

## ***Intergenerational Transmission of Infidelity: The Relationship Between Fathers' and Sons' Cheating Behaviors***

Alexander<sup>1a</sup>, Muhammad Rizky<sup>2b</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Nursing Science, University of Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup> Department of Industrial Engineering, University of Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia

<sup>a</sup> [alexanderkusno@gmail.com](mailto:alexanderkusno@gmail.com)

<sup>b</sup> [mhdrizky1510@gmail.com](mailto:mhdrizky1510@gmail.com)

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### **HIGHLIGHTS**

- Boys are more likely to commit infidelity if their father has had an affair
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### **ABSTRACT / ABSTRAK**

This research explores the relationship between fathers' infidelity and the tendency of their sons to engage in similar behaviors. Grounded in social learning theory, which posits that children often model the behaviors of their parents, particularly within intimate relationships, this research investigates whether a father's cheating behavior influences his son's romantic conduct. A quantitative survey design was employed, involving 384 adult male participants. Data analysis was conducted using Pearson correlation technique to determine the relationship between father's infidelity behavior and son's infidelity behavior. The results showed a significant positive relationship ( $r = 0.45$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), these findings suggest that higher levels of a father's involvement in infidelity are associated with a greater likelihood of similar behavior in sons. The results underscore the importance of considering intergenerational dynamics when addressing cheating behaviors in romantic relationships. Understanding how family experiences shape individuals' relational patterns may inform the development of preventive interventions and emotional education programs aimed at breaking the cycle of infidelity.

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#### ***\*Corresponding Author:***

Alexander

Jurusan Ilmu Keperawatan Universitas Sumatera Utara,

Jl. Prof. T. Maas No.3, Kampus, Padang Bulan, Kec. Medan Baru, Kota Medan, Sumatera Utara.

Email: [alexanderkusno@gmail.com](mailto:alexanderkusno@gmail.com)

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Problems in romantic relationships have become increasingly diverse, with infidelity remaining one of the most feared and frequently discussed issues, particularly among individuals with feminine energy. Infidelity is a leading cause of conflict in both romantic relationships and marriages (Allen et al., 2005). Over the past few decades, research on the factors influencing infidelity has expanded, drawing from biological (Gangestad &

Thornhill, 1997), psychological (Buss & Shackelford, 1997), and sociocultural perspectives (Mark et al., 2011).

One factor that has garnered growing attention is the influence of family, particularly how childhood experiences and observations of parental relationships can shape behavioral patterns in adulthood. Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory posits that individuals tend to imitate behaviors observed within their social environment, including those related to romantic relationships. In the context of infidelity, children who grow up in families where one parent (especially the father) engages in extramarital affairs may perceive such behavior as acceptable or normative.

However, much of the existing literature remains centered on Western contexts and often adopts a universal evolutionary framework. There is a lack of emphasis on the cultural specificity of infidelity, especially in non-Western societies such as Indonesia, where family structure, social norms, and values differ significantly. Cultural beliefs and social expectations in Indonesia may shape how individuals interpret, respond to, and engage in infidelity, suggesting the need for localized inquiry.

Infidelity is a complex phenomenon and can be influenced by various factors, including communication in the relationship. A study by Allen et al. (2021) found that couples with poor communication were more prone to infidelity compared to those with better communication skills. Effective communication helps reduce dissatisfaction in relationships, which is often the main trigger for someone to have an affair.

Moreover, previous studies have found that poor communication within romantic relationships is a significant predictor of infidelity (Allen et al., 2021). Effective communication has been shown to mitigate dissatisfaction—one of the main triggers of infidelity. In addition, the family environment plays a critical role; sons who grow up in households where the father engages in infidelity may be more likely to replicate such patterns in their own romantic relationships (Widmer et al., 1998).

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the intergenerational transmission of infidelity within the Indonesian cultural context—an area that has been largely overlooked in existing research. By examining the potential relationship between paternal infidelity and sons' infidelity, this study seeks to address a significant research gap and provide a culturally grounded understanding of how family dynamics influence romantic behavior in Indonesian society..

## **2. RESEARCH METHODS**

This study employed a quantitative approach with a correlational survey design. The target population consisted of adult males residing in Medan City. The research sample included 384 respondents, determined using the Slovin formula with a 5% margin of error. A purposive sampling technique was applied with specific inclusion criteria: male individuals aged 18 years or older who had been or were currently in a romantic relationship.

