

Parental Influence and Adult Marital Fidelity: A Case Study on Intergenerational Transmission of Relationship Behaviors

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Abstract. This qualitative case study explores the impact of a deviant mother and a non-deviant father on adult marital fidelity influenced by social norms. Focusing on a 50-year-old Han Chinese woman, this study applies Narrative Analysis, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, and the Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI) to the results of semi-structured interviews. The current case study exposes the complexity of linking parental behavior and adult relational outcomes. The father's passive, non-deviant role provided moral grounding but inadequately counterbalanced the mother's influence. Exposure to maternal infidelity led to emotional instability and fear of repeating deviant patterns. Surprisingly, PBI results indicated optimal parenting for both parents, contrasting with the participant's emotional experiences and highlighting quantitative evaluations' limitations in capturing intricate family dynamics. This study enriches attachment and social learning theories by demonstrating how different parental behaviors influence intimate relationships in adulthood. It underscores the need for nuanced theoretical frameworks accounting for complex family situations and gender dynamics in intergenerational transmission of relationship behaviors. Despite its single-case design, this research offers valuable insights into the psychological mechanisms underlying adult infidelity. It provides direction for future studies and therapeutic interventions, emphasizing the enduring impact of childhood experiences on adult relationships and the importance of considering multifaceted family influences in understanding relational patterns.

Keywords: parenting styles, marital infidelity, deviant behavior, attachment theory, family dynamics.

1. Introduction

According to psychology and sociological research, deviant and non-deviant parenting behaviors contribute much to the growth and interactions of children. Deviant conduct refers to behavior contrary to social norms; examples include infidelity. In light of this, non-deviant actions often refer to those behaviors that characterize commitment and social expectations. These activities have been researched to understand how children's personality, relationship decision-making, and growth are affected.

Prior studies primarily looked at factors that impacted children's views and reactions to parental conduct. Thorson focused on the significance of apologies, empathy, and attributions to infidelity

and investigated adult children's forgiveness of an unfaithful parent. As grown-up children attempted to maintain familial unity, a comprehensive apology increased the likelihood of forgiveness, though it was generally not explicitly stated[1]. In addition, in parenting, according to Yaffe, mothers are frequently viewed as more authoritative—responsive, supporting, and controlling, while fathers are often viewed as authoritarian, emphasizing discipline and compliance[2]. However, we also need to focus on how fathers and mothers divide up the parenting of their children. Collett et al. argue that persistent parental inequalities, particularly fathers' lack of involvement, can be attributed to ambiguous identity standards associated with "new fatherhood." They argue that men with ambiguous identity norms about fatherhood are more likely to experience "self-discrepancy," with less commitment to fatherhood and less contribution to childcare[3]. These studies support complementary parenting techniques and suggest that society's gender norms shape parental responsibilities.

By looking at how people interpret romantic infidelity through the lens of narrative identity, Wilkinson and Dunlop made significant progress in the study. Because people who frequently explore and reflect on their encounters have better emotional outcomes, narrative style significantly impacts personality development and psychological well-being[4]. On the other hand, infidelity is also associated with attachment. According to Russell et al., attachment anxiety in either spouse increases the risk of infidelity, which may be due to unmet needs for intimacy[5]. However, these studies did not thoroughly examine the effects of social norms on deviant and non-deviant parental behaviors, nor how these activities affect a child's potential connections, particularly those involving marital infidelity.

To fill research gaps, this study aims to examine how a child's marital infidelity in adulthood is affected by being raised by a deviant mother and a non-deviant father, both influenced by social norms. This study hypothesizes that children exposed to parental infidelity may develop conflicting relationship models in adulthood. Precisely, we predict that exposure to parental infidelity will correlate with ambivalent attitudes toward fidelity in adult relationships. Furthermore, these individuals may exhibit a paradoxical behavioral pattern characterized by heightened vigilance against infidelity in their partners while simultaneously showing an increased likelihood of engaging in unfaithful behaviors themselves.

