

REBUILDING TRUST AFTER MARITAL INFIDELITY: AN ADLERIAN COUPLES THERAPY INTERVENTION

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Abstract: Marital infidelity represents a profound relational injury that can undermine trust, emotional intimacy, equality, and the sense of security within an intimate relationship. The present study examined the potential effectiveness of an Adlerian-based couples therapy intervention among couples who had experienced marital infidelity. An intervention-based design combined quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative component included 34 participants representing 17 married couples. Participants completed the Adlerian Social Interest Scale–Romantic Relationships (ASIS-RR) before and after a structured Adlerian couples therapy program consisting of 6–8 sessions. The qualitative component involved individual interviews before and after the intervention focusing on trust, intimacy, communication, emotions, belonging, self-concept, and forgiveness. Significant improvements were observed in Equality and Reciprocity in the Relationship, Support and Personal Growth, and Shared Activity, Affection, and Intimacy. No statistically significant improvements were observed in Dominance and Control, Suspicious Attitudes Toward the Partner, or Romantic Beliefs. The findings provide preliminary evidence that Adlerian intervention may contribute to improvements in cooperation, mutual support, emotional intimacy, and relational equality following marital betrayal. However, persistent suspicion and established patterns of control may require longer-term therapeutic work. Because the study used a small sample and did not include a control group or long-term follow-up, causal and generalizability conclusions should be drawn cautiously.

Keywords: marital infidelity; betrayal; Adlerian therapy; couples therapy; trust; social interest; intimacy; relationship repair

1. Introduction

Marital infidelity is one of the most significant relational crises experienced by couples. Betrayal may involve sexual or physical involvement outside the relationship, emotional intimacy with another person, concealed digital interactions, or other behaviors that violate the boundaries and expectations established by partners. The discovery of betrayal can disrupt trust, emotional security, communication, and assumptions about intimacy.

Recovery therefore involves more than ending an affair. Couples who remain together must reconstruct a relationship in which transparency, accountability, emotional safety, and trust can gradually be restored. Adlerian theory offers a relational framework for this process through its emphasis on belonging, social interest, equality, cooperation, encouragement, lifestyle, and personal responsibility.

The present study examined whether a structured Adlerian couples therapy intervention was associated with improvements in relational functioning following marital infidelity. The study focused on dimensions of social interest in romantic relationships and explored participants' experiences of trust, intimacy, communication, emotions, self-concept, belonging, and forgiveness.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Infidelity is multidimensional and may be associated with individual, relational, emotional, sexual, social, cultural, and technological factors. Relationship dissatisfaction, emotional disconnection, communication difficulties, attachment insecurity, self-esteem concerns, and opportunities created by digital communication have all been discussed in the literature. These factors provide context for understanding betrayal but do not justify the behavior.

The consequences of infidelity can include anger, anxiety, jealousy, intrusive thoughts, emotional insecurity, damaged self-worth, and difficulties trusting the partner. Trust reconstruction is consequently a gradual process involving accountability, transparency, empathy, consistent behavior, and renewed relational agreements.

Adlerian theory conceptualizes individuals as socially embedded and motivated by belonging and significance. Lifestyle, private logic, inferiority and compensation, encouragement, cooperation, and social interest are central concepts. In couples therapy, these concepts allow clinicians to examine recurring patterns of control, withdrawal, criticism, avoidance, and power struggle while maintaining personal responsibility for betrayal.

An Adlerian approach does not excuse infidelity. Instead, it seeks to understand the psychological and relational purposes that may have contributed to the behavior and to redirect maladaptive goals toward cooperation, equality, responsibility, and belonging. Encouragement is particularly relevant because it can help the injured partner rebuild courage and self-worth

while helping the unfaithful partner move from shame and defensiveness toward accountability and repair.

3. Method

The study employed an intervention-based pre–post design with quantitative and qualitative components. The quantitative sample included 34 participants representing 17 married couples who had experienced marital infidelity. The dissertation reports on a priori power analysis using $\alpha = .05$, power = .80, and an estimated effect size of .50, yielding a required sample of 34 participants.

Couples participated in 6–8 Adlerian couples therapy sessions conducted by the researcher in her professional role as a certified Adlerian couples therapist. The intervention focused on communication, trust reconstruction, understanding the effects of infidelity, emotional intimacy, equality, cooperation, responsibility, and relational belonging.

