

A preliminary study on anxiety and attachment among Mongolian women who experienced partner infidelity

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Abstract— According to the 2024 Statistical Bulletin of the National Statistics Office of Mongolia (NSO, 2024), a total of 4,463 divorces were recorded nationwide. One of the primary causes of marital dissolution is infidelity. For Mongolian women, the psychological state after being exposed to infidelity is not so obvious, but rather hidden, because it is directly related to social expectations and values. After the betrayal of trust, women experience many negative consequences, including decreased self-esteem, social isolation, loss of security, difficulty controlling negative emotions, fear of losing again, and increased internal family conflict. Many studies conducted abroad have shown that women who have been involved in infidelity experience a lot of anxiety. Within this study, a sample of 30 married women aged 26 to 55 residing in Ulaanbaatar was selected. The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between anxiety levels and attachment styles among women who have experienced extramarital betrayal. The research employed the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory and a general demographic questionnaire to collect data. The findings revealed that women who had experienced infidelity exhibited higher levels of anxiety compared to the normative population. Preliminary findings also suggest that attachment styles may be associated with variations in anxiety levels among women affected by partner infidelity. Attachment styles showed limited but notable variation in anxiety levels, suggesting the need for further investigation with larger samples.

Keywords— Extramarital infidelity, Anxiety, Attachment style, Trait anxiety, State anxiety, Mongolian women

1. INTRODUCTION

The family is widely regarded as the primary foundation for psychological stability and social functioning. Changes in society, evolving cultural norms, and reduced trust between partners have begun to put more pressure on intimate relationships. Infidelity, in particular, compromises the couple's sense of trust, emotional safety, and attachment security, often leaving the betrayed partner with significant psychological distress. Many women who experience such betrayal report heightened fear and anxiety, a decline in self-esteem, and patterns of withdrawal from social contact [1]. In psychological literature, this experience is conceptualized as betrayal trauma, a form of trauma that occurs within a trusted relationship and disrupts the individual's internal system of psychological protection. This disruption may lead to persistent anxiety, emotional turmoil, and guilt [2].

Research on betrayal-related psychological difficulties in Mongolia remains scarce. Few empirical studies have examined the emotional consequences of infidelity, the breakdown of trust, or the distress that follows relational betrayal. For this reason, the present study aims to explore anxiety levels among women who have experienced infidelity and to examine the internal psychological factors associated with their distress. The study draws upon Betrayal Trauma Theory and Attachment Theory to guide its conceptual framework. Given the small sample size, the study should be viewed as preliminary, intended to assess the suitability and reliability of the measurement instruments for use in future, larger-scale investigations.

Several studies have examined the psychological consequences of infidelity across different populations. N. Tang and W. Xu [3] investigated gender differences in emotional responses to infidelity among 356 couples in China. Their findings indicated that women reported significantly higher levels of anxiety than men when confronted with both emotional and sexual infidelity ($p < .01$), and were also more prone to self-blame and reduced trust. Another study by researchers at the University of Nevada (2019) explored the moderating role of self-esteem in post-infidelity adjustment. Using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and the DASS-21 Anxiety subscale, the authors found that individuals with higher self-esteem recovered more rapidly and showed lower anxiety, whereas those with low self-esteem reported elevated anxiety and stronger tendencies toward self-blame.

In Mongolia, several graduate-level studies have addressed related issues. For example [4] conducted a master's thesis examining attachment styles and romantic relationship satisfaction among young adults (ages 18–25) using the ECR-R, the Relationship Assessment Scale, and the Trust in Close Relationships Scale. The results confirmed that attachment style was a significant predictor of romantic satisfaction. J. Narantuya [5] in a study involving 86 women who had experienced infidelity, reported that approximately 70 percent exhibited increased self-blame, emotional suppression, reduced self-esteem, and heightened anxiety. Likewise, B. Uuganbayar [6] found that lower marital trust was associated with decreased relationship satisfaction among 120 married adults, using the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI-16).

