



The Lack of Satisfactory Relationships as the Contextual Cause of Extramarital Relationships in Women: A Qualitative Study

Seyed Reza Javadian^{1*} , Azam Fani Sadrabadi²

1. Assistant Professor in Social Work, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Yazd University, Yazd, Iran
2. MA in Guidance and Counseling, Department of Guidance and Counseling, Faculty of Humanities Sciences, Islamic Azad University Yazd Branch, Yazd, Iran

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***Corresponding Author:**

Seyed Reza Javadian

Email:

Javadian@yazd.ac.ir

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Abstract

Introduction: Given the increase in extramarital relationships and subsequent increase in the number of divorces, the present study aimed to study the contextual factors for extramarital relationships in women.

Methods: This study was conducted using a qualitative method based on the grounded theory. To this end, all women involved in extramarital relationships residing in Yazd were considered as the research population. A total number of 40 women involved in extramarital relationships were selected through snowball sampling and purposive sampling and were interviewed. The data collected through the interviews were then analyzed using a theoretical coding technique.

Results: A total of 58 concepts (codes) were identified in open coding and 14 subcategories were extracted in axial coding. Besides, the contextual factors for extramarital relationships were divided into four main categories including emotional and behavioral gaps, unbalanced sexual relations, immature personality, and the evoking social environment. Finally, the lack of satisfactory relationships emerged as a core category.

Conclusion: Based on the findings, it can be concluded that extramarital relationships in women can be considered a multifactorial phenomenon that is formed by the absence of satisfactory individual, marital, and social relationships.

Keywords: Sexual behavior, Extramarital relationships, Women, Family

Introduction

In most societies, including Iran, sexual needs must be met under religious, customary, and legal laws and within the family context. However, the satisfaction of this desire outside the family context may indicate the presence of mental and psychological problems in individuals (1). Besides, extramarital relationships are condemned in almost all societies and religions and even referred to as betrayal and infidelity. In Islam, betrayal is one of the worst and most reprehensible moral evils. For this reason, there are certain penalties for those who commit it. For example, verse 15 of Sura Nisa

condemns marital infidelity: "And as for those who commit prostitution from among your women, ask (against them) four witnesses from among you; then if they bear witness, confine them to the houses until death takes them away or Allah opens some way for them".

Despite social, cultural, and religious constraints on the relationship with the opposite sex in Iranian society, evidence suggests that relationships of this kind are expanding not only before marriage but also among married people in the form of



extramarital relationships (2).

Marital infidelity, marital betrayal, and extramarital relationships have been used synonymously in various studies. Sexual infidelity is defined as the relationship of a married person with a person of the opposite sex (other than his/her spouse) (3). Marital infidelity involves having an intimate or sexual relationship with a person other than one's spouse (4) and extramarital relationships refer to the sexual relationship of a married person with a person of opposite sex beyond familial and marital requirements (5).

Marital infidelity can have varying degrees, stages, and severity, and happens in different forms including verbal, emotional, and sexual infidelity. Infidelity is a traumatic and shocking interpersonal event for a partner in life, but unfortunately, it happens frequently in marriages. Marital infidelity is one of the major causes of divorce and the dissolution of marriage (6).

Research into marital infidelity has revealed several reasons for one's involvement in extramarital relationships including sexual issues (7,8), desire for sexual diversity or excitement, opposite-sex colleagues (9,10), revenge, anger or jealousy, permissive attitudes to relationships (11,12), reduced spouse attractiveness (13), marital dissatisfaction, immaturity, lack of commitment, an overwhelming desire to have a romantic relationship with a person other than the spouse, increased self-esteem, inability to control temptations, spouse unavailability, and drug or alcohol use. In addition to the aforementioned reasons, the existing literature has also considered other variables such as age, education, opportunities, duration of the relationship, divorce history, religiosity, sexual satisfaction, and personality traits as factors affecting marital infidelity (14). Accordingly, studies conducted by Baranoladi et al., Fincham and May, and Allen et al. to predict infidelity have simultaneously focused on individual, relational, and environmental factors (9, 15, 16).

