

## Research Article

# Infidelity, Impulsivity, and Marital Adjustment

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### Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to examine the relationship between different types of impulsivity with marital infidelity and marital adjustment within the Temperament and Character Inventory model of personality. To do so, seventy three individuals (with and without infidelity experience) were selected and administered relevant questionnaires. Analysis of data showed a significant relationship between different types of impulsivity (functional and dysfunctional) and marital infidelity. Also, an inverse relation between infidelity and marital adjustment was observed. Furthermore, functional impulsivity, marital adjustment, dysfunctional impulsivity, and novelty seeking were found to be prominent predictors of extramarital affairs. These results are discussed within the context of the literature on infidelity.

### Introduction

Marital infidelity is considered as one of the most distressing experiences in life that deteriorates the foundations of marriage. Such an experience can be heart-wrenching for both parties involved with disastrous consequences given the affectional and sexual affiliation that exist between couples. Because of heavy emotional investment vested in the relationship by both parties, acting irresponsibly can put a dent into the relationship which may lead to divorce and spousal battering [1,2]. However, there is little evidence as to which individuals are vulnerable to infidelity.

According to The Oxford English Dictionary Infidelity is defined as sexual intercourse by a married person with someone other than one's spouse. However, this definition is broadened by many researchers to encompass sexual infidelity (sexual exchange with no romantic involvement), romantic infidelity (romantic exchanges with no sexual involvement) and sexual and romantic involvement [3].

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Defining infidelity is not an easy task due to different perceptions and attitudes influenced by cultural factors. This can lead to a variety of definitions, depending on the couple or individual. In general, an exact definition of marital cheating is one partner having sexual relations (sexual intercourse) with a third party. At the same time, some think of infidelity as nonsexual situations; i.e., when a married man or a woman forms deep emotional bonds with a woman or a man to whom he/she is not married. Still, there are married men and women who have no objection if their partners develop a close friendship with the members of opposite sex as long as their relationships remain platonic.

Regardless of the type of infidelity (sexual or nonsexual) the fact that there is no single definition of infidelity may stem from the attitudes towards this subject. For example, Treas and Green have reported that individuals with more permissive attitudes toward infidelity in relationships are more likely to cheat on their spouses [4]. Furthermore, the results of a study by Laumann et al showed that more than 70% of their participants did not believe in extramarital affairs and thought it was a wrong thing to do. Such conviction may come from their general belief that infidelity is immoral [5,6].

What makes defining infidelity even more difficult is the fact that attitudes, themselves, are influenced by a number of factors such as culture, gender, and prior experience with infidelity given the interactive effects of these variables [3,7]. For example, in terms of culture, the results of a number of cross-cultural studies on infidelity indicate that attitudes towards infidelity can greatly vary from one country to the other. Specifically, Widmer et al. studied the views of more than 33,000 individuals from 24 countries on extramarital sexual affairs and found a strong disapproval while in other countries such as Russia, Bulgaria and others, there was a more lenient view towards adultery [8]. Moreover, Prins et al showed that, in the Netherlands, couples mostly do not approve of infidelity and believe that it is morally unacceptable whereas Danish couples hold more liberal views towards it [6,7].

The occurrence of marital infidelity can be examined by looking at the relationship between personality and marital satisfaction. For instance, Shackelford et al utilized the Five Factor Model (FFM) of personality to study those facets of personality that account for the likelihood of marital infidelity [9]. Their findings revealed that individuals with low on Agreeableness and those with low on Conscientiousness are less likely to be satisfied with their marriage, thus, becoming more susceptible to committing extramarital affairs. Furthermore, their results showed that low agreeableness and low conscientiousness share the common component of impulsivity and inability to delay gratifications which are strong predictors of infidelities. Another model of personality that has addressed different aspects of personality is the Cloninger's Temperament and Character Inventory (TCI). In this model, seven aspects of personality are measured one of which is Novelty Seeking (NS). Novelty Seeking is defined as a personality trait associated with exploratory activity in response to novel stimulation and impulsive decision making [10].