Two main instruments were used in this study. The first was the Infidelity Scale developed by Drigotas et al. (1999), which measures an individual's tendency to engage in infidelity within romantic relationships and has a reliability coefficient of  $\alpha = 0.86$ . The second was the Perceived Parental Infidelity Scale, adapted from the Parental Marital Conflict Scale by Buehler and Gerard (2002), which measures children's perceptions of their father's infidelity behavior, with a reliability of  $\alpha = 0.81$ . Both instruments were translated and culturally adapted using a forward-backward translation process to ensure linguistic validity. A panel of experts in psychology and Indonesian language reviewed the items for conceptual and cultural appropriateness for the Indonesian context. A pilot test was conducted on the same 384 participants, and item-total correlations were analyzed to refine the instruments and ensure contextual validity within the Medan population.

The research stages began with determining the population and selecting the sample—men aged 18 years and above who had been or were currently in romantic relationships. Data collection was conducted through both online and offline methods. Approximately 65% of the responses were collected via online platforms such as Google Forms, which allowed broader reach but may have introduced self-selection bias, particularly regarding education level and internet literacy. To mitigate this, 35% of the data were gathered offline through in-person interviews or printed questionnaires distributed at universities, workplaces, and community centers across Medan.

To ensure data quality, incomplete or invalid responses were filtered out, and response bias was monitored. For data analysis, the Pearson correlation test was used to examine the relationship between the two main variables, and a simple regression analysis was conducted to determine the extent to which a father's infidelity behavior could predict his son's infidelity behavior.

### 3. RESULTS

Table 1. Demographic Data (n=384)

Categories	Frequency (n)	Persentation (%)
Age		
18—25	142	37,0
26—35	168	43,8
>35	74	19,2
Relationship Status		
Dating	216	56,3
Marriage	128	33,3
Not in relationship	40	10,4
Last Education		
High School	102	26,6
D-3—S-1	234	60,9
S-2—S3	48	12,5
Ever had an affair		
Yes	172	44,8
No	212	55,2

This study involved 384 respondents with diverse demographic characteristics. The majority were aged 26–35 years (43.8%), followed by those aged 18–25 years (37.0%) and over 35 years (19.2%). In terms of relationship status, more than half were currently dating (56.3%), 33.3% were married, and 10.4% were not in a relationship. Most respondents had completed higher education at the D-3 to S-1 level (60.9%), while 26.6% were high school graduates, and 12.5% had attained postgraduate degrees (S-2 to S-3). Regarding experiences with infidelity, 44.8% of respondents admitted to having had an affair, whereas 55.2% reported they had never engaged in one.

Table 2. Correlation Analysis

Variables	Mean	SD	r (Pearson)	p-value
Father's cheating behavior	3,24	1,02	0,45	0,001
Son's cheating behavior	2,89	0,95		

The results of the correlation analysis in table 2, using Pearson's test revealed a significant positive relationship between father's cheating behavior and son's cheating behavior ( $r = 0.45$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). This indicates that higher levels of perceived or experienced infidelity by the father were moderately associated with a higher tendency of cheating behavior in the son. The mean score for father's cheating behavior was 3.24 ( $SD = 1.02$ ), while the mean score for son's cheating behavior was 2.89 ( $SD = 0.95$ ).

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The results showed that the majority of respondents were in the age range of 26–35 years (43.8%), followed by those aged 18–25 years (37.0%), and the remainder above 35 years (19.2%). This suggests that the study population was dominated by young to early adult males who are at a productive stage of life, particularly in building romantic relationships. According to Proulx et al. (2020), individuals within this age range are more actively involved in initiating and maintaining romantic relationships, making this demographic highly relevant in research related to infidelity.

In terms of relationship status, 56.3% of respondents were dating, 33.3% were married, and 10.4% reported not being in a relationship. Interestingly, the proportion of married respondents was relatively high, which allowed the study to further examine how familial experiences—especially paternal infidelity—might impact the stability of sons' romantic or marital relationships. This aligns with findings by Fincham & May (2022), who noted that individuals exposed to parental infidelity are more likely to experience anxiety and mistrust within their own intimate relationships.

With regard to educational background, the majority of respondents held a D-3 or S-1 degree (60.9%), followed by high school graduates (26.6%) and postgraduate degree holders (12.5%). This indicates that most participants were relatively well-educated and might be assumed to have a clearer understanding of ethical behavior and loyalty in relationships. However, a study by Mark et al. (2021) suggests that higher education does not necessarily reduce the risk of engaging in infidelity, as individuals with more education may also face greater relational expectations and increased opportunities for interaction, especially in professional environments.