Given the inconsistency of extramarital relationships with cultural, social, and judicial conditions, research in this field in Iran is facing challenges. Extramarital relationships have also not received serious attention from experts and researchers as a threat to the safety and health of individuals, families, and the community.

Marital infidelity at first glance seems to be an individual phenomenon, but given its disastrous and adverse consequences that disrupt the

institution of the family and the upbringing of children as well as the health and safety of society, it must be regarded as a very serious covert social harm. The available evidence points to the bitter fact that this social problem is pervasive as a stealthy phenomenon in our society (17).

The underlying causes of extramarital relationships in this study are all those factors and subjective and objective conditions that stimulate and intensify the motivation and desire in women to establish unauthorized emotional and sexual relations. Qualitative studies are needed because of the high sensitivity of the issue and limited access to individuals involved in extramarital relationships as well as the severe reaction of society and laws about women involved in extramarital relationships in Iranian society. On the other hand, the reaction of Iranian society to the unfaithful women is more severe than to the unfaithful men since male infidelity is more acceptable because of the possibility of multiple marriages and polygamy. In contrast, official and informal punishments for unfaithful women are more severe than for unfaithful men. Therefore, given the high sensitivity of Iranian society to extramarital relationships, the question is why some women engage in such relationships. Therefore, the present qualitative study was conducted to identify the underlying causes of extramarital relationships in women.

Methods

This study sought to discover and explain contextual factors accounting for extramarital relationships using a qualitative method and Charmaz's constructing grounded theory approach. This approach focuses on the relationship between the researcher and the participant's mind on the path of meaning-making. Charmaz's view of the constructing approach focuses on the description and interpretation of researcher-made categories and concepts.

The research population included all married women who were involved in extramarital relationships for one year before conducting the study and resided in Yazd in 2017. Snowball sampling was used to identify these women and purposive sampling was used to select the interviewees. After interviewing the first person and assuring her, she was asked to identify other persons involved in this type of relationship. Most interviews were conducted in places where interviewees felt secure, such as in cars, clinics and counseling centers, hairdressing shops, and public spaces. Sampling and interviews continued until theoretical saturation. In this study, theoretical

saturation was obtained after interviewing 30 participants. However, to obtain more reliable data, 10 other persons were subsequently interviewed.

A semi-structured interview technique was used for data collection. The interviews started with general questions (How did you end up in this relationship? When did it start?). Afterward, more detailed questions were asked (How is the quantity and quality of this relationship?). In other words, the respondents were initially asked to tell the whole story themselves. The average time of the interviews was about 45 minutes. A total of 40 interviews were conducted. To ensure the respondents of the confidentiality of their data, no personal information such as age, education, and duration of marriage was recorded. The interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees. Immediately after each interview, the recorded interview was transcribed and then analyzed using open and axial coding.

In addition to using the opinions of two experts, a family consultant was asked to monitor the various stages of coding and extracting concepts and themes to increase data reliability. In each interview, the new interviewee was asked to read previous interviews (taken anonymously from similar individuals) and to evaluate the validity and accuracy of the questions asked. Moreover, similar studies were repeatedly compared to maintain the consistency of the research process.

Results

A total of 20 concepts (codes) were identified in the open coding process, 4 main categories and 14 subcategories in the axial coding phase, which are listed in Table 1. Finally, a core category (the lack of satisfying relationships) were recognized.

The lack of satisfying relationships indicates that each of the women interviewed in this study was involved in a kind of relationship that did not meet their needs. This made women affected by social interactions and develop extramarital relationships that can meet their needs in personal, family, and social relationships. In other words, most of the interviewed women felt an emptiness in their (emotional and sexual) relationships with their husbands, the family, and society, as well as in their beliefs that did not meet their needs. This lack of satisfying relationships was manifested in the form of emotional and behavioral gaps, inappropriate sexual relations, and immature personality. Besides, the evoking social environment has paved the way for the establishment of extramarital relationships

in women.

