Religiosity and Social Support as Determinants of Self-Concept: A Case Study on Women Affected by Infidelity
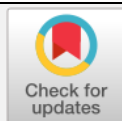
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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Infidelity is a complex social issue that has profound psychological impacts on its victims. Infidelity does not always involve sexual relationships; it can also manifest as emotional closeness. However, any form of infidelity has the potential to undermine the integrity of a marital bond. While infidelity can occur in both men and women, research identifies men as more likely to engage in such behavior. This study aims to analyze the impact of a husband's infidelity on a wife's self-concept. A qualitative phenomenological method was employed. The findings, based on interviews with four participants, reveal that infidelity within a marriage leads to feelings of anger, disappointment, and negative self-perceptions, such as feeling unwanted or unworthy and a loss of motivation to live with enthusiasm. Social support and religiosity were identified as critical factors in rebuilding the self-concept of victims of infidelity. Although religiosity does not instantly eliminate emotional pain, it serves as a significant source of strength, calm, and hope in the process of healing emotional wounds. Recovery from this emotional pain is not an easy process. Social support encompasses assistance in self-acceptance, emotional recovery, and the reconstruction of self-identity. Religiosity fosters self-awareness and reflection, helping individuals shift their focus from worldly concerns to spirituality and ultimate life goals. This facilitates adaptation accompanied by feelings of comfort, tranquility, optimism, and gratitude. Religiosity and social support are perceived as enhancing psychological well-being, providing emotional support, and helping individuals face life's challenges with greater resilience.

1. Introduction

Infidelity is a complex social issue that has profound psychological impacts on its victims. This complexity arises from the diverse causes and perspectives associated with infidelity. Glass and Wright identified reasons for infidelity, including love, sexual needs, emotional attachment, and extrinsic motivations (Glass & Wright, 1992). According to Miller and Vossler, infidelity is defined as a form of disloyalty and a violation of norms governing emotional and even physical intimacy with someone other than one's legitimate partner (Shaleha & Kurniasih, 2021). Infidelity does not always involve sexual relations; it can be limited to emotional closeness. However, regardless of the absence of sexual involvement, all forms of infidelity carry the same potential to undermine the integrity of marital bonds (Fincham & May, 2017). Infidelity is characterized by three key components: emotional intimacy, secrecy, and sexual chemistry (Nugraha & Rahmi, 2021). Muhajarah further posits that infidelity may serve as a mechanism for individuals to maintain personal balance by fulfilling needs unmet by their legitimate partner (Muhajarah, 2017).

In addition to damaging interpersonal relationships between spouses, research indicates that infidelity can negatively affect self-esteem and perceptions of the overall marital relationship. Maladaptive responses, such as obsession and negative self-evaluation, are common among victims of infidelity (Asayesh et al., 2017). Infidelity can occur in both men and women. However, Fincham and May found that men are more frequently identified as perpetrators (Fincham & May, 2017). In Indonesian society, which is still deeply rooted in patriarchal norms, women often face greater stigma than men when their husbands commit infidelity. Wives are sometimes even held "responsible" for their husbands' infidelity due to perceived failures in their roles, such as not maintaining their appearance, lacking religiosity, or failing to meet their partner's needs.

The impact of a husband's infidelity on his wife includes feelings of anger, disappointment, doubt, anxiety disorders, and even depression or trauma from betrayal (Azhar et al., 2018). Nugraha and Rahmi describe two possible reactions from wives who discover their husbands' infidelity: destructive reactions, which lead to divorce, and constructive reactions, which aim to resolve marital conflict and maintain the relationship despite its disharmony (Nugraha & Rahmi, 2021). Some women may develop adaptive coping mechanisms, such as pursuing personal growth or strengthening their religious beliefs, which can mitigate the negative effects of infidelity on self-concept and marital satisfaction (Asayesh et al., 2017). Research shows that individuals with high self-esteem are more protected from the negative effects of infidelity on self-concept. In contrast, those with low self-esteem are more vulnerable to anxiety and depression resulting from infidelity (Shrout & Weigel, 2020).

