



Extramarital Relationships and the Social and Cultural factors Affecting Them: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Introduction: Extramarital relationships are considered as one of the most serious threats to the stability of marital relations and family functioning, one of the main reasons for divorce, and one of the most critical issues faced by families. Accordingly, the present study aimed to explore extramarital relationships in women and find out social and cultural factors affecting such relationships.

Methods: This study was conducted qualitatively using a qualitative content analysis method. The data were collected to the theoretical saturation point through semi-structured interviews with 34 women.

Results: The analysis of the participants' experiences indicated that a set of cultural factors and major developments such as individualism, changing values and promoting alternative values, the absence of an authentic relationship, facilitating effects of technology and social media, changing women's attitudes toward womanhood and its responsibilities, and diminution of religious and ideological beliefs play a role in the emergence and increase of extramarital relationships.

Conclusion: The development of extramarital relationships in women is not just an individual phenomenon but a process influenced by many factors. Therefore, the role of cultural and social factors in the formation and increase of these relationships should not be underestimated.

Keywords: Extramarital relationships, Cultural factors, Social factors, Women, Qualitative research

Introduction

The family is one of the most important and effective institutions affecting the mental and social health of societies. Extramarital relationships are regarded as one of the most important factors that challenge the health of families and one of the most important factors threatening the stability, functioning, and continuity of marital relations (1). Extramarital relationships refer to establishing physical and emotional intimacy and having sexual affairs with a person other than the spouse. A survey of family developments shows that in recent decades, the

family institution has faced many challenges and conflicts compared to the past due to economic, social, and cultural changes, people's attitudes toward themselves and the family, and their expectations of marriage. Estimating the prevalence of extramarital relationships and proving statistics on the frequency of such relationships is a difficult task due to the secret nature of these relationships. However, according to studies, available statistics indicate that extramarital affairs are on the rise (2). However, there are no actual statistics on



such relationships in Iran. Nevertheless, studies conducted by some organizations and researchers have implicitly mentioned this issue. For example, according to statistics published by the Welfare Organization in 2008, the highest number of victims of domestic homicides (30%) are women who had illicit relationships. Besides, 22% of the victims of domestic homicides were men who were killed by their wives, and 40% of these men were murdered with the complicity of their wife's lover (3). Another study in Alborz found about 33% of women in the research population cheated on their husbands. The formation of the concept of intersubjectivity and the representation of extramarital relations in movies, stories, research topics, seminars, etc. are other signs of the increase in the frequency of such relationships in society. The field observations made by the authors of the present study during the interviews also indicated a significant frequency of divorce lawsuits due to extramarital relationships. For instance, it was found that about 60% of these lawsuits were due to the engagement of one of the spouses in extramarital relationships. Dissatisfaction with marital life is one of the most important reasons for women to engage in extramarital relationships so that only 38% of women who have had extramarital affairs were satisfied with marital life and 52% reported low satisfaction (4). Extramarital relationships are considered traumatic and challenging events that can disrupt the structure of the family, threaten marital attachment, and are an important predictor of aggression and divorce. The incidence or disclosure of extramarital relationships creates numerous challenges for couples and harms their psychological, emotional, and social well-being. Therefore, deep knowledge and understanding of factors underlying extramarital relationships and taking effective psychological and social interventions to reduce risk factors, can decrease the harms and consequences of these relationships and thus improve the mental and social health of families. To come up with deep knowledge and understanding of these factors, the present study was conducted using a qualitative approach to explore the objective experiences of people affected by extramarital relationships as quantitative methods cannot provide reliable information about the underlying causes of phenomena. A profound exploration of phenomena and their objective perception is only possible through qualitative research that places great emphasis on interacting with participants and understanding their views, conditions, interpretations of phenomena, and their

lived experiences. Accordingly, the present article seeks to explore the cultural and social factors influencing extramarital relationships.

Methods

Given the exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative thematic analysis approach was used to analyze the collected data. This approach provides an understanding of the phenomenon in question by reducing qualitative data and classifying them and it is a suitable method to obtain reliable results and new insights from textual data. Accordingly, by avoiding the use of predetermined categories, the researcher tries to discover related categories from the extracted themes and label them. To this end, the data are analyzed by frequently reviewing the text to come up with a general understanding of the phenomenon in question. The texts are then read word for word to extract the relevant themes. This process of extracting and labeling the codes is repeated. Afterward, the identified codes are categorized based on their similarities and differences. Finally, each theme/code is further confirmed by quoting some evidence from the text (5).