1. Emotional and behavioral gaps: The findings of the study suggested that emotional and behavioral gaps and women's dissatisfaction with these deficiencies can play a decisive role in motivating their marital infidelity. The related concepts extracted from the interviews included current family dysfunctions, the husband's inattention, feeling lonely and bored, and the husband's violence.

Current family dysfunctions: Family dysfunctions as one of the categories identified in this study include the concepts such as repeated quarrels, nonfulfillment of marital expectations, lack of recreational activities, low income, and loss of love and affection. The couple's disregard for each other's needs as family members and lack of skills in managing life and preventing life from becoming boring and monotonous were the issues that led to family dysfunctions, inducing women to engage in extramarital relationships.

According to one of the participants, "*We did not have any recreation and fun in our life. We did not go to parks or green spaces and we did not take any trip. After a while, when I betrayed my husband I enjoyed myself and it was great fun. It was satisfying*" (Participant 23).

The husband's inattention: This category includes concepts such as the husband's over-attention to his own family, the husband's failure to praise his wife, the husband's inattention, the husband's devotion to his friends and spending time with them. Most of the women involved in extramarital relationships suffered from the husband's inattention.

One of the participants stated, "*When my husband was at home, he was just having fun with the kids and didn't pay any attention to me, as if I was not living in that house and he wouldn't see me at all*" (Participant 3).

Feeling lonely and bored: Most of the interviewed women complained of repeated and prolonged loneliness and the feeling of boredom and monotony in their every life and considered these conditions to be contextual factors for extramarital relationships. One of the participants stated, "*I really feel lonely, my parents died, my sister lives in Tehran, and Saeed was always at work. I was feeling very lonely, and that was the only thing that forced me to have romantic relations with another man*" (Participant 31).

Table 1. The concepts and categories related to the underlying causes of extramarital relationships in women

Main categories	Subcategories	Concepts (codes)
Emotional and behavioral gaps	Current family dysfunctions	Repeated quarrels, Nonfulfillment of marital expectations, Lack of recreational activities, Low income, The loss of love and affection
	The husband's inattention	The husband's over-attention to his own family, The husband's failure to praise his wife, The husband's inattention, The husband's devotion to his friends
	Feeling lonely and bored	The husband's long-time absence, Long-time loneliness, The husband's overnight working, Feeling loneliness, Tiredness of routine activities
	The husband's violence	Charging the wife with betrayal, Suspicion, Strict control over the wife, Beating the wife
Unbalanced sexual relations	Inequality in sexual desires and behaviors	Unequal sexual desires, Limited sexual relations, Habitual sexual relations, Unequal sexual interests
	Annoying sexual relations	Annoying sexual relations, Rough sexual relations, Unexpected sexual relations, Watching porn movies, The husband's premature ejaculation, The husband's late ejaculation, The husband's disinterest in sexual relations
	The husband's lack of sexual skills	Inattention to the wife's sexual desires, The failure to express romantic emotions, Unawareness of the quality of sexual relations, The husband's awkwardness
	The wife's sexual dissatisfaction	Not enjoying sexual relations, Dissatisfaction with the manner of sexual relations, Sexual dissatisfaction
Immature personality	Unstable personality	To compensate for shortcomings, Seeking variety, Taking revenge, Seeking excitement, The need for attention, The feeling of superiority
	Belief in sexual permissiveness	Disbelief in religious instructions, Distorting religious instructions
	Abnormal sexual desires	Interest in engaging in extramarital relationships, Abnormal sexual desires, Extreme sexual desires, Premarital sexual relationships
The evoking social environment	The influence of women engaged in extramarital relationships	Erotic friends, The evoking workplace, The evoking media
	The influence of evoking media	Feeling lonely and cyberspace, The evoking media
	A deviant family	A disrupted family, The mother's prior engagement in extramarital relationships, Strict family members, Forced marriage, Early marriage

The husband's violence: Most women involved in extramarital relationships have suffered from physical and psychological abuse (charging the wife with betrayal, suspicion, strict control over the wife, beating the wife). Accordingly, one of the participants stated, "My husband used to beat me and pull my hair because of the most trivial things. I was tired of these cruelties and disrespects and I decided to do something to compensate for all that" (Participant 6).