Various studies have found that religiosity and social support play crucial roles in rebuilding the self-concept of wives who are victims of infidelity. Noviekayati et al. state that religiosity provides a moral framework, while social support offers external validation—both of which are essential for overcoming feelings of inferiority and fostering a healthier self-concept (Noviekayati et al., 2021). Meanwhile, Eva et al. emphasize that support from close relations helps individuals feel valued and better equipped to face emotional challenges, thereby strengthening their self-concept (Eva et al., 2020). The negative emotions arising from a

husband's infidelity can significantly affect a wife's self-concept, influencing how she perceives herself. However, Baum et al. found that many women reported feeling more independent, having greater control over their lives, and gaining confidence after divorce (Baum et al., 2005).

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the self-concept of wives who are victims of infidelity, focusing on religiosity and social support as factors that may help them cope with life's challenges.

2. Literature Review
2.1. Infidelity

In the context of romantic relationships, Guitar et al. define infidelity as deceiving one's partner by lying about feelings for another person, emotionally dedicating oneself to someone else, failing to provide emotional satisfaction to one's partner compared to another, falling in love, or developing romantic feelings for someone outside the relationship (Guitar et al., 2017). Moller and Vossler describe infidelity as involving emotional and physical intimacy with someone other than one's legitimate partner (Shaleha & Kurniasih, 2021). Infidelity increases levels of depression and adversely affects the mental health of its victims (Cano & O'Leary, 2000). Whether emotional or physical, infidelity is an act that undermines trust and reflects a lack of loyalty within the ongoing relationship (Nagurney & Thornton, 2011). Infidelity can be triggered by various factors, including opportunities and circumstances, conflicts with one's partner, unfulfilled sexual needs, sexual abnormality or animalistic tendencies, lack of faith, and the absence of shame (Al-Ghifari, 2012).

2.2. Self-Concept

In general, self-concept refers to an individual's overall view or image of themselves and their attitudes toward their own identity. It is a combination of beliefs about oneself, encompassing physical, psychological, social, and emotional characteristics, aspirations and achievements, self-motivation, strengths, and weaknesses in comparison to others (Wehrle & Fasbender, 2019). A direct evaluation of "who we are" can be abstracted from one's reactions to past events and experiences. In contrast, a reflected evaluation arises from one's belief about how others perceive them. This concept is often referred to as the looking-glass self.

Self-concept plays a crucial role in shaping individual behavior, as it reflects how one perceives their ability or inability to perform certain actions. Hidayati and Farid highlight three essential roles of self-concept in determining behavior: maintaining internal harmony, serving as a determinant in interpreting experiences, and acting as a guide for individual expectations (Hidayati & Farid, 2016).

2.3. Religiosity

In Chaplin's Complete Dictionary of Psychology, religion is described as a part of beliefs, convictions, attitudes, and rituals that connect individuals to God (Purnomo & Suryadi, 2018). Huber defines religiosity as the thoughts and beliefs individuals hold to view the world, influencing their experiences and behaviors in daily life. Huber refers to this set of thoughts and beliefs as a personal construct system (Purnomo & Suryadi, 2018).

Huber and Huber argue that religiosity can be measured by the intensity with which individuals fulfill religious obligations and uphold prominent religious values in their lives (Huber & Huber, 2012). Syafitri and Hadjam found that religiosity often serves as a protective factor against stressors such as pressure (Syafitri & Hadjam, 2017). Religiosity also has a significant indirect positive effect on the adjustment of divorced women by influencing stress

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levels, thereby facilitating adaptation and optimizing self-adjustment (Muhammad et al., 2019). This demonstrates that religiosity affects an individual's ability to overcome challenges and seek solutions to problems they face. Religious beliefs significantly impact all aspects of human civilization and have a negative correlation with material consumption (He et al., 2022).

2.4. Social Support

Cohen and Wills suggest that integration into social networks can help individuals avoid negative experiences (e.g., economic or legal problems) and reduce the likelihood of psychological or physical disorders (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Social support also plays a crucial role in building self-confidence, enabling individuals to address various life challenges effectively. Moreover, social support serves at least three functions. First, it provides self-esteem support by addressing threats to an individual's self-worth, such as increasing doubts about their abilities. Interpersonal resources mitigate these threats by discussing the problems faced offering attention, sympathy, and reassurance. An essential element of this support is the feeling of being accepted and valued (McIntosh, 1991).

