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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Mediating Role of Mentalization Capacity in the Relationship Between Family Unpredictability and the Infidelity Tendency

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ABSTRACT

The primary aim of this study is to investigate the mediating role of mentalization capacity in the relationship between family unpredictability and the tendency toward infidelity (extradyadic involvement). Family unpredictability refers to the inconsistencies in family behaviors and regulatory systems, while infidelity, within the context of a romantic relationship, refers to a partner's violation of norms regulating emotional or physical intimacy with others outside the relationship. Mentalization is the ability to understand the conscious or unconscious states of mind of oneself and others. The study's participants consisted of 441 middle-aged adults involved in romantic relationships, including dating, engaged, or married. The Retrospective Family Unpredictability Scale, The Mentalization Scale, The Infidelity Tendency Scale, and the Socio-demographic Data Form were used in this study. Structural Equation Modelling was employed to test the proposed model. Findings indicated that family unpredictability significantly predicted both the tendency toward infidelity (extradyadic involvement) and mentalization capacity in middle-aged adults involved in romantic relationships. Mentalization capacity, in turn, was identified as a partial mediator in the relationship between family unpredictability and the tendency toward infidelity. These findings suggest that individuals who experience inconsistencies in family behaviors and regulatory systems may be more prone to infidelity, potentially due to compromised mentalization capacity. The findings obtained in this study highlight the significance of stable family environments and the development of mentalization skills in the risk of infidelity in romantic relationships.

The growing number of individuals seeking family and couple therapy, alongside the demand for expert guidance on relationship continuity and decision-making, underscores the significance of relationship dynamics. Infidelity frequently emerges in the clinical histories of clients seeking couple therapy and has been shown to significantly disrupt relationship dynamics. It stands out that there has been an increase in divorce and infidelity rates with the COVID-19, which started in the past years and has remained the most severe public health problem in the world (Gordon & Mitchell, 2020). COVID-19 has been cited as a factor that brought about relational difficulties worldwide, leading to an increase in divorces and relational crises after 2020 (Nkire et al., 2022).

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In the context of a romantic relationship, the concept of infidelity is defined as a partner's violation of the norms that regulate the level of emotional or physical intimacy with people outside the relationship (Drigotas & Barta, 2001). Family unpredictability is thought to be one of the factors that predicts the tendency toward infidelity in relationship dynamics. The concept of family unpredictability is defined as inconsistency in family behavior and regulatory systems. In other words, family unpredictability arises when family members cannot consistently fulfill their family responsibilities, such as providing care, or are unwilling to fulfill them. Family unpredictability may also occur when the regulatory systems or mechanisms necessary to maintain expectations within the family are disrupted. In this context, parents and other primary caregivers are considered significant contributors to such family chaos or instability (Ross & Hill, 2000).

The concept of family unpredictability is evaluated in the context of attachment (Bowlby, 1969) and learned helplessness theories (Maier & Seligman, 1976). According to Bowlby, the pioneer of Attachment Theory, the baby who experiences a secure relationship with a caring object in the early stages of his life can cope with the negative emotions he experiences in the relationships in his later life, thanks to the safe experiences he has internalized. Bowlby suggests that infants are affected by the unpredictability of the caregiving object's responses (Bowlby, 1969). It has been stated that babies whose mothers respond inconsistently to their needs develop an insecure-anxious attachment style, are less willing to explore their environment, and are more challenging to calm down in stressful situations (Ainsworth et al., 1978). In contrast, consistent care promotes secure attachment, which enables children to believe that their behavior affects their environment (Lewis & Goldberg, 1969). Thus, a sense of environmental unpredictability or predictability develops at an early age.
Learned helplessness is defined as developing a chronic belief that external forces and individuals determine one's destiny (Overmier & LoLordo, 1998). It is seen that the well care provided by the parents is decisive in the development of the belief that the baby affects his relationship with the environment (Katkovsky et al., 1967). Research has shown that learned helplessness is associated with emotional and physical health problems, as well as perceptual and cognitive development issues (Lewis & Goldberg, 1969). Internal working models, a key concept in Bowlby's Attachment Theory, are schemas that influence how individuals perceive themselves and others, shaped by interactions between the infant and the caregiver. These models include two distinct schemas: the 'self-model,' which encompasses the individual's perceptions of themselves and how they appear to others, and the 'other-model,' which reflects their perceptions of the external world (e.g., whether it is safe, insecure, and lovable) (Lopez et al., 1998). These two complementary models ultimately play a fundamental role in the individual's subsequent romantic attachment relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1994).
Bowlby (1979/1994) emphasized that attachment is an essential component of human experience "from the cradle to the grave" and stated that attachment relationships play a substantial role in the emotional lives of adults. Adult individuals bring their personalities with them when they get married, and the developmental problems of the two spouses related to early separation-individuation cause chronic conflicts in their relationships (Katz, 1981). The results of this research emphasize that individuals with secure attachment in the context of object relations differ significantly in their tendency to cheat in romantic relationships compared to individuals with insecure and avoidant attachment styles (Fish et al., 2012).
This study not only investigates the relationship between family unpredictability and the tendency toward infidelity but also aims to understand the dynamics of infidelity by examining the mediating role of mentalization capacity.
Mentalization is the capacity of the individual to interpret the internal mental states of both himself and others (such as emotions, wishes, goals, desires, and attitudes) (Fonagy et al., 2016). It has been suggested that this ability develops through early interactions with a secure attachment. It is defined as the capacity to understand human behavior through mental processes, and individuals who do not develop this ability may face issues related to psychopathologies in adulthood (Bateman & Fonagy, 2013). Mentalization involves the quality and quantity of an individual's psychic representations, which form the foundation of mental life. These representations enable the formation of associations, thoughts, and inner dialogue, and they interact with each other directly or indirectly (Marty, 2019). Fonagy et al. (2015) highlighted that symptoms, such as difficulties in emotion regulation, impulse-control problems, inconsistent relationship patterns, and unstable self-esteem

