

ADULT CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES WITH PARENTAL INFIDELITY IN CHILDHOOD

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*To all the children who had to grow up early,*

*To my childhood...*

## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study aims to investigate children's experiences with parental infidelity in their childhood by using the interpersonal trauma perspective as a framework. The sample consisted of ten participants, 3 men, and 7 women. A semi-structured interview was held and it took approximately 60 minutes to complete. The ten participants' ages ranged from 25 to 30 years. The analysis revealed four main themes and 13 subthemes on two levels: intrapersonal and interpersonal. Three intrapersonal themes and related subthemes were identified, namely 1) growing up before their time, 1a) child as a bridge between parents 1b) emotional parentification 1c) knowledge about parental sexual experience; 2) emotional rollercoaster around parental infidelity 2a) repressed anger 2b) disgust about third-party 2c) fear of resembling parent(s) 3) coping with parental infidelity 3a) social support as a coping strategy 3b) hard to remember details of parental infidelity 3c) normalization of infidelity 3d) try to emotional cut off from offending parent and one interpersonal theme was 4) challenges in romantic relationship 4a) hardship in trusting others 4b) multigenerational transmission of infidelity 4c) selectivity in a romantic partner.

These intrapersonal themes specified the individual's own process in terms of a new adult like position in the family system, emotional ambivalence around parental infidelity, and the mechanisms they used for dealing with the incidence. Additionally, the interpersonal theme indicated the romantic relationship level for adult children's experiences. The findings of this study provide valuable information for clinical practitioners who work with individuals and couples and families by using a trauma perspective. Future studies can focus more on gender-specific parental infidelity experiences. It can also be investigated by crystalizing parental relationship status after revealed infidelity.

*Keywords:* parental infidelity, systems theory, interpersonal trauma, thematic analysis

## ÖZET

Bu çalışmanın amacı kişiler arası travma çerçevesini kullanarak ebeveynlerinden birinin aldatmasını bilen çocukların çocuklarındaki deneyimlerini araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Örnekleme 3 erkek ve 7 kadın olmak üzere on katılımcıdan oluşmaktadır. Yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yapılmış olup, görüşmeler ortalama 60 dakika sürmüştür. On katılımcının yaşları 25 ile 30 arasındadır. Tematik analiz sonucunda iki farklı seviyede, 4 tema ve 13 alt tema ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu iki seviye; içsel kişilik ve romantik ilişki seviyesi olarak belirlenmiştir. İçsel kişilik seviyesinde üç tema ve alt temaları oluşturmuştur. 1) zamanından önce büyümek zorunda kalmak 1a) ebeveynler arasında bir köprü olarak çocuk 1b) duygusal ebeveynleşme 1c) ebeveyn cinsel deneyimlerini bilme 2) ebeveyn aldatması etrafında duygusal dalgalanmalar 2a) bastırılan öfke 2b) üçüncü şahıstan iğrenme 2c) ebeveynlere benzeme korkusu 3) ebeveyn aldatması deneyimi ile ilgili başa çıkma stratejileri 3a) başa çıkma mekanizması olarak sosyal destek 3b) ebeveyn aldatması ayrıntılarını zor hatırlama 3c) aldatmanın normleştirilmesi 3d) aldatan ebeveyninden duygusal olarak kopmaya çalışmak. İlişki seviyesinde ise 1 tema ve 3 alt tema ortaya çıkmıştır: 4) romantik ilişkideki zorluklar 4a) başkalarına güvenmede zorluk 4b) aldatmanın kuşaklararası aktarımı 4c) romantik partnerde seçicilik.

Bu içsel temalar, bireyin kendi sürecini aile sistemi üzerindeki yeni yetişkin rolünü, ebeveyn aldatması etrafındaki duygusal dalgalanmalarını ve bu olay ile başa çıkmak için geliştirdikleri baş etme stratejilerini içermektedir. Buna ek olarak, ilişki seviyesinde ise katılımcıların romantik ilişkilerinde olan deneyimleri göstermektedir. Bu çalışmanın bulguları, kişiler arası travma perspektifi baz alınarak; birey, çift ve ailelerle çalışan klinisyenler için değerli bilgiler sunmaktadır. Gelecekteki çalışmalar, cinsiyete özgü ebeveyn aldatma deneyimi üzerinden araştırma yapılabilir. Aynı zamanda ebeveyn aldatması ortaya çıktıktan sonra ebeveynlerin medeni durumuna göre kristalize edilerek de bu değişimler araştırma konuları olabilir.

*Anahtar kelimeler:* ebeveyn aldatması, sistem teorisi, kişiler arası travma, tematik analiz



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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“It takes enormous trust and courage to allow yourself to remember.”

*Bessel A. van der Kolk*

Having intimate relationships is one of the essential human needs throughout the life span. Many adults pursue a romantic relationship and try to sustain it. After developing a relationship, continuance is also critical. Diverse factors such as level of intimacy, sexual and emotional satisfaction, involvement, physical attractiveness, etc., can affect the maintenance of a romantic relationship. Most couples have explicit and implicit rules in their relationship. When the breach of the relationship rules infidelity is one of the subjects that arise. Therefore, infidelity becomes a crucial factor affecting individuals, couples, and families.

The current thesis aims to explore adult children's lived experiences with parental infidelity in childhood is examined. The participants of the study consist of ten participants who know their mother or father's infidelity. The systems and interpersonal trauma perspective is used as the framework of this study. How the parental infidelity experience influences the relationship is examined through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The introduction section was divided into five main areas that are discussed a) definition of infidelity, b) theoretical framework, c) literature review in terms of the subsystems in the family, d) situation in Turkey, e) the purpose of the study.

### **1.1 Infidelity**

Infidelity is one of the multifaced issues for academic research and one of the most complex, widespread problems in clinical practices (Moller & Vossler, 2015) whether in a couple or individual therapy setting. The literature definition of infidelity differs through time. Various terms and terminologies describe and characterize infidelity, such as extradyadic involvement, extramarital involvement, cheating, affair, unfaithfulness, internet relationships. It has also described betrayal, nonmonogamy, extra sex, and extramarital coitus. Researchers who attempt to study infidelity date back to the 1930s; though, improvements in research

began in the 1960s and 1970s. These early infidelity studies solely centered on sexual relationships outside of committed relationships especially married, heterosexual couples. Infidelity studies also have investigated prevalence rate and attitudes toward infidelity. Little was given to emotional infidelity and infidelity behaviours among dating, cohabiting, and same-sex couples. In the current literature, various forms of infidelity have been studied with different populations; therefore, the definition of infidelity has expanded over past studies. Besides many forms of infidelity, in essence, Blow and Hartnett (2005a) proposed a broader and more precise definition of infidelity in the literature as a:

“A sexual and/or emotional act engaged in by one person within a committed relationship, where such an act occurs outside of the primary relationship and constitutes a breach of trust and/or violation of agreed-upon norms (overt and covert) by one or both individuals in that relationship in relation to romantic, emotional, or sexual exclusivity. (p. 191)”. In other words, infidelity can be identified as any form of behaviour or act that harms the relationship agreement between two people (Hall & Fincham, 2009). It creates a violation of agreed-upon relationship norms and trust. In the literature, the partner who does not commit the infidelity is named as the “nonoffending” or “injured” partner, and the partner who commits the infidelity is named as “offending” or “participating” partner (Clark, 2013).

### ***1.1.1 Types of Infidelity***

Researchers accept several types of infidelity emotional, sexual, combined sexual, and emotional (Thompson, 1984; Fife et al., 2013), and in the light of current technological improvement, online infidelity (Henline et al., 2007). One of the most likely to recognize forms of infidelity is sexual infidelity. Whitty and Quigley (2008) propose that “sexual infidelity is considered to be engaging in sexual intercourse with someone other than one’s partner” (p. 461). Sexual infidelity behavior is any form of conduct caused by sexual charges such as intimate touching, kissing, hugging, oral sex, or sexual intercourse (Özgün, 2010).

Emotional infidelity is another researched and recognized form of infidelity, which consists of emotional bonding such as flirting, dating, falling in love, sharing emotional intimacy, spending quality time with an individual outside of the primary relationship (Özgün, 2010). This emotional bonding can be just as harmful or traumatic as sexual infidelity for injured partner despite relatively few studies conducted (Warach & Josephs, 2021). A combined type of infidelity consists of these characteristics, including sexual behaviors and emotional bonding outside of the primary relationship. In the light of technological improvements, the internet and smartphones provide many possibilities for communication and connection with others outside of the primary relationship the online/cyber infidelity concept has occurred.

Even though sexual and emotional are often the most highly recognizable forms of infidelity, online infidelity is becoming gradually prevalent (Moller & Vossler, 2015). Young et al. (2000) described online infidelity as “a romantic and/or sexual relationship that is initiated via online contact and maintained predominantly through electronic conversations that occur through e-mail, and in virtual communities such as chat rooms, interactive games, and newsgroups” (p. 60). Another definition was added by Nelson et al. (2005), “using the internet to take sexual energy of any sort thoughts, feelings and behaviors outside of a committed sexual relationship in such a way that it damages the relationship” (p.174). Online infidelity is a similar cause and almost as severe as other types of infidelity for the relationship (Schneider et al., 2012; Moller & Vossler, 2015).

### ***1.1.2 Gender Differences and Prevalence***

Gender is another primary variable for infidelity literature, and gender differences in reacting to infidelity generally were explained by evolutionary theory and the sociocultural theory of jealousy. According to evolutionary theory (Gaulin & McBurney, 2001; Buss, 2018), men would be more concerned about the sexual infidelity of their partners due to a lack of certainty about the paternity of offspring from a relationship. On the other hand, women



would be more concerned about emotional infidelity, which might indicate a lack of commitment by the partner to the long-term success of the relationship and any offspring. Women are aware of their offspring's genetic legacy however need guarantees that the partner will provide the resources to ensure the survival of the offspring. Therefore, sexual infidelity makes men more offended than women, whereas emotional infidelity makes women more offended than men (Barelds et al., 2009; Watkins, 2011). In conclusion, in terms of dealing with infidelity, women have more challenges in dealing with emotional infidelity; on the other hand, for men, the situation is entirely reverse, sexual infidelity is more challenging (Kato, 2014a).

Secondly, the sociocultural theory claims that men consider that women do not have any sexual act without love, and women believe that men can have sex without any emotional connection (Harris & Christenfeld, 1996, as cited in Onaylı, 2019). Therefore, an injured male partner may think it also means emotional infidelity when the partner is sexually infidel. On the contrary, when a man has emotional infidelity toward his partner, women might think sexual infidelity has been committed (Wilson et al., 2011). Also, gender differences become essential in the justification of infidelity. Studies have suggested that men's infidelity behaviors are more likely to be linked with sexual dissatisfaction. On the other hand, women's infidelity behavior is more likely to be associated with relationship satisfaction in primary relationships (Whisman & Snyder, 2007; Allen et al., 2008). Likewise, gender differences become apparent as a component of the relationship between infidelity and divorce. Study results showed that male extramarital infidelity ends with divorce less likely than female (Bennett et al., 2002; Frederick & Fales, 2016). Divorce will be examined in a more detailed way in the literature review section.

It is usually assumed that more men involve sexual infidelity than women (Atkins et al., 2001; Allen & Baucom, 2004). Whitty (2005) reached a similar conclusion that women

tend to have an intense emotional relationship outside of their own relationship, even though there is no physical component. On the other hand, men consider mainly physical contact, which typically consists of sexual acts, to form infidelity much more so than emotional engagement out of their primary relationship. Further, Schmitt (2004) conducted a large-scale cross-cultural survey and stated that men desire more sexual partners than women. Even though the prevalence rate of infidelity was studied in the literature, it is difficult to understand the exact rate due to its definition and data collection methods (DuPree et al., 2007). According to Hertlein et al. (2005), married population extramarital infidelity rate 15% to 70%, and 30% of dating couples engage in the infidelity of some kind. Years between 2000 and 2016, the General Social Survey data showed that 13.030 participants reported the prevalence of extramarital sex is more than 16-17% of participants (Labrecque & Whisman, 2017). Moreover, Durex (2005) conducted a global survey from 42 different countries and more than 317.000 people worldwide. According to the global survey results, 22% of participants stated that they have extramarital partner. The highest rates of extramarital infidelity rate belong to Turkey, with 58% of participants reporting having had a sexual extramarital relationship.

The prevalence rate of infidelity information is insufficient in Turkey. Yeniçeri and Kökdemir (2006) stated that among Turkish college students' samples and ages between 18 to 38, rates of infidelity are 19.6%. In this study, infidelity was checked either sexually or emotionally. Turkish Ministry of Family and Social Policies (2013) organized a study called "Turkish Family Structure Research" and one of the sections was about what should be the main reason to divorce. According to the result of the question, infidelity was the most rated answer for both men and women, 94% and %90 percent, respectively. Also, results showed that infidelity is the fourth leading reason to divorce in Turkey. The other study conducted by Akoğlu and Küçükkaragöz (2018) conducted research by 370 divorced couples. According to

the result of the study, 29.7% of women and 14.9% of men reported that infidelity was the main reason for their divorce.

All research shows that, even though it is difficult to understand the precise rate of infidelity due to differences of infidelity definition in different studies, data collection methods, sample, and cultural differences, infidelity occurs across marriages and dating relationships. Therefore, infidelity will probably maintain its place in the literature as an intriguing subject that continues to be researched.

### ***1.1.3 Psychological and Physiological Well-Being***

Major relationship stressors infidelity, are not only harmful to relationships but also to individuals, therefore, influencing personal outcomes such as physical (Warach & Josephs, 2019) and mental health consequences (Shrout & Weigel, 2018). The empirical literature on the direct association between physical health and infidelity is limited. Studies connecting other stressors to mental and physical health outcomes are well developed in the infidelity literature (Hatch & Dohrenwend, 2007). In terms of physical health consequences, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are one of the main risks of victimization of sexual infidelity. Related literature about STIs studies shows that it is related to numerous psychological dysfunctions such as depression (Chen et al., 2008; Rokach & Philibert-Lignieres, 2015), embarrassment, loneliness, and stigmatization (East et al., 2015). Additionally, other main concerns are trauma-related physical health consequences such as suicide and potential stress-related health consequences (Warach & Josephs, 2021).

Depression has been frequently studied in infidelity literature. Infidelity, one of the significant relationship stressors, can have adverse mental health consequences, especially for an injured partner. In the aftermath of infidelity, injured partner commonly experiences adverse emotional reactions, including depression, anxiety, and symptoms related to posttraumatic stress disorder (Gordon et al., 2005; Bird et al., 2007). Injured wives are six

times more likely to be diagnosed with a major depressive episode after revealing extramarital infidelity (Cano & O'Leary, 2000 in cited in Roos et al., 2019). Also, longitudinal study research showed that marital disharmony was also linked to later depressive symptoms for women, stating a recent severe marital stressor such as infidelity and separation threat. Moreover, negative emotional experiences such as depression and anxiety are related to health-compromising behaviours such as smoking and unprotected sex, which is a possibility as an unhealthy practice of diminishing negative emotions (Shrout & Weigel, 2018). However, not only injured partners but also involved partners report negative consequences of extramarital involvement (Baucom et al., 2017). The study found that particularly involved partners experienced depression, guilt, shame, and feeling of withdrawal. Fife et al. (2013) stated that offending partners report significantly more psychological distress than people who have not engaged in infidelity. Lastly, even though infidelity and physical health literature is quite insufficient than psychological well-being, relationship stressors such as conflict have adverse effects on self-rated health outcomes (Baker et al., 2000). Also, relationship stressors can result in poorer physical health for both partner in relationship (Kiecolt-Glaser & Wilson, 2017).

## **1.2 Theoretical Framework**

### ***1.2.1 The Systems Theory***

The systems theory is a holistic term for theories stemmed from General Systems Theory developed by Von Bertalanffy (1950), which identifies the significance of the context when evaluating and understanding the behaviour itself. Family systems approaches are one of the applications of General Systems theory to the family and first applied to the family system by Bowen (1978). Family systems approaches consider individuals as a part of wholeness, for instance, the family system. In terms of systems theory, families as a unit that has exceptional and unique interactional patterns that turn into individuals' values, rules, and

goals. Boundaries that imaginary barriers separated family members from other families have essential to understand how to family functions within its own unique system. Therefore, group identity starts to develop that separated from other systems, families. Additionally, families have not only boundaries that create the uniqueness of other families but also internal boundaries within the family system. Boundaries inside the family system provide the function of either excluding or including family members, creating a "subsystem." For instance, marital subsystem refers to interactions among husband and wife, or same-sex or domestic partners, "parental subsystem" refers to interactions among parent or caregiver and their children. In this perspective, individuals' behaviours cannot be assessed distinctly from the family systems individuals are living in (Kerr, 1981). From a systemic point of view, an individual's symptoms are recognized as originating from an acute or chronic disruption in the emotional dynamics of the relational system instead of labelling these symptoms as pathological. The systemic perspective assesses the symptoms as signs or indicators of failure in the system while adjusting to stress or a change (Yoshimura & Galvin, 2018). Therefore, according to the system theory, any family member's functioning or behaviour is assessed within these behavioural or emotional dynamics of their family relationships, such as a marital, parental, sibling, or extended family subsystem.

Due to its effects, conceptualizing and understanding parental infidelity from a system perspective becomes vital. Infidelity has a significant effect on couples and families, and its impacts can flow through the couple and influence family relationships (Yoshimura & Galvin, 2018). In the familial system, after the disclosure of infidelity, a couple may have decided whether to stay together to fix their relationship or exit the relationship. During this stressful period, not only spousal subsystem is affected, but also other subsystems are, such as siblings or parental subsystems. The new hierarchy starts to establish in the relationship; however, it can cause a further problem for the couple and family due to the broken balance of power

within the relationship. The impact of extramarital infidelity goes beyond the couple subsystem and affects the entire family system. If children informed of extramarital infidelity might experience related traumatic reactions due to threats on the family system. Children may express specific emotions such as anger, disappointment, resentment, and confusion toward both parents and, children may grieve about the loss of the family system. Sori (2007) stated that extramarital infidelity might impact children's risky behaviors. Also, the relevance of extramarital infidelity affects children's risky behaviors and can lead to interpersonal relationship struggles (Thorson, 2009). Understanding the functioning of interpersonal boundaries within the family system with extramarital infidelity would be critical to help family members. Hence, the current study explores the multilayer effects of parental infidelity in adult children's experiences that empathize with the systemic point of view.

### ***1.2.2 Interpersonal Trauma***

Interpersonal trauma can be specified as all traumatic events where the source of trauma is another human being (Widera-Wysoczanska & Kuczynska, 2010), such as rape, abuse, battery, and assault. In other words, interpersonal trauma occurs within the context of human relationships, for instance, physical, sexual, emotional abuse, kidnapping, or the loss of a significant and meaningful relationship (D'Andrea et al., 2012), which creates a traumatic response. Some scholars have also included bullying, witnessing domestic violence, abrupt separation with caregivers, and severe caregiver neglect in childhood (e.g., Finkelhor et al., 2009; D'Andrea et al., 2012; Blood et al., 2013). The concept of interpersonal trauma is divided into two main groups: interpersonal assaultive trauma and interpersonal non-assaultive trauma. Interpersonal assaultive trauma includes trauma types that occur within a human relationship and are physically violent in nature. Research indicates that the probability of PTSD diagnosis has been noted to be higher among those who experience assaultive trauma (i.e., interpersonal violence including physical and sexual assault) than

those who experience non-assaultive trauma (Wilcox et al., 2009; Lim et al., 2015). Interpersonal non-assaultive trauma includes trauma types that occur within a human relationship but are not physically violent. Non-assaultive trauma includes emotional abuse, verbal abuse, neglect, the loss of a significant relationship, and witnessing trauma inflicted upon another individual. This group was not yet studied as an independent trauma type in the literature, but it was identified for this thesis. Additionally, it has been found that interpersonal trauma is more likely to be associated with harmful consequences than non-interpersonal trauma (Belik et al., 2007; Stein et al., 2010). For instance, Forbes (2014) found that individuals who experienced interpersonal trauma types were significantly more likely to state suffering core symptoms of PTSD than those who experienced noninterpersonal trauma.