According to several studies, social support from friends, family, or support groups acts as a "buffer" against stress, helping individuals remain optimistic and face challenges more positively. For instance, Taylor, in Social Support and Resilience, found that social support significantly enhances an individual's ability to cope with difficulties, including emotional trauma such as infidelity (Taylor, 2011).

Muarifah et al. demonstrate that social support significantly impacts the subjective well-being of single mothers (Muarifah et al., 2019). Similarly, Muhammad et al. report that family support is perceived as the most critical form of social support after divorce, compared to support from friends or others (Muhammad et al., 2019). Furthermore, Yulfa et al. highlight that female heads of households require less economic coping, and the more social support they receive, the higher their level of well-being (Yulfa et al., 2022).

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological method. Phenomenological qualitative research is used to uncover, explore, and understand unique and specific phenomena and contexts experienced by individuals (Fadli, 2021). This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the meanings constructed around the role of religiosity and social support in the lives of wives following infidelity by their husbands.

The study participants were adult women who experienced infidelity by their spouses and still had school-aged children. These criteria were selected based on findings that revealed that the majority of single mothers (86.66%) face financial difficulties after becoming single parents (Chanda & Pujar, 2018). Single mothers are also more vulnerable to stress and tend to have lower psychological well-being compared to married mothers. Participant selection was conducted using purposive sampling, where participants who met the research criteria were chosen based on their willingness to share their experiences.

The research was conducted in urban areas where participants had access to both religious and social support. Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection method. Participants were asked a set of core questions. However, there was flexibility to allow them to share their specific views or personal experiences, particularly regarding the emotional impact of infidelity on self-concept, religious practices that aided their recovery, and forms of social support received from family, friends, or religious communities.

After the interviews, an online focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted using Zoom and Google Meet to strengthen the analysis and minimize bias in interpreting the primary data.

The study involved four women as participants, each with the following characteristics:

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Initials	Age	Number of Children	Marital Status	Occupation	Residence
N	34	3	Divorced	Dance Teacher	Depok
O	44	1	Divorced	Civil Servant	Bandung
A	36	1	Divorced	Entrepreneur	Bandung
S	60	4	Separated	Housewife	Bogor

Referring to the approach of Miles & Huberman, the data analysis process was conducted through the following stages (Sugiyono, 2011):
1) Data Collection

Data from the four participants was gathered through online interviews guided by a set of core questions and supplemented with follow-up questions. All data was documented in the form of audio recordings and photographs. Offline observations were conducted one to two times at each participant's workplace or home to ensure the accuracy and relevance of the collected data for the research objectives. The observed aspects included:
a. Participant behavior
Examined through verbal communication, tone, facial expressions, and body gestures.
b. Social interactions
Observed through the participants' interactions with colleagues, community friends, or family members. Communication patterns, such as their role in the community (leader, follower, or mediator), and methods of seeking support were also analyzed.
c. Participant activities
Monitored through religious practices (e.g., daily obligatory prayers) and social activities such as engagement in religious or social communities.
d. Physical environment and symbols
Assessed to analyze religiosity as reflected in physical evidence (e.g., religious decorations), family support patterns (e.g., family/community photos), and the use of religious attire or accessories.
e. Response to situations
Observed by examining participants' reactions to challenges (e.g., handling a child's tantrum).
f. Interaction with the researcher
Analyzed based on participants' responses to questions and their openness and comfort in sharing information.

2) Data Reduction

After collecting data from interviews and focus group discussions, the next step was categorizing responses into predetermined themes: (1) Religiosity, (2) Social Support, (3) Self-Concept, and (4) Trauma or Impact. This step aimed to eliminate irrelevant or excessive data, focusing only on relevant information for further analysis.

3) Data Display

The reduced data was presented in a more organized format, such as matrices, to help the researcher understand the relationships between data elements and identify emerging patterns or themes. This organized display facilitated the process of concluding.

4) Conclusion Drawing or Verification

Conclusions were drawn by verifying and cross-checking the original data in the form of notes and recordings, and through triangulation to ensure the validity of the findings. This process ensured that the results accurately reflected the data and research context.