2. Unbalanced sexual relations: In this study, almost all interviewees admitted that they did not have a satisfactory sexual relation with their husband for various reasons (inequality in sexual desires and behaviors, annoying sexual relations, the husband's lack of sexual skills). This is one of the important factors in extramarital relationships for women. Of course, there were some variations among the participants, which could incite or motivate them to engage in extramarital relationships.

Inequality in sexual desires and behaviors: This category includes concepts such as unequal sexual desires, limited sexual relations, habitual sexual relations, and unequal sexual interests. According to one of the interviewees, "We have married for five years. We've been always using a single sexual model. We are doing sex in the same room and a single position. This model no longer attracts me. I'm tired of it" (Participant 19).

Annoying sexual relations: Many women in the study stated that the quality of their sexual relations with their husband was abusive and disgusting. The issues that women referred to in the interviews included violent sexual relations, unexpected sexual relations, watching porn movies, the husband's premature ejaculation, the husband's late ejaculation, the husband's disinterest in sexual relations. According to Participant 25, "Every time we had sex, it was hurting me for three days. It took almost an hour for him to reach orgasm, and it

really hurt me. When I was complaining about it, he used to say all women wish their sexual intercourse take so long".

The husband's lack of sexual skills: This category includes concepts such as inattention to the wife's sexual desires, the failure to express romantic emotions, unawareness of the quality of sexual relations, and the husband's awkwardness. Some of the interviewed women stated that their husbands did not know enough about sexual intercourse and they started having sex with their wives all of a sudden, leading to the women's sexual dissatisfaction and frustration with having sex with their husbands. For instance, Participant 9 stated, *"I liked my husband to kiss and cuddle me and express lovely emotions, but he didn't do any of this, he just had sex, and when he was just sexually satisfied he left me alone and went away"*.

The wife's sexual dissatisfaction: According to the participants, sexual dissatisfaction is one of the main causes of marital infidelity. Lack of enjoyment of sexual intercourse with the husband, dissatisfaction with the way sexual intercourse was performed, and sexual dissatisfaction were among the reasons mentioned by the participating women for their engagement in extramarital relationships. For instance, Participant 8 stated, *"My husband used to behave quietly when having sex with me. But I loved the noise, shouting, and the diversity in sex, and I didn't like the model used by him for making love with me"*.

3. Immature personality: In addition to unbalanced sexual relations, some personal characteristics and personality traits have also influenced women's tendency to engage in extramarital relationships. The personality traits influencing women's tendency to engage in extramarital relationships were categorized in this study as follows:

Unstable personality: Some women involved in extramarital relationships had some personality traits such as variety seeking, vindictiveness, seeking excitement, having desire for widespread sexual relations, needing attention and a sense of superiority, and thus they were not happy with the tolerance of marriage restrictions and spending time with and being loyal to their husband. Accordingly, Participant 39 stated, *"I don't know. Since I was a teenager, I always wanted to seem good-looking, attract other people, and have them*

look at me. I loved it so much".

Belief in sexual permissiveness: Non-compliance with religious beliefs and instructions and lack of practical adherence to religious values and ordinances are among the factors contributing to marital infidelity.

According to one of the participants, *"Why are men allowed to get married four times but women are not? In my opinion, these rules are nonsense, and no one can blame a woman for having a sexual relationship with someone"* (Participants 12).