The research population included women visiting social work counseling clinics and centers in Eslamshahr who were engaged in extramarital affairs and were willing to receive therapy services. To select the participants, convenience sampling was used. To have the maximum difference in the developed themes, purposive sampling was used followed by theoretical sampling and this process was repeated until the data were saturated and no new information contributing to defining the themes and their properties was observed. The data were theoretically saturated after interviewing 34 women who were selected using purposive sampling from among the women who visited the centers to receive counseling, psychological, and social work services. The credibility of the data was ensured through some measures such as the researcher's constant engagement with the research setting and quick transcription of the interviews.

Moreover, the data were further confirmed through member checking (having the interviews, transcripts, and codes reviewed and confirmed by the participants) and peer checking (having the data analysis and coding procedures reviewed and confirmed by experts in the field of qualitative content analysis). To comply with the requirements for ethical consideration, the objectives of the study were explained to the participants before starting the

interviews. To record and take notes during the interviews, informed consent was also obtained from the participants. Furthermore, to keep the data confidential, the participants' information was recorded using unreal names.

A total of 34 interviews were conducted. Each interview lasted about forty minutes to an hour. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interviews started by asking general questions about less sensitive issues and followed by more detailed questions as the interview progressed. Examples of the questions asked during the interviews are as follows:

- What do you think about having emotional relationships with people of the opposite sex?
- Have you experienced these relationships recently?
- What factors do you think influenced the formation of these relationships?
- Do you think that the situations you had gone through played a role in the formation of these

relationships?

The data collected through the interviews were coded and analyzed. First, the transcripts of the interviews were read and reviewed carefully several times. After extracting the primary codes, significant, points, words, and phrases were identified and highlighted (descriptive codes). In the next steps, the data were analyzed at a higher abstraction level and the primary codes were revised in the form of analytical codes. Finally, the codes were defined as themes (interpretive codes).

Results

The participants' average age was 32.17 years and the average age of their husbands was 36.29 years. The mean age difference in the couples was 4.29 years. Furthermore, 73.52% of the participants were housewives and 26.48% of them were employed. In terms of education, 17.64% of the participants held a bachelor's degree, 11.76% had an associate's degree, 38.23% had a diploma, and 32.35% had high school and lower education.

The participants' demographic data extracted from the interviews are presented in [table 1](#).

Table 1. The participants' demographic data

Participant	Age	Duration of marriage	Education	Number of children
1	31	11	High school diploma	2
2	36	8	Master's degree	1
3	23	7	Primary school	1
4	40	25	Associate's degree	0
5	25	4	High school diploma	1
6	33	5	Master's degree	0
7	26	8	High school diploma	1
8	38	21	High school diploma	2
9	31	10	High school diploma	2
10	42	16	Master's degree	1
11	28	6	Master's degree	1
12	23	4	Associate's degree	0
13	21	1	High school diploma	0
14	29	4	High school diploma	1
15	36	8	Primary school	2
16	38	22	Primary school	2
17	26	9	High school diploma	1
18	30	12	High school diploma	2
19	22	1	High school diploma	0
20	35	15	Master's degree	2
21	37	8	Master's degree	1
22	39	9	Primary school	2
23	43	21	High school diploma	3
24	29	6	High school diploma	1
25	33	8	Associate's degree	0
26	49	22	High school diploma	2
27	42	18	Master's degree	4
28	24	5	High school diploma	1
29	22	4	High school diploma	0
30	33	6	High school diploma	1
31	28	6	High school diploma	2
32	36	19	Primary school	1
33	37	4	Associate's degree	1
34	27	11	Associate's degree	2

The themes extracted from the interviews

Data analysis led to the extraction of the main themes mentioned in [table 2](#). This table shows the subthemes and themes extracted from the interviews.

Individualism

Individualism is a state in which an individual's thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors to satisfy personal wants and needs, regardless of the desires of others, are usually accompanied by selfishness and self-centeredness. Individualization focuses on the transformation of the relationship between the individual and society, implying that social institutions lose their decisive position and individuals themselves become the reproductive units of their lives (6)

"I have lived for others all my life, first for the sake of my parents, then because of my husband and children. They have always been my priority. But now I am my own priority, and it's time to sympathize with myself. There is nothing in this life right and fair. So when should I enjoy life and feel good?" (Participant 9).