Trauma originally comes from the Greek word, and it has been used to mean wound, damage, or pierce since the 1600s; it also describes bodily traumas in medicine and surgery. Like physiological mechanism, the concept of "trauma" has become a prevalent research topic in psychology as the unseen wound and trauma is generally used as a synonym of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the literature. Firstly, links between trauma and psychology have mostly gotten attention due to wars; PTSD diagnosis was first announced during the Vietnam War. Unlike previous editions of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, PTSD is separate from other mental health problems in the DSM-III and categorized as an anxiety disorder. Further, the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III; (American Psychiatric Association, 1980) included a distinctive category to indicate the psychological disturbances that extreme life events produce, and since then, the definition and consequences of trauma have been expanded. Later, according to DSM-IV-TR (APA, 2000), an incident is thought to be traumatic if the incident involves both of these criteria at Criteria A:

1. Experiencing or witnessing actual or threatened death or serious injury, or threat to physical integrity

2. Accompanying intense fear, helplessness, or horror in the response

At the latest form of DSM 5, they qualify a trauma as being revised by specifying actual/threatened death, serious injury, and sexual violence. Further, exposure involved particular circumstances of witnessing also being victimized. Additionally, the main symptoms of PTSD are (a) reexperience of events in the form of intrusive memories, nightmares, or flashbacks and physical or psychological reactions toward the reminders of the event, (b) avoidance of event-related reminders, (c) negative alterations in cognition and mood, and (d) hyperarousal (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p 272-273). Further, the main characteristic of traumatic events is the threat of an individual's life, body part, loved one, and belief system. Therefore, the traumatic events are categorized as intentional human-made such as rape, war, torture, terrorism; unintentional human-made such as traffic accidents and nature-made such as earthquake, tornado, flood, etc. However, what makes an event traumatic depends on the subjective experience of an individual also, it is highly related to individuals' social context, genetic heritage, past experiences, and future expectations as well (Roos et al., 2019). Studies carried out show that the rate of prevalence depends on the type of traumatic event and nature of the research sample. Even though a high rate of exposure to traumatic stressors, the prevalence rate ranges between %6.1 to %9.2 general adult population in national sample (Sareen, 2021).

The notion of infidelity has long been respected as a crucial element of psychological trauma (Akhtar, 2013). Between romantic partners' infidelity, or related events such as a sudden abandonment is one that violates core beliefs and changes the partner's position about the source of love, security, comfort, and stability, especially at the time of personal stress. These incidents can be categorized as attachment injuries and threaten romantic relationship



security, especially for injured partners (Johnson, 2005; Warach & Josephs, 2021). Infidelity is not only one of the main reasons for separation/breakdown but also induces trauma and stress-related disorder such as post-traumatic stress disorder (Roos et al., 2019). Even though there is a consensus that infidelity is an interpersonal trauma, and it has traumatic effects, primarily on injured partners, this claim is supported only by clinical observations, case studies, and very few qualitative research (Özgün, 2010). A traumatic event can be classified as interpersonal when there is a human victim or perpetrator, and the events can be directly experienced or witnessed by the individual (Blalock & Vanbergen, 2020). Most studies have proposed that interpersonal trauma has explicitly been detrimental to individuals' relationships and health. For example, interpersonal trauma has been associated with suicidal thoughts and attempts, depression, substance use, anxiety disorders (Fergusson et al., 2013), and other psychological, behavioral, and sexual health (Maniglio, 2009; Shrout & Weigel, 2017).

Additionally, the term "secondary traumatic stress" created by Charles Figley (1995) describes the acquisition of trauma responses due to a close relationship with a traumatized individual. In other words, secondary traumatic stress is defined as secondary exposure to trauma through a narrative of a first-hand account. Figley (1995) defines secondary traumatic stress as "the natural consequent behaviors and emotions resulting from knowing about a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other—the stress resulting from helping or wanting to help the traumatized or suffering person." The symptoms of secondary traumatic stress are highly similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which include re-experiencing the trauma through intrusive thoughts, avoidance of trauma reminders, compartmentalizing stress reactions, and increased arousal when trauma reminders are present (Ludick & Figley, 2017).

There is no exploratory research on how parental infidelity experiences might affect children's secondary traumatic stress. However, there is still limited research on the

association between secondary traumatic stress on children and parental PTSD. Parental exposure to traumatic events and the existence of parental PTSD has been associated with enhanced levels of parental distress and reduced parenting satisfaction, as well as problematic parenting behaviors such as emotional and physical distance towards children and a higher risk of child abuse (Berz et al. 2008; Cross et al. 2018). Another research showed that veterans deployed during the Afghanistan conflicts who experienced more significant PTSD symptoms were more likely to self-report of poorer quality of parenting behaviors, such as more possibility of applying harsh disciplinary methods for their children (Chesmore et al., 2018). So, extramarital infidelity is considered one of the relationship trauma, and some research has shown that PTSD symptoms can occur, especially in injured partner aftermath infidelity. Due to this gap in the present literature, the goal of the present study is to investigate having parental infidelity in the nuclear family how adult children own subjective experience through the mechanism of secondary traumatic stress.

### **1.3 Literature Review**

This chapter will present a body of research regarding the impact of extramarital infidelity. Firstly, how the family system is affected by extramarital infidelity will be described while including how the couple relationships are impacted will be outlined in two-part of subsystems: a couple and parent subsystems. The second, how extramarital infidelity might affect the sibling subsystem will be reviewed, which is one of the least investigated parts of literature. Then, the parent-child dyad will be investigated under the topic of extramarital infidelity. Lastly, adult children's perspectives and romantic relationship experiences will be presented to understand better the perspectives of children who are aware of parental infidelity.

### ***1.3.1 Impact of Extramarital Infidelity on Family System***

Infidelity has unique dynamics in the family systems when considered one of the most emotionally explosive events. It does essentially cause family separation, conflict, divorce, or the formation of a new stepfamily. Although infidelity is experienced between two partners, its effects do not involve just two people. Therefore, extramarital infidelity affects the relationship of all individuals connected to an affair (Fincham & May, 2017). In other words, associated factors and consequences of infidelity is extending beyond the partner dyad in the family (Negash & Morgan, 2016). Consequently, it is expected that these various factors will shape the whole family, and both family members and children having parental infidelity experience a process of adaptation.

The family system is impacted by divorce due to extramarital infidelity. Many studies propose that sexual infidelity is the most frequent reason for divorce in the United States (Amato & Previti, 2003; Tulane et al., 2011) and worldwide (Levine, 2005). Sexual infidelity predicts divorce more than physical, psychological abuse, drinking and drug use, and absence of love or affection in marriages (Amato & Previti, 2003). Furthermore, emotional infidelity predicts committing sexual infidelity; therefore, it decreases relationship satisfaction and divorce (Allen & Rhodes, 2008; Cravens & Whiting, 2014). Hence, infidelity was one of the most significant causes of divorce (Fincham & May, 2017). Although some studies argue that infidelity is a strong predictor of divorce, some say that the other relationship dynamics such as relationships and sexual satisfaction are responsible for this association. Drawing from the divorce literature, it would seem significant to investigate the effects of infidelity on various outcomes such as children's risky behaviors, attachment styles, and own infidelity. In addition, custody of children after divorce is often given to the mother (Steinbach, 2018); even the parents share custody or responsibilities about the child's care. This familial change, in some

situations, part-time parentings for noncustodial parents change the family system accordingly.

Few studies focus on couples who remain together after extramarital infidelity in the literature. After the detection of infidelity, only a small percentage of couples could enhance their relationship; through time, many suffer from a range of problems. Hall and Fincham (2006) stated that if a couple decides to stay together after infidelity, forgiveness is one of the fundamental factors for redevelop trust and help them cope with stress. Battleson (1997) led a qualitative study with eight couples to explore why couples stay together after discovering one of the partner's extramarital infidelity and what was the role of forgiveness. Reasons to stay together, whether financial, religious, legal, or familial though it was challenging for them to stay together without considering forgiveness. Some studies also supported that infidelity has positive relationship outcomes for developing new form of relationship (Blow & Hartnett, 2005b). As Olson et al. (2002) conducted another qualitative study with couples among whom one of the partners had infidel, some positive outcomes occurred, such as increased assertiveness, realizing the importance of communication, closer marital relationship. In other words, infidelity is not always a death bell; sometimes, it becomes an awakening bell for couples. However, distressed couples made faster progress in therapy situations than couples who were injured by infidelity (Atkins et al., 2005).

The family system also changed when divorced parents re-engaged or remarried, which might cause to create the form of stepsiblings. Additionally, new parental dynamics might occur when another parent participates as a stepmother/stepfather. This change might reason emotional distress, anger, anxiety, or can be positive as a new support system (Moné et al., 2011).

There is a considerable gap in extended family members' inclusion in the infidelity literature. In the systemic point of view, when families experience transgressions, such as

parental infidelity, the stress associated with these events is not isolated to the person committing the infidelity and their partner. Still, it can dramatically change whole family interactions, including extended family (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003). In one example, a study by Tripodi (2006) stated that family members of the offending partner might also express feelings of anger and disappointment. Parents may try to coach both partners to keep the family together or cease such behaviors from occurring again. On the other hand, family members may encourage the injured partner not to stay in the relationship. However, there have been very limited preliminary empirical studies that have examined intergenerational impacts of infidelity or extended family members' inclusion during or in the aftermath of infidelity.

One of the aims of this study is to help contribute to how the extended family members get involved in infidelity, whether a couple who experienced infidelity in their relationship got divorced or not. Also, these types of investigations will expand our understanding of how parental infidelity affects not only the partners involved in the romantic relationship but children and other extended family members.

### ***1.3.2 Impact of Extramarital Infidelity on Sibling Dyad***

Little research within the systemic perspective has specifically focused on the effect of infidelity on family members outside the couple subsystem despite the vital part across life period. From a systemic standpoint, sibling relationships can provide support and stress that affect child development like other family relationships (McHale et al., 2012; Jensen et al., 2018). Supportive and warm relations with siblings might include learning opportunities that provide well-being and optimal functioning (Milevsky & Levitt, 2005; Jambon et al., 2019). In contrast, conflictual and hostile relationships between siblings may involve interference and coercive behaviors that may lead to maladjustment and adverse development (Bank et al., 2004; Whiteman et al., 2014). However, besides these types of relationships, sibling

relationships are often characterized by love and hate dynamics; in other words, siblings can be playful and intimate at one moment hurtful and violent at another (Noller, 2005; McHale et al., 2006).

When the case of infidelity occurred in the family, how sibling dyad affected has received relatively little attention in the literature as mentioned before. Since it is known that one of the main reasons for divorce and marital conflict is infidelity, the relationship between sibling relationships before and after divorce has been investigated in the literature. It is well researched in children that marital conflict raises the possibility of having a poor sibling relationship (Kim et al., 2006). Further, pre-divorce and post-divorce conflict magnitudes might affect adult children's relationships with parents and siblings (Frank, 2007). Also, Riggio (2001) also pointed out how two theoretical approaches might make opposite predictions about sibling dyad relationships. From social learning theory, one might expect sibling relationships to be harmful when the children have learned negative patterns of interactions through the experience of parental conflict. Conversely, social support approach, one might hypothesize that sibling relations could serve as a buffer from the parents' conflictual interactions; children may turn to siblings for needed support. Some of the research findings suggested that constructive sibling relationship can buffer on negative effect of parental marital conflict (Davies et al., 2019).

In the context of infidelity, sometimes parents who adopt diffused boundaries around the discussion of infidelity usually over inform their children and leave them feeling overwhelmed. Additionally, one of the difficulties for children may lie not only being aware of the infidelity first-hand but also facing loyalty controversies. Siblings may split their loyalties to different parents, then turn to dissolve the child subsystem (see, e.g., Minuchin 1974; Sori 2007). In some situations, a child may side with the parent who committed the infidelity to protect them from the judgment of other family members. Conversely, some

children may react angrily against parents whose behavior jeopardizes the integrity of their family and system. In the bottom line, children may become parentified when parent burdens them with the confession of developmentally inappropriate information. Further, Lusterman (2005) stated that secrecy, unlike privacy, has a scope to undermine family boundaries. Such as, when a parent makes promises to a child to secrecy about infidelity (e.g., “Do not tell your father, brother about this”), a hierarchical boundary is breached. When two or more children are told a secret of infidelity individually, each sibling might feel bound to maintain this family secret; however, isolation from siblings is one of the effects of this secrecy. For the purpose of the study, sibling relationships will be investigated after revealed of parental infidelity. Therefore, this study will contribute to infidelity literature about how sibling relationships are affected by parental infidelity from a systemic point of view.

### ***1.3.3 Impact of Extramarital Infidelity on Parent-Child Dyad***

The effect of parental infidelity is a complicated and multifaceted problem. Therefore, it should be examined through the systemic lens with the factors of children's ages, gender, family background, and culture better to understand infidelity's effects on the parent-child dyad. Little research has conducted a family system approach (Yoshimura & Galvin, 2018) despite infidelity literature investigating children's experiences with parental infidelity. In the family, parents should be a source of security and provide a good model of behavior for children and become the backbone of the healthy development of children (Batara et al., 2018). Childhood constructive or adverse experiences influence children's future behaviors and perception of self and world. Primarily, negative experiences are associated with detrimental outcomes for children, and one of these experiences is parental infidelity. Based on the child's gender and age, parental infidelity's effect on children might differ (Lusterman, 2005; Negash & Morgan, 2016).

The discovery of parental infidelity is expected to influence children of all ages negatively. However, the age of children when parental infidelity happens may affect the process of infidelity in terms of children's process of making sense due to the learning process influenced by the ability of individuals' cognitive development. In general, when parents cannot handle the crisis of infidelity, they expose their children to heightened conflict, grief and trauma-like symptoms can be seen (Dean, 2011). Lusterman (2005) stated that learning about a parent's act of infidelity causes to children feels discomfort, confusion, and a sense of family dissolution. Additionally, some of the symptoms and emotions such as anxiety, fear, shock, aggression, worry is affected by parental infidelity that hampers healthy emotional development (Ablow et al. 2009; Blodgett Salafia et al. 2013). Bandura (1977, 1986) proposed that social learning cannot arise if individuals lack the cognitive capabilities to link behavior to specific outcomes. Therefore, younger children who do not fully aware or understand the nature of infidelity might not take the exact inference about extramarital infidelity as older children. Younger children are more likely to realize parental conflict and know that infidelity is incorrect, even though they are most likely not to understand the nature of infidelity behavior, whether sexual or emotional. Children may be aware of parental conflict, but they have no concept of infidelity. Children occasionally express themselves through tantrums or rage.

Researchers argued that younger children would be most influenced by general parental tension and conflict in the family (Sears et al., 2016). Thorson (2009; 2014) reported that parents are less likely than adolescent and young adult children to disclose infidelity to preschool and elementary-aged children. Young children and pre-adolescents who are more likely to be informed of infidelity may fear their parents no longer love them and feel neglected. Unlike adolescents, they may also be more likely to blame themselves when exposed to parental infidelity (Duncombe & Marsden, 2004; Kang et al., 2017). Therefore,



infidelity's consequences do not always express themselves in obvious ways for children at an early age. Despite adolescents not blaming themselves may still have struggles processing the cause and consequences of parental infidelity; also, their confusion could turn into internalizing symptoms such as fear, worry, and depression (Negash & Morgan, 2016).

On the other hand, older children, especially adolescents, are more likely to be aware of the nature of their parent's infidelity behaviors and sexual relationships. Then, older children might be mainly impacted by the discovery of parental infidelity because they more fully being aware of parental transgression (Sori, 2007; Kang et al., 2017). Further, due to the sexual development period of adolescent age, they might be struggling with their sexual development. Additionally, older children and adolescents are more cognitively developed rather than younger children; therefore, they might be the ability to receive messages about infidelity, which is more likely to assimilate their belief systems and behaviors (Weigel, 2003; Schmidt et al., 2016). Adolescents with functioned cognitive abilities may be more oriented to put the responsibility onto one parent, and it may create dysfunctional triads that can continue through adulthood. O'Mara and Schrodt (2017) state that adolescents burdened about their parent's relationship adopt a parentified role. Infidelity makes adolescents deprived of their childhood and sabotages trusting the most important authority figures in their lives (Wardle, 2002). Perlman (2010) stated that adolescents exposed to parental infidelity encounter cognitive and emotional changes that consequently influence their sexual scripts and schemas. Weiser and Weigel (2017) argued that experiencing parental infidelity increases adult children's tendency to engage in infidelity in their romantic relationships.

Similarly, in terms of a structural family therapy perspective, Negash and Morgan (2016) clarify family communication after extramarital infidelity. Children may feel inadequately aware, lonely, alone, or burdened by indescribable feelings due to a result of the absence of family dialogue around the topic in families with rigid boundaries that strictly limit

sharing of information among children. On the contrary, families with diffused boundaries, which are less likely to restrict information sharing among children, may engage in such open discussions with their children regarding parental infidelity that children may feel over-informed and parentified if the knowledge is not age-appropriate appropriate for the child. Finally, rigid triads, also known as triangulation or coalition (Minuchin, 1974), emerge after parental infidelity is revealed. Parents either intentionally or unintentionally push their children to create coalitions with them against their other parents. Sometimes both parents try to triangulate children by asking them to keep secrets about their relationship or infidelity. A child forced to secrecy by both parents is in a most impairing position and may be overburdened with feelings of confusion, guilt, betrayal, and disloyalty. Adolescents who are triangulated into their parents' disputes, according to Fosco and Grych (2010), have weaker relationships with their parents over time. Similarly, the degree to which children in intact but not divorced families has an indirect effect on co-parental communication and satisfaction with their mothers (Schrodt & Shimkowski, 2013). Petronio (2018) also stated that older children generally might face privacy turbulence in the form of family privacy dilemmas such as confidant, illicit, accidental, and dishonesty dilemmas when trying to cope with the information of their parent's extramarital infidelity. Therefore, feeling caught is highly associated with decreased parent-child relationship satisfaction (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Thorson, 2014). However, according to Thorson (2019), concerning parental infidelity forgiveness in terms of adult children's perspective if the offending parent sincerely apologise offers to adult children about the transgression, those children state having more empathy for their parent, in turn, positive influence adult children's probability of forgiveness their offending parent for extramarital infidelity.

There is strong evidence of infidelity causing a family conflict such as divorce (Crouch & Dickes, 2016). Children who have experienced family conflict, especially

infidelity and divorce, are more likely to observe and learn maladaptive behaviors such as poor communication strategies negative feelings and are less likely to accomplish healthy conflict resolution strategies (Crowell et al., 2009). Children who discover parental infidelity may lose respect and have difficulties trusting their parents and more fidelity struggles (Schmidt et al., 2016). In general, adult children who experience severe family conflict such as parental infidelity will be more likely to have future relationship struggles due to exposure to poor communication strategies. Furthermore, when extramarital infidelity occurs in a family with a high level of conflict, children's relationships with both parents suffer (Amato & Afifi, 2006).

#### ***1.3.4 Impact of Extramarital Infidelity on Children for Adult Life***

Even though infidelity is judged to be one of the most secretive, harmful, and relational damaging events for a couple to experience (Warach & Josephs, 2021), the discovery of infidelity is not restricted to married dyad or dating partners. Weiser and Weigel (2017) found that between 24% and 35% of their participants knew about at least one parental infidelity. Similarly, the study conducted by Schmidt and colleagues (2016) reported that 37% of the over seven hundred participants in their study were aware of parental infidelity. In the light of these findings, children are generally aware of the extramarital infidelities in their nuclear family.

Even though some researchers have argued about the potentially destructive impact of parental infidelity on young and adult children, very limited empirical studies have addressed this issue. Thorson (2014) stated that children's discovery of their parents' extramarital relationship was representative of a violation of expectations for both their parents and marriage in general. This argument was consistent with Lusterman's (2005) suggestion that children might experience confusion, discomfort, and dissolution when learning parental infidelity. When families experience stress caused by extramarital infidelity, it associated with

these events is not isolated to the person but can significantly change whole family interactions (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Scheeren & Apellániz, 2018). The stress experienced by children when trying to manage the knowledge of their parents' extramarital infidelity (Petronio & Child, 2020). Relatedly, changes play an essential role in children's sense of security (Amato & Afifi, 2006).