Abnormal sexual desires: Abnormal sexual desires of some of the participating women and the husband's inability to meet their needs have led to severe sexual discontent, anger, and making a fuss. Participant 20 stated, *"I don't know why I don't like having sex at home. I love having sex in the bathroom, on the street, in the car, in the desert, other places"*.

4. The evoking social environment: The existence of an erotic environment and the presence of seducers can induce a person to engage in extramarital relationships. This causes some women to consider some rights for themselves that facilitate their engagement in extramarital relationships. This category was subcategorized into the influence of women engaged in extramarital relationships, the influence of evoking media, and a deviant family.

The influence of women engaged in extramarital relationships: Many of the interviewed women had friends who were engaged in extramarital relationships. Friends and relatives directly or indirectly influenced the participants' attitudes about having an extramarital relationship and its continuation. For instance, one of the participants stated, *"I had some friends who were students. They invited me when they went to a party with their boyfriends. I attended these parties without my husband and I felt like having a boyfriend when I saw they had a great time with their boyfriends"* (Participants 29).

The influence of evoking media: Most of the women who participated in this study regularly watched movies and satellite TV serials (such as Farsi1, GEM TV, etc.). Another group of women pointed to the impact of cyberspace and messenger applications (Instagram, Telegram, Line, WhatsApp) on facilitating and stimulating wider relationships with strangers, which have contributed

to establishing extramarital relationships. As a case in point, Participant 15 said, *"Most of the time I was home, I used to watch Farsi1 a lot and always wanted to experience the excitement of being friends with different people. It was a great channel that had a great influence on me"*.

A deviant family: The concept of a sexually deviant family was categorized into a disrupted family with the mother having a history of extramarital relationships, strict family members, forced marriage, and early marriage. Parenting style and the quality of interaction with children (especially parental strictness), the conflictual environment of the family, quarrels between parents, disrespect for their children, and the failure to express one's love for children make them more vulnerable in adulthood. Some of the women who participated in this study had similar problems during childhood.

Participant 39 stated, *"My dad was addicted and always staying home and my mom was going to work at other people's houses. Every time I asked my mom to take me with her, she refused to do so. One day I cried too much, my dad shouted at my mother, and she was forced to take me with herself. She took me to a house and told me to stay in a room belonging to the owner's kid. My mother told me she was going downstairs to clean the bathroom and the toilet and asked me to stay in the room as the smell of the bathroom might hurt me. After half an hour, I became tired of playing and went downstairs. I heard my mom was talking with a man. When I looked through the keyhole, I saw my mom sleeping with two naked men"*.

Discussion

Based on the findings of this study, the contextual factors leading to extramarital relationships were categorized into four main categories: Emotional and behavioral gaps, unbalanced sexual relations, immature personality, and the evoking social environment. The emotional and behavioral gaps refer to problems that arise from the husband's failures, neglect, and irresponsibility in meeting the woman's mental, psychological, and emotional needs. Accordingly, almost all women were somehow suffering from such problems.

In many cases, the family dysfunctions and the husband's inattention made the woman had a sense of loneliness and monotony in her marital life. Finding refuge and a way to find peace induce women to start having a relationship with a man

other than their husband. This would help women get rid of repetitive and eroding conflicts and quarrels and have a peaceful life (albeit temporary). This was often the case in circumstances that were associated with physical violence on the part of the husband. In these circumstances, a women's feeling of revenge and the need to satisfy her sexual expectations exacerbate the problem.

On the other hand, women are more perceptive and sensitive than men and need to show off their makeup and have attractive clothing. The husband's inattention to the woman's positive points and not praising her become motivating or facilitating factors for a woman to engage in extramarital relationships. Besides, such relationships are promoted by the husband's excessive occupational involvement, differences in opinion and morale, or even the husband's excessive attention to his children or his family members.