By definition, impulsivity is a multidimensional construct in nature used to describe spontaneous actions carried out without forethought and with disregard to their consequences, risky in nature, and often leading to harmful outcomes. Recent work by Dickman on impulsivity has identified two types of impulsivity- functional and dysfunctional impulsivity- whose interactions result in positive or negative outcomes [11]. He proposed that while some people are rewarded for their rapid decision-making abilities despite lack of accuracy, others experience predominantly negative consequences. According to Dickman functional impulsivity refers to the tendency to making quick decisions when such a strategy is optimally beneficial [11]. In contrast, dysfunctional impulsivity is defined as the tendency to act with less forethought than most people with equal ability in addition to inability to plan, reflect on the implications of actions and delay gratification. As such, functional impulsives are thought to be enthusiastic, very active, and productive risk-takers while dysfunctional impulsives, are unable to act with forethought and deliberation that makes them vulnerable to engage in risky behaviors such as marital infidelity.

When marital infidelity occurs (that is, when a partner violates the expectations about what is appropriate in relationship to others) its consequences are devastating for both couples because of the affectional and sexual affiliation that exist between them, therefore, causing them a great deal of unhappiness and dissatisfaction. For example, Atkins et al believe that infidelity occurs because of a lack of happiness and satisfaction in the marriage [12]. Also, Glass and Wright have reported an inverse relationship between marital satisfaction and infidelity, i.e., the higher the level of marital satisfaction, the lower the likelihood of infidelity [3]. Additionally, Perins et al have noted that the risk of extramarital affairs increases as dissatisfaction in marital relationship decreases [6,13]. Furthermore, Tsapelas et al have reported that the degree of satisfaction and adjustment in one's primary, committed relationship is one of the major psychological factors associated with adultery [14].

So, in general, aforementioned studies underscore the detrimental effects of extramarital affairs on different aspects of marriage which can lessen the degree of love and affection felt for the primary partner and can ultimately shorten the length of marriage. As such, it is not surprising that infidelity is considered as one of the major causes of divorce [1].

In sum, given that impulsivity and personality traits are closely intertwined and that impulsive individuals tend to act without deliberation and ignore the consequences when making decisions, the probability of the occurrence of extramarital affair becomes very real. Thus, dissecting the interrelationship between factors namely personality aspects of individuals and impulsivity (one facet of novelty seeking in the TCI) and that how their interaction can lead to marital infidelity bears a great deal of merit. Specifically, because of multidimensional nature of impulsivity, examining the relationship between functional and dysfunctional impulsivity and marital infidelity is worthwhile.

So, in the present study the following research questions will be addressed: What is the relationship between infidelity and functional impulsivity? What is the relationship between infidelity and dysfunctional impulsivity? What is the relationship between infidelity and marital adjustment? To what extent novelty seeking and different types of impulsivity as well as marital adjustment contribute to the likelihood of committing infidelity?

## Materials and Methods

### Participants

Data were obtained from seventy-three men and women of whom 41 (women=22 and men=19) had extramarital affairs and 32 had no such experience. Subjects were informed of the nature of the study and were assured that their information will be kept confidential. Also, participants were not asked to give their names in order to keep maximum level of confidentiality and cooperation. The sample was that of convenient sample because of easy access to the population and the inadequacy of the number of men and women with infidelity experience. The range of the duration of marriage was from 8 to 10 years. The mean age of men was 41.6 years (SD=2.2); the mean age of women was 30.1 (SD=3.04). To analyze the data, multivariate analysis and regression were used.

### Assessment of impulsivity

**Dickman impulsivity inventory (DII):** The DII-short is a self-report questionnaire developed to measure two types of impulsivity, namely Functional and Dysfunctional Impulsivity. It consists of 23 items to be answered with a true/false answer format. The measure provides scale scores for functional and dysfunctional impulsivity. The functional impulsivity scale has 11 items, and the dysfunctional scale, 12 items. Functional impulsivity consisted of items such as "I would enjoy working at a job that required me to make a lot of split-second decisions" and "People have admired me because I can think quickly". Dysfunctional impulsivity consisted of items such as "I often say and do things without considering the consequences" and "I often say whatever comes into my head without considering the consequences" and "I often say whatever comes into my head without thinking. The Cronbach's alpha for the functional and dysfunctional scales were 0.74 and 0.85, respectively, in a sample of college students [11].

### Assessment of marital adjustment

**Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS):** This is a 32-item measure of relationship quality made by Spanier. The scale is divided into 4 subscales: (1) Dyadic Consensus, (2) Dyadic Satisfaction, (3) Dyadic Cohesion together, (4) Affectional Expression. The range of the scale is 0-150 for all items. The higher score shows the better relationship. Total score is considerably consistent with alpha (alpha) as following: dyadic consensus, dyadic satisfaction (0.94), dyadic cohesion together (.81), affectional expression (0.73) [15].