Further exploring the intergenerational influences of parental infidelity on the romantic relationships of adult offspring, a limited amount of research has been done. According to a systemic point of view, the results of an individual's actions in the family influence all connected people. Therefore, children are affected by parental and relational decisions in the family. In other words, adult children's relationships, specifically romantic relationships, are influenced by their parents' romantic relationships within their family of origin. Family of origin has been described as an individual's initial understanding of how people act and interact in their relationships (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Gangamma et al., 2015; Schmidt et al., 2015). Further, relational ethics one of the subjects is learned in the family of origin that it is related to trust, loyalty, and fairness (Atkins et al., 2005; Fincham & May, 2017) and consists of two dimensions that are vertical (relationship between children and parents, intergenerational) and horizontal (relationship between parents, the same generation) relationships. Therefore, loyalty, trustworthiness, fairness is developed in both vertical and horizontal relationships in the family in terms of systemic perspective. Consequently, extramarital infidelity affects relational ethics in the family system context (Schmidt et al., 2016). Schmidt (2017) stated that paternal infidelity and a higher level of conflict between parents were associated with lower vertical relational ethics of adult children's perception.

Moderately little research about intergenerational research about a family of origin experiences and infidelity behaviors and beliefs. One study conducted by undergraduate students by Platt et al. (2008) found that adult male (but not female) children who stated

paternal infidelity were more likely to have been involved in infidelity themselves, suggesting the ongoing consequence of parental behavior. This relationship does not occur between paternal infidelity and female participants engaging in infidelity behaviors in their romantic relationships. Also, according to Perlman (2010), adolescents exposed to parental infidelity experience some cognitive and emotional changes that subsequently influence their sexual scripts and schemas. Weiser and Weigel (2017) stated that experiencing parental infidelity increased children's tendency to engage in infidelity in their romantic relationships. Moreover, perceived level of satisfaction within their parents' relationship for adult children, parental infidelity was found one of two the most significant predictors of participants' infidelity behavior. Nogales and Bellotti (2009) stated that parental infidelity influenced attitudes toward intimacy and love in 80% of the participants. They found that adult children who had experienced parental infidelity were less likely to experience maintaining healthy romantic relationships. According to this study, 70% of participants reported that parental infidelity experience might lessen their abilities to trust their romantic partner in a committed relationship.

Despite the understanding that infidelity is a significant event in couples' relationships, very little research within the ground of couple and family therapy has specifically pointed the effects of infidelity on adult children. Also, it is crucial to understand how a family of origin, parental, infidelity experiences related to adult children's experiences, attributions, and perceptions has very relevant implications for the clinical practices.

#### **1.4 The Context of Turkey**

Turkey is a crossroad country that serves as a cultural bridge between the East and the West, demonstrating that social and cultural mixture of individualism and collectivism for the most part (Medora et al., 2002), also embraces Islamic motives and modern values mixture (Erarslan et al., 2012). Despite massive demographic shifts over the last fifty years about a

population mainly becoming rural, primary cultural values, norms, family, and gender norms are much steadier than demographic changes that define traditional, patriarchal, and authoritarian (Kağıtçıbaşı & Sunar, 1992; Boratav et al., 2014).

Traditionally, the hierarchical system is defined in Turkish family structure in general. Typically, adults are decision-makers and children are followers of the rules in the family. In terms of traditional gender roles in Turkish family structure, strict hierarchy defines family system boundaries. The hierarchy is defined mainly in the family roles and emotional diversity among family members. For example, fathers are more likely to earn money, traditionally positioned as emotionally detached, adopting the role of defender of the family and the maintainer of power. In contrast, housework and childcare are mainly mothers' responsibilities. Although going through changes, Turkish family structure is still predominantly patriarchal (Kağıtçıbaşı & Ataca, 2005). Turkish fathers still keep specific characteristics such as being emotionally distant, performing inadequate self-disclosure, and having harsh limitations based upon respect for their children (Boratav et al., 2016). While both positive and negative emotional expressions are possible with mothers, children are not free to express mainly their anger to fathers (Sunar & Fişek, 2005). In terms of the differential treatment of sons and daughters, while boys are allowed to be less dependent and more aggressive, daughters are educated in a manner always to remain obedient and less independent (Kağıtçıbaşı, 1996). Sexual relationship before getting married are prohibited specifically for daughters (Duyan & Duyan, 2005). Regarding age, younger children had less expressive and instrumental roles than older children; in terms of gender, sons had less expressive and instrumental roles than daughters (Ataca, 2009).

In terms of family structure, generally the nuclear family is predominant which consists of parents and dependent children in the society. Nevertheless, Turkish family can describe as functionally extended, which consist of mutual support and contact among close

relatives such as uncle, aunt, grandparents and cousins who also tend to live physically closer (Kağıtçıbaşı, 1982). Therefore, this contact and mutual support might be seen as more obvious in times of family distress and conflict such as divorce, infidelity, economic distress and also in times of family happiness such as weddings, birth of a child. As a result of that, exploring extramarital infidelity experience from systemic point of view should consist of extended family inclusion as well.

Moreover, Turkey's more egalitarian family structure emerges with socio-cultural changes, especially among upper-class, educated families living in cosmopolitan cities (Bolak-Boratav et al., 2017). In this newly emerging family model, child-rearing practices became less authoritarian. Also, the emotional closeness among parents and children gains more importance (Sunar & Fişek, 2015). This kind of family structure would be perceived as enmeshed in Minuchin's (1974) family-systems theory, yet high proximity between members, an intense hierarchy rendering possible the differentiation and interconnectedness of members is the norm among Turkish families (Sunar & Fişek, 2005).

In parallel the paragraph above, similarly, marriage's meaning has changed from the union of two based on mutual respect to a more egalitarian and emotionally close relationship of two individuals (Bolak-Boratav et al., 2017). The arranged marriage tradition is quite strong, especially in rural parts, but an increasingly educated population sees marriage as a unification of two in love (Medora et al., 2002). However, families are still influential in marriage decisions, and most marriages are homogenous in terms of social class (Sunar & Fişek, 2005).

Despite the increasing number of divorces due to extramarital infidelity in Turkey (Turkstat, Family Structure Research, 2006), there is still a considerable gap in the literature about how others connected to infidelity are affected besides couple subsystem such as in terms of children's perspective. The earliest studies are generally being about married

heterosexual couple's marital satisfaction (Öztekin, 2008; Kankotan, 2008), the extramarital tendency (Polat, 2006; Çavuşoğlu, 2011), forgiveness (Taysi 2007; Özgün, 2009), adult attachment styles and trauma perspective (Kantarci, 2009; Yumbul et al., 2010). As stated before, conducting infidelity research' challenges are about challenges infidelity definition also highly topic sensitive subject, especially for married couples. As a result of this, exploring other subsystems' impacts besides couple subsystems become more challenging in the context of Turkey. Also in the literature, dating couples' infidelity research became common which dating was conducted on tendency, attributions (Yeniçeri & Kökdemir, 2006), coping strategies (Büyükşahin & Bilecen, 2007), and attachment styles infidelity in the dating relationship. However, there is still a considerable gap between the transgenerational effects of infidelity and how adult children perceive and cope with infidelity within the family of origin in Turkey. As stated earlier, children are the fourth corner of extramarital infidelity. Therefore, it is essential to explore how the family system is affected in the adult children's perspective in the familial and cultural context of Turkey.

### **1.5 The Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

One of the main issues experienced in families with parental infidelity is elevated divorce rates due to deteriorating well-being and increased family stress. The effect of infidelity on the partner who has been betrayed has been widely studied in the literature and Turkey. As mentioned above, research has shown that infidelity can trigger severe anxiety and depression (Shrout & Weigel, 2020) and might consider as interpersonal trauma and can cause significant damage to an individual's self-esteem and confidence also has a detrimental effect on relationships and marriages. Especially in the family context, it is impossible to restrict extramarital infidelity impacts only for spouses; other subsystems are influenced as well is discussed before. Little empirical research has been conducted to explore how family experiences are associated with individuals' infidelity behavior. In other words, there has been



little research on the experience of infidelity for individuals outside of marriage, for instance, offspring. Therefore, how adult children's relationships might change with other systems and subsystems aftermath of infidelity, adult children's attributions, coping mechanisms, other relations outside of the nuclear family system, and adult life experiences are explored based on the interpersonal trauma perspective in this study. The aim of the current study will extend our knowledge on this topic by exploring the lived experience of parental infidelity with the lens of interpersonal trauma perspective. Due to existing literature having dominantly quantitative studies, the current study allows an in-depth, exploratory approach with many sides of an adult children's life. Thus, further information about how family-of-origin experiences is related to infidelity behavior has very relevant implications for the treatment of infidelity in the clinical setting.

The main question of this qualitative study is "What are the experiences of parental infidelity of adult children?" This directs to several sub-questions about this study a) How are the changes of family subsystems after parental infidelity experiences for the child? b) How are the coping mechanism strategies? c) How does the meaning of parental infidelity affect adult children's attributions about family, justice, loyalty, and romantic relationships?

## **CHAPTER 2: METHOD**

This study explores the experiences of individual who has parental infidelity in their nuclear family. The purpose of this study to understand the experiences of individuals and interpret them using the system perspective and interpersonal trauma theory.

### **2.1 Thematic Analysis**

*Thematic analysis (TA)* is a moderately distinctive method among other qualitative procedures that helps to identify and interpret themes in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). TA only offers a method of data analysis; however, it does not lead to theoretical, epistemological, or ontological positions (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In other words, thematic

analysis is just a method that is possibly used for any type of research questions, individual experiences, perceptions, attributions, or making meaning out of any social construct. Therefore, one of the main benefits of thematic analysis is flexibility. Because contrary to other qualitative methodologies such as conversation analysis or interpretative phenomenological analysis, which provide a theoretical framework relating to data collection and analysis, thematic analysis can be applied range of theoretical and epistemological approaches. As a result, it can offer a rich and detailed account of data. Also, thematic analysis can be used in many ways, such as experiential to critical (Braun & Clarke, 2013). It can be used to develop a comprehensive description of a phenomenon or some piece or part of a phenomenon or assumption or meaning of the data. However, some scholars criticize TA is insufficiently sophisticated and only labelling or inferring the data, unlike interpretative phenomenological analysis or grounded theory (Antaki et al., 2003). In terms of researcher perspective, Rubin and Rubin (1995) stated that researchers determine the themes and concepts surrounding the interviews; that is why analysis is thrilling. Fine (2002) argued that "giving voice" to the participants helps the researcher represent unacknowledged pieces of a selected story. Thematic analysis can be the essentialist or realist method related to participants' experiences own reality or the constructivist method related to events, certainties, implications, and effects of a spectrum of discourses within the society (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As a third option, thematic analysis can be a contextualist method that stands between essentialism and constructionism. It can be explained by individual experiences becoming meaningful, and in turn, broader social context affects those meanings of individuals. So, thematic analysis can mirror reality while unpicking the surface of reality (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Thematic analysis includes 6 phase process of strategy to identify, analyse and report patterns that are themes within the data set that recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). As

a first step is reading and re-reading in an active way to know and familiarize the data. It helps to initial search of meaning and patterns and be acquainted with all dataset characteristics. The second step is a creation of initial codes from the data. Codes are basic units of raw information that come from the participants, and they can be evaluated in a meaningful way (Rohleder & Lyons, 2015). The third step begins when all data have been coded, and coding has extended an adequate level for the research question. In other words, it is time for analysing codes and considering how diverse codes become an umbrella theme. At this level, the researcher starts to think associations between codes, themes, and different layers of themes. The fourth step is reviewing and refining the themes that require examining the candidate themes' quality and relatedness. This process includes judging categories in terms of internal or external homogeneity (Patton, 1990). This consideration means that themes should be meaningful together, and also, they should be recognizable distinctive among other themes. In this step, themes are reviewed and reshaped in coherence. As a tool, a thematic map can be used to see organizations and relationships of themes (Rohleder & Lyons, 2015). If the thematic map does not correspond with the data set, the third step should be done again to have a suitable thematic map. The fifth step starts when an acceptable thematic map occurs while defining and naming themes. While naming themes, it is crucial not to be too complex and diverse. Another critical factor is that each theme name should identify the story and reflect a broader story based on the research question. The last step is producing the report when the researcher has a bunch of worked-out themes. This step is vital because it becomes the sound of a complicated story of the data, and it should be coherent, logical, and interesting to convince readers. Intense examples and quotes used to capture the essence of the themes are a significant part of this stage (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## 2.2 Sampling

The current study aimed to explore the lived experience of adult children's parental infidelity experiences in their childhood. Therefore, to recruit participants, a purposeful sampling method was used to help discover the specific group of individuals' experiences by using a homogeneous sample. Purposeful sampling purposes for recruiting a small and more likely to have a similarly situated group of participants (Smith et al., 2009). Hence, to recruit adult children with parental infidelity experience for an in-depth and semi-structured interview, snowballing sampling methods were used to recruit participants through personal contacts and word of mouth. As Parker et al. (2019) stated, the characteristic of snowballing sampling was networking and referral; therefore, recruiting the research participants started with a small number of contacts, then referrals who fit the research inclusion criteria were invited to participate in the research. Ten participants, three males, and seven females with parental infidelity experiences, whether fathers or mothers, volunteered to join the study.

The main participation criteria were that the individuals who had parental infidelity experiences could be maternal or paternal before the age of eighteen prior to the study. Another inclusion criterion was that participants should have been in a romantic relationship or have experienced being in a romantic relationship. When emerging or young adulthood, romantic partners tend to spend time together, generally one-on-one rather than being a part of social group activities. These intimate dyadic activities show the significant effect of the parent-child relationship (Collins & Sroufe, 1999). In other words, the quality of an individual's romantic relationship in young adulthood is a strong predictor of the quality of an individual's relationship with their parents (Roisman et al., 2001). Additionally, in terms of the intergenerational transmission approach states that subsequent behaviors in the romantic relationship are shaped by how parents interact in marriage (Amato & Booth, 2001).

Therefore, having romantic relationship experiences is an important criterion to explore parental infidelity lived experiences.

Exclusion criteria for the participating individuals are identified as follows: a) Expected not to have fluency speaking and understanding Turkish. b) having a cognitive or physical disability that might affect the participants' ability to form and complete sentences as data are collected c) expected not to have negative life experiences last six months such as loss of loved ones, depression, abuse, etc. The study's essence is to select participants based on some criteria on its own statement. Adult children who met the criteria described above were accepted to participate in the study.

### **2.3 Materials**

In this study, informed consent and demographics forms were administered to the research participants. The informed consent form (Appendix D) included the purpose of the study, how the researcher maintains confidentiality, and the researcher's contact information. Also, after the interview was done, the participant wanted to get help from the professionals Ozyegin University couple and family center, and Bilgi University psychotherapy clinic number was added. The demographic information form (Appendix C) requested participants' gender, age, educational level, romantic relationship status, occupation, income level, marital status of their parent, whether they get any professional help about parental infidelity. Lastly, semi-structured interview questions (Appendix A-Turkish version, Appendix B-English version) were used to understand participants' experiences at a depth level. Questions mainly divided into four categories a) Childhood memories before parental infidelity b) What is the knowing details about parental infidelity experience (Who, when, when the participant learn, how they learn, how the relationship changes after parental infidelity?) c) How were the participant's experiences after the parental infidelity? (First reactions, how their relationships

were changed, other family members' reactions) d) How are the adult life experiences in the center of parental infidelity? (Romantic relationship, friendship, trust, loyalty, justice)

## **2.4 Procedure**

After the study had been approved by the Ethics committee of Ozyegin University, the interviews were set with the participants. The researcher made a pilot study with one individual who met the criteria before beginning the data collection procedure to understand whether the interview questions were suitable or not. After the pilot study, questions were decided not to adjust because the questionnaire provided information as expected. After the pilot study was completed, the interviews began. The pilot interview was not included in the study. Semi-structured online interviews, including close and open-ended questions, were used for the study by using the online meeting application Zoom. All participants that voluntarily participated in the study were informed that the interviews were recorded and transcribed. They were also briefed that the recordings will be deleted after the transcribed data, and the transcriptions will be stored in an encrypted hard disk. Before the interview, informed consent and demographics forms were sent to participants by e-mail and received electronic signatures forms. Then mutually agreed time interview was held with each participant individually. The data were analysed with thematic analysis steps mentioned above, using MAXQDA software for qualitative research analysis. Emerging themes and subthemes were discussed with the dissertation chair and finalized for reporting.

## **2.5 Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is a significant factor in qualitative studies rather than reliability and validity. In the current literature most commonly used criteria to evaluate qualitative study is that credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) also another one was added a last criterion, authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 1994). To increase the trustworthiness of the criteria pilot study was made before starting the actual data collection

procedure. This help to improve the likelihood of success of the research and reveal unseen problems related to wording, and ambiguous items while creating questions.

Credibility it can be described as a truth of the participants' views and interpretation also includes representation by the researcher (Polit & Beck, 2008). Member checking was used to enhance the credibility of this research that explained below in detail. Secondly, peer debriefing was used to decrease researcher biases in this study that allows providing feedback to the researcher for neutral colleague's examination of the study's interviews, methodology and data analysis procedure. Peer debriefing took place with a couple and family therapist and researcher who has experience in qualitative research.

Transferability refers to findings of the research is whether its applicable to different context, settings or groups (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) despite qualitative study is not generalizable due to limited number of the participants in the nature. However, participants' demographic information and research context provide the assessment of transferability of the study.

Dependability it can be described as the constancy of the data over similar conditions and the context and its can be achieved when another researcher involve the research process. Lastly confirmability means that data represent not the researcher's own biases or point of view, but it should demonstrate participants' responses. Therefore, to increase the probability of the dependability and confirmability factors of the study, expert checking was used by an experienced qualitative researcher (Dr. Serkan Özgün). Another key term is audit trails that are organized and standardized store of the research materials such as interview transcript, researcher reflexive notes, drafts, and reports that would grant an independent researcher to draw a similar conclusion about the data (Garrino et al., 2015). Audit trail enhances to confirmability of the study. Therefore, all documents from the beginning of the research to the final report of the study will be stored at encrypted hard drive by the researcher. Lastly,

Lincoln and Guba (1982) stated that, reflective journals have precise purposes to enhance the reliability of research and decrease bias that is a part of an auditing process. Reflective journal contains the specifics of what the researcher did, believed and felt while analysing the data (Russel & Kelly, 2002). Therefore, reflective journal writing practice make enhance the transparency of the research process, reflective journal of the study was mentioned below (see 2.7).

## **2.6 Member Checking**

Member checking, also known as member validation, means checking the analysis with the participants of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2013). If the researcher feels responsible for being the participant's voice, the researcher's interpretation should reasonably match the participant's understanding of their experiences. Member check is some kind of credibility check for qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, in this study, the general narrative of the themes was reported to participants of the study via e-mail individually. Six of the study participants responded to their narrative, one is Berkay. He stated that reading his own words from a researcher's writing was exciting, and he thanked me for sharing. Yağmur wrote that thanked me for exploring this specific area as a therapist, she wanted to read the further conclusion of the study after the finalise. I responded that, I will send the study when I get the approval from the institute. Buse confirmed that the results were logical and coherent with her stated experiences. Also, she shared that decided to get professional help for herself and encourage her mother too. She said that she found it interesting to read it. Maral has also stated her excitement about the first time being a participant in the research, and she confirmed her narrative, which I sent, and she wished good luck for the rest of the process.

## **2.7 The Researcher's Perspective**

As a principal investigator of this study, I am a master-level couple and family therapy student. As a psychotherapist, I work with individuals, couples, and families from a systemic



perspective. My interest in infidelity started to form during my undergraduate years because of my personal experience with infidelity.