A total of 30 married women residing in Ulaanbaatar participated voluntarily in the study. Participants ranged in age from 26 to 55. Eligibility criteria included:

1. being legally married or in a long-term cohabiting partnership;
2. having experienced infidelity within the relationship;
3. willingness to participate and provide informed consent.

Recruitment was conducted online through voluntary participation, and no incentives were provided.

Data were collected electronically using Google Forms. Participants received an online invitation containing information about the study, the purpose of the research, confidentiality requirements, and an informed consent form. Only participants who gave explicit consent were allowed to proceed with the survey.

Research Questions:

- RQ1: Do women who have experienced infidelity show elevated anxiety levels?
- RQ2: Does attachment style differentiate anxiety levels?

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Anxiety is understood as a psychological and physiological response to perceived threat or uncertainty. In the Mongolian psychological literature, anxiety is described as an emotional state involving worry, tension, and apprehension in anticipation of potential harm [7]. Anxiety is often categorized into two forms: trait anxiety, which reflects a stable tendency to respond with anxiety across different situations, and state anxiety, which describes temporary emotional arousal triggered by situational factors.

After experiencing infidelity, women commonly encounter anxiety through several pathways: internal fear related to trust and safety, a sense of losing control over future outcomes, and self-blame leading to diminished self-esteem [8]. These reactions influence cognitive, emotional, and biological processes, reinforcing the negative association between anxiety and self-esteem.

The conceptual foundation of this study is grounded in Betrayal Trauma Theory [8] and Attachment Theory [9]. According to betrayal trauma theory, infidelity disrupts psychological defense mechanisms and may lead to suppression, hypervigilance, and long-term emotional instability [2]. Attachment theory explains how individuals form bonds with close others and respond to relational threats. Individuals with an anxious attachment style are particularly sensitive to relational instability and tend to experience heightened fear and emotional distress after betrayal [10], [11]. Thus, both theories jointly explain why betrayed women with anxious attachment may show elevated anxiety.

Betrayal Trauma Theory and Attachment Theory jointly provide the conceptual foundation for the present study. Betrayal Trauma Theory explains how violations of trust within close relationships disrupt psychological defense mechanisms and lead to heightened anxiety and emotional dysregulation. Attachment Theory complements this framework by explaining individual differences in vulnerability to relational threat. Together, these theories suggest that anxiety following infidelity is shaped both by the traumatic nature of betrayal and by pre-existing attachment-related regulatory patterns, thereby informing the study hypotheses and analytical approach.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Research Objectives

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between anxiety levels and attachment styles among women who have experienced extramarital betrayal.

3.2 Research Hypotheses

H1: Betrayed women will show higher anxiety levels than population norms.

H2: Anxiety levels will differ between anxious and avoidant attachment styles.

3.3 Instrument

This study used two standardized psychological instruments widely employed in clinical and research settings.

1) State–Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI-Y)

The Mongolian adaptation of the STAI-Y Form Y was used to measure both situational anxiety (20 items) and dispositional anxiety (20 items). Items were rated on a 4-point Likert scale. Internal consistency in previous Mongolian research typically ranges between $\alpha=0.86-0.89$. The scale is appropriate for detecting anxiety responses associated with betrayal, loss of trust, and emotional instability.

2) Experiences in Close Relationships – Revised (ECR-R)

To assess attachment style, the study employed the ECR-R, measuring attachment anxiety and avoidance using a 7-point Likert scale. Prior Mongolian studies have reported acceptable reliability ($\alpha\approx 0.75-0.85$). Attachment anxiety reflects fear of abandonment and dependency, while avoidance represents discomfort with emotional closeness.