4. Results and Discussion
4.1. Self-Concept

The following are excerpts from interviews with participants regarding their self-concept following their husbands' infidelity:

> *"I found out my husband was unfaithful on the very first night of our marriage... He only married me because his parents forced him to, but he impregnated me..."* *(Participant "O")*

The revelation of infidelity at the onset of marriage eliminated any sense of security and created deep doubts about the relationship's future. Feelings of anger, disappointment, and worthlessness emerged as the participant learned her husband openly declared his relationship with another woman. This statement also reflects a situation in which the participant felt a lack of control over her life, especially regarding major decisions within the household.

> *"I often compare myself to other women, wondering why this happened to me. I feel worthless and don't know what to do."* *(Participant "A")*

> *"I've felt worthless before — not angry because of the infidelity itself, but because of the divorce and its impact on the children."* *(Participant "N")*

These statements reveal participants' negative perceptions of themselves, often stemming from emotional trauma. Phrases like *"Why did this happen to me?"* reflect a sense of injustice, which exacerbates emotional wounds. This feeling of unfairness often leads to despair or a loss of motivation to approach life with enthusiasm. The statement *"I don't know what to do"* illustrates a sense of being trapped in a situation with no apparent solution, impairing decision-making abilities. Nevertheless, despite feelings of worthlessness, participants were able to refocus on aspects they deemed more important, such as their children. This demonstrates resilience and the ability to find meaning in their experiences constructively.

> *"I couldn't focus, I just couldn't focus. How could my husband do this? How? Our daily life was fine, very sweet! It's like, what? In front of me, he was so good — a protector of the family, a priority. But then... it was all a lie. Once I found out, I wondered why he was so sweet like that. Turns out, it wasn't real."* *(Participant "S")*

This participant expressed disappointment and struggled to accept reality, experiencing dissonance between her daily experiences and the truth of her husband's infidelity. This led to

confusion and difficulty understanding the situation, as her husband's actions contradicted her previous perception of him. When the infidelity was revealed, her positive image of him shattered, leaving her with a deep sense of betrayal. The phrase *"It was all a lie"* indicates that the participant felt that all of her husband's good behavior had been disingenuous. She began to question whether their entire relationship had been built on deception. The statement *"I couldn't focus"* reflects the emotional toll, including difficulty concentrating due to psychological stress and trauma. This often leads to severe depression and anxiety and, in some cases, derealization—where individuals struggle to distinguish between reality and illusion under extreme emotional pressure (Sierra & David, 2011).

> *"I consider trials not as something bad but as a lesson. I believe God will not test His servants beyond their capacity." (Participant "O")*

> *"I'm stronger now, more realistic. My perspective is simpler. Looking back, it's all in the past because there's no bond anymore. I can talk about it and laugh now. The wounds have healed. Now I need to fix the scars." (Participant "N")*

> *"The light is starting to shine through; what was once dark now has stepping stones appearing one by one. What used to be blank is becoming clearer. I have new plans and goals. I'm stronger now and more assertive, willing to reject and choose what's best for me and my children." (Participant "A")*

Ultimately, all participants expressed that they had been able to overcome the difficulties of their past experiences. Their statements reflect deep self-acceptance, sincerity, and a forward-looking focus on self-improvement. The phrase *"I'm stronger now, more realistic"* demonstrates participants' emotional and mental growth. They feel more capable of facing reality and life's challenges than before, indicating improved self-confidence and resilience. Participants have shifted their perspective, viewing their husband's infidelity as a part of their past, no longer emotionally or practically tied to the failed marriage.

The phrase *"more assertive, willing to reject and choose what's best for me and my children"* highlights the participant's newfound courage in making firm decisions. This reflects a protective attitude toward herself and her children, signaling a clearer sense of responsibility and priorities. Research on betrayal trauma indicates that recovery from emotional pain requires a lengthy process, often involving self-acceptance and learning from adverse events. These experiences can serve as a turning point, fostering resilience and new skills for navigating life (Richardson, 2019).

4.2. Religiosity and Social Support

The four participants were asked about their religiosity, particularly during moments of emotional distress, and the social support they received from their environment, as well as its impact on their lives and self-concept. The following are excerpts from the interviews:

> *"Now I feel more at peace. I realize that Allah has determined my path, and this is my destiny. I don't have parents anymore, so I focus on improving myself... I think about how my life's end must be better... I've started to get used to it." (Participant "O")*

> *"I've come to know God better. In the past, I felt so distant from Him... The Qur'an, which I rarely touched or read, has now become part of my daily routine. Alhamdulillah, it feels incomplete if I don't read it." (Participant "A")*

Religiosity may not instantly eliminate pain, but it serves as a significant source of strength, tranquility, and hope in the process of healing emotional wounds. Unpleasant experiences often become turning points, providing divine guidance that enables individuals to adapt to a new life. The statement, *"I think about how my life's end must be better,"* reflects a profound shift in perspective from worldly concerns to spirituality and eternal life. This indicates deep reflection on life's ultimate purpose, leading to behavioral changes and a transformed outlook on past painful experiences.