The prevalence of individualism frees individuals from traditional roles and restrictions in various ways. It also reinforces individual tendencies and prioritizes individual desires and interests over the interests of the family. Unlike in the past when collectivist and social values and interests were the priority and norms for people's behavior, with the modernization of society, individualistic values and personal interests are given priority and people

choose their lifestyle according to their personal interests:

"I think I did not do anything wrong. When your husband cannot satisfy your sexual needs, someone else comes into your life and meets those needs. I was in relationships with my brother-in-law and that relationship satisfied me so much that I was ready to go to the city where he was living. If my husband knew what to do then I would do anything for him" (Participant 33).

With the dominance of individualism in society, the power and validity of collective standards of behavior gradually disappear and individuals replace their individual and personal norms with collective norms and standards:

"What I did is not called betrayal. It's an ordinary and trivial thing. I'm very frank and straightforward. I see everyone as if they are my brother. If shaking hands and talking on the phone with a man is betrayal, then all people are betraying" (Participant 21).

Changing values and promoting alternative values

Values are one of the main components of the culture and personality system of individuals in society. Besides, change in values is one of the most fundamental changes and as one of the most effective cultural tools, has a significant impact on norms, thinking and behavior patterns, and individual and social preferences. Therefore, changes in values can affect many issues associated with the family:

Table 2. The extracted subthemes and themes

Subthemes	Themes	Underlying factors
Increased autonomy of individuals, unwillingness to accept restrictions, diminishing adherence to family values, unwillingness to give up personal interests in favor of the family interests, individual assertiveness, individual freedom, expecting constant happiness from life	Individualism	Social and cultural factors
Decreased adherence to family values, the prevalence of unconventional norms in society, increased doubts about traditional values, apostasy, libertarianism, acceptance of liberal sexual norms, epistemological conflicts, and seeking meaning	Changing values and promoting alternative values	
The dominance and the significance of gaining experience and the discourse of love, the need for intimacy	The absence of an authentic relationship	
Ease of forming online relationships, membership in online social media and network, using mobile phones, creating sexual fantasies	Facilitating effects of technology and social media	
Raising women's awareness, voluntarism, increasing the power of choice, resisting patriarchal and instrumental attitudes towards women, feeling of entitlement, sexual equality	Changing women's attitudes toward womanhood and its responsibilities	
Personal definition of religion, reduced personal religious adherence and commitment, instrumental use of religion, relativization of values, decline of religious beliefs, decline of religious tendencies	Diminution of religious and ideological beliefs	

“My mother used to advise me that I have to back off if my husband is not good-tempered, if he does not give money to me, and if he beats me and I have to forgive him for the sake of my children. They belong to the old generation and for them life means contentment, contempt, and silence against any actions done by the husband. Now, everything has changed, and having a boyfriend is natural and valuable” (Participant 4).

The absence of an authentic relationship

An authentic relationship is a self-centered relationship with no external norms and is only based on the satisfaction of the parties involved in the relationship. The demand for intimacy is an integral part of this type of relationship (7).

Intimacy has some constituting elements such as the feeling of closeness with the spouse, sharing common feelings and experiences through the mutual process of self-disclosure, and feeling peace and tranquility when spending time with the spouse. The development of human relationships from attention to profit and economic and social benefits into relationships that entail commitment, intimacy, and mutual trust free from environmental requirements shows the position of intimacy in the continuation of life in the contemporary era and the lack of such intimacy can lead to extramarital relationships:

“Life without love and intimacy is nonsense. Even if you marry the richest man, you will get disappointed when there is no love. For women, nothing is more important than love and intimacy. I do not feel intimacy with my husband at all, and without this feeling, life turns into hell for me. If you do not love your husband, you think you are killing your soul and you feel you are being raped” (Participant 27).

Facilitating effects of technology and social media

Online social media and networks can lead to the formation and change of perceptions, beliefs, and internalization of values and behavior. Social media play a crucial role in internalizing values and norms and shaping people's behavior and attitudes. They can reduce sensitivity to issues such as having extramarital relationships and normalize these behaviors so that people are encouraged to engage in them. The permissive attitudes of the community, friends, and others towards these relationships increase the possibility of committing them:

“In my free time, I was chatting on the internet. It was pretty normal for them to talk about sexual

matters. They often asked me to make a friend and have relationships with them. When I said I was married, they insisted even more frequently to engage in relationships with them. It was strange to me but very normal for them. Things were the same in Telegram groups. Married men and women often talked about sexual affairs and planned to go out on a date” (Participant 14).

