 2020; Kato & Okubo, 2023; Rokach & Chan, 2023).
7. Blaming for Mistakes: Blame-shifting evades accountability and exacerbates power imbalances. Unilateral attribution typifies black-and-white thinking in high-conflict relationships and compounds stress beyond the focal issue (Nasiri et al., 2022; Regas, 2019; Rokach & Chan, 2023).
8. Being Blamed by Children: Open criticism from children toward parents indicates disrupted authority structures and is linked to externalizing behaviors in adolescence, with children adopting evaluative roles typically reserved for parents (Ghaem Mohammadi et al., 2023; Nasiri et al., 2022; Youngblood, 2022).
9. Interfering in Affairs: Workplace sabotage constitutes psychological abuse; supporting professional autonomy improves relationship quality. Constant criticism reflects attempts to limit professional self-realization—an established form

of coercion (Nasiri et al., 2022; Regas, 2019; Rokach & Chan, 2023).

9.1 Interfering in Children's Matters: Coparenting conflict predicts child adjustment problems; healthy couples maintain a united parental front. Academic control and undermining parental authority show how children become proxies in marital power struggles (Ghaem Mohammadi et al., 2023; Nasiri et al., 2022; Youngblood, 2022).

9.2 Interfering with Clothing: Controlling appearance violates bodily autonomy; clothing choices express identity. Persistent criticism suggests efforts to shape a partner's self-presentation—symbolic violence within intimate dynamics (Regas, 2019; Rokach & Chan, 2023; Saniei, 2021).

9.3 Interfering with Personal Purchases: Consumer autonomy signals basic respect; joint decisions should balance individual preferences. Imposed styles and mandated separations show how trivial choices become battlegrounds for control (Ghasemi et al., 2017; Nasiri et al., 2022; Rokach & Chan, 2023).

9.4 Commenting About Others: Public criticism serves social-isolation functions; healthy couples maintain privacy boundaries. External disparagement likely reflects broader patterns of boundary violations extending beyond the dyad (Regas, 2019; Youngblood, 2022; Zola, 2007).

9.5 Interfering in Adult Children's Marital Lives: Marital interference predicts dissolution; generational boundaries are crucial for newlyweds. Severed contact demonstrates serious consequences of failing to respect generational boundaries (Rokach & Chan, 2023; Youngblood, 2022; Zola, 2007).

10. Emotion-Regulation Techniques: 10.1 Seeking Social Support: External validation buffers marital distress, though overreliance risks triangulation. Therapeutic friendships and explicit emotion regulation exemplify healthy coping through social connection (Regas, 2019; Youngblood, 2022; Zola, 2007).

10.2 Physical Activity: Exercise reduces stress physiology and acts as a constructive emotional outlet; combined social-physical approaches indicate active stress management (Nasiri et al., 2022; Rokach & Chan, 2023; Youngblood, 2022).

11. Egoism and Self-Centeredness: Parental narcissistic features correlate with exploitative parenting; self-centered discipline undermines children's emotional security. Controlling demands reflect enmeshment patterns linked with

psychological control (Regas, 2019; Rokach & Chan, 2023; Saniei, 2021).

12. Seeking Peace Through Parallel Relationships: External emotional compensation is common in distressed marriages; while relieving, it risks eroding the primary bond. Alternative outlets show how parallel relationships buffer conflict yet may weaken investment in the primary relationship (Grøntvedt et al., 2020; Luo & Yu, 2022; Rokach & Chan, 2023).
13. Maintaining Silence: Strategic silence prevents escalation but suppresses expression; chronic use correlates with depression. Defiant quiet and protective muteness illustrate how silence becomes both shield and prison amid chronic conflict (Regas, 2019; Rokach & Chan, 2023; Youngblood, 2022).
14. Loss of Family Contact: Cutting off family can contain conflict but damages support systems; total loss of contact predicts poor post-divorce adjustment. Unilateral cutoff, avoidance, and complete severance indicate escalating boundary actions that disconnect individuals from vital support (Rokach & Chan, 2023; Youngblood, 2022; Zola, 2007).
15. Existential Crisis and Loss of Identity: 15.1 Loss of Meaning: Marital distress can trigger existential anxiety when relationships scaffold self-concept; meaning confusion predicts depression. Deep disorientation shows how marital crisis can erode life narratives and destabilize identity (Choopani et al., 2021; Najjar et al., 2024; Rokach & Chan, 2023).