During my graduate years, I had a chance to work with couples who came to therapy aftermath of infidelity, or individuals who were injured or participating or knew parental infidelity, basically I have chance to work with infidelity stories during my internship, whether my own clients or the case discussed during supervision. I realized that even though people have different backgrounds, social settings, sexual orientations, and belief systems, they can share similar experiences, and infidelity can touch our lives in many ways. Sometimes we cheated, sometimes we injured, sometimes witnessed, sometimes we had to keep a secret from one parent: in many forms and patterns. It becomes the inevitable truth of our lives. I find it valuable to try to understand the topic, which is highly widespread in our lives; however, I think we can still not fully understand infidelity. Additionally, as a systemically trained psychotherapist, I find it valuable and interesting to investigate how systems and subsystems are affected aftermath of parental infidelity. As Virginia Satir stated, "It is now clear to me that the family is a microcosm of the world. To understand the world, we can study the family: issues such as power, intimacy, autonomy, trust, and communication skills are vital parts underlying how we live in the world. To change the world is to change the family." This quote makes me feel more excited about my research questions and gives me the courage to pursue my interest in this specific topic. Because in the literature, exploring the family system after infidelity is quite rare. Lastly, I found it valuable to investigate this topic in Turkey's cultural conjecture, to which I belong. I believe that giving consideration to culture might help to detect the research gap in the literature. Also, it contributes to clinical implications in a cultural setting.

From my side of the story, I have not experienced parental infidelity experience. However, I have been injured; I believe that it was a painful also maturing experience for me

which I realized years later. While reading literature about infidelity and searching the specific research question, I decided to create the research question a bit further from my own experience. I believe that thanks to this distance, I decrease the chance of being triggered while conducting a study, I try to eliminate emotional overwhelming.

In the data collection process, even though I felt scared about not finding participants at the beginning of the study because I thought that infidelity is known as a topic of an avoidant and sensitive subject, it became much easier than I thought to reach individuals who had parental infidelity experience. I did not use any flyer or social media announcement regarding avoidance of harm for the study because it can trigger possible research candidates. Therefore, the participants finding process started with spread by word of mouth. I realized that many individuals shared the same experiences in my small social environment. Many friends of mine directed me to candidate participants of the study. I recognized that parental infidelity is a topic that can be talked about in a trusted social environment for adult children. As a researcher's bias, I thought I could not find participants who had experienced maternal infidelity because maternal parental infidelity culturally seems more inappropriate than paternal. In other words, people might be tended to hide maternal infidelity, or maternal infidelity tends to appear less likely. However, two participants out of ten know maternal infidelity experienced; others are paternal infidelity. At the same time, maternal infidelity was kept a secret from their fathers in both cases.

While listening to the participants' unique experiences about parental infidelity during the data collection procedure, I admire their courage to talk to someone about one of the most secretive family events in their life. I thought that, If I were in their place, I might hesitate to participate in the research study on one of the explosive familial topics. During data collection, some participants seemed more confident to speak because they had shared these experiences before; some needed to ensure confidentiality more than others. Also, some of the

participants experienced intense, emotional moments, short breaks were recommended during the interview. On the other hand, I thought that some of the participants shared their experiences in a distant perspective like from third person eyes. However, in the bottom line, I truly believe that all the participants genuinely opened their hearts to me with admirable courage. At the end of every interview, I felt great gratitude toward them, and respect for their personal experiences. After every interview, I was amazed at how they coped with the incident and were aware of the consequences of parental infidelity in their adult life. It made me think about how resilient and adaptive we are as human beings.

I had no experience before as a qualitative researcher, contrary to the quantitative research study. Therefore, I was a bit nervous about being interviewed in one-to-one session. As I read before conducting interviews, it was essential to turn off the psychotherapist button; therefore, sometimes, it was hard not to validate or reflect on what the participants said. Because I should have known that I was standing there as a researcher. However, after the first two or three interviews, I felt more confident about conducting interviews with participants. Towards the end of the data collection, I thought that the interview structure was steady and valid; however, I felt more confident while asking questions depending on their unique experiences. On the other hand, having some experiences as a psychotherapist became helpful and valuable during the interviews, such as having empathic listening skills, using mimics to help them feel heard, and understanding their unique experience by posing questions. Having an interview guideline and general questions made the whole process more standardized for me; therefore, I felt more confident as a researcher. Additionally, touching with the data first-hand made me feel so excited as a researcher who conducted qualitative research for the first time. On the contrary, a qualitative study focusing on words, emotions, thoughts, and unique experiences rather than numbers made me feel more satisfied as a

researcher. It was an unforgettable experience for me and for my future directions in academia.

### CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

This section will provide a) demographics of the participants, b) vignettes for each participant c) thematic overview study examine c) intrapersonal themes and subthemes, d) interpersonal theme and subthemes. The connection between these levels will be discussed in the discussion section.

#### 3.1 Demographics

Ten participants' demographic information is presented in Table 1 below. In order to protect the participants' anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms were given to each participant.

Table 1.

*Pseudonym (Code), Age, Gender, Level of Education, Occupation, Relationship Status, Marital Status of Parents*

Pseudonym (code)	Age	Gender	Level of Education	Occupation	Relationship Status	Number of siblings	Getting Psychological Treatment/Support
Bora	27	M	Bachelor's degree	Psychologist	Single	1	Yes
Yağmur	27	F	Master's degree	Clinical Psychologist	Cohabiting	-	Yes
Maral	27	F	Bachelor's degree	Accountant	Cohabiting	1	No
Yağız	24	M	Bachelor's degree	Master's student	Committed Relationship	1	No
Elif	27	F	Master's degree	Clinical Psychologist	Committed Relationship	1	No

Yaren	28	F	Master's degree	HR Specialist	Cohabiting	1	No
Berkay	27	M	Bachelor's degree	Accountant Executive	Committed Relationship	1	No
Buse	30	F	Master's degree	Clinical Psychologist	Married	1	No
Ece	27	F	Bachelor's degree	Sales and Marketing	Committed Relationship	-	No
Zeynep	27	F	Bachelor's degree	Lawyer	Cohabiting	2	No

Table 2.

*Characteristics of Parental Infidelity*

Pseudonym (code)	Maternal vs Paternal	Age of Knowing Parental Infidelity	Secret bearer/Known by family	Marital Status of Parents
Bora	Mother	16	Secret bearer	Married
Yağmur	Mother	12	Secret bearer	Divorced
Maral	Father	12	Known by family	Divorced
Yağız	Father	16	Known by family	Married
Elif	Father	8	Known by family	Divorced
Yaren	Father	11	Known by family	Married
Berkay	Father	17	Known by family	Divorced
Buse	Father	12	Secret bearer	Married
Ece	Father	15	Known by family	Divorced
Zeynep	Father	14	Known by family	Divorced

### **3.2 Vignettes of the Participants**

This section includes researcher's own personal observations, and insights about each participant and for the interview process as well. Each vignette starts with demographic information and concludes with the researcher's evaluation of the interview process.

#### **3.2.1 Bora**

This was the first interview following the pilot, and it was the shortest interview among all other interviews. Bora is a research associate in psychology, 27 years old, and has a younger brother. Before I started interviewing him, I had my own excitement as a researcher because the interview process would begin. When Bora came to the meeting that we decided mutually about time, he looks like excited and cheerful. His energy made me feel comfortable and helped me overcome the interview's stress after a while. Before starting the interview, for icebreaking, we talked about his research area, etc., and also I explained the right of withdrawal anytime he felt uncomfortable about the subject. Bora stated that he had a romantic, committed relationship a year ago; however, he is single now. He has not lived with his family for ten years; however, parental infidelity is still a secret between Bora and his mother. He mentioned that he becomes more relaxed when he puts some boundaries between his parents and also feels safer because the infidelity was not ongoing. As a researcher, I felt satisfied at the end of the interview because I thought that he shared his own experience sincerely and without hiding it. At the same time, I believe that because Bora has gone through his own therapy process is one of the reasons to talk about sensitive issues comfortably.

#### **3.2.2 Yağmur**

Yağmur is 27 and a master's student. She said she would participate in the study during our telephone conversation. She stated that she was interested in the research topic as a psychologist. But on the other hand, she wanted to be sure of the confidentiality of the study.

The researcher has explained how the confidentiality process was guarded to the participant in detail. Jointly agreed to meet via zoom on the day and time. The participant said that the subject we are going to discuss is a matter that is really sensitive to her. She added that she is still working on this. She seemed a little nervous at the beginning of the interview. Therefore, the study information has been transferred to the participant's face to face. The participant is 27 years old and an only child. The participant gave the questions straightforward answers. It was thought that the third person was in an important place in the participant's life, causing shame and remorse about this vital information that was kept from the father. When she said that she had cheated on his partners in his previous relationships while her therapy process was ongoing, her biggest fear was to look like her mother. She was making a considerable effort to maintain loyalty in her current romantic relationship, like having an alarm system against being unfaithful. She was trying to care about her relationship. It also made me think that being a clinical psychologist is more aware of their own processes.

### **3.2.3 Maral**

Maral is 27 years old and an accountant; she learned about her father's infidelity when eleven years old. The participant mentioned some concerns and hesitations about what she would talk about in her interview. She was afraid that what he was actually saying wasn't working as a process. Maral's concerns were tried to relieve, and the general process and criteria have been re-briefed, jointly creating the day and time are settled. Ice-breaking questions were asked about her childhood so that the participant could answer questions more easily. She stated that she did not speak much about parental infidelity earlier; because she did not want to think about it. She also mentioned some problems other than parental infidelity affecting her in the family system. During the interview, she gave a great example of how denial works for her about parental infidelity. In other words, parental infidelity became a

topic avoidant for her. Also, how hard to trust others for sharing something and keeping close to them.

As a researcher, one of the exciting parts of our interview, she had very picky about romantic partner selection. As time goes by, she said that she had a tendency to choose someone who was an introvert or had a limited social environment. She tries to create a trusted shelter for herself without the chance of being injured. She has always had romantic relationships that lasted longer than two years. Currently, she lives with her boyfriend.

#### **3.2.4 Yağız**

The participant is 25 years old and a master's student in engineering. I had difficulty understanding Yağız's feelings and emotions when he was speaking during the interview process. However, I also believed that he tried to give as many honest answers as possible. Compared to the participants of the study, I felt that what we were talking about was a little more about content rather than process. I believed he was confused about his father's infidelity because he thought it was only an emotional situation. At the same time, I felt that the shared feelings that emerged as themes or patterns in the interview process with other participants were not formed in this participant. The participant's experience is a little bit outlier when considering other participants.

As a researcher, I felt that his experience with parental infidelity was mainly related to denial or feeling that he had nothing to cope with when I examined the interview. He describes himself as impassive, especially in the home environment. Throughout these years, he stated that the online world was very appealing to him; that's why he had not gotten into the arguments and fights around infidelity. However, from his point of view, he saw his father as a coward who stood behind his mother when his infidelity was appeared by the other side's husband. He emphasized that after the incident, he lost the respect of his family, his father, and his mother.



### ***3.2.5 Elif***

Upon first contact on the phone, Elif left an impression that she is a person who is eager to participate in the study. She is 27 years old, and she learned about her father's infidelity when she was seven years old while secretly listening to their parents' conversation. When I asked questions about her childhood and years of adolescence during the interview, she had very vivid memories and images that she shared. She remembers the İzmit earthquake in 1999 and, accordingly, the loss of her cousin, her grandmother, and how her mother was during these times. After a while, her sister had a cerebral haemorrhage. Then she learned about parental infidelity, and her parents got into the process of divorce. When I listened to her, I thought the timeline was quite hard for someone, especially a child. I believe that being an older child made her more responsible for her life and her family members, especially after the infidelity was revealed. As she said, she became the backbone of her mother. After finishing the interview, I thought that the statement "psychologists are wounded, healers." Because of her statement, she believed that she overcame all by helping his mother, standing with her, or being aware of her emotional status. And now, she had a profession that required helping someone. On the other hand, she created great social support systems, including close friends, activities, and projects she attended. She is also a clinical psychologist; I feel that she really opened her heart to me without avoiding saying and keeping anything.

### ***3.2.6 Yaren***

She is 27 years old and an HR specialist at one of the corporate firms. The participant's childhood was in one of Turkey's most popular tourist cities. She expressed that her family raised her under pressure and restraint because of the city circumstances. Still, despite all the restrains she had been under, she was a rebellious child, especially during her adolescent years. She also indicated that his uncle lives with them; he became more like an older brother to her. The participant said her first childhood memory was about her father's infidelity.

During the interview, she mentioned her mother's statements; her mother always stated that their marriage continues because the children and men are untrustworthy. As she believed that it affected her more than she thought. While everything happened, when she was with her mother as a team against her father, she coped with them by writing journals and dancing. Especially dancing has become part of her life while dealing with all family issues. She does not believe that her parents are in love. At the end of the interview, she stated that it is impossible to crystalize all the changes she has been through with only parental infidelity. It was a very valid point regarding all schemas changes around parental infidelity. She is currently in a romantic relationship, and they decided to get married.

### **3.2.7 Berkay**

Berkay is 27 years old and accounted executive at a company run by his family. He learned about his father's infidelity at the age of 17 with her mother; however, as he stated, he realized some signals before it was certain. He has had a romantic relationship for more than two years. Before the current relationship, he said that he had long-lasting romantic relationships. Berkay's interview provided vibrant details, especially about changing his opinions about the offending parent and what happened to the family after the incident. Berkay said:

*“What happened has happened, but our lives were lost, we were ruined, we broke up, we are done. It is like someone took us, and they hit us in our face, in our mouth with a sledgehammer. Such a situation happened. My father has ruined my life.”*

I think all the statements he said were compelling. On the other hand, while he feels that way, he stated that he felt responsible for taking care of the offending parent because he was terrified his father did something to himself. With all the contradictions he had, he also feels responsible for others in his family, including his mother and younger brother. During the interview, he expressed himself with rich details and information. At the end of the

interview, he asked, "isn't it hard to listen to all these stories?" curiously. For a while, the importance of social support system was discussed with the participant.

### **3.2.8 Buse**

Buse is 30 years old, a clinical psychologist, and has been married for four years. She was the only participant in the data who was married. She accidentally found out about her father's infidelities at 12 years old and kept it a secret. Since she is a therapist, the interview with her was very fluent, full of her thoughts, emotions, and experiences. She generally focused on process rather than content while answering the interview questions. Despite her openness and clear expression, she stated that her parental infidelity experience and what she lived through became talkable with others recently. Maybe that's why, I felt that sometimes she was having a hard time talking with me, she did not show facial mimics or gestures; generally, she sometimes spoke with a blank facial expression. She said she could open the topic to her husband last year after her insecurities came up. As a researcher, I am fascinated by people's courage to talk. When they started to speak about what they hid, I believe that it became easier to deal with it even thirteen years later.

Her thoughts are generally about when she felt to keep the secret. She accused her mother, an injured parent, of her deficiencies, such as "what is missing on you then my father cheated on you?". She blamed her mother due to infidelity. During the interview time to time, when she thought that she accused her mother when she was younger, she felt injustice to be so angry with her mother and for being accused of her. She gave metaphors about how she became surveillance of her father's behaviors after she learned about third parties, saying: *"I became a personal detective to check every lie of my father. However, it was frustrating."*

### **3.2.9 Ece**

She is 27 years old, and she is working at one of the corporate companies as a marketing and sales specialist. She accidentally found out about her father's infidelity at 15

years old. She kept it a secret for a while because her father forced her because her mother was taking treatment for cancer. After a while, some other incident made everything visible. During her parents' divorce process, firstly, she was accused by her father of to cause of divorce, and then she was charged by her aunt for causing her mother to take less money in the divorce. After all, she has gone through, she describes her life in two parts. The first one is about family only, including her mother, and the second part is about friends and her social environment. Like other participants, she used her close friends as a coping mechanism; unlike other participants, her experience related to external family members became more confusing and messier, including an emotional cut-off to protect herself due to accusations. At the end of the interview, she asked me, "*How am I? Am I problematic? How do you describe me?*" kinds of questions. I explained that participants' answers and themes were sent at the analysis part, and she said she was looking forward to reading them.

### **3.2.10 Zeynep**

She is 26 years old and a lawyer at a law firm. While talking with her before the research interview, she has some hesitations about confidentiality due to her father's position in the business world. I explain the security and confidentiality procedure to her during and after the process. Later, jointly mutual time, the interview part begins. Later, the interview part began at a jointly mutual time. She learned about her father's infidelity via her mother when she was fourteen. She stated that her father has been diagnosed with psychological problems such as drug addiction and a narcissistic personality disorder. Additionally, she knows about her mother getting infected with STIs due to her father's sexual infidelity.

The interview with Zeynep touched me deeply because her emotions sometimes pushed her at the same time, she talked about the incidence and family issues around parental infidelity very clearly and sincerely. When she spoke about her grandmother, who is fascinating support for her, her eyes watered at some point in the interview. When asked if she

needed a break, she wiped her tears and continued to answer the questions with her chin up. It was a compelling moment for me as a researcher because she continued to express herself on a sensitive topic without any mandatories. I appreciated her courage to talk to someone who did not know and sincerely thanked her at the end of the interview.

### 3.3 Thematic Overview

Ten interviews were conducted with individuals for the purpose of this research. The study's central research question was: What are the experiences of parental infidelity of adult children? Sub-questions were this study a) How are the child's changes in family subsystems after parental infidelity experiences? b) How are the coping mechanism strategies? c) How does the meaning of parental infidelity affect adult children's attributions of family, justice, loyalty, and romantic relationships?

These questions classified the results into two levels of themes and subthemes: a) intrapersonal themes level, to discover the individual's emotional, cognitive process and coping strategies b) interpersonal themes level to explore the experiences of being in a romantic relationship experience.

### 3.4 Intrapersonal Themes Level

The thematic analysis yielded three intrapersonal themes and ten subthemes. Table 3 gives an outline of three intrapersonal themes and ten subthemes.

*Table 3.*

*Themes, Subthemes, and Reoccurrences from 10 participants*

Theme	Subtheme	Reoccurrences from 10 participants
<b>1</b>	<b>Growing up Before Their Time</b>	
	101 Child as a bridge between parents	8
	102 Emotional Parentification	8

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	103	Knowledge about parental sexual experience	7
<b>2</b>		<b>Emotional rollercoaster Around Parental Infidelity</b>	
	201	Repressed Anger	7
	202	Disgust about knowing 3rd party	7
	203	Fear of Resembling Parent(s)	8
<b>3</b>		<b>Coping with Parental Infidelity</b>	
	301	Social support as a coping mechanism	6
	302	Hard to remember details of parental infidelity	7
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### ***3.4.1 Intrapersonal Level Theme 1: Growing up Before Their Time***

This theme is named "growing up before their time" because the participants' experiences around parental infidelity causes early ages involvement and familiarity with adult-like behaviors, responsibilities, knowledge about adult romantic relationships and part of the solution to marital dyad conflict. All the participants mentioned that they had to be mature early in their childhood in the nature of their circumstances. They provided emotional caregiving to parents or siblings before they were emotionally ready when they knew about parental infidelity.

Buse, for instance, reflects on her own thoughts about had to grow up early when answering the question, "When you look at the parental experience, what do you think the positive and negative aspects were?" as follows:

*"I think that getting into the adults' world at a very young age causes rapid and compulsory maturation. Maybe it was a positive thing for my family, relatives, and*

*environment however, I am not quite sure it is positive for my own experience. You know, I got into something so real, so fast. I tried to understand sexuality, emotions, and romantic relations in an adult world."*

Her comments about the question reflected the idea that how children had to become familiar with the adult world, especially their own parents'. She had to become adult-like, and she was confused about this compulsory maturation, whether positive or negative for her during her childhood.

Another similar response to this situation came from Yaren, she said:

*"I thought all of this had turned me into a kid who took too much responsibility before the required age, tries to make vital decisions and force me to take responsibility."*

Yaren's answer also emphasized that she must take responsibility and become a decision-maker due to parental infidelity.

It covered the incidence that gave rise to these responsibilities and roles, which affected the participants' state in their families rather than being a child. Based on participants' accounts, three sub-themes emerge as "child as a bridge between parents", "emotional parentification," and "knowledge about parental sexual experiences."