Sexual fantasy refers to the actions and behaviors that are formed in people's minds about sex and the thoughts that motivate people to seek to satisfy their sexual needs. Cultural and social restrictions increase people's sexual fantasies, which can affect marital sexuality and raise expectations. Sexual fantasy is regarded as a reinforcing factor in reducing sexual satisfaction and sexual health, which increases the expectations by creating a gap between reality and fantasy, and causes a sense of sexual deprivation:

“At first I thought we did not have any problem in our marital life as I had little sexual information. But after watching a few movies, reading materials about sexual issues, and chatting on Telegram, I realized that married life is completely different from what I was experiencing at that time” (Participant 3).

Due to their features such as the possibility of remaining unknown to others, ease of forming online relationships, low cost, no need for confidence and self-expression, and the possibility of deception and providing false information, social media pave the way for people's engagement in extramarital relationships. Furthermore, some participants stated that the use of online social networks due to their virtual (unreal) nature is permissible, and having relationships with other people using such media is not considered as extramarital relationships. The decline of emotional relationships in married life due to spending much time using social media and distancing oneself from real space and drowning in cyberspace with the hope of satisfying one's psychological needs (8), can also create many marital problems. The excessive use of virtual social media and networks makes couples spend less time together and facilitates their engagement in extramarital relationships. When a relationship is disrupted due to some reasons including the use of online social media, it can lead to marital infidelity (9).

Changing women's attitudes toward womanhood and its responsibilities

Changing the attitude of women to womanhood is one of the issues of modern society. Accordingly, the

growing trend of women's activities and participation in social affairs has changed many aspects of family life. Due to the prevalence of patriarchy and traditional views of society, women in their objective roles were more restricted and prohibited from engaging in social activities. However, during modernity, women gained subjective power and become aware of their rights. Therefore, they are increasingly demanding equal rights with men by resisting the dominant gender order, sexual stereotypes, and patriarchy. In other words, the modern woman does not accept the traditional relationships that seek to make her more dependent:

"In Iran, men think that because they are men, they own women and they think that since women are financially dependent on them they cannot protest no matter what men do and women have to do anything for the sake of their marital life and children and that they have to get along with all problems in life and thus they are much oppressed by men" (Participant 27).

"My husband betrayed me. He believed that men have the right to have 4 wives at the same time, so he started engaging in sexual affairs with another woman. In my opinion, if a man gives himself the right to betray his wife, he should give the same right to his wife. And that's all" (Participant 8).

Concerning sexual relationships, women have shifted from passive activism to active partnering and seek to receive sexual services instead of providing them. This situation sometimes makes men feel incompetent but since traditional values are still dominating public life, it can cause many conflicts between couples:

"My husband does not accept that he cannot satisfy me when we have sexual relations and never takes my grief seriously because he thinks that since he is a man he should only enjoy our sexual relations. Unless a man accepts that the wife should be satisfied in this relationship and he tries to make it pleasurable for his wife, nothing will be okay" (Participant 12).

Diminution of religious and ideological beliefs

The diminution of religious and ideological beliefs is a process in which religious beliefs, practices, and religious institutions lose their social role and significance. Since religion and religious beliefs have a decisive role in determining gender norms and building sexual relations (10), the decline of such beliefs can affect people's actions and behaviors:

"When you live with someone you don't love, thinking of commitment and love makes no sense. I believe that just being tied to a person through a marriage contract does not entail having romantic relationships with him. The love between two people is sacred and warrants having relationships with each other" (Participant 17).

"I think the most important things are the things we do in this world, and there is no other world. I doubt everything, and I no longer believe in anything. If we do not enjoy our life when we are young then why should we live?" (Participant 1).

Discussion

One of the themes that emerged in this study was the prevalence of individualism. With the prevalence of individualism, norms, values, traditions, and beliefs lose their controlling power in the modern era and there would be a growth of individualism in women as opposed to the pre-modern era when the traditional context diminished the individuality of women by overemphasizing the duties of motherhood and wifeness. The facilitative role of communication and social media was another theme extracted from the interviews with the participants. The positive effect of using communication technologies such as online social media and the Internet on the growing trend of extramarital relationships, for reasons such as the possibility of anonymity and easy access to such media, can make social media a means of self-expression and pave the way for extramarital affairs, as highlighted by Clyton et al. (11) and Norton et al. (12). Social media can also predict low marital quality, marital dissatisfaction, and marital problems (13). The increased number of communication and social media and networks and new communication technologies can affect people's tastes, needs, and lifestyles by promoting relativism in ethics and influencing feelings, beliefs, and values as these media play a significant role in the cultural and leisure activities of people in society. They can also promote mental and practical patterns of behavior among individuals through education, induction, and advertising and play a decisive role in shaping people's attitudes and behaviors, resulting in a kind of confusion in the choice of values and seeking meaning and identity in life. Therefore, people feel that their personal interests conflict with the values that govern society. As the results of a study in 2016 showed, promoting Western lifestyles and Western behaviors under the influence of social media is one of the factors inducing people to engage