> *"Resilience comes with having dreams. I joined a comeback journey — it felt like an escape, keeping myself busy and learning something new." (Participant "N")*

> *"I am so grateful, Subhanallah, Alhamdulillah. I don't understand; it must be Allah's will. Life is just enjoyable now. Blessings come so easily… I am more prosperous now than when he was here. Nothing is lacking at home, even more so than before. Back then, we couldn't afford help, but now we can. It's something I still can't believe..." (Participant "S")*

Participants, especially those who were homemakers and unemployed, expressed concerns about financial stability when considering divorce. Fears of not being able to meet basic needs or cover costs for their children's education and health were key reasons why they initially chose to stay and forgive their unfaithful partners. However, the presence of supportive individuals during moments of emotional distress had a significant impact on helping these women regain their spirit and self-confidence. Social support from close relations played a vital role in their recovery, alleviating anxiety and depression while fostering resilience against future traumatic experiences (Anantasari, 2011). Surrendering to God also opened pathways to a better life.

> *"There are so many kind people around me. I kept asking, 'Why don't I have a husband?' But these people don't belittle me. Instead, they embrace me, saying, 'What do you need? Here you go.' It's all made easy by Allah. That's the truth." (Participant "S")*

After divorcing and living as single parents, all participants reported that the financial concerns they once feared did not materialize. Religiosity was acknowledged as an essential internal factor in fostering acceptance and ultimately helped release them from the negative emotions caused by their husbands' infidelity.

> *"Accepting reality is crucial when faced with an unpleasant truth." (Participant "N")*
> *"Now I feel more at peace. Allah has determined my life, and this is my path." (Participant "O")*

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During the focus group discussion (FGD), participants shared that they found valuable lessons in their experiences, such as becoming more determined to raise their sons to be responsible men.

> *"A man must be able to lead a household, both financially and emotionally. That's why I'm teaching my son to cook." (Participant "O")*

> *"I have three sons. They need to take on bigger responsibilities and prepare to become future heads of families." (Participant "N")*

Research by Anjani revealed a positive relationship between social support and religious coping strategies among widows (Anjani, 2019). Higher levels of social support correlated with stronger religious coping strategies, while lower levels of support resulted in weaker coping mechanisms. Similarly, Nursanti et al. found a significant positive relationship between religiosity and emotional regulation in single mothers (Nursanti et al., 2022). These findings align with the current study, where all participants agreed that their sense of self-worth was rebuilt through a combination of religiosity and social support. The greater the social support received and the higher the level of religiosity, the quicker the recovery of a positive self-concept among victims of infidelity.

Studies also show that women as single parents can overcome financial challenges by increasing their productivity and creativity, as well as leveraging social networks or family support to reduce economic burdens. These experiences often lead to strengthened character, optimism, and success in building stability for their families (Afdal et al., 2022).

5. Conclusion

Findings from the study involving four participants indicate that infidelity within marriage, perpetrated by the husband, significantly disrupts the mental and physical well-being of wives and affects nearly all aspects of their lives. The distortion of self-concept, resulting from feelings of inferiority, self-comparison with others, and uncertainty about the future of their marriage, leads to emotional trauma and psychological confusion. However, through a transitional process encompassing emotional, psychological, social, and spiritual recovery, the participants were able to rediscover their inner strength and rebuild a healthier self-concept.

Social support and religiosity played vital roles in this journey. Social support facilitated self-acceptance, emotional recovery, and the reconstruction of identity. Religiosity fostered self-awareness and reflection, helping participants shift their focus from worldly concerns to spirituality and life's ultimate purpose. This shift eased the adaptation process, instilling feelings of comfort, tranquility, optimism, and gratitude.

6. Acknowledgment

7. Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors have declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning this article's research, authorship, and/or publication.

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