



Woman in Culture and Arts

An Examination of the Factors Contributing to the Development of Extramarital Relationships among Women Based on Love Schemas: A Qualitative Study

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article type: Research Article Article history: Received: 7 June 2025 Received in revised form: 2 November 2025 Accepted: 20 August 2026 Published online: 2 October 2026 Keywords: <i>Attachment Styles, Extramarital Relationships, Love Schemas.</i>	Introduction Extramarital involvement—whether emotional or sexual—constitutes a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that cannot be ascribed to a single causal factor. It frequently arises from the cumulative convergence of personal, relational, and contextual influences, ultimately resulting in behaviors that lead to relationship dissolution. Its repercussions go well beyond transient discomfort, involving the deterioration of trust, emotional volatility, and the possible disintegration of the marital relationship. Despite its prevalence, there is no universal definition of infidelity; interpretations vary from physical sexual acts to the exchange of private online messages or emotional closeness with someone outside the committed relationship. These conceptual inconsistencies hinder cross-study comparisons and necessitate contextually informed investigation. From a motivational standpoint, infidelity cannot be solely attributed to isolated factors such as dissatisfaction or opportunity; rather, it arises from a complex interplay of needs, beliefs, and contextual circumstances. Narratives indicate that inadequate intimacy, unmet emotional needs, wrath, revenge, or the pursuit of novelty serve as primary motivating factors. However, cultural context significantly influences these interpretations, especially for women, whose perceptions of intimacy and autonomy differ across societies. The present study seeks to fill this gap by investigating how love schemas—internalized cognitive-affective frameworks related to intimacy, passion, commitment, and autonomy—influence the ways Iranian women conceptualize and justify extramarital experiences. Given the mediating role of adult attachment styles in emotional responses, the research integrates both schema theory and attachment perspectives to provide a culturally sensitive analysis of relational infidelity. Methodology The research utilized a qualitative phenomenological approach to elucidate the lived experiences associated with extramarital relationships. Phenomenology was selected for its ability to elucidate the fundamental nature of subjective experiences that remain inadequately understood. Data were gathered via semi-structured, in-depth interviews initiated with an open-ended question regarding participants' daily relational experiences, followed by probing inquiries designed to elicit affective and cognitive interpretations. The sample consisted of 20 women aged 20 to 45, all residents of Tehran, who had participated in extramarital relationships. Participants were intentionally recruited mainly through counseling centers and were referred by mentors or acquaintances following their voluntary assent. Among the sample, 11 individuals were homemakers, 4 were teachers, and 5 were self-employed; 13 possessed high school diplomas or lesser, while 7 held associate's or bachelor's degrees. Ethical assurances encompassed anonymity, confidentiality, and audio-recorded interviews carried out with explicit consent. Each session lasted approximately one hour. Prior to the interviews, participants completed the Love Schema Scale (LS). The six-item, six-point Likert scale instrument categorizes individuals into specific love schemas—secure, clinging (anxious), avoidant (withdrawn), unstable (disorganized), disinterested, and non-serious—based on perceived levels of autonomy and intimacy. In data analysis,

interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim, inductively coded, and systematically organized into primary and sub-themes that represent common affective and cognitive processes.

Results

Analysis identified three primary themes and twenty subordinate themes, focusing on specific love-schema patterns that underpin women's motivations and experiences in extramarital relationships:

1. Maintaining Distance from Intimate Relationships (Avoidant Schema)

Women exhibiting the avoidant love schema perceived extramarital affairs as a method of maintaining emotional detachment and safeguarding their personal autonomy. Originating from early experiences of emotional neglect, this schema engenders a pronounced aversion to dependence and vulnerability. They viewed marriage as limiting rather than supportive, considering emotional intimacy a potential threat to independence.

Common subthemes encompassed a continual desire for independence, heightened sensitivity to emotional restriction, negative perceptions of trust, and the rationalization of infidelity as a natural reaction to unmet needs rather than a moral failing. Sexual activity was frequently separated from intimacy, considered a physical act devoid of emotional connection. Consequently, these women demonstrated a tendency to avoid conflict and favored emotional detachment over confrontation. The avoidant schema corresponds with the avoidant attachment style, wherein infidelity serves as a defensive mechanism to preserve psychological boundaries and self-regulation.

2. Persistent Pursuit of Intimate Relationships (Clingy Schema)

Participants exhibiting a clinging schema pursued persistent emotional intimacy and validation, resorting to extramarital relationships as a means of compensating for perceived rejection or neglect within their marital relationship. The formative context generally encompassed inconsistent caregiving, which contributed to persistent anxiety regarding abandonment.

Key subthemes encompassed dread of rejection, feelings of loneliness, motivations for revenge, the necessity for reassurance, and diminished self-esteem. Such women exhibited emotional instability and reliance on external validation, particularly regarding their attractiveness and sense of self-worth. Infidelity was employed unconsciously to reaffirm a sense of desirability, elicit the spouse's attention, or manage negative emotions. Their accounts indicated that infidelity offered transient alleviation of emotional distress rather than sexual fulfillment. The behavioral pattern closely resembles the anxious-ambivalent attachment style, characterized by compensatory efforts to sustain emotional stability through alternative sources of affection.

3. Ambivalent Attitude toward Intimacy (Unstable Schema)

Women displaying the unstable schema oscillated between a desire for intimacy and a dread of envelopment. This internal contradiction, originating from tumultuous or inconsistent early emotional environments, led to emotional instability and impulsiveness. Their accounts described patterns of profound attachment punctuated by abrupt withdrawal, motivated by fears of rejection or a loss of control.

Subthemes encompassed emotional instability, conflicting emotions toward the spouse, intolerance of distress, doubt regarding the durability of the relationship, and a propensity for novelty-seeking behavior. For numerous individuals, infidelity served as an emotional refuge from anxiety, a symbolic assertion of autonomy, or a safeguard against expected rejection. The inconsistent emotional regulation observed aligns with disorganized attachment, wherein relational instability is sustained by unresolved concerns of intimacy and separation.

Across various groups, the two theoretically proposed schemas—*disinterested* and *non-serious love* schemas—failed to manifest among participants, indicating their limited applicability within the examined cultural context.

Conclusion

Drawing upon phenomenological insights, the study concludes that extramarital relationships are not solely moral transgressions but also psychological manifestations of unresolved attachment requirements and maladaptive love schemas. Three principal cognitive-affective configurations were identified:

1. **Avoidant Schema:** Infidelity as a defense of freedom and self-autonomy;
 2. **Clingy Schema:** Infidelity as compensation for deprivation of love and reassurance;
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3. **Unstable Schema:** Infidelity as impulsive regulation of ambivalence and emotional volatility.

All three originate from deficiencies in establishing secure relational bonds and from detrimental internalized beliefs regarding intimacy, trust, and self-esteem. These schemas demonstrate how the failure to maintain a balance between intimacy and independence undermines secure attachment, resulting in women engaging in cyclical, short-term relational coping strategies.

Thus, effective interventions must move beyond moral condemnation to schema reconstruction, attachment repair, and emotional regulation training. Therapies such as Schema Therapy, Emotionally Focused Therapy, and Attachment-Based Counseling can help women identify and reframe maladaptive relational patterns, fostering the ability to form intimate yet autonomous partnerships. Without restructuring these underlying cognitive-emotional systems, solely moral or punitive approaches are unlikely to prevent recurrence, as unresolved attachment insecurities will continue to drive maladaptive relational behaviors.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest in this article.

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