in extramarital relationships (14). It also seems that communication media expose people to a huge bulk of information and data and make them constantly rethink and reconsider their norms and values. Moreover, they have a decisive role in ideological differentiation and can lead to the processing and evaluation of information about themselves, others, and society, resulting in the collapse of social norms and values and breaking taboos. Social media also plays an effective role in determining mentality, culture, and individual and social behaviors. In a similar vein, Vossler highlighted the impact of misuse of social networks and cyberspace on extramarital relationships (15).

Adherence to religious beliefs can increase the durability and stability of their marriage (16). The diminution of religious beliefs is another consequence of the modernization of societies. Many people, influenced by the process of modernization, turn to personal interpretations of religion and come up with a different definition of norms in many areas of their social life, and accepting deferred satisfaction for a better future is no longer considered a value per se. Instead, people tend to seek instant gratification and engage in the irresponsible pursuit of pleasure. Accordingly, individuals seek independence from religious instructions in various matters, especially their social and personal activities, and act according to their rational calculations and do not act according to existing religious instructions. In fact, the discourse of modernity challenges religious beliefs and creates new systems of meaning paving the way for extramarital relationships. Likewise, Burdette et al. (17) Firoozjaian and Ghadiri (18) showed that people who do not believe in any religion engage in extramarital affairs more than those with religious beliefs. Furthermore, Sharaf al-Din et al. showed that poor religious beliefs can be one of the most important factors in engaging in extramarital relationships (19). Accordingly, it can be argued that religiosity creates commitment in marriage by affecting the cognitive system and beliefs of spouses. It also has an important effect on marital commitment. Besides, religion indirectly hinders marriage instability by promoting factors such as happiness, relationship quality, and satisfaction (20). The results of research by Metingley Also indicate that religious people are less likely to have extramarital affairs (21). Religious values can lead couples to consider religion as a roadmap that provides guidelines for sexual relations, sexual roles, and self-sacrifice in marriage (22). Religion directly affects the quality of marriage by providing a wide

range of values that govern relationships, norms, and social support. The absence of a genuine relationship was another theme identified in this study. Giddens believed that the modern world, in addition to its significant differences with the traditional world, also leads to a transformation of intimacy and is closer to authentic relationships that require mutual trust and commitment to the relationship. In fact, personal bonds in authentic relationships require new types of trust that arise through intimacy and closeness with another person (23). Giving priority to personal satisfaction is created through love and true intimacy between couples and downplays other factors and its lack in relationships with the husband and the need to experience it lead women to engage in extramarital relationships.

One of the limitations of this study was the selection of the participants using a purposive sampling method. Other researchers are recommended to use the random sampling method that allows the generalization of their findings to larger populations. This helps to come up with a better understanding of the lived experiences of people engaging in extramarital relationships and uncover factors and issues underlying such relationships.

Conclusion

Given the findings of the present study, the role of cultural and social factors in extramarital relationships should not be overlooked. These factors are significant due to the rapid changes resulting from the transition of Iranian society into modernism and uneven, unbalanced developments in various institutions of society and the resulting issues and threats, as well as the lack of macro strategies to control consequences and provide proper education to families and the involvement of many families with these issues. Therefore, paying attention to macro factors in social planning and cultural capacity building can have a greater impact. The findings of this study can provide a basis for preventive interventions in the form of educational and community-based programs and can be used as a scientific resource by managers and social planners. In the field of cultural and social policymaking, it is necessary to pay attention to the changes in the transition of a society to modernism and the developments around it in all areas. Moreover, some planning is required to respond to these changes by discussing sexual issues in Iranian society, getting rid of taboos, and providing targeted sexual education at the macro and micro levels. Accordingly, holding workshops

on psychological issues and marital skills and promoting a culture of using counseling and psychological services by educational, cultural, and social centers and non-governmental organizations can be effective.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors did not declare any conflict of interest.

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