To examine these processes, this study incorporated Narrative Analysis (NA) and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) into a qualitative case study design. Data collection includes comprehensive, semi-structured conversations in conjunction with the Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI), which offers a quantitative assessment of parenting approaches. The inclusion of NA allowed the study to understand better how the interviewees' stories were shaped by the social environment in which they lived, and it was also an excellent analytical method for analyzing and researching the "How" question[6]. Also, when exploring highly significant life events, such as major transitions, relationship shifts, health challenges, or other emotionally charged experiences, IPA is particularly effective as a research method[7]. Parker et al. designed PBI to measure perceived parental care and overprotection, including questions such as: "Did your mother speak to you in a gentle and friendly tone?" (care) and "Did your father try to control everything you did?" (overprotection)[8]. The PBI benefits will provide additional perspective to the narrative information about the user's experience with deviant and non-deviant actions in categorizing parents' parenting styles. In addition, through a two-decade-long follow-up, Wilhelm et al. suggest that people's perceptions of their early parenting experiences are relatively stable over time and are not significantly influenced by emotions, life events, or other factors[9]. This means that the use of PBI in this study can be a true reflection of the parenting styles experienced by the respondents during their childhood.

The interview aims to understand the participant's childhood, relationships with their parents, and how they view loyalty in their grown-up years. Some key questions include:

“Tell me about a time when something your mom did made you feel torn or conflicted emotionally.”

“What was your father's reaction to your mother's conduct, and what impact did that have on you?”

“In what ways do you believe your parents' relationship has shaped your perspectives on marital fidelity?”

The organized yet adaptable interview approach invites the participant to examine particular examples and broader insights into the impact of parental behaviors on their emotional and psychological growth. The amalgamation of narrative descriptions and psychological assessments will yield a thorough understanding of how early life experiences influence adult marital dynamics, especially with infidelity.

This study enhances the field by addressing the shortcomings of prior research, namely the need for more emphasis on the interaction between social norms, deviant and non-deviant behaviors, and parenting methods, providing a more nuanced comprehension of these dynamics. This research emphasizes the psychological processes by which abnormal parental actions may affect future marital faithfulness, in contrast to earlier studies that mainly concentrated on forgiveness or general parenting disparities. The PBI enhances methodological rigor by offering quantitative insights about caring approaches, which are cross-referenced with qualitative narrative data for a more comprehensive study.

This study strengthens the comprehension of how parental effects, molded by social standards, impact adult relationships. The results have considerable significance for psychological theory and practice, providing insights into the risk variables associated with marital infidelity and potential prevention measures. This research examines the interaction between deviant and non-deviant parental behaviors, social norms, and adult relationship outcomes, providing therapeutic advice and enhanced understanding of family dynamics to inform future studies on the subject.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

For this research, this study has chosen to spotlight one particular case: Hua Li (Pseudonym), a 50-year-old woman of Han Chinese descent. What makes her story stand out is her family dynamic. Li's mother often acted in ways that went against social norms, while her father was more subdued and typically followed societal expectations. By looking closely at Li's experiences, I hoped to understand how parents' actions and society's rules affect a person's views on staying faithful in marriage later in life.

2.2. Design and procedure

In order to gain a fuller understanding of Li's upbringing and its impact on her relationship in adulthood, this study adopted a qualitative case study design, incorporating narrative analysis (NA) and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Through a semi-structured interview format, the study focused on exploring the participant's childhood experiences, particularly the parts related to parental behavior and her perceptions of infidelity in adulthood. All interviews were audio-recorded to allow for exhaustive analysis.

To quantitatively analyze Li's perceptions of their parents' caregiving styles, the study used the Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI). The scale helped us to categorize participants' descriptions of parental behavior, such as overprotection, neglect, or emotional warmth, thus providing a powerful addition to the qualitative data. Given that this study focused on generating rich personal stories and analyzing the parent-child relationship in depth, I did not introduce experimental manipulations or specific tasks.

2.3. Materials

During the interviews, the researcher recorded the dialogue using an audio recording device and translated it using speech-to-text technology, subsequently calibrated for accuracy. In addition to the interview data, this study quantitatively assessed Li's perceptions of their mothers' and fathers' caregiving styles in the early years of their lives using the Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI).

2.4. Data analysis

This study used two significant approaches to make sense of the transcribed interviews. First, it applied NA to explore how Li constructed her life story about social norms. The current study also employed IPA further to explore her subjective experiences and emotional interpretations of experiences. Using these approaches jointly allows this study to better understand the psychological consequences of her father's passive role and her mother's deviant behavior.

