



Marital Infidelity among Married Couples: Roles of Emotional Intelligence and Narcissistic Personality Traits in Makurdi, Benue State

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Abstract

This study investigated emotional intelligence and narcissistic personality traits as predictors of marital infidelity in Makurdi Metropolis Benue State. Two hundred married couples from the area, who had been married for up to five years (2018 - 2022), participated in this cross-sectional research. The sample consisted of 96 (48%) males and 104 (52%) females, with an average mean age of $X=2.64$, and standard deviation of $SD=.80850$. The Brief Emotional Intelligence Scale, Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (HSNS), and Marital Infidelity Scale (MIS) were used for data collection. Simple linear and multiple linear regression analysis were employed to test three hypotheses. The results indicated that emotional intelligence significantly predicted marital infidelity among married couples in Makurdi Metropolis [$R=.418$, $R^2=.174$ $F(1,194) = 40.973$, $p<.01$]. Similarly, narcissistic personality traits significantly predicted marital infidelity among couples in the same area [$R=.418$, $R^2=.174$ $F(1,194) = 40.973$, $p<.01$]. Additionally, the combination of emotional intelligence and narcissistic personality traits had a significant predictive influence on marital infidelity [$R = .435$, $R^2 = .189$, $F(2,187) = 21.627$ $p<.01$]. Based on these findings, it is recommended that couples improve on willingness to communicate - communication skills and understanding of each other's emotions is very important before making and taking any actions. This can help navigate conflicts and challenges more effectively. Marital Institutions can offer comprehensive pre-marital counselling programs that include discussions on emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and relationship expectations.

Key words: Emotional Intelligence; marital Infidelity; narcissistic; Personality Traits; stress

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1. Introduction

Marriage stands as an essential pillar in contemporary society, so much so that for many individuals, the notion of not marrying is scarcely even considered a viable option for life (Meki & Zirima, 2018). Yet, the institution of marriage has undergone significant evolution over time, particularly concerning its durability and the adherence to marital vows by partners. Traditionally, across numerous cultures, marriage has been viewed as a lifelong union (Norona et al., 2018). Implicit within most marital commitments is the expectation of faithfulness, with the understanding that marriage vows inherently entail a pledge to forsake all others (Onah, 2020). When this commitment is broken, it constitutes infidelity within the marriage. Infidelity, commonly referred to as cheating, primarily denotes a breach of the expectation of sexual exclusivity. It encompasses various behaviours, including engaging in affairs, extramarital relationships, sexual intercourse, oral sex, kissing, fondling, emotional connections beyond friendship, maintaining close friendships, involvement in internet relationships, and the use of pornography (Ramgoolam, 2015).

Across cultures, intimate relationships typically involve an explicit or implicit expectation of exclusivity, particularly regarding matters of sexuality. Infidelity is characterized as a breach of trust, manifesting as unreliability and the act of cheating on a committed partner, despite an agreement of exclusivity (Onah, 2020). Within the context of marriage, sexual infidelity is commonly labelled as philandering, adultery, or having an affair (Atkins et al., 2005). What constitutes infidelity varies across cultures and depends on the specific dynamics of the relationship between individuals (Holmes et al., 2018). Even in open relationships, actions outside of the agreed-upon boundaries can still be perceived as infidelity. Various studies have delved into the topic of infidelity, classifying them into eight distinct groups as illustrated in Figure 1, which will be further explored in the subsequent section (Knopp et al., 2017).