3.4 Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional, non-probability convenience sampling design. Data were collected from women who had experienced extramarital betrayal, and the study focused on examining their anxiety levels and attachment patterns at a single point in time. The study involved human participants and was conducted in accordance with ethical principles for psychological research. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained electronically prior to data collection, and all responses were collected anonymously. No identifying information was recorded, and participants were free to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Given the limited sample size, the findings should not be interpreted as conclusive evidence but rather as indicative trends. The primary aim of the study was to examine the feasibility of the instruments and analytical approach, thereby laying groundwork for larger-scale investigations.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

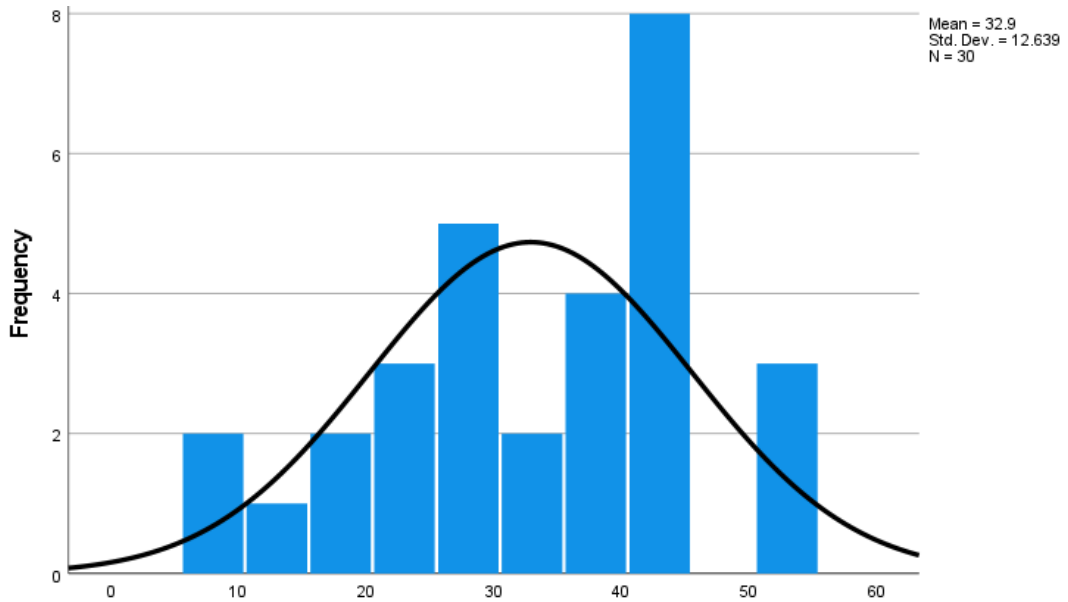


Fig.1 Distribution of State Anxiety Scores

Inspection of the distribution of state anxiety scores shows that the majority of values fall within the central range of the histogram bars, indicating a relatively even and approximately normal distribution of scores.

The mean age of the women in our study was 36.9 ± 7.8 , with the youngest being 26 and the oldest being 55. The age distribution is shown in Figure 2 as follows.

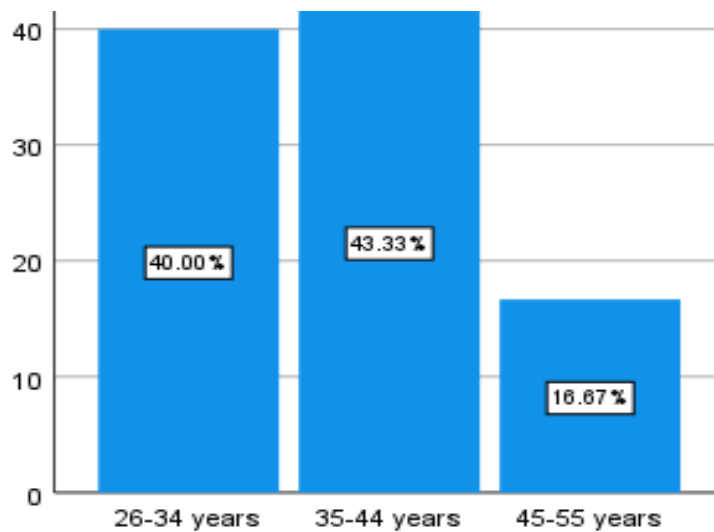


Fig.2 Age group of women surveyed

33.3% of the women surveyed had a master's degree and 63.33% had a bachelor's degree.