### Personality assessment

**The Tridimensional Personality Questionnaire (TPQ):** This is a 100-item true/falsepaper-and-pencil test that assesses the three personality dimensions of Novelty Seeking, Harm Avoidance, and Reward dependence. Novelty seeking has four facets one of which is impulsiveness that is measured by eight true/false questions. To address the questions of the present study, only the data related to NS is reported. The Cronbach's alpha for NS is 0.76 [16].

**Author-made infidelity questionnaire:** Because of the unique factors contributing to the occurrence of infidelity in Iran, an author's-made questionnaire was designed to assess extramarital affairs which consisted of 7 items to be answered with a Yes/No answer format. This questionnaire consisted of items such as "Is your spouse impotent?", "Is your partner unable to produce a child?", Is your

partner always busy with work?”, “ Do you get sexual satisfaction from your partner?”. The Cronbach’s alpha for this questionnaire was 0.85.

## Results

Table 1 illustrates the relation between different types of impulsivity and marital adjustment. As shown, there is a significant relation between marital adjustment with functional and dysfunctional impulsivity ( $p < .05$ ).

Variables	Functional impulsivity	Dysfunctional impulsivity	Marital adjustment
Functional impulsivity	1		
dysfunctional impulsivity	0.191	1	
marital adjustment	0.341*	0.367*	1

\*  $P < .05$

**Table 1:** Correlation coefficient between impulsivity and marital adjustment.

Table 2 illustrates the relation between marital infidelity and different types of impulsivity. As shown, there was a significant relation between marital infidelity and functional and dysfunctional impulsivity ( $p < .01$ ).

Factor	Functional impulsivity	Dysfunctional impulsivity
Marital infidelity	0.565**	0.407**

\*\* $P < .01$

**Table 2:** Correlation between functional and dysfunctional impulsivity and marital infidelity.

Table 3 illustrates the relationship between marital infidelity and Marital Adjustment. As shown, there was a significant relationship between marital adjustment and infidelity ( $p < .01$ ,  $r = .48$ ).

Factor	Marital adjustment
Marital infidelity	0.481**

$P < .01$ \*\*

**Table 3:** Relationship between marital adjustment and infidelity.

Table 4 illustrates the relation between personality traits and marital infidelity. As shown, there was no significant relationship between personality traits and marital infidelity.

Factor	Novelty seeking	Harm avoidance	Reward dependence	Insistence
Marital infidelity	0.234	0.207	0.198	0.151

**Table 4:** Correlation between personality traits and marital infidelity.

In order to evaluate the predictive effect of personality trait, impulsivity and marital adjustment, subjects, based on their response frequency, were divided into two groups, with or without marital infidelity. Subsequently, logistical regression was performed on the data. Results of our analysis showed that by entering variables

simultaneously, our model can explain 67% of the variance. Correlation square (Nagelkerke R Square) of predictive (independent) variables with dependent variables was 0.669%.

Regression coefficient analysis of the data revealed that the predictive ability of novelty-seeking, harm avoidance, reward dependence and persistence had no significant effect while other variables with significant predictive effects are shown in Table 5. According to the results of odds ratio (OR), the most important variables that could predict marital infidelity were, in order of importance, functional impulsivity, marital adjustment, and dysfunctional impulsivity. According to table 5, given that predictive variables such as functional impulsivity ( $B = 0.459$ ) and dysfunctional impulsivity ( $B = 0.459$ ) were positive, any increase in the values of these variables increases the likelihood of marital infidelity.

## Discussion

The findings of the present study revealed a significant relationship between different types of impulsivity (functional and dysfunctional) and marital infidelity. These results are consistent with those of Shackelford et al that reported low conscientiousness and low agreeableness (two components of impulsivity) are related to adultery [9]. Although reported studies, to date, have only noted the close association between impulsivity and sexual promiscuity, the present study was the first to investigate different types of impulsivity and their relation to marital infidelity within the temperament and character inventory model. As suggested by Patton et al impulsivity is comprised of three components: 1) motor impulsiveness which is shown by acting without thinking, 2) cognitive impulsiveness which is shown by making quick decisions, and 3) non-planning impulsiveness represented by lack of thinking carefully about the future, all of which amount to taking spontaneous actions without having any regards for their negative long-term consequences [17,18]. As mentioned before, Dickman proposed a distinction in defining impulsivity where he identified two factors-functional and dysfunctional impulsivity [11]. Functional impulsivity which refers to the tendency to making quick decisions when such a strategy is optimally beneficial, and dysfunctional impulsivity which refers to the tendency to act with less forethought than most people with equal ability as well as inability to plan, reflect on the implications of actions and delay gratification.