are linked to a lack of mentalization. The psychological self develops when a person puts himself in another person's shoes with his feelings and thoughts (Fonagy & Target, 2002). In this context, it is believed that individuals prone to infidelity may cheat due to a weakness in their capacity to interpret their partner's mental states (such as emotions, desires, goals, and attitudes). In other words, partners in a relationship may be more likely to cheat when there is a deficiency in their mentalizing capacity.
Based on these explanations, this study aims to investigate the relationship between family unpredictability and the tendency to cheat and to understand the role of the mentalization mediator variable. In this context, answers to the following questions will be sought in this research:

1. Does mentalization capacity have a mediating role in the relationship between family unpredictability and the infidelity tendency?

2. Do the participants' deception tendencies, family unpredictability levels, and mentalization capacities differ according to gender?

3. Do the infidelity tendencies, family unpredictability levels and mentalization capacities of the participants differ according to the education level?

4. Do the participants' infidelity tendencies, family unpredictability, and mentalization capacities differ according to the relationship status?

5. Do the participants' infidelity tendencies, family unpredictability, and mentalization capacities differ according to their current romantic relationship?

6. Do the infidelity tendencies, family unpredictability levels, and mentalization capacities of the participants differ according to the deception status in their current romantic relationship (non-relationship)?

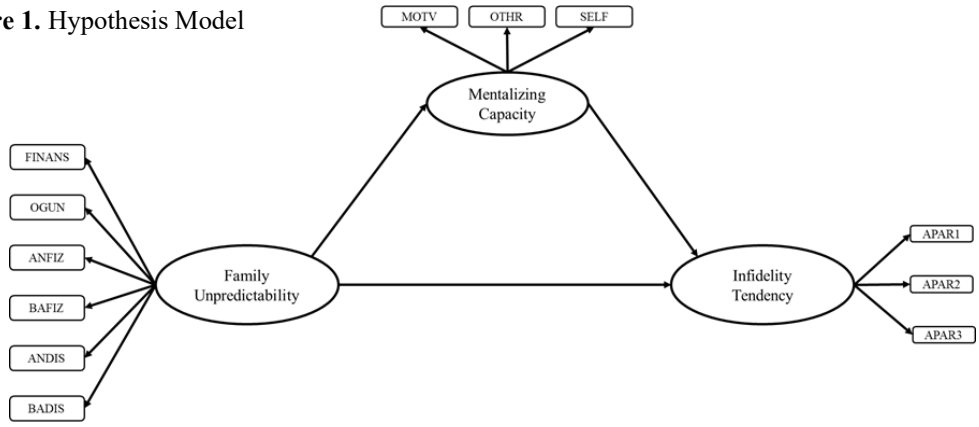
7. Do the infidelity tendencies, family unpredictability levels, and mentalization capacities of the participants differ according to the parent's cheating (non-relationship) status?