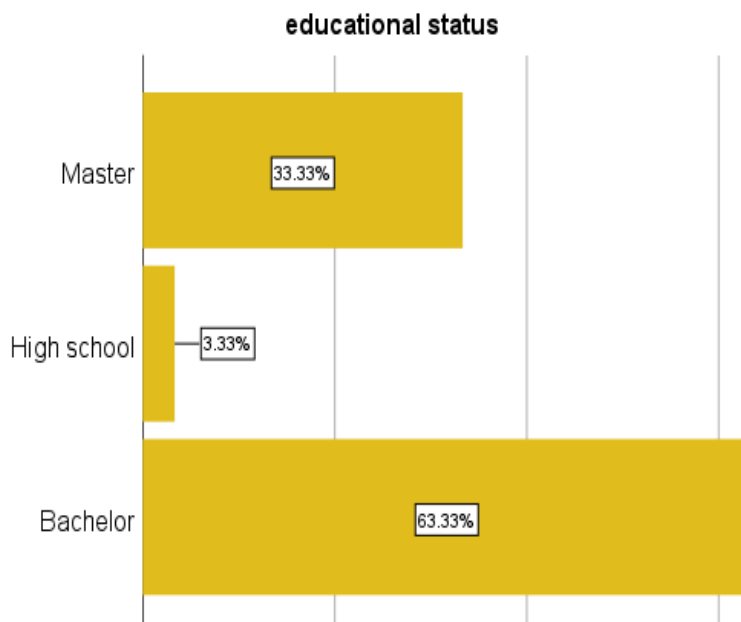


Fig.3 Education of women surveyed

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of this sample (n=30)

Characteristics	Frequency	Percent
Are you living with your husband now	Yes	7 23.3
	No	23 76.7
If so, please select what type of communication you had or the form of it	Sexual relations	3 10.0
	Messages, chats, and more	15 50.0
	The above two	12 40.0
How did you find out about the issue?	from an outsider	8 26.7
	I knew it myself	22 73.3
How did you react to this incident?	officially divorced	3 10
	Temporarily living separately	4 13.3
	Forgiven	23 76.7
Have you received psychological counseling or psychotherapy services after this incident?	Yes	2 6.7
	No	28 93.3
Was there anyone listened to you after the extra marital affairs	No one said anything	14 46.7
	Family	3 10.0
	Friends	13 43.3

As can be seen from Table 1, women who are victims of extramarital affairs are less likely to forgive their husbands, overcome their problems alone, and do not receive psychological help in the event of being victims.

Among the women surveyed, 40% had moderate levels of situational anxiety, 10% had high levels, and 33.3% had low levels.

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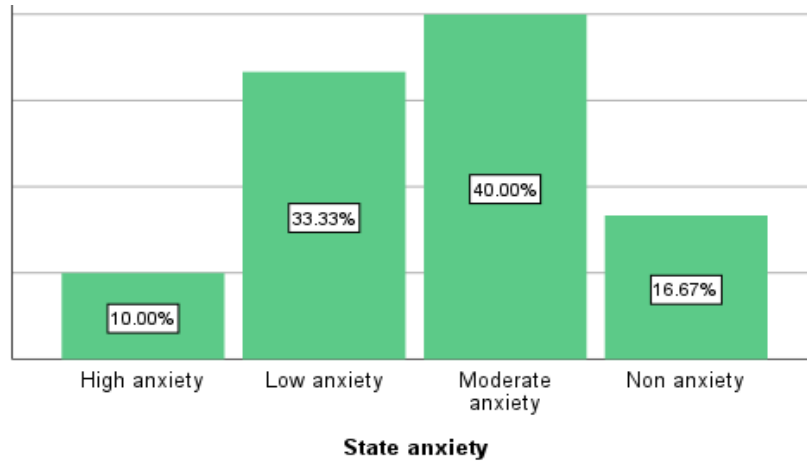


Fig. 4 State anxiety

Based on trait anxiety scores, the 30 women who participated in the study were classified into three main categories according to their score levels, as illustrated in Figure 5. Among the participants, 50% exhibited high levels of trait anxiety, 40% demonstrated moderate levels, and only 10% showed low levels of trait anxiety. The predominance of moderate to high trait anxiety indicates that elevated and persistent anxiety characteristics are common among the women in the sample, suggesting a generally heightened level of trait anxiety within this group.