So, to define our results in this context, it can be stated that our findings are consistent with those of McAlister et al that concluded individuals with dysfunctional impulsivity are more likely to participate in sexual behaviors outside an established relationship given that their actions are relatively with little or no forethought about the consequences. In terms of functional impulsivity, since this type is associated with enthusiasm and adventurism and, in many instances, it is considered as a positive trait which can aid in taking advantage of opportunities (sexual opportunities); therefore, the basis for the significant relationship found between functional impulsivity and marital infidelity in the present study could be that our subjects might have actively sought out sexual opportunities and when they arose they took advantage of them. It is also possible that our subjects might have had higher sex drive which propelled them to look for opportunities to commit extramarital affairs. So, all in all, since the present investigation found a significant correlation between both types of impulsivity and marital infidelity, it can be concluded that regardless of the types of impulsivity, marital infidelity is strongly associated with impulsivity [9].

Variables	B	Standard error	Statistics	p.v.	EXP (B)	C.I. for %95
Constant	-1.676	3.967	0.179	0.673	0.187	-
Novelty seeking	0.116	0.432	5.62	0.03	1.123	0.866-1.457
Harm avoidance	-0.138	0.154	0.807	0.369	0.871	0.644-1.178
Reward dependence	-0.094	0.105	0.794	0.373	0.911	0.741-1.119
Insistence	0.164	0.128	1.662	0.197	1.179	0.918-1.513
Functional Impulsivity	0.793	0.218	13.202	0.0001	2.21	1.441-3.389
Dysfunctional Impulsivity	0.459	0.204	5.061	0.024	1.582	1.061-2.358
Marital adjustment	-0.059	0.023	6.339	0.012	0.943	0.9-0.987

**Table 5:** Regression coefficient of Predictive ability of Independent variables of Marital Infidelity.

Furthermore, our results indicated a significant association between extramarital affairs and marital adjustment. This finding was similar to the conclusion of that suggested as marital satisfaction and happiness increases, the probability of adultery decreases [12,19]. Such finding is not surprising because if couples are unable to fulfill each other's needs for love and affection, they tend to seek them somewhere else which, in turn, renders them susceptible to committing adultery.

In determining to what extent different personality aspects, namely novelty-seeking, and impulsivity as well as marital adjustment contribute to the occurrence of extramarital affairs, regression analysis of our data revealed that, in order of importance, functional impulsivity, marital adjustment, and dysfunctional impulsivity were the most significant predictors of adultery. This finding is consistent with the results of studies in the literature reporting the close relationship between marital infidelity and marital adjustment [3,6,18]. Also, our results, regarding the role of impulsivity, were similar to what is reported in the literature, with the exception that, the present study, addressed two types of impulsivity, functional and dysfunctional, both of which were not only significantly correlated with infidelity, but were significant predictors of adultery. This implicates that impulsivity, regardless of its type, plays an important role in committing extramarital affairs and needs to be taken into account when addressing the issue of adultery.

Given the intertwined nature of impulsivity and novelty-seeking in a variety of behaviors (drug abuse, risky sexual behaviors) and that novelty seeking is closely aligned with impulsivity, it was somewhat surprising that our findings showed neither an association between nor a predictive relationship between the two [20]. Although the basis for this result remains unclear, one possible explanation for it could be that we did not assess the relationship between the two types of impulsivity with novelty seeking. It might have been the case that novelty seeking might be accompanied with only one type of impulsivity (functional or dysfunctional) and not the other. Nevertheless, our results imply that personality style marked by impulsivity (as a whole) may not always be accompanied by novelty seeking unless the type of impulsivity is ascertained. In other words, it is possible that the co-existence of impulsivity and novelty seeking might, to some extent, depend on the type of impulsivity; a possible direction for future research.

## Conclusion

Nonetheless, this finding does not, by any means, diminish the importance of the role personality aspects in undertaking risky behaviors such as committing extramarital affairs and therapists need to take

them into account when confronted with offending couples. In fact, personality aspects of the offending spouse are particularly of great importance when deciding upon a course of action and therapists need to keep in mind that, in formulating a therapy strategy for offending couples, the offending spouse with high novelty seeking (high exploratory behaviors) is more likely to drop out of treatment programs and cease therapy. This is especially relevant when both parties have agreed to reconcile and obtain each others' trust and confidence in order to improve their marriage.

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