#### **3.4.1.1 Subtheme 101: Child as a Bridge Between Parents**

Eight out of ten participants mentioned loyalty struggles between their parents after infidelity was revealed, being forced to keep the secret from one parent, or becoming a bridge between their parental conflict. The moderator role around parental infidelity becomes seeable in many ways in this study. Firstly, an injured parent reveals some information and details about the offending parent's infidelity and some points in their marriage. Secondly, after extramarital infidelity is known or discovered by the child, they become a part of parental communication while conveying the messages between them. Lastly, one of the parents tries

to affect the child's thoughts and beliefs about infidelity or offending parent. Becoming a bridge experience around parental infidelity was explained by Berkay as a:

*"I listen to my father; I am not sure whether I can do something or not. Then I listen to my mother and her problems about my father. I convey to my mother what my father told me, and to my father what my mother told me. I was acting like bridge in between. I was a person who constantly listen to both of them and conveys information from one to the other. I took a position of a bridge. This was my duty."*

This statement clearly showed how he became the connection between two parents in times of infidelity. His position as a bridge became his duty to resolve parental problems not related to children. However, the place conveying messages made him more desperate to solve their problems. Like Berkay, Ece also emphasized emotions and struggles when she had to be a moderator with her parents after infidelity.

*"I was like a judge between them. I am trying to mediate between them like they were my clients, and I was trying to find middle way for both. I also did that a while they were divorcing after whole thing, I said you will get this, and you will get this too. But I should not say this, what is my position between them, why? I have done a lot of things like that. I am sure there are more, but these came to my mind first."*

She explicitly described the pattern she had duty for her parents' conflict. Also, she had a mission for direction to adult-like decisions and helped them find a final solution like a judge. She still could not understand why she had to find a balance between them. While expressing these statements, her voice became quite angry toward the situation she had experienced. Similar statements and experiences came from Zeynep. She had learned about her father's infidelity behaviors from her mother, and after she knew, she had to become a problem solver between them about the incident. Zeynep stated her experience as a:



*“My mother told me that my father cheated on her. One day when we were talking she told me that. After a while, I found myself between their arguments. For instance, one day my parents called me, and they told me “We are going to ask you question please decide whether is okay or not.” There was a message that is came from that woman to my father about going dinner. My mother saw the messages and then both of them asked me my opinion about the dinner. I said no.”*

Zeynep not only became a person a problem solver between parent, also she became decision maker about the third-party involvement. While Zeynep is doing this explicitly, Yaren became a detective to monitor her father’s infidelity behaviors and check him with her mother. Her mother build alliance with her against her father:

*“After my mother started to drive, there were days when, for example, we went out at night and followed my father's car. "Where is it going?" there were some sciences in my head where my mother and I follow him.”*

Last example of being triangulation children around the incidence, after a parent’s infidelity revealed, the offending parent apologizes for the infidelity behavior to the child. Yağız said that:

*“After everyone in our in my family found out that my father was cheating on my mother, I think that my father felt extremely embarrassed toward me rather than my sister or my mother. I do not know why but he apologized way too many times. He said, “This will never happen again”. And I did not know what to say either, I did not say much. I just only able to say that “I did not want him to upset my mother again, please do not do this again.”*

#### **3.4.1.2 Subtheme 102: Emotional Parentification**

Eight out of ten participants' experiences were linked to emotional parentification. This sub-theme explores the participants' experiences of being an emotional caregiver of their injured parent, offending parent, or sibling. Additionally, keeping secrets from children while

considering other people's lives, carrying the burden only for themselves, makes them emotional caregivers to consider other family members' well-being. For taking care of all family members after the infidelity and feeling responsible for their well-being Berkay gave a great statement about his standpoint after the incident:

*“Life has pushed me to the responsibility of being his older brother. I tried harder to support him especially after my father’s infidelity revealed and divorce process. Normally, I intended to live my life without them. My purpose is taking care of work, take care of my father, take care of my mother and take care of my brother. I will try to make my mother well, I will try to my brother well, everyone will recover, everyone finds their way in life then I will take care my life. If I had not done this, my conscience would have been very uncomfortable.”*

Berkay explains here how he is becoming emotional and institutional care giver of his family members with his conscience. He underlined that how family members need comes before his needs and life plans. Another part of taking care of injured mother’s emotional needs after other parent’s infidelity revealed, Elif said that:

*“My mother was so depressed after infidelity, and I was in the first grade learning to read and write. At that time, for instance my mother did not support me or took care of me. I already get up for school and get ready for my own. At this point, just like I said, I had a task being supporter her during depressed time and I tried to talk to her, I tried to comfort her. I always tried to support her.”*

Elif describes how being taking care of her mother when she was depressed while her mother couldn’t take care of her. She partly become her mother’, injured parent’s caregiver. Another participant explained that he needed this information keeping as a secret because considering other family members during mediating between the injured parent and other family members. Bora explained that as like:

*“I was the crisis solver in the family, I had no right to create crisis. There were too many people to be affected by hearing of the incidence. My brother, my father, my mother herself, the extended family... I did not want them to know that. I have to consider my family; I must consider my parents.”*

Another similar statement came from Buse; she felt that she had to hide her father's infidelity behaviors to keep a secret. She did not talk with her mother due to taking care of her emotions, a similar logic to Bora. She prioritized her mother's emotions, feelings, and situation rather than herself. Buse said:

*“I've never talked about this with my mother or father. I thought that it will make her emotionally devastated. She might feel embarrassed if she knew that I know about my father's infidelity. I did not want her to feel compelled to make a decision.”*

Lastly, taking care of siblings emotionally like a parent, considering siblings' emotional needs, and trying to protect them made them become emotional parents around parental infidelity. Buse said:

*“I never spoke about infidelity with my brother. We have been talking about my mom and dad's relationship for a year maximum two years. We talk about their parenting, incompetence, mistakes etc. We criticize my father's awkwardness and selfishness and my mother's childishness, but we have never talked about the theme of infidelity over their relationship. I never wanted to give him that burden. So, it is my burden and something I have experienced, but he does not have to carry it.”*

As same as Buse, Zeynep gave similar examples about being emotional guard of sister and brother. Zeynep explained that:

*“My siblings learned from my father's later explanations. They learned later than me. I did not tell them. While I was going through that process with my mother and father, my sibling fortunately was one click outside of whole. Obviously, everything was hard for them*

*too however it was a bit harder for me. My sister and I were closed but I wanted to protect them from all the information I wish I had not known. I do not know; it was a complicated process.”*

### **3.4.1.3 Subtheme 103: Knowledge about Parental Sexual Experience**

Seven participants out of ten shared similar experiences about knowing parental sexuality. This sub-theme explores the participants’ experiences of exposure and knowledge of parental sexual experiences, whether inside or outside of the marriage. This knowledge and information about parents’ sexual behaviors have been experienced as uncomfortable and unpleasant. Bora gave the following example:

*“I mean so unpleasant (I am saying it was unpleasant at my childhood, it seems normal now), so awful, I came across a sexually explicit text messages between my mother and him. I would not expect from that age and I read all of them, all sexual messages. I read over and over all night long. I mean for someone of that age, I think it was very detailed content and it was very detailed.”*

Bora statement explained that how he felt uncomfortable about the offending parent sexual messages and due to reading them he became aware of the sexual content. As the similar experience Bora has, Buse gave similar saying about her father’s experiences before the marriage and after she discovered his infidelity. She knows many sexual partners her fathers involved with. Buse:

*“He had a fiancée before my mother, but there was another African American woman in his life before he broke off engagement. So, there is always a women’s theme in my father life like it and he never kept it. After I discovered he cheated on my mother, I found old messages with other women. So not just one woman in his life. There were Turkish women, there were foreign, there were women who meet regularly when they meet at the annually*

*corporate meetings and so on. You know, I got into something so real and so fast and I tried to understand sexuality in the adult world and for my father world.”*

Buse knew about her father’s relationship outside of their marriage. While reading her father’s messages, she became aware of his sexual activities and types of women, and occasions he got involved in. As she stated, he caused her to understand her father’s sexuality around her knowledge. Another participant explained that the offending parent himself gave some information about both marital sexual lives. The offending partner gives attribution to sexuality to explain his infidelity behaviors. Ece said:

*“When I asked him “why are you doing something like this if the woman is cancer?” he started to cry and he said “you know I could not stand it, I could not help myself, I could not resist. There were things like we could not do with your mother” kinds of thing he said. For example, my mother used to have vaginismus that is why they ever had a healthy sex life. They wanted to solve it; however, they could not solve it effectively. My father told me something like that about their sex life and make connection his infidelity to this.”*

While the offending parent explained to her the reason behind the infidelity, Ece became knowledgeable of her parents’ sexual life, her mother’s sexual dysfunction, and why her father was involved with other women. Also, she justified in her mind why her mother has a problem with normalizing it. Zeynep also stated knowing about her father’s sexual behaviors outside of her parent's marriage and knowing the consequences of this sexual infidelity.

*“When my mother had to leave the house, it turned out that my father had sexual relationship with many women. That is why my mother got sick and had to receive very painful treatment. It is not a scenario like my father fell in love with a woman and cheated with her. It is not pleasant but sleeping with random women and carrying disease and infecting. It feels worse than just participating infidelity.”*

Also, Elif has the same experiences about knowing offending parent sexual experiences outside of marriage. Elif explored the unpleasant and troublesome situation as like:

*“Before the women he is married to, he cheated on my mother with different women. I even learned that there were different types of women. I mean there were foreign women, those who were very old age and those who were very young age. It was hard to believe that my father was like that, I mean sexually. It was hard to learn that.”*

Similar with Elif’s experiences, Berkay said:

*“At some point my mother found performance enhancing drugs at my father’s bag and they did not have any sexual life at that time. Technically, this performance enhancing drug is either his bag as a hobby or there is someone and something going on there. There was such a shitty situation.”*

Also, Berkay knows about his parental sexual life and his father's sexual life while expressing her emotions about the situation.

#### **3.4.2 Intrapersonal Level Theme 2: Emotional Rollercoaster Around Parental Infidelity**

The second intrapersonal master theme explores the participants’ emotional experiences after learning about one parent’s extramarital infidelity experiences. “Emotional rollercoaster” expression means that there was no unique emotional reaction after knowing the incident; however, the children generally felt a range of emotions and different magnitudes at different times. Therefore, as an umbrella term emotional ambivalence was used to correspond to what they experienced emotionally and struggles around the range of emotions. Participants reported a sincere openness to their emotional imbalance around parental infidelity. Based on participants’ reflections, three subthemes were named “repressed anger”, “disgust about third party”, and “fear of resembling parent(s).”

Subthemes of the emotional rollercoaster around parental infidelity will explain below however, for three participants, emotional rollercoaster experience also includes empathy toward the offending parent. Being empathetic toward the offending parent was valuable and particular emotion to give place in this section to understand emotional imbalance, and how the children could approach the offending parent's behaviors. Yağmur described how she understood the offending parent's infidelity behavior, she expressed that she could understand why her mother did this:

*"I almost applauded my mother, you know, I was very sympathetic to my mother for cheating, I was very understanding toward her for cheating. I could see the difficulties in her relationship with my father. I was aware that my mother's emotional needs were not met in their marriage, I was aware that something was missing for my mother. And maybe that person was providing it to her at some point. He was good for my mother, and I said "okay," so I never got angry."*

Buse also has the same empathic position toward the offending parent after she learned about her father's infidelity.

*"I don't think it's fair at all, this is what I said, but he was that kind of man. There has never been such a man, that is, when telling his own youth stories and his expectations from life, I belong to this family and this woman, and he has never felt or made me feel that there can be no other person in my life. Actually, I wasn't surprised. That's why I respected the man for being who he is, and I understood that he actually becomes the person he wants to be."*

#### **3.4.2.1 Subtheme 201: Repressed Anger**

Seven out of ten participants mentioned the subtheme "repressed anger". The subtheme covers some obstacles around expressing anger in any possible way. Also, it covers how the repressed anger comes into participants' adult life after decreasing the intensity of the incidence. The participants expressed repressed anger toward offending or injured parents for

many reasons around parental infidelity. Yağmur was explained her repressed anger very clearly and vividly during the interview as an answer to the question “How was your relationship with your mother/father was changed after you learned about infidelity?”. She said:

*“I think I didn't like it very much, but I think there was a part of me that was angry with my mother. Because I started to not feel as sincere as I used to, but that anger is so deep inside, and it wasn't supposed to come out that I didn't even realize it. Maybe if my anger came out or I showed that I was angry about it, I would have to do this to two important people in my life. When I think about it now, it seems possible, so there was anger inside I can see it. But I didn't say anything while she was in the relationship. So I greeted her very maturely. I said, "It is okay" I didn't tell anyone either.”*

Yağmur was known to offending parent's extramarital partner very closely, the third party was a part of her life too. While she repressed her anger toward both the mother and the third party, she realized that some parts inside her were angry with her mother even though she could not understand that age. Rather than express her anger, she repressed to show both important ones in her life. Like Yağmur, Bora described his repressed anger and how he realized that a year later from the incident:

*“Because it was really hard information for me to process, and I thought that anger disappeared over time inside me. Until I was at the point where I thought that I was coping with this, and I had completely neutralized its effect on my life. A year later after I've learned, while I was fighting at home with my mother about an issue that really doesn't matter, we also had an apartment worker at home. Next to her I shouted to my mother, "At least I'm not a bitch like you," I said at that moment, "Okay, I haven't been able to solve anything, it means I'm still struggling all these, and emotions I had to repressed especially rage it was.”*



As Bora stated, his anger looked like disappearing inside him; however, a year later, he felt the anger he repressed probably unconsciously. His anger became visible near a stranger who did not know the truth. His statement showed that after the incident how he repressed his rage toward the offending parent. Also, Yaren was angry about her father's behavior, especially when she was neglected because of the third parties in her childhood. Also, she had anger that came up in her adult life toward an injured parent due to telling her age-inappropriate information about her father. Therefore, she stated that her anger was for both of her parents; only an injured parent appeared in her adult life.

*“When I say anger, the reason why I was forgotten at school was that woman, and then it made me very angry. I mean, you can forget but forget for another reason, forget about the busy work schedule, you come to me with a smug woman, it's a shame... When I think about it, I still agree, I guess I would get angry again today, but I didn't show this to anyone how angry I was toward my father. Also, in the first year of university, I felt great anger inside me toward my mother. The reason for the anger was that my father did not drag me into these processes, my father was not a man to lift me up and tell me about them and share them. but I was involved in all the processes because of my mother.”*

As Yaren clearly stated, she felt anger because her father forgot her when he was in a relationship with other women. Rather than expressing this anger, she dealt with it without showing it toward him. Also, anger toward the injured parent became visible and recognizable when the physical distance occurred.

#### **3.4.2.2 Subtheme 202: Disgust About 3rd Party**

Seven out of ten participants describe their feelings toward the offending parent's extramarital partner as disgust and revulsion. Some of the participants knew the third party before they learned about the infidelity, some of them had never met them before the incident they only met after the offending parent decided to get married, and some of them only knew

their name, etc. There were many possibilities around the third party; however, feeling disgusted about their connection trial was generally rejected by children and it was found unpleasant. Even though third-party approach to children in a manner, children had negative feelings toward them even before infidelity became revealed to them. For instance, Yağmur stated that her place about mother's extramarital partner and how she can see him as her point of view:

*"He used to say nice things to me. I wouldn't care, or it would be disgusting for me to even say nice things like that. It sounded to me as if he was trying to befriend his girlfriend's daughter, and it sounded bad back then. I guess I was in such a judgmental place. He was married, so my mother too, but they were in a romantic relationship. I didn't like that. So, for example, he added me on Facebook afterwards, I didn't accept it, I don't want to establish a relationship with him from anywhere extra."*

Maral also has the same feelings about the third party. She said that:

*"I could never be close to that woman, I never felt close. I did not want to talk to her when we are had to be at same environment. I was acting like she did not exist. I did not want to even look at her face, I did not want to see her, I cannot stand to see her."*

Yaren also underlined the how she felt about knowing her father's extramarital partner:

*"I remember my father picked me up and there was another woman in the car he took. I know this woman who stop by our shop a lot. He has a nickname, "Jo..". When I saw the woman in the car, I understood something unwillingly. Then I saw her in the shop and "What is this woman doing here?" I understood that woman has silly behaviors like "ehee hee my dear." etc. Then that woman came to the shop again, I remember that I had no contact, I ignore her, I was pissed involuntarily. Not only anger but also there was something like that like disgust you know, detestation."*

Yaren's father did not explain to her anything however when she saw the third party, she understood that something was going on between them. The participant described the third-party behaviors as silly, and she tried to avoid her consciously when she faced with her occasionally. Her feelings towards the third party included disgust, repulsion, and antipathy. Like Yaren, Zeynep knew the third party from family shared environment. She described how she knew the third party and she became a spouse of her father after her parents divorced. She has some feelings about her continues as she stated:

*“After that, there was also a woman, we always heard that woman's name in strange contexts, she was also our neighbour from my grandmother's summer house or something like that, which is a very silly connection. Anyway, we heard about that woman all the time and my father had a relationship with that woman as far as I understood. And now he married the woman. I still want to complicate that woman's life; I still disgust her. I am very stubborn, and I will enjoy to make her life miserable. I still cannot stand to see her.”*

#### **3.4.2.3 Subtheme 203: Fear of Resembling Parent(s)**

The subtheme “Fear of resembling parent(s)” is the most occurrence subtheme in the main theme. Eight participants out of ten expressed that they had a fear of being like at least one parent, whether injured or offending, and resembling their relationship. As a researcher, one of the exciting findings of this subtheme, some participants feared being like their injured parents. After the incident, their image of the injured parent became weak, powerless, and fragile about them. Also, the participants had a fear of resembling offending parents in the time of their own romantic relationship struggles, especially when they were faced with an ethical or moral dilemma in that relationship. Buse stated that how she has an alarm system of being like the offending parent:

*“What if I cheated on my partner one day and if I become someone like my father, I was very afraid of these things. On the other hand, the concept of monogamy is not an*

*institution that I believe in, however I have a side like I will be monogamous in spite of my father.”*

Even though Buse does not believe in being monogamous, she had blocked to live what she thought instead of choosing to live against the offending parent, opposite to not being like him. She clearly stated that she chose the path of being different from the offending parent. Yağmur expressed her fear when she was being unfaithful at her own romantic relationship and she stated her fear of being like her mother, offending parent, as like:

*“Maybe, I don't know, I may have felt a little bad from somewhere for lying to them. Because they also put some hope in something, but it didn't happen. Then something like this happened... The thing I don't want most in myself, that is, in life, is to look like my mother. One day I sat down and said: "Here you go, you're your mother's daughter now", something like this happened to me. (...) Then she said, "That person saw you with a boy" or something. I also said something like "You are the last person in the world who can comment on this to me, so please shut up, I will do what I want". I thought about it, "You've just become your mother's daughter," It was like “Bihter and her mother talking in the mirror scene.”*

When Yağmur was faced with contradictions or struggles in the romantic relationship, she realized that she had become like her mother, which was the most terrifying thing for her. On the other hand, she prevented to mother’s expressing her opinions about her “unethical” behaviors in the relationship. Berkay had a similar statement as like above:

*“The idea of cheating, etc., does not occur to me at all, because thanks to my father, my conscientiousness on this issue has gone to a whole other level. I have personally witnessed how people can go through trauma, and as an individual who has experienced this, if I do this, I cannot possibly bear this guilt over someone else. It is terrifying. That's why I'm very careful not to be like him in this regard.”*

Also, Zeynep stated her fear about being like her father, the offending parent.