Methodology

Research Model

This study employed a descriptive research model to investigate the relationships between family unpredictability, mentalization capacity, and infidelity tendencies. A relational screening design was used to examine these relationships. The structural model, which was developed and tested as part of this research, is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Hypothesis Model



Note: FINANCE: Total scores from the Financial Unpredictability sub-dimension of the Retrospective Family Unpredictability Scale, OGUN: Total scores from the Retrospective Family Unpredictability Scale's Unpredictability of Meals sub-dimension, ANFIZ: Total scores from the Retrospective Family Unpredictability Scale from the Maternal Physical-Emotional Satisfaction sub-dimension

BAFIZ: Total scores from the Retrospective Family Unpredictability Scale Father Physical-Emotional Satisfaction Unpredictability sub-dimension, ANDIS: Total scores from the Retrospective Family Unpredictability Scale from the Mother Discipline Unpredictability sub-dimension, BADIS: Total scores from the Retrospective Family Unpredictability Scale-Father Discipline Prediction sub-dimension , MOTV: Total scores from the Mentalizing Scale's Mentalizing Motivation sub-dimension, OTHR: Total scores from the Mentalizing Scale's Mentalizing Others sub-dimension, SELF: Total scores from the Mentalizing Scale's Self-Oriented Mentalization sub-dimension, APAR1-3: Infidelity tendency.

Sample

The sample group for the present study consisted of 441 individuals aged between 21 and 58 years (M = 33.30, SD = 8.62) currently in an ongoing relationship (married, dating, or engaged). The participants were recruited through online advertisements and social media platforms (Facebook, X, Instagram and WhatsApp), targeting individuals in romantic relationships. The survey battery was distributed to 600 individuals, resulting in a participation rate of approximately 73.5%.

When examining the demographic characteristics of the participants, 76% (N = 335) identified as female, and 24% (N = 106) identified as male. In terms of education, 61% (N = 273) were university graduates, 25% (N = 112) had post-doctoral qualifications, 10.7% (N = 47) were high school graduates, 1.1% (N = 5) had completed secondary school, and 1.9% (N = 4) had completed primary school. Regarding relationship status, 82.8% (N = 365) were married, 13.2% (N = 58) were dating, and 4.1% (N = 18) were verbally engaged. Additionally, 89.8% (N = 396) reported having no past or present experience of being cheated on by their current partners, while 10.2% (N = 45) had experienced infidelity in the past or present with their current partners. Furthermore, 95.7% (N = 422) did not have another romantic relationship parallel to their current one, while 4.3% (N = 19) did. Lastly, it was found that 71.7% (N = 316) of participants reported that neither of their parents had a history of infidelity, while 28.3% (N = 125) reported that at least one parent had a history of infidelity.

Data Collection Tools

The Retrospective Family Unpredictability Scale: The Retrospective Family Unpredictability Scale was developed by Ross and McDuff (2008) to evaluate the behavior patterns of individuals in their families concerning unpredictability. Participants answer the items on the scale by reflecting on their past experiences. The total score indicates the level of unpredictability within the family. The scale is a five-point Likert-type instrument consisting of 28 items. It has six dimensions: (a) Financial Unpredictability, (b) Meal Unpredictability, (c) Mother Physical-emotional Satisfaction, (d) Father Physical-Emotional Satisfaction, (e) Mother Discipline and (f) Father Discipline. Scores on the scale can range from 28 to 140, with higher scores indicating greater perceived family unpredictability.

The scale was adapted into Turkish by Oktay and Uluç (2019), where it retained its six-factor structure. The overall scale's internal consistency coefficient ranged between .87 and .90, while the internal consistency coefficients for the sub-dimensions ranged from .71 to .85. In the current sample, the internal consistency coefficient for the entire scale was calculated as .92.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted using the data collected in this study. The analysis revealed that the factor loadings of the scale items ranged from .48 to .88. The goodness-of-fit indices were $\chi 2/df$ (1762.39/335) = 5.026, p = .001, IFI = .92, NNFI = .91, CFI = .92, SRMR = .067, and RMSEA = .098 (confidence interval for RMSEA = .094–.10), indicating an acceptable model fit.

The Mentalization Scale: The Mentalization Scale was developed by Dimitrijević et al. (2018) to evaluate the mentalization capacities of participants in both community and clinical samples. The scale consists of 25 items, rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Completely False, 5 = Completely True), and is divided into three sub-dimensions: Self-Based Mentalization (MentS-S), Others-Based Mentalization (MentS-O), and Motivation to Mentalize (MentS-M). The scale's total score ranges from 25 to 125, with higher scores indicating better mentalization capacity.