The principal quantitative measure was the Adlerian Social Interest Scale–Romantic Relationships (ASIS-RR), developed by Kalkan (2009). The study examined six conceptual dimensions: Equality and Reciprocity in the Relationship; Support and Personal Growth; Shared Activity, Affection, and Intimacy; Dominance and Control; Negative or Suspicious Attitudes Toward the Partner; and Romantic Beliefs.

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted before and after the intervention. Interview questions addressed trust, intimacy, communication, emotions, self-concept, belonging, and forgiveness. Qualitative material was analyzed thematically. Quantitative data were analyzed using repeated-measures general linear model procedures.

4. Results

The quantitative findings indicated significant pre–post improvements in three dimensions of relational functioning: Equality and Reciprocity in the Relationship, Support and Personal Growth, and Shared Activity, Affection, and Intimacy.

No statistically significant improvements were observed in Dominance and Control, Negative or Suspicious Attitudes Toward the Partner, or Romantic Beliefs. The persistence of suspicious attitudes is clinically meaningful because suspicion following betrayal may function as a

protective response to a genuine violation of trust. Similarly, established patterns of control may reflect longstanding relational and lifestyle patterns that require more extended intervention.

The qualitative component complemented the quantitative findings by emphasizing trust, communication, emotional safety, belonging, intimacy, responsibility, and forgiveness as central elements of recovery. The therapeutic process was characterized by movement from discouragement and blame toward greater responsibility, transparency, and cooperation.

5. Discussion

The findings provide preliminary evidence that an Adlerian couples therapy intervention may contribute to improvements in several important dimensions of relational functioning following marital infidelity. The strongest changes occurred in equality and reciprocity, support and personal growth, and shared activity, affection, and intimacy. These domains correspond closely with Adlerian principles of cooperation, social interest, encouragement, and belonging.

Improvement in emotional intimacy is particularly relevant because betrayal disrupts assumptions of relational safety. Structured therapeutic work may help couples gradually re-establish emotional connection through mutual respect, equality, encouragement, and cooperative behavior.

The improvement in equality and reciprocity is also consistent with the Adlerian emphasis on nonhierarchical relationships. After betrayal, injured partners may seek control to restore safety, while the unfaithful partner may become defensive. Therapy can help interrupt this cycle by emphasizing responsibility and mutual respect.

The absence of significant change in suspicious attitudes suggests that trust reconstruction may proceed at different rates across relational domains. Improved communication and intimacy may occur before hypervigilance and suspicion decline. Likewise, dominance and control may be more resistant to a brief intervention because they may reflect longstanding lifestyle patterns.

The findings should not be interpreted as demonstrating superiority of Adlerian therapy over other evidence-based approaches. The design did not include a control or comparison group,

and the sample was small. The results are therefore best understood as preliminary evidence warranting further controlled investigation.

6. Clinical Implications

Clinicians working with couples after infidelity should prioritize emotional and relational safety rather than treating forgiveness or reconciliation as immediate goals. The partner who violated the relationship must assume responsibility, while the injured partner should be given space to process anger, grief, uncertainty, and loss of trust.

Adlerian encouragement may be useful in reducing discouragement and defensiveness. The injured partner can be supported in rebuilding self-worth and agency, while the unfaithful partner can be guided toward accountability, empathy, transparency, and reparative behavior. Therapists should also recognize that intimacy, equality, suspicion, and control may change at different rates and may require different therapeutic strategies and durations.

7. Limitations

The study has several limitations. The sample was relatively small and consisted of 34 participants, limiting statistical power and generalizability. Outcomes were assessed immediately after the intervention, preventing conclusions about long-term maintenance. The study relied substantially on self-report measures, which may be influenced by social desirability and recall. The qualitative component was based on a single case study and therefore cannot represent all couples recovering from infidelity. Most importantly, the intervention was not compared with a control or alternative treatment condition, preventing causal conclusions regarding the specific efficacy of Adlerian therapy. Finally, cultural values concerning marriage, gender roles, family cohesion, forgiveness, and infidelity may influence therapeutic outcomes and limit cross-cultural generalizability.

8. Conclusion

Marital infidelity is a profound relational injury requiring sustained processes of accountability, transparency, emotional responsiveness, and trust reconstruction. The present study suggests that an Adlerian couples therapy intervention may contribute to improvements in equality and reciprocity, support and personal growth, and shared activity, affection, and intimacy following betrayal. At the same time, persistent suspicion and control may require longer-term therapeutic work.

The study offers preliminary empirical support for further investigation of Adlerian couples therapy as an approach to relationship repair after infidelity. Larger randomized and longitudinal studies are needed to establish the durability, generalizability, and specificity of these findings.

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