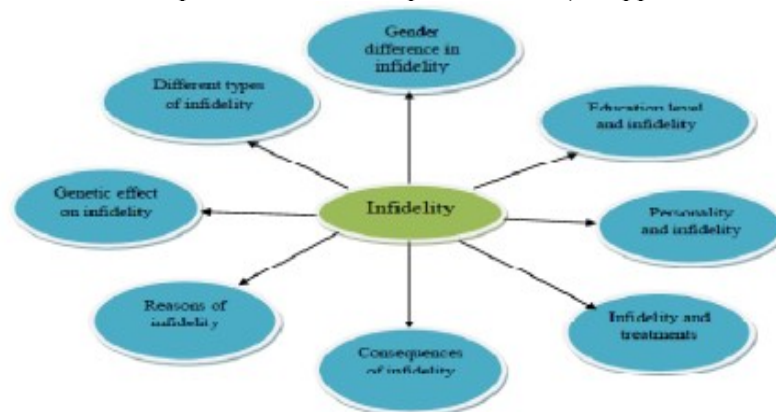


Figure 1: Different groups of studies on infidelity

Infidelity is prevalent, with estimates suggesting it occurs in 20% to 40% of marriages in America (Atkins et al., 2001). This indicates a significant number of individuals who find themselves emotionally entangled with partners who are unfaithful. Interestingly, research reveals that 90% of cheating spouses do not go on to marry their affair partners (Arnett, 2015). Moreover, for the cheating spouse, the option of seeking couple therapy exists, which has been demonstrated to aid in rebuilding the marriage post-affair (Marín et al., 2014). However, this leaves 90% of the “other” partners without support. Surprisingly, there is a dearth of research on the psychological

impact of being the “other” person in an adulterous relationship (Benoit, 2015). Further studies have illuminated that individuals with maladaptive attachment styles are more inclined to engage in infidelity (DeWall et al., 2011).

Through eight comprehensive studies, DeWall and colleagues (2011) investigated the link between avoidant attachment, infidelity, and commitment. Their findings revealed a positive correlation between an avoidant attachment style and infidelity, mediated by levels of commitment. Avoidantly-attached partners tended to exhibit lower levels of commitment, leaving unanswered questions regarding the effects on the “other” partner. For instance, if the “other” partner holds high expectations for the relationship, they may ultimately be disappointed due to the avoidantly-attached partner's low commitment levels. Infidelity is also associated with narcissism, low relationship commitment, impulsivity, and alcohol/substance use (Atkins et al., 2005). Additionally, it has been found to be positively correlated with one's narcissism while negatively correlated with one's sexual satisfaction in marriage (McNulty & Widman, 2014). Narcissistic individuals, known for their charm and social adeptness, may not encounter difficulty in finding alternative partners (Atkins et al., 2010).

However, the impact of a narcissistic personality on the relationship with the other partner remains largely unexplored. Given narcissists' ability to manipulate others for personal gain, the consequences of their deception on the other partner remain unclear (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In today's global landscape, the frequency of divorce cases is on the rise, underscoring the instability within marital institutions among couples. As highlighted by Kaytez (2020), divorce rates have steadily climbed worldwide, juxtaposed with a decline in marriage rates. Similarly, in Malaysia, the number of divorce cases increased by 0.1 per cent from 203,741 in 2017 to 206,253 in 2018 (Dato' Sri, & Mohd, 2019). Numerous factors influence marital well-being and the likelihood of divorce, including education, gender, socioeconomic status, commitment, communication within the marriage, conflict resolution, the presence of children, and sexual dynamics. Additionally, the role of emotional intelligence emerges as a significant aspect deserving further and more attentions. According to the ability theory, emotional intelligence encompasses a set of cognitive skills that enable individuals to perceive, utilise, interpret, and regulate emotions, thereby facilitating adaptation to various environments (Antoñanzas, 2017). It comprises four primary abilities: the perception and expression of emotions, emotional enhancement of cognition, emotional comprehension, and emotional regulation (Anghel, 2016).

Emotional Intelligence (EI) essentially integrates cognitive and affective states of mind, blending intelligence with emotion. It entails the capacity to recognise, manage, and appraise emotions. While some researchers propose that emotional intelligence can be cultivated and strengthened, others argue that it is an innate trait. Various assessment tools have been developed to gauge emotional intelligence, each with differing content and methodologies (Antoñanzas, 2017). High emotional intelligence is believed to empower individuals to effectively express their emotions in a constructive manner and comprehend the emotions of those they interact with, thereby enriching interpersonal relationships and enhancing performance, particularly in the workplace (Wicks et al., 2018). Emotional Intelligence is not synonymous with being soft; it represents a distinct form of intelligence, enabling individuals to harness their emotions to make informed decisions in the moment and exert more effective control over themselves and their impact on others. It empowers individuals to think more creatively and leverage their emotions to address challenges (Elhaj, 2015). Emotional Intelligence shares some overlap with general intelligence but is distinguished by its focus on utilising emotions to navigate life effectively. An emotionally intelligent individual excels in four key areas: identifying emotions, utilising emotions, understanding emotions, and regulating emotions (Shuib et al., 2018). Consequently, it is evident that emotional intelligence significantly influences marriage and is closely linked to a couple's satisfaction with their relationship (Abbasi et al., 2016), and infidelity. Numerous studies have underscored the positive correlation between emotional intelligence and marital satisfaction