15.2 Self-Criticism: Marital distress amplifies negative self-appraisals; self-criticism mediates dissatisfaction. Perceived social displacement reflects internalized failure, where relational problems are redefined as self-defects (Grøntvedt et al., 2020; Kato & Okubo, 2023; Rokach & Chan, 2023).

16. Fear and Anxiety Responses: 16.1 Fear of Exposure: Shame-avoidance fuels secrecy; reputation anxiety intensifies in collectivist contexts. Panic over being exposed shows how marital problems transform into social threats where privacy boundaries are porous (Luo & Yu, 2022; Mahmud et al., 2024; Rokach & Chan, 2023).

16.2 Sexual Distress: Sexual dissatisfaction often mirrors relational distress; negative labeling exacerbates intimacy

problems. Critical sexual appraisal shows how emotional disconnection manifests physically, creating a vicious cycle (Luo & Yu, 2022; Nasiri et al., 2022; Rokach & Chan, 2023).

17. Psychological Distress: 17.1 Despair and Hopelessness: Marital distress can provoke clinical hopelessness; loss of meaning predicts depression. Existential resignation illustrates how marital problems can hollow out basic life significance (Choopani et al., 2021; Najjar et al., 2024; Rokach & Chan, 2023).

17.2 Feelings of Vulnerability: Perceived helplessness in relationships associates with anxiety; chronic stress disrupts coping capacities. Globalized distress shows spillover effects whereby marital problems impair broader functioning (Nasiri et al., 2022; Rokach & Chan, 2023; Youngblood, 2022).

18. Behavioral Reactions: 18.1 Verbal Aggression: Escalation follows negative reciprocity patterns; verbal aggression predicts relationship violence. A hostile communication style reflects the “criticism–contempt” sequence identified as a divorce predictor (Qasemi et al., 2018; Rokach & Chan, 2023; Youngblood, 2022).

18.2 Anger and Hatred: Chronic anger maintains distress; partner-focused hostility relates to poor conflict resolution. Misattributed anger and gendered hostility indicate development of negative cognitive schemas about relationships (Grøntvedt et al., 2020; Rokach & Chan, 2023; Wróblewska-Skrzek, 2021).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study sought to explain disclosed marital infidelity in men using the inter-systemic model, focusing on the interaction of individual, relational, familial, and socio-cultural factors. The findings revealed that men’s infidelity did not arise from a single cause but emerged as a complex outcome of multiple interconnected influences. This aligns with the inter-systemic perspective, which emphasizes that individual behavior within marriage is shaped by a dynamic interplay of personal vulnerabilities, couple dynamics, family-of-origin patterns, and broader cultural norms (Regas, 2019; Zola, 2007). Men described a range of individual factors—including sexual dissatisfaction, personality traits like egocentrism and sensation-seeking, and emotional distress—that combined with marital conflicts, emotional disengagement, and weakened relational bonds to create conditions conducive to infidelity.

Such findings support previous evidence that diminished marital satisfaction and emotional intimacy serve as primary antecedents of extradyadic involvement (Maryam Haghani et al., 2019; Qasemi et al., 2018).

One of the salient relational patterns identified was the progressive emotional withdrawal from the marital relationship. Participants often reported a decline in emotional closeness and a sense of being psychologically disconnected from their partners. This is consistent with research showing that chronic emotional disengagement predicts the dissolution of marital bonds and increases the likelihood of seeking intimacy outside the relationship (Nasiri et al., 2022; Youngblood, 2022). Moreover, the participants described using avoidance strategies—such as minimizing conflict, silencing complaints, or deliberately withdrawing from joint activities—as mechanisms to cope with ongoing marital tension. While these strategies provided temporary relief, they contributed to long-term relational deterioration, echoing prior findings that avoidance and emotional suppression often escalate marital dissatisfaction and increase vulnerability to infidelity (Regas, 2019; Saniei, 2021). This underscores how emotional disconnection and conflict-avoidant patterns can erode the protective functions of marital intimacy, leaving the relationship more susceptible to external attachments.

