



The correlation between emotional empathy and communication schemas in women affected by partner infidelity

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ABSTRACT. In today's world, the issues and challenges of human relationships, especially couple relationships, are one of the most important areas of psychological and social research. One of the most important problems that can disrupt couple relationships is infidelity. Infidelity in marital relationships, as an emotional, psychological, and social crisis, can have devastating effects on individuals' individuality and shared lives. The aim of the present study was to examine the correlation between emotional empathy and communication schemas in women affected by partner infidelity, 2025. This cross-sectional study was conducted on 380 women affected by partner infidelity that referred to Mashhad Health Centers. The research instrument consisted of Sociodemographic characteristics, attitudes towards extramarital affairs, couple relationship schemas, empathy, and perceived self-compassion - short form questionnaire. The data was analyzed using the SPSS V.26, and Amos-24 software and descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data, and structural equations with path analysis method. The mean age of participants was 29.62 ± 6.61 years. The results of the study showed that perceived self-compassion plays a mediating role in the relationship between emotional empathy and attitudes towards extramarital affairs in participants. Also, couples' communication schemas and emotional empathy have a significant relationship with attitudes towards extramarital affairs. In addition, perceived self-compassion plays a significant mediating role in the interaction with couples' communication schemas in relation to attitudes towards extramarital affairs. These findings indicate the importance of paying attention to psychological components such as self-compassion and empathy in psychological interventions for women affected by infidelity in order to reduce negative attitudes towards extramarital affairs and strengthen couple relationships. © 2025 Published by Public Knowledge Project (PKP).

Keywords: Perceived self-compassion, Emotional empathy, Communication schemas, extramarital affairs.

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Introduction

One of the prominent models that addresses interactions in couples and its role in effective adaptation to the environment is the model of couple relationship schemas by Koerner and Darkner (2002)(Koerner & Mary Anne, 2002). The concept of couple communication schemas refers to the framework through which partners interpret and engage in their relationship. It is defined by how couples communicate, what they say and do, and the meanings they attach to these interactions (Epstein, Falconier, & Dattilio, 2020). Meanwhile, women experience the experience being cheated on by their spouse differently, both emotionally and psychologically. Some women may seek revenge, while others may seek healing and reconciliation. Emotional empathy, the ability to understand and share another person's feelings, can play an important role in this situation (Adams, Santo, & Bukowski, 2018). Women who have been cheated on by their partners are more likely to forgive and continue the relationship when they feel their partners understand and empathize with them (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Eggum, 2010). Research has shown that empathy plays an important role in shaping attitudes toward extramarital affairs, and higher levels of empathy are associated with stronger opposition to extramarital affairs (Shimberg, Josephs, & Grace, 2016). Emotional empathy means the ability to feel and understand the pain and suffering of others and is known as one of the important factors in creating good and healthy relationships with others.

Methods

This cross-sectional study was conducted on 380 women affected by partner infidelity that referred to Mashhad Health Centers. The research instrument consisted of Sociodemographic characteristics (age, education level, occupation, marital status, and income), Emotional Empathy Questionnaire, communication schemas of couples.

The components of the 21-item Davis Emotional Empathy Questionnaire (Davis, 1983) are empathetic concern, perspective-taking, and personal distress. The questionnaire is scored on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). Components and questions related to each component: Empathetic concern: 1, 4, 7, 10, 14, 17, 18; Perspective-taking: 2, 5, 9, 12, 16, 19, 21; Personal distress: 3, 6, 8, 11, 13, 15, 20. Questions 2, 4, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15 are reverse scored. Its validity was confirmed by content and face methods and its reliability was confirmed by calculating Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.93. To measure the communication schemas of couples, the 26-item Ritchie and Fitzpatrick questionnaire (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990) was used. This tool is a questionnaire about the state of family communication that asks questions on a 5-point scale. A score of 4 is equivalent to completely agree and a score of 0 is equivalent to completely disagree.