among married couples (Abbasi et al., 2016; Anghel, 2016; Yediri & Hamart, 2015). For instance, research by Abbasi et al. (2016) highlighted a substantial positive relationship between emotional intelligence and marital satisfaction, identifying it as a critical factor in fostering marital contentment. Similarly, a study conducted by Eslami et al. (2014) revealed a significant positive correlation between emotional intelligence and marital satisfaction among 226 married individuals in Iran.

The findings indicated that individuals with higher emotional intelligence demonstrated better social coordination, greater self-control, enhanced social skills, more cooperative interactions, closer relationships, and ultimately, greater marital satisfaction. Furthermore, studies by Anghel (2016) and Yedirir and Hamarta (2015) revealed a significant positive association between emotional intelligence and marital satisfaction among married couples in Europe, conducted in Romania and Turkey, respectively. It is noteworthy that men and women in stable relationships exhibit notable differences in how they balance personal emotions. Anghel (2016) suggests that happiness, emotional awareness, and self-actualisation are closely linked to marital satisfaction. This may stem from the understanding that successful intimate relationships necessitate strong communication skills, including attentiveness to one's partner's perspective, empathetic understanding of their experiences, and sensitivity to their needs.

This underscores the idea that educational intelligence alone may not ensure marital success in the long term; other qualities, such as emotional intelligence, are vital for fostering healthy human relationships and achieving success in life. Additionally, changes in family structures, such as the shift from joint to nuclear families (Onah & Oladejo, 2023) was found to have been linked to increased infidelity and divorce rates (Soman et al., 2016). Career pressures, conflicting work schedules leading to limited time spent together, behavioural issues, changing lifestyles, and growing independence further contribute to marital challenges. Women, empowered by increased education and job security, may seek legal recourse to exit unfulfilling marriages (Gandhi, 2017).

In the realm of personality psychology, factorial research has increasingly focused on the general factorial model of personality structure and its influence on emotional responses and interactions, known as the "Five Factor Model" or the Big Five. This model identifies five broad dimensions or super-factors of personality: Extraversion, Neuroticism, Conscientiousness, Openness to Experience, and Agreeableness (Roberts et al., 2006). Extraversion pertains to engagement with the external world, with introverts exhibiting opposite traits such as reticence and lower energy levels. Agreeableness encompasses personal characteristics related to social harmony and cooperation (Josiah et al., 2019). One personality dimension associated with valuing understanding and kindness toward others is Agreeableness (A). Individuals or couples high in Agreeableness are often described as friendly, compassionate, and willing to compromise, demonstrating a genuine concern for the well-being of those around them and spouse. Conversely, Conscientiousness (C) reflects how couples regulate their impulses and demonstrate self-discipline. Conscientious couples are known for their reliability, persistence, and ability to effectively plan and execute tasks, making them dependable and goal-oriented. Neuroticism (N) captures the tendency for couples to experience negative emotional states such as anxiety, depression, and anger. Those high in Neuroticism may be more prone to intense emotional reactions and perceive ordinary situations as threatening. Openness to Experience (O) describes a cognitive style that distinguishes between couples who are conventional and those who are imaginative and open-minded. High scorers in Openness are often curious, creative, and receptive to new ideas and experiences, while those low in this trait may prefer familiarity and resist change. Narcissism, characterised by an excessive focus on oneself, inflated self-importance, and a lack of empathy, is closely linked to infidelity. Research consistently demonstrates that individuals, couples or spouse with narcissistic traits are more inclined to engage in extramarital affairs (Apt & Hurlbert, 2017).