Another prominent theme was the experience of sexual dissatisfaction and its role as a motivational trigger for infidelity. Several participants described monotony, lack of novelty, and perceived incompatibility in their sexual relationships, which they viewed as justifications for seeking sexual fulfillment elsewhere. This aligns with research showing that sexual dissatisfaction is one of the strongest predictors of infidelity and that monotony in long-term sexual relationships often precipitates extramarital involvement (Grøntvedt et al., 2020; Luo & Yu, 2022). However, these men also emphasized the emotional dimension of their extramarital relationships, indicating that sexual motives were intertwined with unmet emotional needs. Such findings resonate with studies suggesting that infidelity often reflects attempts to compensate for deficits in both sexual and emotional domains rather than being solely driven by sexual desire (M. Haghani et al., 2019; Rokach & Chan, 2023). The coexistence of sexual dissatisfaction and emotional longing reinforces the need for conceptualizing infidelity as a multifaceted coping strategy rather than a purely hedonistic act.

The study further highlighted the role of cognitive and emotional processes, particularly ambivalent attachment and

emotional dissonance. Many participants described oscillating between affection and resentment toward their spouses, which sustained a push-pull dynamic of closeness and withdrawal. This mirrors prior evidence that ambivalent attachment patterns are associated with relational instability and a higher likelihood of infidelity (Kato & Okubo, 2023; Wróblewska-Skrzek, 2021). Moreover, participants reported cognitive dissonance between their moral beliefs and their actions, often justifying their behavior through rationalizations to reduce guilt and preserve self-concept. This is consistent with findings showing that men frequently employ justification strategies to cope with the psychological discomfort of violating moral or relational norms (Choopani et al., 2021; Isa-Najad & Bagheri, 2017). Such dissonance-reduction mechanisms may perpetuate the behavior by preventing emotional accountability and obstructing opportunities for reconciliation.

At the familial level, the findings revealed how dysfunctional family-of-origin patterns and ongoing family interference shaped participants' relational dynamics and indirectly facilitated infidelity. Many men described growing up in families marked by conflict, boundary violations, or emotional neglect, which affected their capacity for intimacy and conflict resolution within their marriages. This supports the systemic view that intergenerational patterns of relational dysfunction can be transmitted and replicated in adult relationships (Saniei, 2021; Zola, 2007). Furthermore, participants noted frequent interference by in-laws and blurred boundaries between the marital dyad and the extended family, which intensified marital conflicts and eroded spousal solidarity. These observations align with prior research indicating that family enmeshment and triangulation weaken couple cohesion and increase vulnerability to extradyadic attachments (Ghaem Mohammadi et al., 2023; Rokach & Chan, 2023). By situating infidelity within the family system, these findings affirm the inter-systemic model's premise that marital behaviors are embedded in broader relational contexts.

The influence of sociocultural factors was also evident in the participants' narratives. Many men noted that societal norms subtly condoned male infidelity or minimized its moral significance, which reduced their sense of personal accountability. This reflects gendered double standards commonly observed in collectivist societies, where male sexual transgressions are often normalized while female infidelity is heavily stigmatized (Luo & Yu, 2022; Wróblewska-Skrzek, 2021). Participants also described economic stressors and the impact of digital technology—

such as social media facilitating contact with potential partners—as contextual enablers of infidelity. These findings are consistent with research suggesting that cultural scripts surrounding masculinity, economic pressures, and technological accessibility create opportunities and justifications for extramarital involvement (Mahmud et al., 2024; Nasiri et al., 2022). The interplay of these cultural dynamics underscores that infidelity is not merely a personal failing but a behavior shaped by sociocultural structures that define gender roles, moral expectations, and relational norms.