The results of studies by Allen et al. (16), Glass and Staeheli (18), Fathi et al. (17, 19), Fouladiyan et al. (20), Scheeren et al. (21), Bashirpour et al. (22), Habibi Askarabad and Hajiheydari (6) showed that emotional dissatisfaction is an important factor in women's extramarital relationships. This finding was supported by the results of the present study. According to Estes and Hammons, emotional and sexual deficiencies are considered the causes of infidelity. In another study, Leighton pointed out that 90% of those who have illegitimate relationships stated that the main reason behind engaging in these relationships is the non-satisfaction of emotional needs in their marital relationship (6). In contrast, Eslamzadeh et al. (23) concluded that relational intimacy was identified as the effective preventing factors for extramarital relationships.

One of the other causes of extramarital relationships in this study was unbalanced sexual relations that encouraged the participating women to engage in extramarital relations through failures, inequalities, irrational expectations, impotence, the husband's inattention to his wife's sexual needs, and ultimately lack of desirable and satisfying sexual relations.

Sexual problems include inequality in sexual interests and behaviors, annoying sexual relations experienced by women, the husband's lack of sexual skills, and the wife's sexual dissatisfaction. These results were consistent with the findings of studies by Fathi et al. (17,19), Fouladiyan et al. (20), Bashirpour et al. (22), Shirdel (24), Habibi

Askarabad and Hajiheydari (6), Guitar et al. (7), and O'Connor et al. (8). According to Thomson, low marital and sexual satisfaction (both quantitatively and qualitatively) increases the likelihood of extramarital relations (25).

Individual characteristics and personality traits (conceptualized in the form of immature personality in this study) constitute another class of factors inducing marital infidelity among women. The results of this study suggested that some women engaged in extramarital relationships with men were motivated by compensating for shortcomings, seeking variety in sexual relations, taking revenge, seeking excitement, the need for attention, and the feeling of superiority. Moreover, belief in sexual permissiveness and abnormal sexual desires encouraged women to engage in extramarital relationships. These findings were consistent with the results of previous studies by Fathi et al. (17), Baranoladi et al. (9); Kuroki (10), Bashirpour et al. (22), and Scott-Kakures (12). According to Kruger et al. (11) and Johnson, multiple individual tendencies can increase the tendency of an individual to have extramarital relationships. Similarly, Bashirpour et al. (22) and Shirdel (24) found that variety-seeking is one of the reasons for the tendency of married men and women to have illicit sexual relationships.

Based on the findings of the present study, other factors accounting for extramarital relationships include the evoking social environment such as the influence of the evoking media, the influence of other women involved in extramarital relationships, and the impact of the sexually deviant family. The role of sexually erotic media, especially satellite TV channels cannot be ignored. By showing numerous films with the content of betrayal and extramarital relationships, they seek to make a change in audience attitudes by normalizing infidelity and weakening the foundations of the family. On the other hand, it should be noted that in the present social context of our society, the possibility of interaction between the two genders through cyberspace (Telegram, WhatsApp, etc.) and telephone has also increased. Although the introduction of communication devices as a factor underlying marital infidelity is a major mistake, one cannot overlook the facilitating role of such devices for inducing extramarital relationships.

Furthermore, the influence of friends on the formation of extramarital relationships should not be overlooked. Many of the interviewed women had friends who had extramarital relationships

or encountered women who had experienced extramarital relationships. This finding was in line with Fouladiyan et al. (20), Bashirpour et al. (22), and Bonk and Baker's view that people tend to experience extramarital relationships when their friends or family members are involved in marital infidelity (17).