Additionally, she also mentioned her fears of being like their parent's relationship in her own romantic relationship. She stated her fear that her own romantic relationship would resemble of her parents' relationship because of similarities between them, and she was described this fear as like that:

*“There is also something like this, for some reason, since I was little, I was always afraid of looking like my father, I have such a fear. For example, in my relationship with him, I was always wondering if I was being my father; it's a very strange thing. It's probably very pathological. It scared me that one day, if my boyfriend and I broke up for any reason, for example, if I cheated on my boyfriend, they would accuse me of being the same as my father, and that's how his father was, and he had already done that.”*

*“Like me, my mom and dad have been friends since high school, dated, then got married. For example, this bothered me. Because I have a similar relationship in that respect, I met when I was in high school, I fell in love, we are not getting married now, but we are on this road, a similar process actually. This resemblance had me stressed for a while. It's not a very rational thing about whether we will end up like this, but it put me under stress.”*

On the contrary Maral fear is being like her mother, the injured parent. She stated that:

*“My relationships have always been different from my mother's relationships. It has always been different until I reached this age, and I always said that my relationship will never be like the relationships my mother had. This is neither with my father nor with his boyfriend, and I know it will not be like any of them. Because I always said to myself, my relationships, romantic relationships will never be like this, there will never be such unhealthy relationships.”*

### 3.4.3 Intrapersonal Level Theme 3: Coping with Parental Infidelity

This master theme explores components that emerge to have been through in the participants' process of coping mechanisms about parental infidelity experiences. The incidence is highly stressful for couples as well as the individual outside the couple dyad. Therefore, the incident was so stressful for the children, that it is crucial to know how the children built coping strategies around parental infidelity. No matter the process, how children cope with the stressor is vital, especially considering nonadoptive coping strategies. All participants reported some kinds of strategies to deal with the incident on themselves. Regarding the participants' responses, four subthemes were created named "social support as a coping mechanism", "hard to remember details of parental infidelity", "normalization of infidelity", and "trying to cut off from offending parent."

Five individuals indicated that avoidance was partly their way of coping with the family crisis. Participants did not explicitly state that it was an avoidance however, they tried to find something outside of the family to help them make some distance between the incident and themselves. Sometimes it was a hobby such as dancing, and sometimes school and lectures made them avoid familial conflict. As a one of the examples of Bora stated that:

*"Also, I was able to cope with the lessons. Lectures and school were a very good support mechanism for me since I was such a "nerd type" in high school back then. In fact, it helped me not to cope, but to think."*

Like Bora, Zeynep used school life which was one of strategies she used to cope with the process.

*"I think working or academic life allows you to continue that process. I feel like that; there is an ease and thinking that comes from concentrating on other things, which is a good thing in some periods. Otherwise, you will go crazy thinking the same thing. That's why it's clear why Bihter killed herself because she had nothing to do. Otherwise, if she had a job, she*

*would divorce Adnan so that she would do something else, or she wouldn't hang out with Behlül. Because otherwise, we're stuck in our own heads. They definitely helped me as well. My life revolves around other things."*

Additionally, two participants indicated that one of the coping strategies uses denial as a part of their coping strategy. Yağmur stated that infidelity was nothing to deal with when she knew about it. She stated that:

*"After learning about this incident, it was as if there was nothing to deal with for me. I couldn't share it with any of my friends, it was impossible because all my friends knew that person too. I tried ignoring everything."*

Like Yağmur, Yağız gave a similar statement about how he coped with the process when he learned. And he told about his qualification that make him to help during stressful times and he still has:

*"Honestly, I did nothing to deal with this incident. Even if I was sad, I didn't care that much because I had a feature like this; it still exists. You know, I'm experiencing an event right now, an emotional and intense event that affects me, but I need to approach it logically. Then I can stop thinking about this incident. It was like it."*

Both avoidance and denial were not included in the subthemes categories in this study due to reoccurrence, however, it was helpful to understand different coping strategies used by children during the process whether consciously or not. Therefore, their coping strategies might still be valid in their adult life.

#### **3.4.3.1 Subtheme 301: Social Support as a Coping Mechanism**

Six out of ten participants underlined having social support outside of the family system is an important source when they were tried coping with parental infidelity experience. This support is mostly experienced through sharing the information they had to face with close friends or romantic partners. Zeynep, for example, described this as follows:

*“Of course, my friends have great support, of course. For example, if I feel lonely, of course I have a boyfriend. Why didn't I tell him? In other words, whenever I feel alone, he comes to me and chats with me for hours. The same goes for my friends and close friends. Definitely support networks. Either it comes from family, or it comes from friends. When I say friend, of course, I also include my boyfriend.”*

As like Zeynep, Berkay also explained how friends were the social support system for him, best and only one option he had. He said:

*“My friends. I've never have other support system rather than my friends. Always my friends and my girlfriend. During that period, by telling my girlfriend or my close friends to whoever they were. I didn't have anything else, I didn't have anyone to share this issue with. It's not something you can tell a passer-by anyway. Either it will be a professional person or someone very close to you, otherwise it is difficult.”*

Ece also, emphasized that how she can proactively have used her social support system as consist of close friends:

*“I have told a lot of people I trust. I got overcome this process while talking with them, asking their opinions and suggestions, wanting them to be with me. They helped me a lot.”*

Bora also explained the social support need when he faced with her mother's infidelity and how he used it while saying:

*“I told my best friend at the time because I needed support, I needed someone who could understand me. I needed to someone who closer age to me and needed this support. Did I feel that support? I felt. He supported me very well in that process. He kept that secret, he listened to me, because it was a difficult information for me to process.”*

#### **3.4.3.2 Subtheme 302: Hard to Remember Details of Parental Infidelity**

This subtheme, which was mentioned by seven participants, reflects the participants struggles when they tried to remember details of the incident. Generally, the first reactions



when they learned were so blurry. On the same day after they first discovered this information, they had difficulty remembering how things had turned out for them in the participants' minds. From their perspective, some participants stated that some memories are vivid and colourful; however, sometimes, people were vague when talking about the incident, especially the incident's timeline. Similar vagueness belongs to Yaren's statement, and she had difficulties remembering specifying the time period when she learned about it the first time:

*“I mean, when I realized this, believe me, I don't know when. But when I remember this event, the matching event was my father cheating on my mother, as I said. I just don't know how old I was to understand the concept of infidelity. When I think about it now... I don't know, I guess I feel like it's always been there. It is hard to tell. I couldn't give you specific time.”*

Also, Bora stated that he remembered his initial feeling when he saw the text messages between his parent and the third party however, he added that:

*“When I first saw all these conversations between my mother and him, I feel shocked and like stuck something inside me. But it's not very clear for me, it's a bit blurrier than other memories and details. I mean what did I do after turning off the computer, I don't remember at all.”*

Berkay has learned about his father's infidelity with his mother. He expressed this unclear moment to himself about what that night he had been through as a:

*“At that moment we all learned that I didn't know exactly what I was doing. So, we spent a few hours with a bit of flu.”*

As like others, some of the participants' expressions about hard time to remembering details as follows:

*“I do not remember at all. I mean for example, I know I heard my parent while they talking, I remember hearing it but how that conversation ended what happened after that, I do not remember at all.”* (Elif)

*“Right now, I could not remember her name too. I could not remember how my sister told me or told my mother about she saw my father with her while holding their hands.”*  
(Maral)

*“By the way, I don't remember very clearly their conversation with my father because I was in shock in the first place. What did I ask, how he respond. It is not clear.”* (Ece)

### **3.4.3.3 Subtheme 303: Normalization of Infidelity**

Six out of ten participants stated that with this incident, the concept of infidelity turned into the idea that it is a part of life and normal. This subtheme explores how the participants' normalization of infidelity or parental infidelity while gaining some understanding of the incidence. It is a fundamental element in the making-sense process and acceptance of the fact of infidelity. Bora said that:

*“Infidelity is actually a fact of life. Infidelity always seemed like something you could only see in movies and TV shows. I always thought that it wouldn't happen in real life, in my close circle. In adolescence or childhood...I realize that it could happen, and it can happen to me any time, everybody can experience it.”*

Bora describes that the incident made him realize that the concept not only belongs to the fictional world, but it can also happen to his inner circle even if he cannot have experienced it. When he experienced it, all the illusion was broken, and it helped to realize him happen at any time in life. Elif has similar statements about the infidelity and divorce:

*“On the other hand, I remember that I learned very early age that such things happen around me, that people can cheat and then get divorce.”*

Berkay has a similar statement about it. Also, he includes divorce as well in his comments:

*“I had friends at school, their parents separated, divorced etc. It seemed strange to me, I always wonder how it is, what kind of life is it, is it possible that kinds of questions or I found interesting parents are not together in the house kinds of things came to my mind. I was saying that, but after things are changed for me too. I learned very painfully that it is normal.”*

Normalization of the process while looking at others, relatives and friends' experiences might help them to normalize infidelity. Zeynep stated that:

*“I think it's a very different experience, everyone has so many similar stories. So many similar and even worse stories have happened a lot of people around me as I know. I guess it had a huge effect too. I am not only person who live this shit.”*

#### **3.4.3.4 Subtheme 304: Try to Emotional Cut off From Offending Parent**

This subtheme explores the participants' experiences trying to cut off from offending parents emotionally after parental infidelity is revealed, and some details became more precise. Seven participants out of ten have experience trying to cut their bonds with an offending parent. “How was your relationship change with your parents after parental infidelity (Father or mother)?” question was asked to the participants. As Yaren put it:

*“I think as I was told that my father was untrustworthy and a liar, I create my distance from my father after I found out that he cheated on my mother. Very clearly. We had an emotionally long-distance father-daughter relationship. We were closer when I was a kid, but I got colder from him, especially with this incident.”*

Here, the participant expressed a shifting father-daughter relationship especially after she found out about parental infidelity. In relation to that, changed her opinions about her

father contributed to the emotional distance between them. Maral responded to this question as a:

*“Maybe this is one of the most valid reasons why I don't want to talk to my father much. I mean, I was seeing very little. When I ran out of money, I was going to my father to see if you could give me money or something. I mean, my father was right under my nose, my mother did not prevent me, but a part of me did not want to go and see him. My father was never the kind of person I would be afraid of or ask question like father figure. I knew that if I asked something, I wouldn't mind if he said no to me, or he knows that I wouldn't mind. We are so distant, and in some part, I created this.”*

Here, the participant mentioned that even though no one prevented her to see her father after the incident, she put some distance between them, intentionally or unintentionally. Her father became a person only instrumental, financial support; the father lost the meaning of being a father. Lastly, Buse mentioned her emotional cut-off experiences not only offending the parent but also from the family as a coping mechanism.

*“After that, there was a time spent with a lot of friends by getting away from the family a little bit. Indeed, there is a period when I was extremely disconnected from the family especially from my father until I was 24 or 25. There was a period when I don't want to see them much like this, I don't go into the same environment unless I have to, you know, I don't really enjoy being as a parent and child. Perhaps by getting further away from them.”*

As the same as Buse, Bora have similar experiences about boundaries with his parents after the infidelity. For both Buse and Bora, they kept parental infidelity as a secreted from the other family members. Bora's answer portrayed this experience as follows:

*“It helped me draw my boundaries with the family a lot, I think that was the biggest contribution to me, because we had a really toxic relationship with my mother. After this incident, I needed a distance from my mother; I think this experience helped me to set limit for*

*my mother and I did put some distance. I was able to put it this way. After that, I was always controlling this boundary. I think the boundaries become rigid after the incidence, but it helped me a lot in family relations. It made me feel more comfortable.”*

Here, the participants create some boundaries to parents especially for offending parents while he is controlling these boundaries. Also, he stated that, these rigid boundaries made him to feel more comfortable in terms of family relations.

### **3.5 Interpersonal Themes Level**

The thematic analysis shown one theme and three subthemes regarding romantic relationship experiences which related to the research question of this study. Table 4 provides an overview of this theme and subthemes.

*Table 4.*

*Theme, Subtheme and Reoccurrences from 10 participants*

Theme	Subtheme	Reoccurrences from 10 participants
<b>4</b>	<b>Challenges in Romantic Relationship</b>	
	401 Hardship in Trusting Others	6
	402 Multigenerational Transmission of Infidelity	8
	403 Selectivity in Romantic Partner	6

#### ***3.5.1 Interpersonal Level Theme 1: Challenges in Romantic Relationship***

All the individuals described the challenges in their romantic relationship experiences after parental infidelity. They mentioned various experiences in the past or ongoing relationships such as being unsure about others' opinions, beliefs, and thoughts, arising some anxieties or feeling threatened in the relationships, and needing to control the partner therefore, being picky in their partner selection for building romantic alliance.

### 3.5.1.1 Subtheme 401: Hardship in Trusting Others

Six participants stated that they had struggles while trusting others such as friends, family members, or romantic partners related to knowing parental infidelity. Yaren reported a decreased capacity for trusting others especially for men:

*“I think it affected me a lot, especially in trusting other people, I have huge problems with trust. Not only has my father cheated on my mother, but it is also affected by how my mother reflected this on me. She always gave me messages such as “men are unreliable, you can never trust them, they always lie, they always cheat, it is necessary to control them constantly.”*

She also pointed out that, it was not only about parental infidelity, but also her mother’s statements about how men are untrustworthy. Additionally, Buse claimed that she had a trust detector for chasing people’s lies at her social environment, it was like a heritage from her father:

*“Since I have always been such a clearer perception in terms of my nature, does someone lie, does someone hide something I think, I may have scrutinized the friendship relationship because I think the tracking part was passed on by my father. Sometimes it becomes hard to trust people when found a lie.”*

Another similar statement came from Berkay:

*“My perception of trust has changed a lot, it's about what I should trust. I realized the quote “don't even trust your father” how valid and true also I understand what it really implies.”*

Berkay explained that he understands that people are untrustworthy due to his unfaithful father. Yağmur also explained what she thinks while talking with others:

*“I have a sceptical side in relationships. On top of that, it's not a very intense side, but for example, it can be something I have to deal with. My first thought was “Is there something*

*behind this?” or “Is he saying his true feeling?” Sometimes these thoughts may come to my mind automatically, so it can be difficult for me to trust at some points towards people's behaviors and attitudes.”*

As the same as Maral, she defined herself as a controlling people's behavior due to lack of trusting. She said:

*“I think it is very difficult from my point of view. Because in the end, I can't find out what everyone is doing, I can't control everything, I made them bored people who are with me such questions “What did you do, with who, when, tell me everything I want to know everything with tiny little details” types of questions. It is so difficult to trust others and frustration thing both for me and for others in my relations”*

#### **3.4.1.2 Subtheme 402: Multigenerational Transmission of Infidelity**

This subtheme explores the participants' experiences of infidelity behaviors within their own romantic relationships. Eight out of ten participants experienced breaching overt or covert relationship rules by having been unfaithful toward past or ongoing romantic relationships. Participants who have the experience of being an offending partner in their relationship only describe infidelity as a sexual act rather than emotional infidelity. Yağız stated their experiences as saying:

*“I've had three romantic relationships so far. I cheated on two of them, they were also long-term relationships. So, my first cheating was a one-night stand. In the second, it continued with other people for a certain period of time...”*

As he stated, Yağız has been a part of being an offending partner both in one-night stands and also for continuous experiences. Yağmur also have been cheated on her partner, and she explained her justification for her own infidelity behaviors as a:

*“He was working as a sailor on top of long-distance relationship. We couldn't get together because of the distance, and we could hardly see each other because of his busy*

*work schedule. it started to become my need that was not met much anymore, I wanted to physical contact, he could not be with me at important moments. I mean, I loved that person very much, it still has a different place for me, but for example, there were people who could give what he could not give at that time. For example, there were people around me who could show interest, who wanted to be by my side at important times, and who met my adrenaline needs, and luckily, there were people around me. I leaned a little there, I did not have a sexual relationship with anyone, but I did have emotional intimacy. I did this in secret from my boyfriend at the time. I didn't tell them I had a boyfriend either.”*

Yağmur explained her process very clearly regarding how unmet needs in her relationships made her fulfil her emotional needs in others. Buse also has a similar experience as Yağmur; however, she cannot put her experience classified as cheating because it was no actual sexual contact between them. Therefore, she eliminated in her mind the emotional infidelity types of infidelity. Also, she mentioned her sexual fantasies about another man outside of her own romantic relationship, and she was confused about whether it was infidelity. Yağmur explained her experiences as a:

*“I've never cheated, but there was someone I had long distance crush when I was on Erasmus. He wanted to come to where I am and I was with my boyfriend actually and that's how I cheated on him in my mind. I dreamed it, I hide it like this, it comes like this, we live like this, it happens like this and so on. But a part of me didn't dare do that. I didn't do that. I'm thinking right now, is there anything else that goes into the concept of cheating? I cheated a lot in my mind, but I never cheated physically. I've never cheated, except for the masturbation experiences I've dreamed of someone else.”*

While she considered her experienced not an actual infidelity, but she categorised her behavior as infidelity in her mind.



### 3.4.1.3 Subtheme 403: Selectivity in Romantic Partner

Six out of ten participants mentioned how selective they are about romantic partners while trying to build a romantic relationship. They described this selectivity as a part of trusting others. The participants claimed to have more control over their choice or decreased chance of being injured by romantic partner. Maral described it as follows:

*“I try to bring very reliable people into my life. So, if he has a little bit of flirtatiousness, he can't come into my life. I can't easily find anyone who is reliable. Also, I guess I am trying to choose the most antisocial partner in my life. Maybe right now, for example, I'm comfortable in that way. So, I don't think it's something I can control. I mean, I feel like it's okay even if I don't control it, and that's why that part of me is never bothered.”*

Berkay talked about how trust is essential in his romantic relationship, and he added that it only occurs at the beginning of the relationship with a few people:

*“In romantic relationship, I need to seek the trust from other side. There is a point where I sit down and start sharing something with the person I trust. Trust in romantic life develops early and happens in very few people. Maybe that is why I have always had long term romantic relationship. Because I am quite picky, if I found that trust it was hard to give up for me. I try to hold someone as strong as possible.”*

Also, Bora had the similar statements, he putted his reference point his parent's relationship:

*“This loveless relationship between my parents continues with marriage now. At this point when I look at them, their marriage I am very picky about romantic partner. This incidence has a huge impact on my point of view about romantic relationship. My standards and criteria are high now because in some point I know what I do not want from romantic partner candidate.”*

Also, Buse described her husband was a best option in terms of trust:

*“The man I chose for marriage, really has best material in terms of trust.”*

#### **CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION**

The present study aims to explore adult children's parental infidelity experiences in their childhood in Turkey. By interviewing each participant, the goal was to explore their unique experiences, how family life and relationship were changed around parental infidelity and its effects on adult romantic life. Concerning that, the main research question was "What are the experiences of parental infidelity of adult children?" This directs to several sub-questions about this study a) How are the changes in family subsystems after parental infidelity experiences for the child? b) How are the coping mechanism strategies? c) How does the meaning of parental infidelity affect adult children's attributions of family, justice, loyalty, and romantic relationships?

As it is presented at the result section, based on the reflections of ten participants' semi-structured interviews guided by interpersonal trauma perspective as the framework of the study, four themes were identified on two levels a) intrapersonal b) interpersonal. Three themes were identified under intrapersonal themes level, namely a) growing up before their time, b) emotional rollercoaster around parental infidelity, c) coping strategies about parental infidelity and one main theme were identified under the interpersonal theme level that is challenges in a romantic relationship. Three subthemes fall under the theme of growing up before their time, and they are children as a bridge between parents, emotional parentification, and knowledge about parental sexual experiences. This theme includes children's experiences of becoming familiar with the adult world, adult-like behavior, and having age-inappropriate responsibilities and information about parental sexuality. The second theme is the ambivalent emotional states of children around parental infidelity experiences. Therefore, emotional experiences as a dynamic process after the incident still affect them in their adult life and subthemes discussed under this theme. The third theme explores how the participant deals with this experience during times of familial stress. Lastly, challenges in romantic

relationships investigate how parental infidelity affects their romantic relationship in their perception and how they built and maintained their relationship through precautions and behaviors.

The following section examines four themes concerning the existing literature about parental infidelity experiences. Then, based on previous findings and the results of the present study, some clinical implications will be presented. Thirdly, some limitations and strengths of the present study will be discussed. Lastly, suggestions for further studies will be made.

