

# The Dynamics of Family Psychological Strength in Wives Whose Husbands Have Affairs

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**Abstract**—Infidelity is a phenomenon that threatens family integrity because it takes a toll on commitment in the family which can lead to divorce. Nevertheless, some affected families choose to maintain the integrity of the family although the household was overwhelmed by the affair. This study aimed to explain the dynamics of family psychological strength in wives whose husbands had an affair. This study used a qualitative study with the IPA (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis) method. Participants in this study were wives whose husbands had an affair, but the problem was resolved, and the family now reconciled. The results showed that there were efforts to draw oneself closer to Allah and improve the quality of self, and social support played an essential role in dealing with their infidelity cases. Teamwork and the active role of each family member were needed to achieve conducive condition and family strength. Family strength was viewed from the aspects of appreciation and affection, commitment, positive communication, enjoyable time together, spiritual well-being, and the ability to cope with stress and crisis.

**Keywords**—family, family strength, infidelity, wives

## I. INTRODUCTION

A family is a fundamental unit of society [1]. Ideally, a family is built to achieve eternal happiness, but unfortunately divorce cases occur in many societies. In 2015, 90 per cent of 445,568 cases filed to the religious court in Indonesia were divorce cases [2]. Several factors of divorce were lack of harmony, lack of responsibility, economic issues, third party involvement, and moral crisis [3]. Infidelity was the fourth most frequent reason for divorce. Infidelity can affect the psychological condition of the affected people including loss of trust, guilty feeling, deceptive behavior, anger, depression, suicide attempts, murder, marital conflict, divorce, anxiety, remorse, loss of respect and love, and even unemployment [4]. However, not all families come to divorce decision when faced with infidelity. Some families decided to maintain the integrity of the family and then even create a stronger family after the infidelity that befell the family.

In this digital era, gadgets are used in all sectors of life. Although useful, they may also have negative implications. In this context, excessive use of gadgets can result in lack of quality time with family which makes the relationship between family members tenuous, lack of direct communication, and lack of time for discussion as a family. This can cause long-term pathological reactions such as depression due to misunderstanding, feelings of not understood, and loneliness [5]. Surveys have shown that the high use of social media on the Internet relates to poor quality of marriage, marital unhappiness, problematic

relationships, and proneness to think about divorce [6]. On the other side, previous experience also influences a person's decision to continue his/her marital relationship or not. Those people who experienced parental separation (divorce) during their childhood are less likely to have an eternal marriage as adults [7].

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### A. Infidelity

One of the main factors that cause problem in marriage was infidelity. Infidelity is an emotional and/or sexual relations between someone married with another person who is not his/her legal partner [8]. Forms of infidelity according to Subotnik and Harris [8] include *serial affair*, where there is no emotional involvement in the affair and only limited to momentary satisfaction; *flings*, where the affair only happens once and with no emotional connection so it does not have a big impact; *romantic love affair*, an affair involving emotional relationship; and *long-term affair*, an affair that lasts for years. Men have a higher tendency to commit adultery than women [9]. Someone who has close relatives who have/had an affair will be more likely to be involved in an affair as well. There are three types of vulnerability to infidelity which relate to friendship, individual factors, and socio-cultural influences [10]. Furthermore, infidelity has a negative correlation with one's religiosity and self-esteem [11].

### B. Family Strength

According to Sunarti [12] family strength is the ability of a family to solve problems by utilizing the resources they have to meet their family needs. In this case, the family will have three types of strength, namely physical strength, social strength, and psychological strength. Physical strength incorporated notions of physical health [13]. Social strength includes harmonious social relations with others and the support of others (e.g., mobilized extended kin and social support, find and develop community resources) [14]. Psychological strength focuses on tackling non-physical problems, positive emotional control, positive self-concept which includes hope and satisfaction, and husband's care for his wife. Family strength can also be identified through aspects of appreciation and affection, commitment, positive communication, enjoying time together, spiritual well-being, and the ability to deal with stress and crisis [15]

## III. METHODOLOGY

The authors used a purposive sampling technique to get participants in this study. The criteria of participants in this study included being a wife whose husband had affair, does

not have plans to divorce as the indication of family resilience, and willing to become research participant. This presented study was conducted in DKI Jakarta. Direct in-depth interviews when participant stayed in DKI Jakarta and then online interviews (i.e., WhatsApp chat) were used to collect the data. Data validity was tested using data triangulation method which carried out using several obtained sources. The method of analysis used in this study was the IPA (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis) [16], [17].