The Turkish version of the scale was adapted by Törenli-Kaya et al. (2021), where it maintained the three-factor structure. The internal consistency coefficients for the Turkish version were .84 for the total score, .78 for MentS-S, .80 for MentS-O, and .79 for MentS-M.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) conducted in this study found that the factor loadings of the items varied between .40 and .70. The goodness-of-fit indices were $\chi 2/df$ (1082.27/272) = 3.99, p = .001, IFI = .90, NNFI = .90, CFI = .90, and RMSEA = .082 (confidence interval for RMSEA = .077–.087), indicating an acceptable fit. The internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) for the total scale in this sample was calculated as .86.

The Infidelity Tendency Scale: The Infidelity Tendency Scale, developed by Polat (2006), is a five-point Likert-type scale consisting of 30 items designed to measure individuals' tendencies toward infidelity. The scale includes 18 positive items measuring infidelity tendency and 12 negative items, which are reverse-scored and assess behaviors not considered infidelity. Scores on the scale can range from 30 to 150, with higher scores indicating a greater tendency toward infidelity.

The original scale reported a Cronbach's α coefficient of .95. Test-retest reliability indicated a coefficient of .84, showing good stability over time. In this study, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) revealed that the factor loadings of the items ranged from .29 to .85. The goodness-of-fit indices were $\chi 2/df$ (1711.02/405) = 4.22, p = .001, IFI = .97, NNFI = .97, CFI = .97, SRMR = .053, and RMSEA = .086 (confidence interval for RMSEA = .081–.090), indicating an acceptable model fit. The internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) for this sample was calculated as .94.

Socio-demographic Data Form: The socio-demographic data form was created by researchers to collect information on participants' basic demographic characteristics. This form included items on age, gender, education level, relationship status, duration of the current relationship, and previous experiences of infidelity. The form also gathered data on participants' parents' history of infidelity and any current parallel romantic relationships. This information was used to contextualize the primary variables of the study and ensure a comprehensive analysis of the participants' backgrounds.

Procedure

The battery was prepared in 2022 and consisted of four sections designed to assess various variables of interest. The battery was designed to gather comprehensive data on participants' backgrounds, family unpredictability, mentalization capacity, and infidelity tendencies. Data were collected online using Google Forms, allowing for convenient and wide-reaching participation.

Data Analysis

Structural Equation Modeling was used to test the hypothetical model. In the evaluation of structural model tests, as the cut-off point for goodness-of-fit values, <.10 for RMSEA; ≥.90 was considered for CFI, IFI, NFI, and GFI (Kline, 1998; Schumacher & Lomax, 2004).

Before the model test, preliminary analyses were made, and the data distribution was evaluated. The skewness values of the observed variables in the model were between .163 and 1.28; kurtosis values varied from -.116 to 1.51. As a result, it can be stated that there is no deviation from the normal distribution.

Findings

Measurement Model Findings

In the hypothesis model, which was determined to be tested within the scope of this research, the observed variables were defined for each latent variable. Since a two-stage approach was followed in model testing, the measurement model related to the model was tested first. In the model, three plots were observed, consisting of the total scores from the Retrospective Family Unpredictability Scale sub-dimensions for the latent variable "Family Unpredictability," the total scores from the Mentalization Scale sub-dimensions for the latent variable "Mentalization," and the items of the Infidelity Tendency Scale for the latent variable "Infidelity Tendency." has been determined. The correlation coefficients between the observed variables in the model are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Correlations of Observed Variables in the Structural Model

	FINANS	OGUN	ANFIZ	BAFIZ	ANDIS	BADIS	MOTV	OTHR	SELF	APAR1	APAR2
FINANS											
OGUN	.424**										
ANFIZ	.243**	.371**									
BAFIZ	.330**	.390**	.511**								
ANDIS	.246**	.313**	.510**	.289**							
BADIS	.296**	.317**	.233**	.446**	.390**						
MOTV	-.047	.045	-.103*	-.049	.033	.036					
OTHR	-.060	-.064	-.197**	-.158**	-.070	-.055	.547**				
SELF	-.246**	-.207**	-.192**	-.237**	-.254**	-.303**	.299**	.393**			
APAR1	-.025	.066	.075	.087	.031	.128**	-.129**	-.154**	-.169**		
APAR2	-.005	.063	.074	.051	-.005	.078	-.141**	-.170**	-.179**	.847**	
APAR3	-.018	.087	.127**	.113*	.010	.119*	-.110*	-.152**	-.196**	.854**	.848**