#### **4.1 Theme 1: Growing up Before Their Time**

The first main theme, "growing up before their time" refers to participants' early adaptation to adult roles, responsibilities, and duties, being aware of some age-inappropriate information such as parental sexuality and providing extensive support for caregivers and/or siblings. In contemporary Western cultures, childhood can be defined as a period without adult responsibilities (Feng et al., 2020); however, contrasting opinions can be seen in non-Western cultures, such as sibling care is essential for children's future adult life responsibilities (Hughes et al., 2018). While considering Turkey as a combination of traditionalism and modernism (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2005), Burton's (2007) adultification conceptual model helped to understand the process conceptualized using urban and rural settings. According to Burton (2007), the concept of adultification occurs when an absence of caregiver presence, whether emotionally or instrumentally. Early adultification can arise in many factors, such as disruptions in family life, familial, economic distress, and being children of divorce families (Bishop et al., 2020). Therefore, child early self-sufficiency and forced adult-like roles appear before they are emotionally prepared to do so (Hooper et al., 2011b; Schier, 2014). Pittman et al., (1990) stated that in his research, highlight the traumatic impact on children due to trust issue that could arise if parents deprioritize their children well-being in times of extramarital affair such as requiring child to keep infidelity as a secret,

neglecting their responsibility as parents. Pittman (1989) also described parental infidelity as “training ground for the children’s adult lives” (p. 267). Therefore, parental infidelity is one reason children might experience adult like roles, responsibilities, and acknowledgments (Duncombe & Marsden, 2004). Due to parental infidelity, children can face increased levels of stress and anxiety around the transgression (April & Schrodt, 2019). From the participants' approach, several subthemes emerged around early roles for the children.

In this sense, the first subtheme named "child as a bridge between parents" after parental infidelity was revealed around the incidence to help them decrease parental conflicts. Becoming a bridge between parents is a statement using triangulation of children around the incidence of involving children in disputes. According to Bowen (1978), triangulation occurs when a dyad experiences stress. When considering extramarital infidelity as one of the severe stress factors for couple dyad, it is not surprising that children's position changed whether their parents remained married or not. There were several occurrences in how the children became triangulation around parental infidelity in this study. If the children learn about infidelity from the injured parent, an alliance is built against the offending parent; also, the offending parent triangulates the children while trying to establish a relationship with the third party and child against to injured parent. Negash and Morgan (2016) reached a similar conclusion that discovery of parental infidelity by children put them in the form of cross-generational alliance against their one parent by another parent purposefully or not. Therefore, children became triangulated around parental infidelity. Additionally, children's mission of resolving parental conflict is not only restricted by conflicts around parental infidelity but also includes divorce process. However, some of research findings proposed that parental infidelity with nondivorce families' adult children generally avoids discussing the topic in order to maintain the harmony of the family, on the other hand, spouses that experienced divorce due to parental infidelity children can have opportunities to talk about the causes of

divorce (Negash & Morgan, 2016). On the contrary, Thorson (2021) found that parental marital status after extramarital infidelity revealed it does not impact on boundaries that parents use. In other words, after extramarital infidelity revealed, parent-child relationship boundaries were changed whether parents divorced or not. Research findings of this study is that parental status for triangulation does not matter as Thorson (2021) suggested that. Furthermore, triangulated children reported poorer relationships with both parents (Fosco & Grych, 2010). The statement was consistent with the result of this study. The relationship with both parents was affected due to triangulation around the parental infidelity. However, children's relationship with the offending parent was changed especially around parental infidelity, the relationship with the injured parent relationship mainly consisted of a coalition around the incidence, and the relationship generally was changed in children's adult life.

In the second subtheme named emotional parentification, participants pointed out the becoming an emotional caregiver for injured parents and siblings in the time parental infidelity. Only one participant stated that he also took care of the offending parent due to his concern about the offending parent after the infidelity was revealed. This study's emotional parentification findings were consistent with the study that found children became comfort-seeking positions for parents beyond the healthy boundaries who had experienced infidelity (Nogales & Bellotti, 2009). Also, Negash and Morgan (2015) suggested that child with are overburdened with details about parental infidelity generally shows parentified qualifications. The participants in the study described consciousness of their parent's emotional and psychological needs and wanted to meet their parental needs. As a consequence of being an emotional carer of the family member, children have the burden of taking care of some family members. Regarding the attachment theory perspective (Bowlby, 1969), children create a caregiving system toward their parents emotionally rather than receiving to survive emotionally (Schier, 2009). Therefore, children maintain emotional closeness to their parents

with form of emotional parentification rather than fulfilling their own emotional needs. The current study showed that children have experienced witnessing injured parents stress, anxiety, withdrawal symptoms, and depression. Many studies suggested that post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms can be seen in the injured partner (Özgün, 2010; Gottman, 2011; Timm & Hertlein, 2020). Therefore, caregivers in the house had a psychological absence on children, considering that this study's generally injured parents were mothers. In other words, taking care of an injured parent and having a responsibility to soothe them became a part of emotional parentification. Another interesting finding of this study is that besides participants taking care of injured parents also take care of a sibling emotionally. In other words, participants who had siblings stated that while caring for other family members with adult-like duties, participants did not share parental infidelity information to not burden a sibling. The children who kept infidelity a secret became emotional caregivers for both injured or offending parents and their siblings to protect the familial harmony they had. In the literature, parentification has some negative consequences however recently studies showed that parentification might help to growth some capabilities in children, accompanied by some deficiencies. In other words, when children take care of family members, these experiences help them to develop resiliency, create positive coping strategies (Tompkins, 2007).

Knowledge about parental sexual experience is the last subtheme under the main theme of growing up before their time. Children stated that they got some information through connections between a third party and the offending parent interaction or from one parent's confession about marital sexuality. Knowing parental sexuality is conceptualized by Shopper (2002) as an "illusion of parental celibacy." According to that, children inherently think that parents are not engaging in any sexual relationships or doing it only for procreation (if children know where and how babies come) but not for pleasure-seeking. This understanding should naturally extend because children would not be able to tolerate comprehensive sexual

information about their parent's sexual life. That is an essential part of healthy sexual development for children during adolescence because it prevents them from gaining age-inappropriate information for children. However, knowledge of parental infidelity and knowing parental sexuality breaches this for children. The findings of the study support this and consist of other research that emphasizes how parental infidelity might affect the sexual development of children. The effects of parental infidelity impact the sexual learning of the children in terms of scripts and schemas (Pearman, 2010; Negash & Morgan, 2016). The new formation of sexual schemas has been associated with rigid sexual communication, sexual avoidance, and anxiety during sexual activity (Pearman, 2010). However, there was no further examination about adult children's sexual schemas in their adulthood in the current study. In this research, statements from each participant's knowledge about parental sexuality differ. Some are fully aware of infidelity through direct observations of offending parent activities or being told details about one parent to the children. This may leave children with overwhelming and might put the position of an ethical dilemma. New parent-child relationship characteristics occurred in participants who are aware of their parental sexuality in their parents' marriage or outside of the marriage. Knowing about sexuality with the offending parent's extramarital partner, a feeling of disloyalty on behalf of the children toward the injured parent and also a feeling of risky discomfort can be seen.

Additionally, another critical dimension of sexuality is related to societal norms in Turkey. Turkey has been conceptualized as a representative of honor culture (Uskul & Cross, 2019). As a characteristic of honor culture, women's behavior can be seen as a deviating form of honor code rather than men. In other words, if the women were perceived as unfaithful, men could control women and family honor (Arin, 2001). While honor culture considers these unwritten rules, Turkey also has secular looks that differ from other Middle Eastern countries. When considering all participants who participated in the study in urban cities, they can be

raised by a more secular and less feature honor culture. Their reactions and attitudes toward parental infidelity might differ from other parts of Turkey. In other words, it can be different reactions to knowing the mother's sexual behavior or the father's. It also can be different gender of the children might cause them to react differently to parental infidelity. Even though variables are not constant in this study, future research should consider gender and rural vs. urban differences. However, in the bottom line knowing parental sexuality is a burden for all children and affects their sexual scripts in their relationships.

#### **4.2 Theme 2: Emotional Rollercoaster Around Infidelity**

The second theme, the emotional rollercoaster around parental infidelity, consisted of three subthemes: repressed anger, disgust about the third party, and fear of resembling parent(s). According to the participants' statements, they experienced different emotions, which can cause emotional ambivalence around parental infidelity. However, it is essential to know how parents handle the affair, and sometimes the consequences of infidelity might be as significant as the infidelity itself. In times of distress, families can be on both sides of the spectrum; therefore, it can cause changes in children's reactions and feelings to the incident. In the current study, parent(s) might tell too much information children about details of parental infidelity; conversely, infidelity becomes a family secret, and no one is allowed to talk about or discuss the subject. However, in the bottom line, children who became aware of parental infidelity might display a range of emotions. Interestingly, some of the participants of the current study expressed that they felt empathy toward offending parents' behaviors. They stated that even they got mad toward the offending partner due to infidelity behavior, they also understood the circumstances she/he had that can cause to be with another person. They expressed how unhappy the marriage was and how the offending parent became happier when contacting the third party. Also, awareness of parental infidelity can set many fears such as parents' divorce and anger about circumstances experienced (Cunningham & Skillingstead,



2015). Likewise, children who know the incidents expect reactions of anger, sadness, and confusion, however, it is important to know that children are unique and may act out differently; still, there are usually primary responses that are experienced such as overwhelming fear and loss of trust (Nogales, 2010). Also, a feeling of guilt can be seen, especially when the children are forced to keep secrets from other parent due to the position of choosing sides between parents. Thus, a wide range of emotions create ambivalence, and it is like riding an emotional rollercoaster for children.

The reactions of the children may be different in the perception of how family life was disrupted, but in general, children's emotional responses toward parental infidelity are similar to divorce literature (Duncombe et al., 2004); children tend to become angry and blame one or both of the parents and feel pain about loyalty contradiction between parents. Researchers found that when the children cannot cope with the incident effectively, feelings of guilt, anxiety, depression, and shock can be seen (Dean, 2011; Blodgett Salafia et al., 2013). However, specific findings of this study found anger as an emotion, but it was generally repressed by the children for several reasons such as fear of abandonment by the offending parent, not being the reason for the family dissolution, having some fear of offending parent's physical and emotional well-being, fear of losing connection toward the injured parent. Repressed anger can be defined as hardship in expressing anger, rage, expressing anger using different and generally opposite emotions, or denial of anger feeling (Owca, 2020). Bruehl et al., (2007) suggested that individuals choose repressed anger over an expressed anger where there is a perception of control. Repressed anger is also an underlying reaction of fawn response conceptualized by Walker's (2013) 4-F model that individual reactions acutely, chronically, or globally respond with fight, flight, freeze or fawn response or combination of all. Anger is one of the emotions underlying the fawn response, like sadness and fear (Walker, 2013). Fawn response is described as both a survival and defense strategy that is

knowledgeable when exposed to traumatic events during a real or perceived threat. Fawning is a behavioral response that internalizes reflexes that suppress natural impulses and emotions to do self-protection when childhood experiences that are not labelled by mutual trust between children and parents, emotional safety, and stability. Therefore, participants might learn to navigate their emotions and schemas to protect themselves from further emotional discomfort and pain. Additionally, this protective response, fawn response, help them deal with some threats such as humiliation, abuse, and abandonment. According to Walker (2013), individuals use this strategy to accomplish two goals: the first one is increased safety from physical and emotional abuse, and the second is an emotional connection with a caregiver. Even though it was not always clear, researchers agree that different responses are intended to protect organisms from real or perceived threats (Van der Kolk, 2015). The results were consistent with the current study on children's emotional reactions around parental infidelity. When children in a determination to shelter their caregiver regardless of their position, preserve an illusion of family stability and a fawning response provides. Research has shown that when the anger is inhibited, consciously or not, it affects well-being and memory due to chronic activation of the hippocampus (Sapolsky, 1996). In the current research, participants expressed that anger comes after a while or in their adult life toward their parent(s), especially toward the offending parent. Taylor et al., (2009) stated that inhibition of anger when it was a consciously valuable concept due to not always show dysfunctional. Therefore, participants' anger that repressed might be a portion of their coping strategies.

Generally, participants had known about the offending parent's extramarital partner before the children learned about the incident. Four participants stated that they doubted the offending parent's activities with a third party. In the end, all the participants have some knowledge about offending parent extramarital partner. Eight of the participants had strong, negative feelings about the other party, mostly disgust and avoidance when faced with

spontaneous occasions. When children met with them, participants stated that they willingly avoided the third person and felt uncomfortable around them. Some of the participants had never encountered the third part; however, their opinion about them was powerful feeling as a disgust. Some of the participants clearly expressed their feeling of disgust. Also, third parties were generally women in this study because paternal infidelity was much more common among the participants, and children's attitudes toward them as depraved. On the other hand, some of the participants stated that their offending parents got married after divorcing from injured parents. Participants expressed some ongoing difficulties and had persistent negative feelings even though the offending parent and the third party got married. All participants expressed that they do not have any close relationships between them. The result of this study was consisted with Brown (2013) claimed that remarriage with the third party produce strong negative feelings from children particularly, when loyalty struggles continue between parents. In the literature, there was no study about the relationship between the offending parent's extramarital partner crystalizing before and after divorce. Therefore, unique findings contribute to literature about children's feelings, emotions, and attitudes toward the individual outside of the marriage.

The last subtheme, fear of resembling parent(s), is one of the unique findings of this study. Participants expressed an intense fear of being like their parents, especially fear of resembling an offending parent in their romantic relationship. Many of them said they had solid determination to avoid mistakes they observed during their parents' relationship and having a relationship like their parents' had is another source of fear. Even though adult children reject their parent's relationship models in their own romantic relationships or in adult life, they sometimes realize that they were being like them. Especially when they committed infidelity in their own romantic relationship, they experienced this fear more deeply being like the offending parent. Therefore, differentiation from the parent becomes an

essential component of their adult romantic life. On the other hand, fear of being like the offending parent or fear of the same relationship as parents has also become an alarm bell for them, especially when they are part of the offending in their own romantic relationship. In their romantic relationship, they expressed that solid need to be different from an offending parent; when they thought about being like them, they felt some regret and fear. This specific result supports Cunningham and Skillingstead' (2015) divorce study, which was related to parental modelling for adult children in divorce; study result showed that children might show worry and concern about being and acting like their parents in their own romantic relationship parents due to their belief that some parental traits were detrimental for the marriages. Also, fear of resembling parents' impacts sceptical thoughts of adult children's lifelong marriage and not believing healthy family structure.

#### **4.3 Theme 3: Coping with Parental Infidelity**

There were different approaches to dealing with parental infidelity in the present study. The third main theme is coping strategies around parental infidelity. It is essential to know that little is still known about children's coping strategies surrounding the event due to current literature. This theme emerged from participants' explanations of how they could handle the impacts of parental infidelity as a significant stressor. To protect their own well-being, participants consciously or unconsciously develop several coping strategies. In some circumstances if extramarital infidelity is an isolated-on couple dyad and they can work it out quietly and calmly without knowledge of children there could be less impact on children. However, the incidence resolution took a long time with full of resentment for months, years children most likely to face with significant effect especially when emotional or professional support does not help them to navigate their emotions (Clark, 2013). Therefore, some participants explained they used distractions such as focusing on school, writing, or dancing while the family atmosphere was chaotic or the children only person had knowledge about the

incident. Accordingly, to avoid the situation, they used some distractions to keep them busy, shifting their focus to others. These can be categorized as avoidant coping strategies; however, only five participants used avoidance for coping mechanisms; therefore, it was not created as a subtheme. Also, only one participant's offending parent apologized to the children; according to his statement, it helped them feel more secure. The participant's statement correlated with Thorson's (2017) suggestion that it was beneficial for children to cope with the incidence if the unfaithful parent chooses to apologize for engaging in infidelity with age-appropriate information with caring, helpful, supportive messages.

Most of the participants reported that they rely on the social support system, and they did not use only the initial times of knowledge of parental infidelity. Sharing the impact and details of parental infidelity with a close friend is a part of their coping strategy. Hobfoll et al., (2007) stated that having a loved one who can trust and understand impacts emotionally relieving and vital progression of recovery. Similarly, perceiving support and degree of care can increase the use of more adaptive coping strategies (Chen et al., 2015). As Lu (2015) stated creating and maintaining healthy and constructive connectedness with friends and peers might provide a sense of normality when children face with familial challenges and hardships. The active or problem-focused techniques that participants used were seeking social support, which can also be considered an emotional-focused strategy (Southwick et al., 2016), specifically when children leaned on others to soothe themselves emotionally. Therefore, participants' statements about using their close friends both problem-solving techniques and emotional focus strategies in dealing with parental infidelity. Additionally, for social support, only two of the participants mentioned extended family members' support during the conflictual, stressful times of parental infidelity. In the current study, children generally did not have knowledge about whether extended family members knew about the incident or how they reacted to the parental infidelity. During the interview, they mentioned not very close

extended family relationships; therefore, they did not mention how they responded to the incident. The availability of an external support system might be tremendously crucial for children dealing with parental infidelity stress; it might help them distance themselves from the stress due to infidelity. According to Lebow and Rekart (2013), social support, which is described as a close relationship with another individual, is a predictor of coping with the trauma. Further, social support enables children to have a chance to have positive relationships without infidelity. In this study, children generally use close peer relationships and romantic relationships rather than mentors, external family members, and neighbours. Participants use social support systems also during the divorce period of their parents.

As a second emerging subtheme was hard to remember some details about parental infidelity. All the participants had some hesitations about some elements of the incident, especially after they first learned and discovered one of the parent's infidelity. Generally, remembering their first reaction was a shock and confusion; it was hard to give some meaning to the incident; however, what happened next, and what they did were so blurry for the participants after initial learning. In the trauma literature, Figley (2012) stated that traumatized individuals generally employ negative coping strategies such as avoiding others, attempting to forget traumatic materials, or showing anger. The participants also utilized these strategies initial times in the knowing incidence, which further indicates the existence of traumatic experiences. However, an important factor in the severities of later reactions to the traumatic event depends on the person's perception of the incidence and degree of threat (Steele & Kuban, 2011). When the person attributes the event as more threatening more anxiety and related symptoms occur (Van der Kolk, 2015). Related to these findings, people who have experienced post-traumatic stress are generally unable to remember some details of critical events in their lives (Lerias & Byrne, 2003). Traumatic symptoms generally block the retrieval of traumatic events, and this might reason to difficult to remember details due to the

distress experienced (Orbach et al., 2001; Brainerd et al., 2008) and memory suppression (Catarino et al., 2015). However, only examining the hardship in remembering some details about parental infidelity is insufficient to label post-traumatic stress disorder. One of the crucial factors about remembering is that participants generally had some difficulties remembering first learning details, which might be caused shock reactions whether participants are suspicious or not about infidelity before revealed.

All the participants have mentioned their belief that distorted family institutions and infidelity are becoming part of life to give meaning to the incident. The normalization of the experiences is likely to contribute to dealing with the incidence and also actively used for own adult life and romantic relationship. Normalizing was employed to cope with a range of stressors, but the most common statement was the uncontrollable fact of life, and everyone can experience the incidence in their life. Normalization has been known as a coping strategy within the stress literature, specifically linking to parental coping with their children's experiences of illness (Roy & Chatterjee, 2005). Interestingly, limited attention has been given to the attributions of normalization while children's cope in the infidelity literature. Additionally, when the normalization has been recognized, it has been included within the description of rationalization, acceptance, and reappraisal strategies. Therefore, normalization is highly related to children's cognitive state connected to children's age. That is why it became more valid in the adult life when they see their life or parental infidelity a bit further distance, despite the fact that it was still an accurate coping mechanism for an adult children's experiences for making sense of it and helping them normalize when they were injured in their own romantic relationship. Via this coping effort, individuals can adapt to the stressful situation, alter the meaning of the incidence, and help them manage the stressful situation (Brooks et al., 2019).

The last subtheme for a coping mechanism is trying to cut off from an offending parent emotionally and sometimes physically. In the case of parental infidelity, very limited studies have examined the particular connections between feeling caught and satisfaction in the offending parent-child relationship. Schmidt et al., (2016a) suggested that parental infidelity negatively affects the parent-child relationship and parental infidelity is related to lower levels of trust, justice, and loyalty. Thorson (2020) suggested that relationship satisfaction between children-parent was higher when the parents are married because injured parents might use fewer boundary violations rather than remain married; however, much of the research was needed in this specific parent-child dyad. Additionally, there is evidence that men and women interpret infidelity differently (Guitar et al., 2017), and that there are different norms in how society perceived sexual infidelity between men and women (Boyce et al., 2016). Therefore, trying to emotional cut off from offending parent and attributions about children's perspective might depend on biological sex of the offending parent. In this study, most of the offending parents were fathers however if the offending parents were mothers, the result could be different in terms of trying to emotionally cut off from the offending parent. Additionally, participants explained something was broken after they learned about the offending parent's extramarital activities. They stated that they needed to put some distance between offending parents in the first place, then this emotional distance created some physical distance for some of the participants, especially when their parents divorced, and they became more mature. Some participants stated that their relationship with the offending parent was not close before the revelation of infidelity, however, the incident makes the emotional distance more seeable. This finding was also correlated with Nogoles' (2010) findings that when one parent is involved in extramarital infidelity, the general response for children is resentment and trying to avoid offending parent. For children who know parental infidelity, some factors can be protective as labelled traumatic experiences such as children's



age at which the infidelity occurred, adaptive coping strategies, and temperament (Fong et al., 2019). It is not permanently damaging for some children and has characteristics of traumatic growth. McLaughlin and Lambert (2017) stated some protective factors lead to resilient outcomes against trauma; these are individual characteristics of children, a supportive family environment, and having external support for family members.