**IV. RESULTS**

Two participants (AS and IM) were married to their husbands (SY and PY, respectively) as their wishes without coercion. Problems in AS' family began when her parents-in-law had a different understanding of how to raise her first child. Later her husband was known to have an affair with another woman. SY's behavior towards AS and his family was also not good. AS and her children were victims of her husband's domestic violence but she did not dare to report her husband's behavior. SY committed an affair not just once but many times with various women, ranging from high school girl to widow. AS learned about her husband's affair from her husband's mobile phone. The only thing the AS could do at that time was to pray to Allah. She prayed (wholeheartedly) to Allah every single night.

"...perhaps it's Allah who saved me, protected me because I often cried during my night prayers. I cried during my *tahajud* [late night prayer] not only for ten-day or a month. Not even only a hundred nights." (AS58)

"It was absolutely due to the power of prayer. Purely with the power of prayer." (AS172)

Until one day AS decided to change herself. She tried to improve herself to counter her husband's affair. AS shared her family's problems with her best friends and religious teacher. She was encouraged by her friends. Then one day SY's behavior was discovered by AS' mother and mother in law. A mediation process was carried out from which SY signed a written agreement to not repeat his mistakes.

"I bought a duty stamp, typing the agreement myself in which I entered some points to be signed by him. My mother and my mother-in-law acted as witnesses. I told him that this is the last time. If he repeats his act again, even once, I have the right to ask for anything, including divorce, child custody, and property share. The point was that I have the right to ask for anything and that means it includes everything." (AS64)

Then SY asked for a year to change his behavior gradually. During the phase, AS deleted her social media account and several contact in her cell phone. SY began to show changes in his behavior. He did not show abusive behavior towards his family anymore. AS' family life began to improve since.

"Now he does things like watching TV, taking care of chickens, chatting with our children, teasing them and helping with their homework. He is much better now, he's drastically changed. He even doesn't mind if he have to wash dishes [laughter]." (AS140)

"Yes, making jokes, exchanging humor. He's now more humorous, whereas he used to be an individual who did not like humor." (AP28)

"Eer..... as for five-time daily prayer, papa now prays regularly. Eer, he also fasted and performed the Ramadan prayers with my little brother during last Ramadan." (AP26)

As for IM, after three months of marriage with PY, various problems began to arise. After a year of marriage and after the birth of his first child, PY was known for having an affair. IM learned about her husband's affair through social media and the cell phone PY used. IM felt angry when she found out her husband had a relationship with another woman, but then she could forgive her husband and managed to maintain their marriage. However, similar incidents happened again up to four times. In the last case, IM relied on Allah. IM's little sister advised to IM to get closer to Allah and deepen her religious knowledge through videos which can be accessed on social media YouTube. IM finally decided to improve herself by changing her demeanor and worship habits. After deepening her religious knowledge, IM felt calmer and more able to control her emotions. IM, who had expelled her husband eventually forgave him and invited him to come back, to live together with the family.

"But for fixing the problem, I did it myself with the help of Allah." (IM 203) "None. Just begging for forgiveness and promising not to repeat his wrongdoing." (IM 214)

Apart from being more able to accept the situation, the reason IM asked her husband to come back was also because of her child who looked depressed when the father left.

"... and my child who begged with sadness, every day, to have the father back." (IM 82)

IM then asked for an agreement with her husband that he would change for the better. IM said that if her husband is known to do the same thing again in the future she would not hesitate to sue for divorce. After that, IM's husband began to show a change in behavior towards the family and also became more diligent in worshipping Allah as did IM.

"Yes, much different. My husband shows more positive attitude now." (IM 225)

After that, IM and PY spent more time together and communication between the two was run smoothly. The IM and PY family then became more harmonious and stronger since.

"Yes, thank Allah, to eventually care for each other since." (IM 239)

"Harmonious. He becomes a more romantic and funny person. He likes to tease. And both of us gain weight [laughter]." (IM 220)

**TABLE I. RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

Description	Participant 1	Participant 2
Initial	AS	IM
Gender	Female	Female
Age	37 years	37 years
Religion	Islam	Islam
Ethnic group	Sundanese	Arab-Malay
Status in the household	Wife	Wife
Number of children	2	2
Highest education	Senior High School	Undergraduate
Occupation	Entrepreneur	Housewife
Spouse's occupation	Military	Event Organizer
Number of siblings	-	4
Age of marriage	18 years	10 years
Husband's initial	SY	PY

## V. DISCUSSION

The husband of the two participants engaged in affairs several times through social media. The introductions of SY (AS' husband) and PY (IM's husband) with their respective affair partners were through social media Facebook. IM initially found out her husband's affair through Facebook as well. The internet gives the possibility to harm marriage and family's ties, norms, and standards of behavior due to the unlimited access and freedom of expression [5]. SY admitted that he had more intense relationships with the other women because he had more intense feelings towards them. As for PY, he had an affair with her cousin because her cousin also had problems with her husband. A type of affair that involves an emotional relationship is called romantic love affair [8]. In this type of affair, there is a tendency to establish a long-term relationship.