These individuals often prioritise sexual relationships outside their committed partnerships and hold permissive attitudes toward casual sex. Additionally, their self-centred nature may lead them to disregard their partner's emotional well-being, making them more susceptible to infidelity (Campbell et al., 2017). Furthermore, narcissists may believe that alternative partners will benefit from their attention and advances, further fuelling their propensity for marital infidelity (Campbell et al., 2017). Couples with narcissistic tendencies often exhibit high levels of exploitativeness (Raskin et al., 2019) and low empathy (Watson et al., 2018). This combination of traits may lead them to be more deceptive in seeking alternative sexual partners, prioritising their own desires over their partner's feelings. Furthermore, narcissism is associated with a lack of commitment to the relationship (Campbell & Foster, 2020), which, as Drigotas et al. (2019) emphasise, increases the likelihood of infidelity. Overall, research suggests a positive correlation between narcissistic personality traits and a propensity for marital infidelity. These traits, marked by self-centeredness, permissiveness toward casual sex, low empathy, and a lack of commitment, collectively heighten the risk of engaging in extramarital affairs.

There appears to be a parallel between emotional intelligence and narcissism (Jauk, Freudenthaler, & Neubauer, 2016; Czarna et al., 2015) that may influence marital infidelity. Low emotional intelligence may hinder one's ability to understand and respond to their partner's emotional needs, potentially leading to dissatisfaction and infidelity. Similarly, individuals with narcissistic traits may prioritise their own desires and seek extramarital relationships, disregarding their partner's emotions (Czarna et al., 2015). Both emotional intelligence and narcissism lack empathy, which could contribute to infidelity. It is important to recognise that emotional intelligence encompasses a broader spectrum of skills, including emotional awareness and effective communication, while narcissism is primarily characterised by self-centeredness. Despite these distinctions, the shared deficiency in empathy may elucidate how these factors intersect and influence marital infidelity. The present study seeks to investigate the predictive role of emotional intelligence and narcissistic personality traits in marital infidelity within the diverse cultural and socioeconomic context of Makurdi.

Theoretical Review Attachment Theory

Attachment theory, proposed by John Bowlby (1950), suggests that early experiences with caregivers shape individuals' attachment styles, which in turn influence their adult relationships (Bowlby, 1973). In the context of marital infidelity, individuals with insecure attachment styles (such as anxious or avoidant attachment) may be more likely to seek emotional fulfilment or validation outside their marriage. For example, a spouse with an anxious attachment style may seek reassurance and attention from others due to insecurity or fear of abandonment, while spouse with an avoidant attachment style may distance themselves emotionally from their partner and seek intimacy elsewhere. Emotional intelligence and narcissistic personality traits could interact with attachment styles, influencing how individuals navigate their relationships and vulnerabilities to infidelity.

Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory, on the other hand, was developed by sociologist George Homans (Homans, 1958) in the 1950s and further expanded upon by other sociologists such as Peter Blau and Richard Emerson in the 1960s and 1970s. It originated from Homans' attempt to explain social behaviour and relationships in terms of costs and rewards, drawing from principles of behavioural psychology and economic theory (Blau, 1964). Social exchange theory posits that individuals engage in relationships based on a cost-benefit analysis, seeking to maximise rewards and minimise costs. In the context of marital infidelity, couples may weigh the potential benefits of extramarital affairs (such as excitement, novelty, or emotional fulfilment) against the perceived costs (such as guilt, betrayal, or the risk of relationship dissolution). Emotional intelligence may influence individuals' ability to access and manage these costs and benefits effectively, while narcissistic personality traits may skew their perceptions and priorities in favor of personal gratification and self-interest. Thus, according to social exchange theory, marital infidelity may

occur when couples perceive the benefits of infidelity to outweigh the costs, influenced by their emotional intelligence and narcissistic tendencies.

The objectives of the study are following:

- i. To investigate the predictive influence of emotional intelligence on marital infidelity among couples in Makurdi Metropolis.
- ii. To ascertain the predictive influence of narcissistic personality traits on marital infidelity among couples in Makurdi Metropolis.
- iii. To examine the joint influence of emotional intelligence and narcissistic personality traits on marital infidelity among couples in Makurdi Metropolis.

The following hypotheses were formulated to guide the study:

- i. Emotional intelligence will significantly predict marital infidelity among couples in Makurdi metropolis.
- ii. Narcissistic personality trait will significantly predict marital infidelity among couples in Makurdi metropolis.
- iii. Emotional intelligence and narcissistic personality traits will jointly predict marital infidelity among couples in Makurdi metropolis.