The first 15 items are related to the dimension of conversational orientation and the next 11 items are related to conformity orientation. Each subject obtains two scores from this tool. A higher score on each scale means that the subject perceives more conversational orientation or conformity in his family, respectively. Components and questions related to each component: Conversational orientation: questions 1 to 15; Conformity orientation: questions 16 to 26. Its validity was confirmed by content and face methods and its reliability by calculating Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.87. The data were analyzed using SPSS software version 20 and T-Test, one-way analysis of variance, and Pearson and Spearman correlation.

Results

The mean age of the subjects was 29.62 ± 7.06 . The results of the study showed that the mean score of emotional empathy was 47.33 ± 11.33 and the mean score of communication schemas was 16.38 ± 5.05 . Pearson correlation coefficient showed that there was a significant correlation between emotional empathy and communication schemas ($r=0.1$ and $p=0.028$) (Table1).

Table1. Socio-demographic characteristics and the mean of social support and breast cancer fear based on socio-demographic characteristics

Variables	N(%)
Educational level	
Primary school	78(20.25)
Secondary school	48(13.63)
High school	52(14.77)
Graduate	154(43.75)
Post-graduate	53(15.05)
Income	N(%)
≤ 1 million	71(18.44)
1-3 million	71(20.17)
3-5 million	57(16.20)
5-7 million	94(26.70)
7-10 million	66(18.75)
10-15 million	26(7.38)
Occupational status	N(%)
Household	235(61.03)
Employee	150(42.62)

Table 2 presents the frequency and percentage distribution of the participants based on their marital status. As indicated in the table, a significant majority of the respondents, 92 individuals (82.1%), were married. The second-largest group consisted of single participants, accounting for 16 individuals (14.3%) of the sample. The lowest frequencies were equally attributed to divorced and widowed participants, with each category comprising 2 individuals (1.8%) of the total sample. These findings demonstrate that the study's sample is predominantly composed of married individuals (Table 2).

Table 2. The correlation between the women's emotional empathy and communication schemas

Scales	Communication schemas	
	r	P value*
Emotional empathy		
Empathetic Concern	0.10	0.01
Perspective	0.07	0.12
Personal Disturbance	-0.05	0.28
Total	0.13	0.028

Pearson correlation coefficient*

Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the relationship between women's emotional empathy and communication schemas. The findings revealed that the mean score of emotional empathy was relatively high, and the mean score of communication schemas indicated a moderate level among participants. Importantly, the results of the Pearson correlation test showed that emotional empathy had a significant positive association with communication schemas, suggesting that women with higher levels of empathy are more likely to engage in constructive and effective communication (Stanley, Mettilda Buvaneswari, & Meenakshi, 2018). This finding is consistent with previous research emphasizing the role of empathy in promoting interpersonal understanding and supportive communication (Davis, 1996; Eisenberg & Eggum, 2009).

Among the dimensions of empathy, empathic concern demonstrated a weak but significant positive correlation with communication schemas. This supports the idea that empathic concern functions as a motivational component of empathy, encouraging prosocial behavior and responsive communication (Batson, Fultz, & Schoenrade, 1987). Although perspective-taking also showed a positive relationship with communication schemas, this association was not statistically significant. This result may suggest that the cognitive component of empathy alone is not sufficient to improve communication unless it is accompanied by emotional involvement and concern for others (Decety & Jackson, 2004).

Interestingly, personal distress showed a negative, although non-significant, correlation with communication schemas. This finding aligns with theoretical perspectives that conceptualize personal distress as a self-oriented emotional reaction that may interfere with effective interpersonal interactions. Individuals with high levels of personal distress may become overwhelmed by their own emotions, thereby limiting their ability to provide constructive responses in communication (Eisenberg, Eggum, & Di Giunta, 2010).

Finally, the total empathy score was positively and significantly associated with communication schemas. This suggests that empathy, as a multidimensional construct, plays a critical role in shaping healthy and adaptive communication patterns. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of fostering emotional and motivational aspects of empathy while managing maladaptive responses such as personal distress to enhance effective communication among women (Eisenberg & Eggum, 2009; Decety & Jackson, 2004).

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