Importantly, the men in this study described their infidelity not simply as a pursuit of pleasure but as an escape from chronic emotional pain and marital stagnation. This perception aligns with systemic perspectives that view infidelity as a maladaptive coping mechanism used to regulate distress in dysfunctional marital systems (Regas, 2019; Zola, 2007). Rather than confronting unresolved conflicts directly, participants sought external relationships to temporarily restore self-esteem, emotional excitement, or a sense of vitality. However, this strategy often exacerbated existing conflicts and deepened emotional disconnection from their spouses, consistent with prior findings that avoidance through extramarital relationships compounds rather than alleviates marital problems (Nasiri et al., 2022; Youngblood, 2022). These insights highlight the paradoxical nature of infidelity as both a symptom of marital dysfunction and a catalyst for further relational breakdown.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that disclosed marital infidelity in men is best understood as an emergent outcome of intersecting systemic forces. The inter-systemic model provided a useful framework for mapping how individual vulnerabilities (e.g., sexual dissatisfaction, emotional dissonance), relational dynamics (e.g., emotional withdrawal, conflict avoidance), family-of-origin influences (e.g., boundary violations, intergenerational conflict), and sociocultural pressures (e.g., gender norms, technological affordances) converged to produce this behavior. This holistic approach transcends reductionist explanations that attribute infidelity solely to personality deficits or moral weakness and instead situates it within the broader relational ecosystems in which men are embedded. Such an understanding has significant implications for therapeutic interventions, suggesting that addressing infidelity requires not only individual behavior change but also systemic restructuring of couple, family, and cultural dynamics (Regas, 2019; Rokach & Chan, 2023; Zola, 2007).

5. Suggestions and Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample consisted of only 15 men who had disclosed their infidelity, which limits the generalizability of the findings. The use of criterion-based purposive sampling, though appropriate for qualitative inquiry, may have introduced selection bias by including individuals who were more willing to discuss their experiences. Self-reporting also posed the risk of social desirability bias and selective recall, as participants may have minimized or rationalized their behaviors to preserve self-image. Furthermore, the study was conducted exclusively in Tehran, where cultural and religious norms regarding gender and sexuality may differ from other regions, potentially limiting the cultural transferability of the findings. Lastly, the cross-sectional design precluded examination of the temporal evolution of infidelity-related processes and their long-term relational outcomes.

Future studies should build on these findings by employing larger and more diverse samples to enhance generalizability. Incorporating mixed-method designs could allow for triangulation of qualitative narratives with quantitative measures of attachment, marital satisfaction, and psychological well-being. Comparative studies examining both men's and women's experiences of disclosed infidelity would clarify gendered differences in motives, emotional responses, and social consequences. It would also be valuable to explore the perspectives of betrayed spouses and other family members to capture the systemic ripple effects of infidelity. Longitudinal research could track how men's justifications, emotional states, and relational behaviors evolve following disclosure, shedding light on the processes of reconciliation, relapse, or marital dissolution. Furthermore, cross-cultural studies could examine how varying cultural scripts about masculinity and fidelity influence the dynamics and meanings of infidelity across contexts.

The findings underscore the importance of adopting a systemic lens in therapeutic work with couples affected by infidelity. Interventions should move beyond focusing solely on individual pathology and instead address the relational and contextual factors that sustain infidelity. Couple therapy can focus on rebuilding emotional intimacy, improving conflict resolution skills, and renegotiating boundaries with extended family to strengthen the marital dyad. Integrating family-of-origin work may help clients recognize and modify intergenerational patterns that contribute to

emotional disengagement and mistrust. Culturally sensitive approaches are crucial, as therapists must navigate gender norms and moral expectations that shape clients' attitudes toward fidelity. Preventive efforts could include premarital education and marital enrichment programs emphasizing emotional communication, sexual intimacy, and mutual responsibility to reduce the risk of infidelity.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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