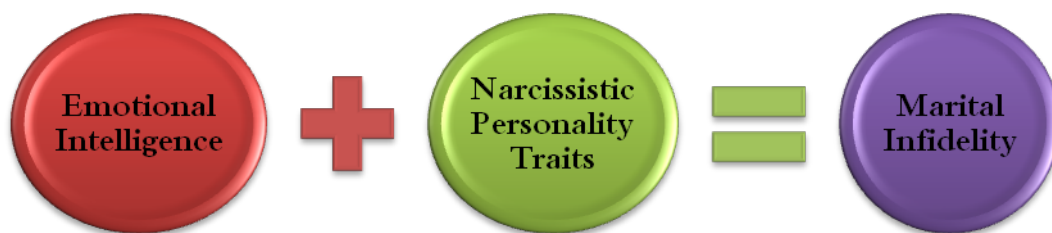


Figure 2. Study Model

2. Methods

The design for this study was cross-sectional research design. This design helped to gather data from a sample of married couples in Makurdi at a specific point in time. This data includes measures of emotional intelligence, narcissistic personality traits, and self-reported instances of marital infidelity. This study was carried out in the Modern Market, Ankpa/Wadata and Apii ward part of Makurdi Metropolis in Benue State. The majority of the indigenes in Modern Market Ward where the research was carried out speak Tiv, Idoma and Igede languages which are the major languages spoken in Benue state, with several of the participants speaking other Nigerian languages.

2.1. Participants

The study comprised married couples residing in Modern Market ward, Ankpa/Wadata and Apii in Makurdi Metropolis, who had entered marriage within the past five years (2018 - 2022). Descriptive statistics from the result revealed that 96(48.0%) of the respondents were male, while 104(52.0%) were female. In terms of religion, 155(77.5%) identified as Christian, while 45(22.5%) identified as Muslim. Regarding educational qualifications, 70(35.0%) had completed primary school, 49(24.5%) had completed secondary school, 36(18.0%) held a degree, 19(9.5%) had a diploma/NCE, and 26(13.0%) had completed postgraduate studies. In terms of ethnicity, 95(47.5%) were Tiv, 45(22.5%) were Idoma, 21 (10.5%) were Igede, 14(7.0%) were Yoruba, and 24(12.0%) were Igbo. This study employed the single-stage cluster sampling method to select 104 participants. This technique ensures an equitable opportunity for all eligible couples in the designated area.

2.2. Instruments

Brief Emotional Intelligence Scale: This was used to evaluate participants’ emotional intelligence. The instrument contains only 10 items and is designed to capture EI quickly while maintaining acceptable psychometric properties (test-retest reliability, $r = .35$ to $.48$).

Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (HSNS): This is a 10-item Likert scale designed to gauge covert narcissistic tendencies. It is a self-report tool where individuals rate the extent to which each item reflects their feelings and behaviour.

Marital Infidelity Scale (MIS): In this scale, respondents were asked to rate each item on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree." The total score for the scale is the sum of the item scores, with a possible range of 10 to 50. Higher scores indicate a greater degree of marital infidelity.

2.3. Procedure

Before commencing data collection, the researcher secured an introductory letter from the Head of the Department of Psychology at Benue State University, Makurdi. This letter was presented to the Registrar at the Marriage Registry in Makurdi, Benue State, to obtain information regarding the number of couples married between 2018 and 2022 in the region. Participants were duly informed about the voluntary nature of their participation in the study and their right to withdraw at any time. The simple linear regression analysis was used to analysed hypothesis one and two, while multiple regression was used to analyse hypothesis three. This analytical method was done using Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS).

3. Results

The result in Table 1 indicated that emotional intelligence significantly predicted marital infidelity among couples in Makurdi metropolis [$R = .226$, $R^2 = .051$, $[F(1,188) = 10.042$, $P < .01$]. The result further revealed that emotional intelligence accounted for 5.1% of the variance in marital infidelity among couples in Makurdi metropolis. With this result, hypothesis two was accepted.

Table 1: Simple linear regression showing emotional intelligence as a predictor of marital infidelity among couples in Makurdi Metropolis

Variables	R	R ²	df	F	β	t	P
Constant	.226	.051	1,187	10.042		11.265	.000
Emotional intelligence					.226	3.169	.002

The result presented in Table 2 indicated that narcissistic personality trait significantly predicted marital infidelity among couple in Makurdi metropolis [$R = .418$, $R^2 = .174$, $F(1,194) = 40.973$, $p < .01$]. The result further narcissistic personality trait accounted for 17.4% of the total variance observed in marital infidelity among couples in Makurdi metropolis. Based on this finding, hypothesis one was accepted.