This study also showed that another factor that paves the way for women's extramarital relationships is growing up in a sexually deviant family. Concepts related to this factor include a broken family with the mother having a history of extramarital relationships, a strict family, forced marriage, and early marriage. Besides, the addiction of the father, which is accompanied by dysfunctions in the family, forced or early marriage, or growing up in a restrictive, strict family, creates a feeling of vengeance in women. This feeling, along with other factors, as contextual factors, drives the person to establish extramarital relationships. Some people have learned to respond to betrayal or any other negative behavior and react negatively and justify their behavior with a kind of defense mechanism. In other words, they provide justifiable reasons for their failure, defeats, and maladaptive behaviors (19), as indicated by results of the studies by Fathi et al. (17), Sharaffoddin and Salehi Zadeh (26), and Shirdel (24). In other words, they provide justifiable reasons for their failure, defeats, and maladaptive behaviors (24), as indicated by results of the studies by Fathi et al. (17), Sharaffoddin and Salehi Zadeh (26), Bashirpour et al. (22), and Shirdel (24).

One of the limitations of this study was the difficult and lengthy process of data collection. Many of the participating women refused to have their interviews recorded because of the taboo of extramarital relationships and fear of disclosure of their information. It is also possible that many women, because of the immoral nature of the extramarital relationships, have narrated their stories in a manner to lay the blame on society, the family, or the husband.

Conclusion

According to the results of this study, the four main categories account for extramarital relationships in women. The essential point is that these categories and their subcategories overlap in some cases. Furthermore, the three major categories of emotional and behavioral gaps, unbalanced sexual relations, and immature personality are cyclically interconnected and affect each other (Fig. 1).

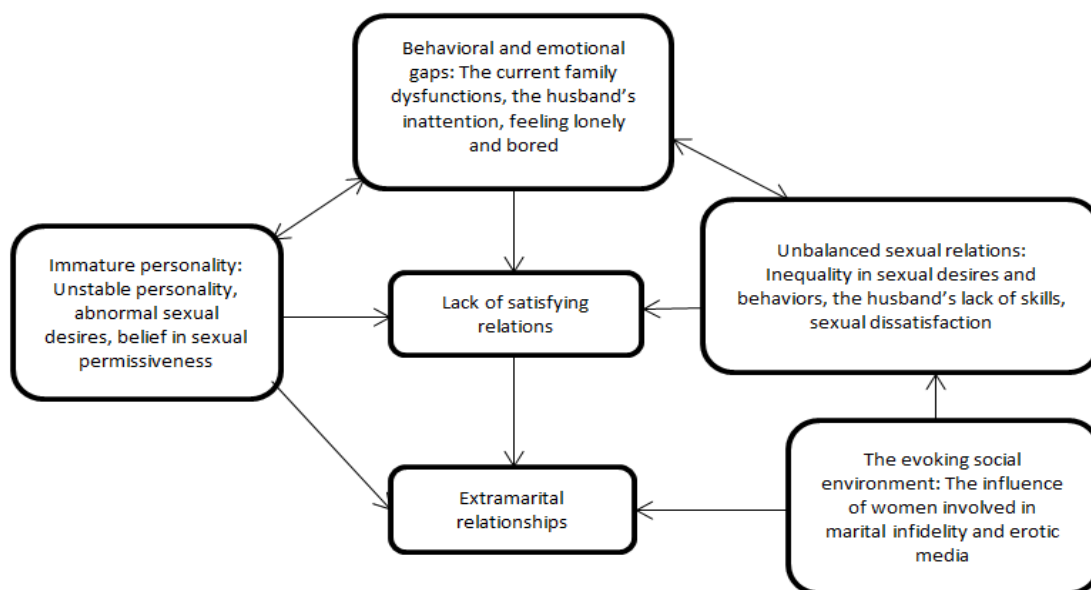


Figure 1. Contextual factors for extramarital relationships

Finally, it is concluded that extramarital relationships in women are a multifactorial phenomenon that may occur due to dysfunctions in personal, familial, marital, and social relationships. In other words, a woman, as a social actor, enters into extramarital relationships under the influence of other unfaithful women that can meet unmet needs when she feels that her needs are not sufficiently met in the current personal and family communication network. Whether these needs are met through such relationships is a question that needs to be addressed by future research.

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