*p <. 05, **p < .01,

Note: FINANCE: Total scores from the Financial Unpredictability sub-dimension of the Retrospective Family Unpredictability Scale, OGUN: Total scores from the Retrospective Family Unpredictability Scale's Unpredictability of Meals sub-dimension, ANFIZ: Total scores from the Retrospective Family Unpredictability Scale from the Maternal Physical-Emotional Satisfaction sub-dimension BAFIZ: Total scores from the Retrospective Family Unpredictability Scale Father Physical-Emotional Satisfaction Unpredictability sub-dimension, ANDIS: Total scores from the Retrospective Family Unpredictability Scale from the Mother Discipline Unpredictability sub-dimension, BADIS: Total scores from the Retrospective Family Unpredictability Scale-Father Discipline Prediction sub-dimension , MOTV: Total scores from the Mentalizing Scale's Mentalizing Motivation sub-dimension, OTHR: Total scores from the Mentalizing Scale's Mentalizing Others sub-dimension, SELF: Total scores from the Mentalizing Scale's Self-Oriented Mentalization sub-dimension, APAR1-3: Infidelity tendency.

The goodness of fit values obtained when the measurement model was tested, $\chi 2/Sd$ (217.27/51) = 4.26, p=.001, IFI=.92, NNFI=.90; CFI=.92; RMSEA=.086 (confidence interval for RMSEA=.074–.098) and is at an acceptable level. The standardized path coefficients calculated in the measurement model are given in Figure 2. The relationships between the latent variables are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Correlations of the Latent Variables in the Structural Model

Latent Variable	1	2	3
1. Family Unpredictability	-		
2. Mentalization	-.28*	-	
3. Infidelity Tendency	.18*	-.25*	-

*p<.01

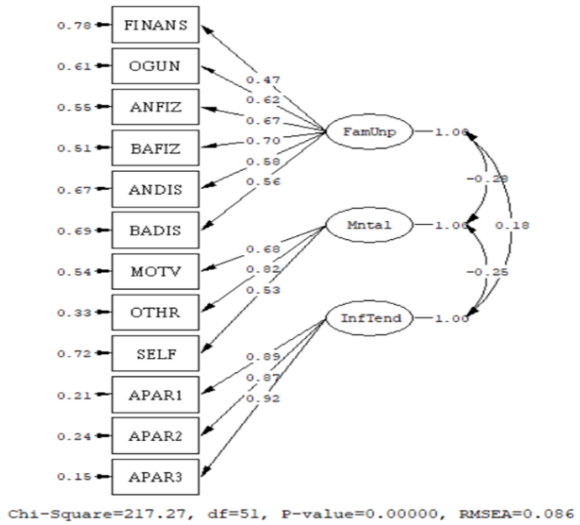


Figure 2. Standardized Path Coefficients for the Measurement Model

Note: FINANCE: Total scores from the Financial Unpredictability sub-dimension of the Retrospective Family Unpredictability Scale, OGUN: Total scores from the Retrospective Family Unpredictability Scale's Unpredictability of Meals sub-dimension, ANFIZ: Total scores from the Retrospective Family Unpredictability Scale from the Maternal Physical-Emotional Satisfaction sub-dimension BAFIZ: Total scores from the Retrospective Family Unpredictability Scale Father Physical-Emotional Satisfaction Unpredictability sub-dimension, ANDIS: Total scores from the Retrospective Family Unpredictability Scale from the Mother Discipline Unpredictability sub-dimension, BADIS: Total scores from the Retrospective Family Unpredictability Scale-Father Discipline Prediction sub-dimension , MOTV: Total scores from the Mentalizing Scale's Mentalizing Motivation sub-dimension, OTHR: Total scores from the Mentalizing Scale's Mentalizing Others sub-dimension, SELF: Total scores from the Mentalizing Scale's Self-Oriented Mentalization sub-dimension, APAR1-3: Infidelity tendency.

When examining the relationships between the latent variables, all correlation coefficients were statistically significant. Specifically, there was a positive correlation between family unpredictability and infidelity tendency ($r = .18$, $p < .01$) and a negative correlation between family unpredictability and mentalization capacity ($r = -.28$, $p < .01$). A statistically significant negative relationship was observed between mentalization capacity and infidelity tendency ($r = -.25$, $p < .01$).

Structural Equation Modelling

When the model given in Figure 1 was tested, the analysis results showed that the goodness of fit values was $\chi 2/Sd$ (217.27/51) = 4.26, p=.001, IFI=.92, NNFI=.90; CFI=.92; RMSEA=.086 (confidence interval for RMSEA= .074–.098), and it is seen to be at an acceptable level. The standardized path coefficients of the model formed as a result of the analysis are given in Figure 3.