Table 2: Simple linear regression showing narcissistic personality trait as a predictor of marital infidelity among couples in Makurdi Metropolis

Variables	R	R ²	df	F	β	t	P
Constant	.418	.174	1,194	40.973		10.394	.000
Narcissistic Trait					.418	6.401	.000

Table 3: Multiple linear regression showing narcissistic personality trait and emotional intelligence as joint predictors of marital infidelity among couples in Makurdi Metropolis

Variables	R	R ²	df	F	β	t	P
Constant	.435	.189	2,185	21.627		7.101	.000
Emotional Intelligence					.103	1.475	.000
Narcissistic Trait					.391	5.586	.000

The result in Table 3 indicated that Narcissistic personality trait and emotional intelligence jointly predicted marital infidelity among couple in Makurdi metropolis [$R = .435$, $R^2 = .189$, $F(2,187) = 21.627$ $p < .01$]. Additionally, the result shows that narcissistic personality trait and emotional intelligence jointly accounted for 18.9%, of the variance marital infidelity among couples in Makurdi metropolis. Based on this finding hypothesis three was accepted.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Hypothesis one revealed that, emotional intelligence significantly predicted marital infidelity among couples in Makurdi Metropolis. This refuted earlier stated study by Abbasi et al. (2016) who highlighted a substantial positive relationship between emotional intelligence and marital satisfaction, identifying it as a critical factor in fostering marital contentment. Though, a study conducted by Eslami et al. (2014) revealed a significant positive correlation between emotional intelligence and marital satisfaction among 226 married individuals in Iran. The findings indicated that individuals with higher emotional intelligence demonstrated better social coordination, greater self-control, enhanced social skills, more cooperative interactions, closer relationships, and ultimately, greater marital satisfaction.

Narcissistic personality trait significantly predicted marital infidelity among couples in Makurdi metropolis. Similarly, individuals with narcissistic traits may prioritise their own desires and seek extramarital relationships, disregarding their partner's emotions (Czarna et al., 2015). Overall, this study suggests a positive correlation between narcissistic personality traits and a propensity for marital infidelity. These traits, marked by self-centeredness, permissiveness toward casual sex, low empathy, and a lack of commitment, collectively heighten the risk of engaging in extramarital affairs (Jauk et al., 2016).

Emotional intelligence and narcissistic personality traits jointly predicted marital infidelity among couples in Makurdi metropolis. This indicated here appears to be a parallel between emotional intelligence and narcissism (Czarna et al., 2015) that may influence marital infidelity. Further, Anghel (2016) earlier suggests that happiness, emotional awareness, and self-actualisation are closely linked to marital satisfaction. This may stem from the understanding that successful intimate relationships necessitate strong communication skills, including attentiveness to one's partner's perspective, empathetic understanding of their experiences, and sensitivity to their needs (Josiah et al., 2019).

5. Recommendations

To couples, it important to improve on willingness to communicate - communication skills and understanding of each other's emotions is very important before making and taking any actions. This can help to navigate conflicts and challenges more effectively. Couples should reflect on their behaviours and tendencies, especially if one exhibit narcissistic traits. Self-awareness can be a powerful tool in fostering healthier relationships.

Marital Institutions can offer comprehensive pre-marital counselling programs that include discussions on emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and relationship expectations. This can better prepare couples for the challenges they may face. They should provide support services for couples experiencing marital difficulties, including counselling and therapy sessions tailored to address issues related to emotional intelligence and narcissistic traits.

The government as an important aspect of the society should allocate resources to support initiatives aimed at promoting healthy relationships and reducing marital discord. This could include funding for relationship education programs and mental health services. They should consider implementing policies or laws that protect individuals from emotional abuse or manipulation within relationships through the registry. This can help address issues related to narcissistic behaviours.

Further research is needed to deepen understanding of the dynamics between emotional intelligence, narcissism, and marital infidelity. Academic institution and researchers should explore potential interventions or strategies for prevention and intervention. Also, the need for collaboration between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to develop evidence-based interventions and policies that promote healthy relationships and reduce the prevalence of marital infidelity can be overemphasised.

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