This study also used the PBI as a second form of criteria to further contextualize Li's perceptions of her parents' parenting styles. Although the PBI provided some quantitative criteria, Narrative Analysis remained the principal method for this study. This approach allows the detailing of rich, complex emotional and psychological patterns that cannot be provided by statistical significance alone.

3. Results

The interview results revealed multiple core themes related to Li's mother's infidelity and father's passive, non-deviant roles. At the same time, the quantitative data provided by the Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI) provided valuable insights into parenting styles that are considered more desirable based on the criteria of the Chinese version of the assessment form[10].

3.1. Impact of the mother's infidelity

The participant frequently referred to instances where her mother's infidelity was explicitly integrated into the home environment concerning how she was affected by her mother's extramarital affairs. One of her significant lines, "My mother did get her lover home, and it made me feel ashamed and uneasy. (personal communication, September 9, 2024)" She also described how her mother's activities caused the household to experience emotional instability: "My mother's infidelity caused me to feel that there was no protection. (personal communication, September 9, 2024)" The interviewee usually cited her family's daily activities as a source of stress, a concept that persisted throughout the discussion.

In addition to the narrative data, the participant's mother received a care score of 30 and an overprotection score of -10 from the Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI). According to the analysis needs and the PBI's Chinese scale, these results indicate that her mother practiced optimal parenting regarding care and protection.

3.2. The father's passive role

Li described her father as a steadfast, non-deviant person who, despite his moral grounding, could not struggle or control the situation. She remarked, "My father was typically faithful, but he never had the will to stop my mother's behavior. (personal communication, September 9, 2024)" She described his passivity in dealing with the family's problems, mentioning that "he merely accepted all without requiring her or trying to protect us. (personal communication, September 9, 2024)" His lack of authority and personal appearance was frequently made known, and the family's position was consistently depicted as passive.

According to the Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI), the father received an overprotection score of -11 and a care score of 28. According to the Chinese PBI scale, based on these results, his silent role also practiced optimal parenting regarding care and protection.

3.3. Fear of repeating maternal patterns

Li's problem of succeeding in her mother's feet, particularly in terms of infidelity, was another significant idea. She continued, "I often worry that I may be like her, even though I am determined not to. (personal communication, September 9, 2024)" She explained how her mother's behavior had heightened her awareness of the risks of infidelity in her associations, which persisted throughout. She said, "I watch myself closely, trying not to imitate what I saw rising off. (personal communication, September 9, 2024)" Still, Li was honest with me about several of her near-imminent affairs. In describing these events, she also repeatedly referred to her inner fear.

3.4. Emotional conflict around fidelity

Li often considered the inner emotional conflict brought on by fidelity-related issues. "I am constantly looking for possible cross a line or permitting someone to get close," she said (personal communication, September 9, 2024). She also mentioned how difficult it was to navigate relationships while being hyper-aware of her upbringing's results and how this feeling of discord was a recurring fashion. Another quotation that illustrates this emotional struggle is cited as follows: "The fact that I cannot completely relax in a relationship because I am constantly unsure whether I should act the way my mother did. (personal communication, September 9, 2024)"

Integrating qualitative and quantitative research methods improves our interpretation of the participant's understanding of fidelity, relationships, and parental influence. Despite the optimal parenting classification for both parents based on the PBI results, Li's narrative revealed significant emotional conflicts, particularly concerning her family's deviant behavior and its prolonged-term impact.

4. Analysis

4.1. Integration of methods

By combining NA and IPA, I can examine Li's narrative structure and her more profound emotional responses to her upbringing. The PBI results provide additional context for these analyses by defining optimal parenting styles in contrast to the participant's emotional experiences with her father's passivity and mother's infidelity.

Li's account of her mother's infidelity dominates NA. She describes fragile situations, such as her mother's explicit entry of a lover into the house. According to the PBI results, her mother's

parenting is efficient regarding care and overprotection, which suggests that her mother provided ample emotional support from a prepared analysis view. Despite the difference between interest and infidelity, the story reveals a deeper emotional conflict: Li views her family's behavior as a source of instability and emotional deception.