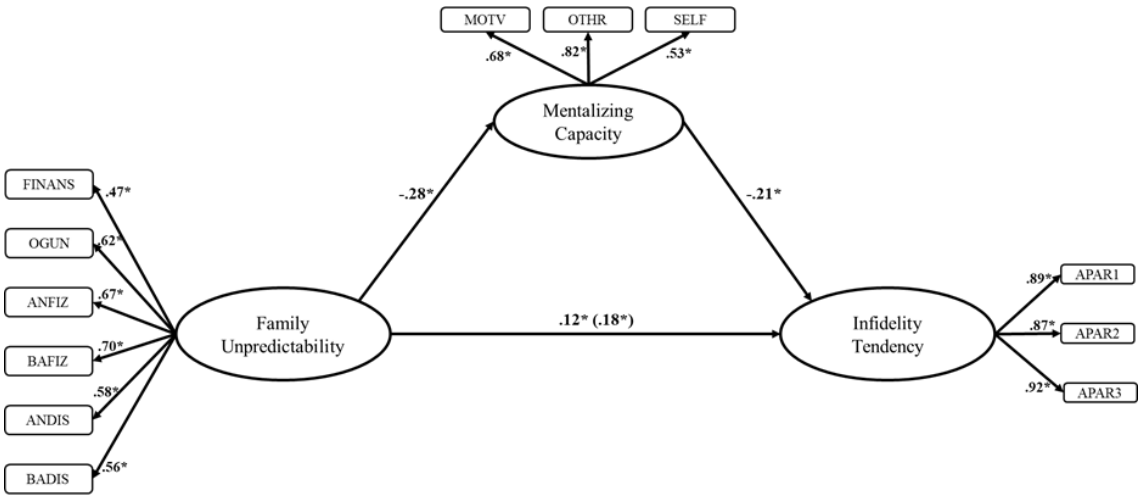


Figure 3. Standardized Path Coefficients for the Structural Model

As a result of model analysis, family unpredictability ($\beta = .12$, $p<.05$) and mentalization capacity ($\beta = -.21$, $p<.05$) were on the infidelity tendency. In addition, it was determined that family unpredictability had a statistically significant predictive effect on mentalization capacity ($\beta = -.28$, $p<.05$). It was seen that family unpredictability and mentalization capacity together explain a 7% variance in the variable of infidelity tendency. As a result, mentalization capacity mediated the relationship between family unpredictability and infidelity tendency partially.

Differences in family unpredictability, mentalization capacity and infidelity tendency were evaluated according to participants' gender, educational background, relationship status, cheating experiences in their current relationships, and whether at least one of their parents showed cheating behaviour.

As a result of the analysis, it was found that the infidelity tendency ($t439 = -7.69$, $p < .001$) and mentalization capacity ($t439 = 3.14$, $p = .002$) differed according to the biological sex of the participants; however, it was determined that family unpredictability did not vary according to their biological sex ($t439 = .81$, $p = .419$). The mentalization capacity of women ($\bar{X} = 96.74$, $S = 10.64$) was higher than that of men ($\bar{X} = 92.94$, $S =$

11.56), and the infidelity tendency of men ($\bar{X}$= 63.69, S = 23.47) was higher than that of women ($\bar{X}$= 48.36, S = 15.74).

When evaluated in terms of education levels, the number of primary and secondary school graduates was not included in the analysis. As a result of the analysis, family unpredictability (F2, 438 = 5.31, p = .005) and mentalization capacity (F2, 438 = 6.55, p = .002) differed according to the education level of the participants; however, it was determined that infidelity tendencies (F2, 438 = .93, p = .397) did not differ. Since it was determined that the homogeneity assumption was met, the Scheffe test was applied for comparisons between groups. According to the results of post-hoc analysis, the level of family unpredictability of the participants with a master's degree-doctorate ($\bar{X}$= 49.82, S = 14.86) was determined to be lower than the participants with a high school education level and below ($\bar{X}$= 57.66, S = 15.15); mentalization capacity of the participants with a master's-doctoral degree ($\bar{X}$= 97.96, S = 10.29) and a university degree ($\bar{X}$= 95.84, S = 10.92) was higher than the participants with a high school education level and below ($\bar{X}$= 91.54, N = 11.51) was high.

In terms of relationship status, in the analyses made with the Kruskal Wallis H test, the infidelity tendency differed according to the relationship status (H2 = 18.31, p < .001); however, family unpredictability (H2 = 3.03, p = .219) and mentalization capacity (H2 = 1.03, p = .597) did not differ according to relationship status. As a result of the Bonferroni pairwise comparison test, it was seen that the participants whose relationship status was dating (Mean Rank = 283.22) were more likely to cheat than those who were married (Mean Rank = 209.35).