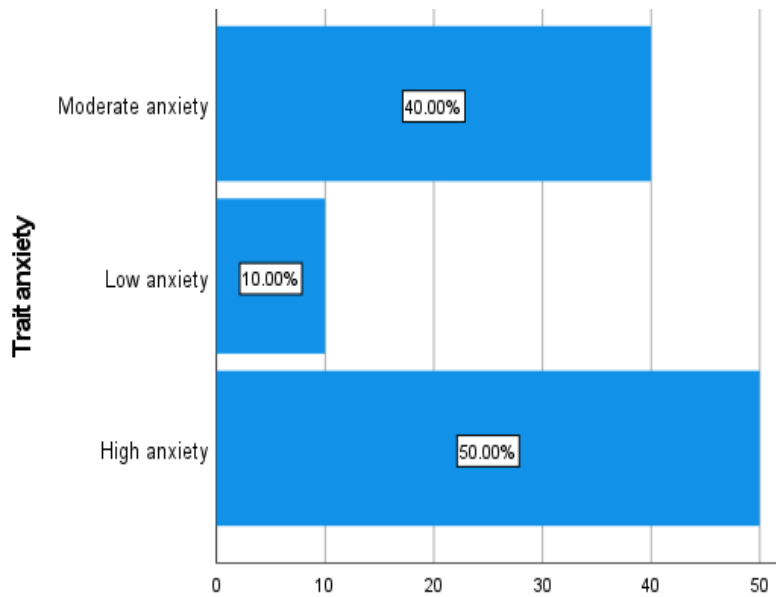


Fig.5 Personal trait anxiety

Table 2. Independent Samples t-Test Results for State and Trait Anxiety by Attachment Style

Variables		M	SD	t	df	p
Avoidant attachment	State anxiety	33.7	11.9	4.50	28	.043*
	Trait anxiety	49.1	9.2	2.90	28	.090 (ns)
Anxious attachment	State anxiety	32.9	12.6	1.46	28	.290 (ns)
	Trait anxiety	48.6	9.59	2.44	28	.080 (ns)

Note. *df* values were calculated based on independent samples *t*-tests ($df = n_1 + n_2 - 2$). $p < .05$ indicates statistical significance. Results with $p > .05$ are reported as not statistically significant (ns) and are interpreted descriptively. Independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to examine differences in state and trait anxiety across attachment styles. Among women with an avoidant attachment pattern, state anxiety was significantly higher ($t(28) = 4.50, p = .043$), whereas differences in trait anxiety did not reach statistical significance ($p > .05$). No statistically significant differences were observed for state or trait anxiety within the anxious attachment group ($p > .05$).

5. CONCLUSION


Overall, the results show that women affected by extramarital betrayal exhibit markedly elevated anxiety levels, that attachment-related differences do not align with initial expectations, and that the observed patterns provide preliminary empirical support for both Betrayal Trauma Theory and Attachment Theory while demonstrating the suitability of the applied measures for broader future research. Practically, the findings emphasize the importance of assessing anxiety and relational vulnerability in psychological support services for women affected by infidelity. However, the small sample size and cross-sectional design limit the generalizability of the results. Future studies should employ larger samples, include control groups, and adopt longitudinal approaches to more clearly identify attachment-related differences in post-betrayal anxiety.

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AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

1. First Author

	Tuvshinzaya Norovdorj	tuvshinzaya.do@gmail.com
	<p>Tuvshinzaya Norovdorj is a student studying for a master's degree in psychology at the National University of Mongolia.</p> <p>Her research interests include anxiety, attachment processes, women's mental health, and psychological responses to relational trauma. She conducted the data collection, analysis, and manuscript preparation for this study.</p>	

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	<p>Erdenechimeg Sharavdorj, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at the National University of Mongolia.</p> <p>Her research focuses on clinical psychology, trauma, and counseling. She supervised the research design, theoretical framework, and academic quality of this study.</p>	