Through IPA, this study examines how Li feels about this strain personally. She fears duplicating her mother's activities even though she recognizes her commitment to stop it. She continues, "I am frequently concerned that I may be like her, despite my best efforts not to. (personal communication, September 9, 2024)" Her subjugation to her mother's deviant behavior reveals a deep-rooted psychological conflict, likely to be the source of her fear, in contrast to her imagined notions of what parental treatment may be as her mother's optimal parenting. This suggests that while care was provided in some ways, it was overshadowed by the mental stress brought on by the mother's extramarital affairs.

In NA, Li mentions her father as a moral man who helped her develop a grounded and strong sense of healthy morality. However, because of his conformity, he was also unable to face and control the loss of control in his marriage. According to Li, who regularly refers to her father as a source of moral support, "he never had the authority to stop or interfere with my mother's behavior. (personal communication, September 9, 2024)" Due to the father's role as a stabilizer, highlighted in this story, Li experiences unsettling feelings of frustration and helplessness. According to the PBI results, her father's care score of 28 and overprotection record of -11 also suggest optimal parenting despite his perceived failure to assert authority or support the mental well-being of the family.

Through IPA, Li's response to the passivity of her family is explored. She reconsiders how her father's inability to act left her without a reliable model for dealing with emotional issues in relationships. Her problems with intimacy and loyalty are evidence of this, as she points out, "There is a part of me that is always on guard, afraid that I might cross a line or allow someone to get too close. (personal communication, September 9, 2024)" Despite being technically regarded as optimal parenting in terms of care, her father's calm side left private spaces in the child's development, according to the entrenched issue. The difference between the PBI's optimum categorization and Li's emotional response highlights how difficult parental responsibilities play in shaping children's social designs as they age.

4.2. Cross-referencing themes

Numerous cross-referenced components in both NA and IPA reveal unsettled emotional tension, turmoil, and pain related to Li's upbringing.

Effects of Maternal Infidelity: In NA, Li's profile of her family's infidelity is described as a source of emotional turmoil, particularly in terms of how it affected the family's sense of security and stability. The family's optimal parenting record contrasts with her story, causing a disconnect between the structured assessment of care and the emotional instability described by Li. Through IPA, this conflict is reflected in her solid horror of repeating her mother's conduct, which suggests the participant had internalized both care and betrayal from her mother.

Father's Passive Role: When telling her story, Li paints a picture of her father as a good man who did not speak up much, mainly when family problems arose. The Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI) shows he was a caring parent, but when we look deeper into Li's personal experiences, we see she is disappointed by his lack of action. Li feels torn—she loves her dad for being loyal but wishes he had done more. This has made Li question the limits of relationships and personal influence.

Fear of Recurring Patterns: One of the most prominent themes when analyzing Li's personal experiences is her fear of being unfaithful like her mother. This worry is tied to her parent's

behavior: her mom's actions outside social norms and her dad's reluctance to step in. These experiences left Li emotionally exposed, a feeling stuck with her into adulthood. Even though the PBI suggests both parents were great caregivers on paper, Li's actual life has been entirely of inner conflict. She is determined not to let her past shape her future relationships.

4.3. Conclusion

Li's relationship with her parents is complicated. The figures from the PBI seemed to show that Li's mother and father practiced optimal parenting. However, Li's account and deep feelings tell a different story.

Take her mother, for example. The PBI described her as being caring and overprotective. However, in Li's personal experience, we found it was because of the emotional betrayal caused by her mother's unfaithfulness, emotional. PBI stated that her father was caring; however, Li's story showed much frustration. His tendency to be quiet left Li feeling stuck in things she could not change.

This research captures a discrepancy between what tests like the PBI show and individuals' feelings while growing up in complex families. Li's case is an example of how parents' interactions may shape children's coping skills with relationships, trust, and fidelity later in life. It reminds us that, all too often, there is more to the story than formal measures can survey.

5. General discussion

This case study tried to explore how being brought up by a socially standardized deviant mother and a non-deviant father influenced the predisposition towards marital infidelity in adulthood. The findings of the present case study have highlighted the hitherto unexplored relationship between parental behavior, social norms, and adult emotional consequences, providing critical insight into how deviant and non-deviant parental behaviors pattern a child's future relationship dynamics concerning infidelity.