#### **4.4 Theme 4: Challenges in Romantic Relationship**

The only interpersonal theme of the current study is "challenges in a romantic relationship," which refers to difficulties initiating and maintaining an interpersonal relationship and that divided into 3 subthemes: hardship in trusting others, the multigenerational transmission of infidelity, and selectivity in a romantic partner. Nogales' (2009) study was conducted on adult children who experienced parental infidelity. It was found that 80% of adult children's mindsets toward relationships and intimacy were changed due to their parent's infidelity. Additionally, the same study found that parents' infidelity decreased their ability to trust in their romantic relationships. Therefore, early experiences of parental infidelity have consequences on adult children's relationships with others, especially with romantic partners (Harold & Sellers, 2018). Even though a negative aspect of parental infidelity was experienced in their lives, study's participants also acknowledged and realized some positive sides of the incident. They reported their expectations from others, especially from their romantic partner, were more concrete and realistic in their interpersonal relationship. The most frequently mentioned aspect of experiencing parental infidelity appeared to be hard to trust others, especially in romantic relationships.

Evans and Revelle (2008) defined trust as a belief or confidence in another person's honesty, integrity, and reliability. Place of trust is a significant component in creating and maintaining healthy relationships. Trusting behaviors include maintaining confidentiality between sides and reliability, like keeping promises and honesty, which means telling the

truth. Trust can be categorized as dyadic for both beliefs and trustworthiness. Likewise, people's opinions about the trustworthiness of others and their own are associated (Rotenberg et al., 2009). When trust became a vital part of a healthy human relationship, the early parental relationship became the foundation for the children's sense of trust and model for how children relate with others (Bowlby, 1973). Therefore, when the participants exposed to poor examples of interpersonal behavior might struggle with trusting others. Greater intensity and frequency of interparental conflict were significantly associated with adult children reporting less trust and justice. Adult children who reported their parent's conflictual and felt threat during marital conflict said they had more negative views about themselves. For the others (Platt et al., 2008), research shows that once children learn about their parental infidelity, increased unclarity and discomfort are experienced, and hopes for their parents' relationship. The concept of marriage is disrupted (Lusterman, 2005). As Brown (1991) stated, children, are more likely to see other people in less positive ways because they identify them as untrusting in a relationship. Also, Nogoles and Bellotti (2009) stated that, parental infidelity might be cause to decrease children's ability to trust may result that they might approaching every interaction with great suspicion. Another research finding supported that trust and self-efficacy in relationships were linked to parental infidelity and adult children's infidelity (Weiser & Weigel, 2017). People who have parental infidelity background are less trusting toward others, and they are also suspected of staying trustworthy (Sori 2007). In this study, themes of struggle with trust were quite common among all participants. All the participants defined trust as crucial; however, many stated that they have some problems trusting others or fewer people who can count. Especially participants whose parents are still married and the children who kept infidelity a secret have difficulty trusting others. Also, problems with trusting others are not restricted by romantic partners and friends sharing personal information and self-disclosure, especially at the beginning of the forming

relationship. With the formation of new friendships, they have obligations about tracing to lies. They generally stated a limited number of people, very few people they can trust including their family members.

The second subtheme is the multigenerational transmission of infidelity based on participants' reflections. Participants generally did not know they had been injured or not in their romantic relationship; however, they were offended part of their romantic relationship, whether a one-night stand, long-term sexual involvement, or emotional infidelity. This finding is consistent with earlier research studies that found positive correlations between parental infidelity experiences of adult children and children's infidelity behaviors in their romantic relationships (Platt et al., 2008; Weiser et al., 2015). It can be related to the parental infidelity experience by sending unforgettable messages to offspring about the infidelity, and this message constructs the children's belief system as well and parental infidelity can be conveyed intergenerationally; therefore, when the children become a watcher of the incidence that cause a relational breach of trust, they are less likely to have negative beliefs about cheating (Weiser & Weigel, 2017). In other words, regarding parental infidelities, there is a worrying component that may encourage children to believe that this is a typical gesture of love. According to Schmidt's study (2015), which was conducted by a large number of female participants, when parental infidelity and interparental conflict occurs, the adult children are more likely to continue the pattern of infidelity or lack of trustworthiness in their own romantic partner. In other words, when a child becomes an observer or part of an environment where broken trust in the relationship in spouse dyad in the family, the child's trust formation is likely to be affected. Interestingly, when participants fear resembling their offending parent or their parent's relationship, committing infidelity was like a contradiction. During the interview, they confirmed their infidelity behaviors in past romantic relationships; however, they mentioned regretting what they did. This contradiction became awareness about what

they want to do in their relationship; sometimes, it became an alarm system for themselves and their relationship in adult life. Also, participants stated when they committed emotional infidelity outside of the primary relationship; they did not make sure whether it was infidelity or not. Including emotional bonds without sexual behavior can be considered infidelity; however, participants reported that they felt something could be wrong. To avoid this conflictual feeling, sometimes they label emotional bonds as a "friendship."

In addition to these two subthemes, the participants also consider partner selection thoroughness. During adulthood, important decisions about the romantic relationship are made; however, the foundation of this stems from childhood (Lo, 2019). In childhood, how parents interact with each other, and children interact with the caregiver is vital in shaping romantic relationship development and affecting people's beliefs about romantic relationships and romantic partners (Conger et al., 2000; Fraley & Roisman, 2019). Parents' role modelling is related to children's timing and level of romantic involvement and interpersonal skills (Shulman et al., 2012). In the light of the literature, one of the challenges was the participants experiencing being picky for romantic partner selection due to fears of being injured or a decrease in the risk of being hurt. According to the participants' statement, this selectivity is not specific to one relationship but rather an ongoing and general pattern while forming a romantic relationship. Adult children's capacity to trust the offending parent was damaged, and they were more prudent when initiating romantic relationships because they were frightened of their romantic partner's infidelity behaviors also, fear of rejection and lack of trust in dating partners might be seen in individuals who experienced parental infidelity (Salih & Chaudry, 2021). Therefore, participants emphasized that feeling trust is the number one characteristic of a person who can be within a romantic relationship. Otherwise, they stated that jealousy and controlling behavior disturbed the participants. One of the participants' statements was very interesting while selecting a romantic partner; she said she was selective

about romantic partner candidates being less socially active and outgoing. Therefore, it might be the reason behind the rationale is concerns about being injured or more easily controlling their romantic partner. This finding is also linked with the attachment researcher's findings that there is a positive association between parental infidelity and insecure attachment style (Borst, 2015). Despite the extensive literature on the dynamics of infidelity in couples, there's been little research on the effects of parental infidelity on their adult children's relational processes (Schmidt et al., 2015; Parker & Campbell, 2017).

#### **4.5 Clinical Implications**

It is a well-known fact that infidelity is harmful to individuals and their relationships. This study is expected to provide a space for adult children to make their stories heard as a third party who experienced and acknowledged parental infidelity. It is essential to recognize that the consequences of parental infidelity are not the only parameters for the relationship dyad and recognize that the entire family system is affected. Further, it is crucial to differentiate the relationship between the parents themselves and the relationship between each partner and their children. The child-parent relationship might differ whether an offending or injured partner in terms of infidelity. At this point, the central significance of the present study will be to provide qualitative data for the trauma concept of parental infidelity. Therefore, the current study might contribute to understanding adult children's reactions, whether traumatic or not, and how their relationships with their parents, siblings, and partners might be affected. Also, contributes to how children cope with the incidence, and how their romantic relationship was affected by parental infidelity experiences. In other words, the current study increases the understanding of the effects of parental infidelity on the children's views of family, parents, self, and others. Thus, the study offers support for focusing on the parental dyad when the couple is conflictual, but it also shows the importance of working with their children.

Moreover, systemic-oriented therapy begins with evaluating various historical, psychological, and relational factors that overt or covert shape individuals, couples, and families. Based on this study, systemic therapists should ensure that the assessment includes a description of the family of origin experiences, such as parental infidelity that might influence couples' present romantic and sexual relationship. Genogram would help delineate what relationships within the family of origin before and after infidelity was exposed. Therefore, a therapist should ask clients how they experienced learning about their parents' infidelity, what changed in their relationship, and how some meanings and expectations were changed about trustworthiness, loyalty, fairness, and justice within a romantic relationship. Additionally, a therapist should consider the age at which children found out about parental infidelity in terms of cognitive and emotional development about abstract concepts. Another implication of the findings from this study is addressing relational dynamics related to parental infidelity through family therapy. The study showed that clients who have experienced parental infidelity might struggle to be triangulation with loyalty conflicts. The finding suggests that when working with families affected by these findings, couple and family therapists must pay close attention to how the offspring encourage to choose sides or form alliances by parents. It should be carefully examined so that clinicians may identify what the best treatment practices are for families faced with parental infidelity. Additionally, for a healthy adjustment to the new situation it is important to understand contextual, developmental norms around parental infidelity by family therapists. Professionals might have better understanding and assisted parents when they decided to discuss or not discuss sensitive topic with age appropriateness.

People's experiences as children in the child subsystem and as a partner/spouse in the couple subsystem will inform couple and family therapists, and clinical psychologists in ways that allow them to have complicated approaches. Also, they provide awareness of the potentially constructive and detrimental messages that children, whether young, adolescents,

or adults, are exposed to this phenomenon's surroundings. The present study also supports the intergenerational transmission of parental infidelity on adult children committing in infidelity. Individual or group therapy may thus be good for children whose parents have engaged in infidelity to enable them to discover new methods to deal with relationship problems.

#### **4.6 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

The present study contributes to the literature and clinical considerations about parental infidelity experiences by examining individuals who have knowledge of one of the parent's infidelity in their childhood. Even though the studies about infidelity date back to the 1960s in Western culture, studying affairs outside of the couple dyad has a new area to explore, similar to Turkey. This study is unique in terms of the first qualitative research examining extramarital infidelity outside of the couple dyad in Turkey. In this sense, exploring the familial dynamics in the eyes of adult children's perspective in the Turkish family context can become influential in research and psychotherapy. In addition to that, studies have primarily been conducted from an empirical view, the quantitative method. In this study, utilizing a qualitative design created more chances and opportunities to understand the unique experiences of individuals more deeply.

Besides these strengths, there are also some limitations of the present study. As a nature of the qualitative research, the result is only a basis for understanding the experiences of a small group of aimed participants, and it cannot be generalized to other individuals who have experienced parental infidelity. Secondly, participants have at least a bachelor's degree, and most participants were female. Future research can build upon a sample with a more significant number of male participants and a sample of individuals from more different educational and socioeconomic backgrounds to assess the comprehensiveness of these family patterns. Additionally, maternal and paternal infidelity can be crystalizing for future research; only two participants experienced maternal infidelity in the data. Therefore, exploring gender-

specific parental infidelity might be discussed. Another important future direction can crystalize parental marital status after infidelity revealing whether divorced or stay married and how the children's experience differs. Because in this study, parental marital status did not explore in a depth way.

Also, all the participants were recruited from urban areas of Turkey, and they continue their adult life in metropolitan cities. While infidelity is generally considered unethical by romantic couples in urban areas, infidelity may be viewed contrarily in other parts of the country, particularly gender distinctions can be seen particularly. The result could differ depending on whether children grew up in an urban-rural location. In Turkey's cultural context, there are some differences between urban and rural sides of the country in terms of gender roles and "honor" (namus). Honor may be another distinguishing factor when examining extramarital infidelity, with adult children having different maternal or paternal fidelity responses. Thus, future cross-cultural research is needed to understand the appropriateness of framing the event as a transgression.

Furthermore, longitudinal studies should be conducted in the upcoming to determine the impact of parental infidelity on the adult child's experiences. Research conducted in the future on the effect of parental infidelity on the adult child should also be directed with individuals in their older ages such forties. When people grow more senior and mature, they might construct their own family, they may consider their parents' connection differently, and as a consequence, memories of it may impact them differently.

Moreover, the shortage of developmentally relevant and satisfactory self-report techniques may be blamed for the absence of data on young children's understanding of their familial ties. As a result, scientists must create reliable and secure methods to collect data on children's emotional and cognitive experiences related to parental infidelity from children



directly. In addition, to verify the integrity of participants' reports, researchers should limit the number of years since each participant discovered their parental infidelity experience.

Because of the delicate essence of the research question, the study topic, it would be understandable for some individuals to find sharing some realities and points about themselves and their families if they knew the topic that they are going to talk about emotionally challenging for them. Time allocated to establishment alliance with participants must be relatively short due to bases regarding practically. Consequently, individuals who voluntarily participate to the study might not feel themselves safe enough to declare their vulnerable feelings in front of the investigator. It must be taken into consideration that some individuals not sharing their experiences with total transparency, and they might choose to hide some scope for themselves might reduce the depth of research.

## **CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION**

This study aimed to understand the experiences of adult children around parental infidelity in their childhood in Turkey. More specifically, it is tried to understand how children experienced parental infidelity and how the incidence affects their lives during and after parental infidelity. The present study includes ten participants who reported their experience of parental infidelity. All participants were raised and lived in some of the urban cities in Turkey. The interviews were done individually with each participant through the online platform Zoom.

Nearly all participants had the same experiences as growing up early before their time, they had to face adult and couple problems of their parents, and they all described this experience as unfavourable. Most of them had tried to find some social support system to deal with the incidence and emotions characterized by ups and downs. They found some methods to deal with the transgression with the spectrum of emotions experienced during and after the incident. Around the incident, new roles became more valid for the children beginning of the new hierarchical family system, and therefore the children have new positions in the familial

hierarchy. Even though parental infidelity was experienced in childhood, perceptions about words, self, and others were changed, especially for their romantic relationship in adult life.



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## APPENDIX A: The Questionnaire in Turkish

- 1) Bana biraz çocukluğunuzdan ve ergenliğinizden bahseder misiniz?
  - a) Çocukluk dönemi hatıralarınız nasıldır?
  - b) Aileniz ile ilişkiniz nasıldı?
  - c) Nasıl bir ortamda büyüdünüz?
  - d) Çocukluğunuzda size derinden etkileyen hatırladığınız öne çıkan olaylar nelerdir?
- 2) Ebeveyn aldatmasından bahsedebilir misiniz?
  - a) Hangi ebeveyniniz aldattı?
  - b) Ne zaman oldu? Kaç yaşındaydınız? / Siz ne zaman öğrendiniz?
  - c) Aldatılan ebeveynin bu durumu nasıl öğrendiğini biliyor musunuz?
  - d) Siz nasıl öğrendiniz?
  - e) Paylaşmak istediğiniz, hatırladığınız detaylar nelerdir?
  - f) Aldatma sonrası ilişkiler nasıl şekillendi?
  - g) Tüm bu deneyimle nasıl baş ettiğinizi düşünüyorsunuz?
- 3) Bu durumu öğrendiğinizde ilk nasıl tepki verdiniz?
- 4) Bu durumu öğrendiğinizde aldatan ebeveyniniz ile ilişkiniz nasıl oldu?
- 5) Bu durumu öğrendiğinizde aldatılan ebeveyniniz ile ilişkiniz nasıl oldu?
- 6) Kardeşleriniz var ise onlar bu durumu nasıl karşıladılar? Sizin ilişkileriniz değişti mi?
- 7) Geniş aile/akrabalar öğrendi mi? Nasıl tepkiler verdiler?
- 8) Bu deneyimin size herhangi bir şekilde değiştirdiğini düşünüyor musunuz? (aileye bakış, arkadaşlık, romantik ilişkiler, güven, adalet, sadakat)
- 9) Hiç romantik ilişkilerinizde aldattınız ya da aldatıldınız mı?
- 10) Bu deneyimin hayatınızda olumlu ve olumsuz yönleri nelerdir? Bunlarla nasıl baş ettiniz?
- 11) Eğer bu araştırmayı yürüten araştırmacı siz olsaydınız, size sorulmayan hangi soruyu katılımcıya sormak isterdiniz?
- 12) Bana sormak istediğiniz herhangi bir şey var mı?

## APPENDIX B: The Questionnaire in English

- 1) Could you please tell me about your childhood and teenage years?
  - a) How was the childhood memories?
  - b) How was your relationship with your family?
  - c) What was the environment in which you were raised?
  - d) What were the prominent experiences that you remember deeply affected you in your childhood?
- 2) Can you talk about parental infidelity?
  - a) Who cheated?
  - b) When? / How old were you when parental infidelity happened? / When did you find out?
  - c) Do you know how to injured parent learned about this incidence?
  - d)How did you learn?
  - e) What are the details you want or remember to share?
  - f) How did your parents' relationship status change after infidelity?
  - g) How do you think you coped with this experience?
- 3) How did you react when you learned about this situation?
- 4) How was your relationship with your parent who is being offending?
- 5) How was your relationship with your parent who is injured?
- 6) If you have siblings, how did they cope with this situation? Have your relationships changed?
- 7) Have extended family/relatives found out? How were their reactions?
- 8) Do you think this experience has changed you in any way? (perception on family, friendship, romantic relationships, trust, justice, loyalty)
- 9) Have you ever cheated or been cheated on in your romantic relationships?
- 10) What are the positive and negative aspects of this experience in your life? How did you deal with these?
- 11) If you were the researcher conducting this study, what would you have asked, which I haven't asked to you?
- 12) Have you have further question to ask?



**APPENDIX C: Demographic Form (Translated from Turkish)**

- 1) Gender: .....
- 2) Age: .....
- 3) What is your last graduated school?
  - Primary  Middle school  High school  College  Graduate school
- 4) Occupation: .....
- 5) How do you define your socio-economic status?
  - High class  Upper middle class  Middle class  Low class
- 6) Your marital status: .....
- Single  Non committed relationship  Committed relationship
  - Cohabitation  Engaged  Married  Divorced
- 7) General health Problem:
  - Yes .....(Please specify)  No
- 8) Marital status of your parents?
  - Married  Divorced  Separated but not divorced  One or both are died

## **APPENDIX D: Informed Consent (Translated from Turkish form)**

Dear Participant,

This research is conducted by Özyeğin University Couple and Family Therapy graduate student. This research aims to investigate adult children's parental infidelity experiences. There is no right or wrong answer in the study. Please try to express yourself as clearly as possible.

Scientific purpose is main objective of this study. The data that collected during the study will be evaluated anonymously therefore no names will be used any step of this study. Each participant will have code and data will be collected with this codes. The result of the study will not be matched with your personal information. The information and data in this research will only be known to be researcher and will be storage in the researcher's encrypted harddisk.

Participation of this study is completely voluntary. You always have right not to sign this form. Even if you have signed the form, you have right to stop working anytime when you feel uncomfortable. If you agree to participate the research, you will be asked to participate in the interview which will last 60-90 minutes. The meeting time will be held via the Zoom application at a jointly agreed time. In the process, audio will be recorded and stored in encrypted hard disks by the researcher and does not match your personal information. In the interview open-ended questions will be asked in the context of parental infidelity.

At the end of the research, experiences you have will be collected under certain themes. You will be contacted via e-mail to get information whether emerging themes reflect your experiences.

For more information about the study, you can contact the researcher via e-mail . If you have further questions, suggestions or any problems regarding the ethical concerns of the research or research details, please contact Özyeğin University Ethics Committee.

At the end of this interview, if you think that you need psychological support, you can contact Özyeğin University Couple and family center via phone or e-mail.

**I have read the details of the research project which mentioned above. I agree to participate in this study voluntarily.**

**Name Surname:**

**Date:**

**E-mail:**

**Signature:**