Family unpredictability (t439 = 1.60, p = .110), mentalization capacity (t439= .01, p = .991) and infidelity tendency (t439= .71, p = .479) did not differ according to experiences of cheating in current relationships. Similarly, family unpredictability (Z = -.55, p = .581) and mentalization capacity (Z = -.27, p = .787) did not differ according to experiences of cheating in current relationships. However, as expected, the infidelity tendency (Z = -4.23, p = .000) was determined to differ according to the cheating experiences in their current relationships. Those who have cheating experience are more likely to cheat than those who do not.

Finally, family unpredictability (t439 = 7.02, p = .000) differed according to whether or not at least one of the parents showed cheating behavior; however, it was determined that mentalization capacity (t439 = .21, p = .836) and infidelity tendency (t439 = 1.47, p = .143) did not differ according to whether or not at least one of the parents showed cheating behavior. As a result, the family unpredictability levels of the participants whose parents had cheating experience (t439 = 60.05, N = 13.75) were higher than those whose parents had no cheating experience (t439 = 49.59, S = 14.24).

Discussion

Research findings revealed that both family unpredictability and mentalization capacity significantly predicted infidelity tendency, while family unpredictability also predicted mentalization capacity. Recent studies (Bornstein, 2002; England-Mason & Gonzalez, 2020; Hajal & Paley, 2020; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2022) indicate that the way parents treat their children and the family environment predicts the problematic behaviors, social competence skills, and emotion management skills of children. The expectation of an individual who grew up in an unpredictable environment not being able to spend their future in an unpredictable and well-being (Hill et al., 2008) is an indication that the nature of the relationships they will establish in adulthood will also be unlikely to be healthy and inclusive. From this perspective, individuals raised in unpredictable environments may engage in relationships with unstable outcomes, including infidelity. Frisch and Frisch-Desmarez (2010) emphasize that although some couples appear to be a couple by establishing emotional relationships, after a few months of honeymoon, they start to attack everything related to their partner to defend themselves. This clinical picture seen in couple relationships is an indication that individuals have not internalized sufficiently strong and continuous relationship representations to maintain a certain quality of attachment. It is seen that they perceive their partners as distorted internal objects, and it is they may try to meet this need by establishing parallel relationships with the desire to establish an emotional connection.

Hazan and Shaver (1987), who were the first to formulate romantic couple attachment, stated that attachment is a lifelong and evolving process; they stated that while they were primary caregivers at an early age, they were often partners in romantic relationships by adulthood. They defined individuals with a secure attachment style as those who have high self-confidence and do not have problems establishing close relationships. Research results show that people who do not have a secure attachment style are more likely to participate in emotional and/or physical infidelity styles (Fish et al., 2012; Hatamy et al., 2011). These findings align with the present study showing that unpredictability significantly predicts the tendency toward infidelity (extradyadic involvement). The study suggests that individuals with insecure attachment may struggle with mentalization, which could, in turn, increase their susceptibility to infidelity in the context of unpredictable family dynamics.

The mediating role of mentalization capacity in the relationship between family unpredictability and the tendency toward infidelity, which is the main research subject, was confirmed by the partial mediation effect. The concept of mentalization, which emerged from attachment theory, is one of the criteria for evaluating the client in the context of a psychodynamic perspective.

The basic deficiencies of mental representations originate from the earliest developmental stages of the individual. The most common cause of this inadequacy is the insufficiency, inconsistency, or excessiveness of the mother's emotional responsiveness to her baby. The decrease in mental representations does not allow the formation of associations, thoughts and inner thinking. It prevents them from being used healthily way in the relationship with the other. The expression and discharge of these arousals is only possible by taking action with behaviours (Marty, 2019). In this perspective, individuals whose mentalization skills are not good enough can take action with defense mechanisms, such as acting out to cope with situations that cause conflict and intense emotional stimulation. The tendency of partners to cheat is a breakdown of a relationship agreement that has a framework and norm. The individual chooses one of the most economical ways to eliminate the conflict situation with their partner and puts it into action. This path is indicative of a primitive defence mechanism. At the same time, it is an indication that mental representations of the client, such as how their partner will feel, what they will think, and how much damage they will take in their mental world, cannot function adequately. In acting out, the individual provides temporary relief by re-enacting the childhood trauma. This situation occurs outside the person's awareness area; the person cannot distinguish between his past traumatic experience and acting out behavior (Lees & Stimpson, 2010). Insecure-unpredictable internal object representations experienced by the individual are reactivated due to the intimacy inherent in the romantic relationship. In this context, it will be possible to experience healthier partner relationships by minimizing traumatic situations, such as the tendency toward infidelity with mentalization skills.