The findings suggest that parental behavior and child-rearing practices played a leading role in influencing adult behavior, particularly regarding intimate relationships. Li's mental distress was bolstered by the conflicting parental models of a deviant mother and a non-deviant father, which gave rise to concern about intimate relationships. Whereas Li's mother certainly acted deviantly—her infidelity, in essence, normalizing these unconventional patterns of relationships for her father himself was not deviant and, therefore, was a juxtaposed model of stability. This minor dilemma caused an inner conflict within Li, which could be described as a fear of reciting deviant behavior into action and a need for stability and mental connection.

These studies expand existing research by growing on attachment and social learning theories, which assume that early relationships shape adult behaviors. Although these theories have traditionally focused on consistent parental models, my study highlights the impact of contradicting parental effects, proposing that future research include more nuanced theories to account for the richness of growing up with deviant and non-deviant family models.

On the other hand, one of the essential aspects of this study is the gender dynamics involved in Li's experiences. Her social identity norms-influenced assimilation of her mother's deviant behavior was mainly evident. Her mother's deviant behavior appeared to conflict with traditional gender roles, which often call for people to be loyal and caring. In contrast, her father's non-deviant behavior adhered more closely to social expectations for male stability. This suggests that gender has a significant influence on how parental activities are perceived and internalized, which may lead

to a variety of psychological outcomes. If the gender roles had been reversed, the participant's experiences and inner conflicts might have differed. These results demonstrate that gender must be considered when examining the intergenerational transmission of relationship behaviors.

It, therefore, appears that the findings support the notion of intricate and complex mechanisms underlying how both deviant and non-deviant parental behavior influences adult infidelity. In other words, Li's exposure to maternal deviant behavior-especially with regards to the normalization of infidelity-would seem to have brought aspects of emotional vulnerability and fear of betrayal into her adult relationships in the first instance. However, her father's stable but passive behavior cannot balance out her mother, leaving Li without a robust framework for resolving social conflicts and setting boundaries.

Whereas Li gave an emotional account of his upbringing, the PBI results pointed to both parents having optimally taken care of him. This sets a limitation for quantitative use outside of its contextual environment; even though the parents can technically be considered good enough care providers based on the PBI, the participant's living experience was one of turmoil and inner turmoil. This suggests that even if standardized measures give optimal parenting, experiences for individuals reared in such contexts can be far more complex and emotionally variant.

This analysis underlines the complex relationship between structured parenting assessments and the subjective emotional realities of individuals who grow up in difficult family situations. It further highlights the strong influences that parental behaviors have on adult relationships, trust, and fidelity, putting into perspective a holistic approach to understanding how the long-term effects of childhood experiences weigh on adult behavior.

Admittedly, this is a limited study, relying upon only one case. Since the qualitative case study method provides an in-depth investigation into the participant's experiences, by its very nature, it reduces the generalizability of the findings. Future studies should involve larger sample sizes and multiple cases to understand better how these dynamics interact within different settings and groups. The other area needing further research is the cultural aspects. Cross-cultural research efforts could provide handy insights into how the depth to which parental roles and behaviors, as they become the social norms, affect the development of later relationship behaviors during adulthood.

Further, the use of self-reported data, particularly in sensitive domains such as parental marital infidelity and personal relationships, may introduce bias either due to memory effects or in a social desirability direction. A future study might avoid these limitations by employing mixed-method approaches, combining qualitative interviews with quantitative measures such as the PBI, and using associated data modeling to provide comprehensive insights.

One major limitation of this study was the preexisting relationship between the researcher and the participant, which could impact the data collection and interpretation processes. Although ethical guidelines have been followed, future studies should consider third-party interviews or other strategies for minimizing bias.

Although the case study approach has obvious limitations, it provides considerable insight into perspectives that may have needed to be addressed if longer statistical analyses had been used. Further research is therefore suggested to extend these findings through more substantial and broader samples, held for cross-cultural differences, and also using mixed-method approaches to comprehend better psychological processes underpinning adult infidelity. This paper underlines how therapeutic intervention is essential for early family dynamics, especially when conflict between parental models has created a significant impact.

Conclusively, this study furthers our understanding of how family influences shape adult relationships and provides implications for preventing and treating adult relationship problems. It

underlines the complex interplay between parental behavior, childhood experiences, and adult relationship outcomes, pointing to the need for nuanced approaches both in research and clinical practice.

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