IM suspected that the main cause of her husband's infidelity was their financial problem. The financial problem made her husband consumed by overthinking and anxiety and then sought escape by having an affair. Both cases of fidelity happened due to lack of marital satisfaction in their families and studies have found that infidelity positively relates to marital dissatisfaction [11]. Another similarity between SY and PY was that their religiosity was knowingly low when they engaged in affairs. This was indicated by SY's refusal when reminded by AS to worship Allah. SY responded negatively with anger when his wife reminded him to pray. AS for PY, according to IM, PY was lazy to worship Allah and rarely did the five-time daily prayer. Infidelity has been found to have a negative correlation with one's religiosity and self-esteem [11].

After mediation, AS claimed to feel bland in her marriage relationship because she was disappointed, lost her trust to and no longer felt in love with her husband. The same thing happened to IM. After the problem was discovered, IM also felt blandness in her relationship with her husband. She no longer fully believed in what her husband said and her husband behavior including what he did outside the house. She had thought about committing suicide, but her fear was greater than her tendency to commit suicide. It has been found that infidelity can lead to loss of trust, suicide attempts, marital conflict, divorce, and also loss of respect and love [4].

At present, the situation of both participants' households is stable and harmonious again. However, the impact of the infidelity experienced in the household is still felt by AS. Since the affair problem in her family ended, AS actually becomes more irritable and difficult to trust others. AS feels everyone has the intention to do bad to her. She also reported experiencing hallucinations several times. This is also a negative impact of infidelity. Her level of depression increases. According to Gordon, Baucom, and Snyder [18], among negative impacts of an affair for the person being cheated is showing symptoms of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). Besides, he/she can also have a high risk of depression and anxiety [19]. Unfortunately, AS is not willing to consult with experts such as psychologists or psychiatrists, so it is not clear whether or not the symptoms experienced by AS are that of PTSD.

### A. Family Strength in the Case of Infidelity

A positive point for both participants' households in terms of family strength is their ability to maintain their family integrity. According to Afiatin et al., [5] a healthy and strength family is a family that can go through problems or sources of problems and can adapt to all changes that occur. At present, both participants' have been able to get through the source of the problem, the infidelity. Both participants and their families are also able to adapt to new roles and circumstances after the mediation process to create a conducive and harmonious atmosphere

One of AS' efforts to solve the source of the infidelity problem in her marriage was by doing a *rukiah* on her husband. AS conducted the *rukiah* or *ruqyah* with the help of her religious teacher. According to the Great Dictionary of the Indonesian Language [20] *rukiah* is a heart therapy by reading *dhikr* or prayers as the Prophet Muhammad SAW did that serves to ward off evil influences from the heart. *Ruqyah* is classified as one of the various praying methods in Islam. Prayer in Islam refers to a variety of practices which include the ritual prayer, reading the Qur'an for healing (i.e., *ruqyah*), and supplications [21], [22]. In line with the previous Islamic studies, *Ruqyah* refers to therapy with specific procedures using the verses of the Al-Qur'an and prayers ma'tsur from the hadith of the Messenger of Allah that recited to patients. As Islamic psychotherapy, *ruqyah* utilizes the energy of reciting Al-Qur'an that renders curing effect or behavior change for individuals with mental disorders and possessions [23].

As for IM, she tried to improve herself. IM strived to deepen her religious knowledge properly and correctly and strived to be more disciplined in applying her knowledge. IM also learned how to calm herself through the religious knowledge she learned. Studying religious knowledge changed IM and she becomes more sincere in accepting the situation. IM then becomes calmer and less harsh than she used to be, before the initial affair occurred. As IM changes, PY also slowly begins to change.

The turning point of AS' husband's change was after the signing of the letter of agreement. After signing the agreement, SY asked for one year to change himself. SY also tried to no longer be active in social media to avoid external influences that might hinder his attempts to change. The susceptibility to engage in infidelity can be influenced by friendship and social-cultural relationships [10]. As for PY, the turning point of his change was after his second child was admitted to the hospital because of which IM asserted that if PY does not change to a better direction in the next few years, IM will file a divorce.

In general, according to the participants, the key to family strength is mutual understanding, patience, not being selfish by accepting mistakes and not blaming. Family strength must be based on mutual trust between partners. The couples must be dealt with encouraging each other to reduce emotions during their marriage. So when an argument occurs, one of them should be willing to succumb to prevent it from escalating. Having a commitment to maintain the marriage after infidelity through not filling the divorce can be argued as the wives effort in developing her family strength. To restore the situation and conceive what has happened after the affair the couple needs to rebuild

their basis of commitment and build more caring and loving communication [10].