Notably, 44.8% of respondents admitted to having committed infidelity, while 55.2% had not. This is a relatively high prevalence when compared to global male infidelity rates, which range from 20% to 40% (Rodrigues et al., 2023). One possible explanation for this could be Indonesia's predominantly patriarchal culture, where male dominance in relationships might normalize or even implicitly tolerate extramarital affairs. As Wang & Li (2023) highlight, cultural norms have a strong influence on the level of acceptance toward cheating, particularly in societies with patriarchal systems that are often more permissive of male infidelity.

Further analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between father's cheating behavior and son's cheating behavior ( $r = 0.45$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), suggesting that the higher the perceived level of paternal infidelity, the more likely sons were to report similar behavior in their own relationships. This finding supports Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, which states that behaviors can be learned through observation, particularly from influential figures such as parents. In this context, sons who witnessed or were aware of their father's infidelity may come to view such behavior as acceptable or normative. Similarly, Proulx et al. (2020) found that children exposed to parental infidelity often experience reduced trust and commitment in their romantic relationships.

These findings are further supported by Mark et al. (2021), who reported that parental infidelity can weaken moral expectations regarding fidelity, especially when it is normalized within the family system. Fincham and May (2022) also noted that children raised in households marked by high conflict or infidelity are more prone to adopt maladaptive relational patterns, including unfaithful behavior. From a developmental psychology perspective, these patterns are also consistent with attachment theory (Yen & Tan, 2023), which suggests that insecure attachment during childhood—often resulting from family instability—can negatively affect relationship quality in adulthood. This is reinforced by Rodrigues et al. (2023), who found that individuals with attachment insecurity are more likely to engage in extradyadic relationships.

Personality and family dynamics also play a crucial role in influencing cheating behavior. According to Glass & Wright (2019), individuals with narcissistic traits or low levels of empathy are more likely to engage in infidelity. The absence of consequences

when sons witness their father's cheating can lead to the perception that such behavior is tolerable or without repercussions. In addition to familial and psychological influences, external factors such as technology are also relevant. McDaniel et al. (2022) found that social media and dating apps have significantly increased the avenues and frequency of infidelity. In this study, several young male respondents in Medan City reported that digital platforms facilitated their engagement in relationships outside of their committed partnerships.

While these findings are insightful, it is important to acknowledge the study's limitations. The cross-sectional design used in this research captures behavior and perceptions at a single point in time, making it impossible to draw causal conclusions. Longitudinal studies would provide a clearer picture of the developmental trajectories linking paternal and filial infidelity. Additionally, this study focused solely on the father-son dynamic and did not account for the potential influence of maternal behavior or sibling relationships, which may also play a role in shaping relational patterns.

The implications of this study are significant for family counseling, relationship education, and public health policy. Intervention programs should be targeted toward individuals with a family history of infidelity, especially during adolescence and early adulthood, to help prevent intergenerational transmission of such behavior. Community-based education initiatives, including relationship ethics in school curricula, could also be beneficial. Furthermore, religious and cultural leaders in Indonesia have a key role to play in promoting healthier relationship norms and challenging permissive attitudes toward male infidelity. Future research should explore additional moderating factors such as religiosity, beliefs about gender roles, socioeconomic status, and the influence of mother-child dynamics to develop more comprehensive and culturally relevant interventions.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study found that there was a significant positive relationship between fathers' cheating behavior and sons' cheating behavior. These results confirm that family experiences have a strong influence on children's behavior patterns in their romantic relationships.

The implication of these findings is the need for family-based interventions that emphasize the importance of communication and education in relationships. Practitioners such as family counselors and relationship therapists are encouraged to incorporate discussions about family history and intergenerational patterns of infidelity into their therapeutic approaches. Tailored interventions can help clients recognize inherited behavioral tendencies and develop healthier relational habits.

Prevention programs and couples counseling should also aim to foster awareness of how parental models influence relationship choices, thus helping individuals break the cycle of infidelity across generations.

For future research, it is important to consider additional variables such as maternal role, religiosity, and local culture. Furthermore, longitudinal studies are recommended to better understand the long-term effects of early family experiences on individuals' romantic behavior over time.

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