## *B. Family Strength Aspects*

### *1) Appreciation and Affection*

After the affair was resolved, AS and SY gave their time more often for spending time together at home during the office lunch break to have lunch together, for example. Besides, AS tried to not offend her husband. She tries to appreciate her husband's struggle to change for the better. As for IM, she shows affection for her husband by sharing positive energy with him. IM also keep trying to advise and remind her husband when he does things that are inappropriate behavior (i.e., her husband's affair).

AS and IM re-establish an atmosphere that supports harmony in their families. Both of them tried to re-create a positive atmosphere in their family. These factors successfully enable their marriage to survive and regain harmony despite the hard cases they experienced. Olson said [15] that appreciation can be showed by expressing gratitude, building a positive atmosphere, and also helping each other to become better person.

### *2) Commitment*

SY's positive changes made the family even better. SY is currently spending more time at home and is involved in family activities. Previously, he often left home to stayed overnight somewhere. Besides, he is now willing to take a role in domestic chores. This is in line with Olson's family strength theory [15] according to which a strong family is indicated by high commitment between its members. Such a family will spend more time and energy on family activities. This is also true with PY and IM. They spend more time on family activities. They are also actively involved in their children's school activities including in the school events. Also, IM tries to serve his husband wholeheartedly.

### *3) Positive Communication*

SY's treatment toward his wife and children used to be authoritarian. However, since the problem was resolved, SY began to change. Before leaving home for work, SY always says goodbye to his family. He also becomes more humorous towards his family and is willing to back down for the good of his family. Humor benefits the family and make it stronger [15]. As for IM and PY, their communication used to be distanced and rare. After the affair problem was resolved, IM feels to have more time and opportunity to share many things with her husband. Many changes have occurred in PY's behavior because of which his relationship with IM becomes even better. IM feels that, in general, his communication with PY now becomes warmer.

Changes in the communication style in these two subjects help the process of restoring harmony in their family. This is because positive communication has a role and quality that is very important for the family [15]. The communication process itself can build a collaboration in the family to deal with problems so that it can foster family resilience [24].

### *4) Enjoying time together*

Now SY also spends more time with his family. He used to be rarely available for his family so there was no time to

do activities with the family at home. Simple things like watching television together at home, helping with children's schoolwork, and going home during office lunch break turn out to have a significant impact on the harmony of his family. Indeed, families who spend time together and enjoy can be categorized as happy families [15]. Likewise, IM and PY also have an agreement that they must have quality time with the family. It was implemented by IM and PY by having short holiday (e.g., staying in a hotel with the whole family).

### *5) Spiritual Wellbeing*

There were similarities in the behaviors of the two participants during the affair case they experienced. One thing that strengthen both participants is their prayers to Allah. When the case occurred, AS fought against her husband's affair partners by improving herself. The case made AS *hijrah* (transforming oneself religiously) and draw herself closer to Allah. Likewise, after the cases of multiple affairs committed by her husband, IM tried to improve herself and deepen her religious knowledge. IM then tried to *hijrah* too. According to Olson [15], spiritual wellbeing can help humans to overcome problems that are felt to be beyond their capacity to deal with.

Besides, there was a change in both participants' husbands' spiritually. Both SY and PY have an improved spirituality after the affairs were resolved. Previously, both of them were not diligent in worshipping Allah. Now both become better performers in terms of worshipping Allah.

### *6) The ability to cope with stress and crisis*

The success of SY and IM to restore their family harmony despite the affairs SY committed indicates a capability to cope with crises in their family. These participants' experience relates to their family strength. Their ability to deal with infidelity problems is proof of success in terms of family strength [15].

## VI. CONCLUSION

The main effort both participants made when experiencing affair cases was to draw themselves closer to the Creator and tried to improve their quality as a person. Social support also played a significant role for both participants. Both participants have people who help to support their family's strength. Restoring harmony after a storm hits is certainly not easy. It requires collaboration between family members. An effort that was made to make it happen was by making the family members closer to each other. The psychological strength of both participants' family can be seen from the aspects of appreciation and affection, commitment, positive communication, spending time together, spiritual well-being and the ability to deal with stress and crisis.

This study involved two individuals and their significant others. The difficulty in triangulating data to match information from interviews through social media was strongly considered in this study. The data was limited because it could only be accessed via WhatsApp statuses and IM is not a very active social media user.

The findings of this study suggest that long-term impacts, especially psychological ones, can affect the victims of infidelity. Pre-marital counselling is thus

important to be followed by prospective couples who want to get married. Structured premarital counselling that involves both partners can be specified as a prerequisite for marriage. Future studies are expected to be able to obtain more comprehensive data and more diverse participants and explore the causes of infidelity from the perspective of the infidelity perpetrators to get more a comprehensive understanding of the psychological strength of the family in the case of infidelity.

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