Further analysis revealed that women generally demonstrate greater mentalization capacity than men, whereas men exhibit a stronger tendency toward infidelity. Mentalization capacity refers to the ability to understand and interpret others' mental states. The study by Törenli-Kaya et al. (2021) highlighted that women tend to have a greater mentalization capacity. This higher capacity in women is believed to be linked to their stronger internal motivation to understand others' mental states from early developmental stages (Rutherford et al., 2012). Studies have shown that women generally exhibit higher levels of emotional intelligence women typically have higher levels of emotional intelligence (Joseph & Newman, 2010) and empathy (Ibanez et al., 2013), which are closely related to mentalization.

The finding that infidelity tendency differs according to gender aligns with existing literature on the topic. Research has shown that men often place more importance on external relationships than on their primary relationships and exhibit stronger desires for non-relationship involvement (Atkins et al., 2001; Prins et al., 1993). Additionally, Kakırman-Moroğlu (2022) found that men have a higher tendency toward infidelity than women. This gender difference may be attributed to various factors, including evolutionary theories suggesting that men may seek multiple partners to maximize reproductive success and social and cultural norms that may grant men more latitude in engaging in infidelity. Moreover, men may experience less societal pressure to maintain exclusivity in relationships, which could further contribute to their higher infidelity tendency.

Another notable finding of this study is that family unpredictability and mentalization capacity differ according to the education level of the participants; the level of family unpredictability of the participants with a master's-doctorate education level was lower than the participants with a high school or lower education level.

Moreover, participants with undergraduate and graduate-level education demonstrated higher mentalization capacity than those with a high school education or below. These findings suggest that the increase in the level of education contributes positively to the level of family unpredictability. The healthy experience of the sub-dimensions of family unpredictability, such as financial unpredictability, meals, mother physical-emotional satisfaction, father physical-emotional satisfaction, mother discipline, and father discipline can accompany the increase in the education level of individuals. Ross and Hill (2002) describe the unpredictability scheme as follows; "...it describes it as a widespread belief that people are intolerable and that the world is chaotic. This belief has consequences on people's emotions, cognitions, and experiences." From this perspective, the effect of all these variables on children's future education life was supported by the research. The fact that the mentalization capacity is related to the ability to make sense of the other person's mental states (e.g., emotions and thoughts) to predict and make meaningful human behaviors, supports the high level of mentalization in people with a high level of education (Möller et al., 2014).

The research found that infidelity tendency varies according to relationship status, with participants who were dating being more likely to cheat than those who were married. In the related literature, studies are showing that marriage prevents non-relationship behaviors. Married women have a lower tendency to have non-relationship relationships than women who are dating or living together (Forste & Tanfer, 1996; Treas & Giesen, 2000); it is seen that cohabiting partners have lower levels of commitment compared to married couples (Bumpass et al., 1991). This situation can be interpreted as that marriage functions as a commitment mechanism as a protective factor against infidelity in couples, that marriage is built both as a written and verbal contract. It requires more responsibility than dating or engagement situations (Kakırman-Moroğlu, 2022).

Another result of this research is that those who have experienced infidelity (those who are in a parallel romantic relationship) have a higher tendency to cheat than those who do not. This result also points to the high infidelity tendency, associated with involvement in parallel romantic relationships. Moreover, it was found that the family unpredictability levels of the participants whose parents had cheating experience were higher than those whose parents had no cheating experience. This finding aligns with the notion that a child's perception of a secure world is initially shaped within the relational bond formed with their parents and the broader family environment.

Therefore, emotionally and cognitively unstable family dynamics may disrupt an individual's perception of a secure world and elevate family unpredictability levels. Ross and McDuff's (2008) study also compared the retrospective family unpredictability of adult participants over the age of 18 with divorced and undivorced families, and all sub-domains of family unpredictability (especially finance and paternal satisfaction unpredictability) were higher in participants with divorced parents compared to those with undivorced parent. Another similar study showed that participants with divorced parents were more unpredictable about their meal routines and finances than those who did not have divorced parents (Ross & Miller, 2009).

In conclusion, given that the empirical measurement of family unpredictability and mentalization variables using Turkish scales is relatively recent, this research is expected to contribute significantly to adult and couple therapy. Specifically, the finding suggests that suggest that enhancing mentalization capacity within the psychotherapy process may help mitigate infidelity tendencies—a major concern in romantic relationships. The findings indicate that while higher levels of family unpredictability predict a greater tendency toward infidelity, an increase in mentalization capacity within the relationship can mitigate this tendency. Therefore, working on improving mentalization capacity during therapy may have a therapeutic effect, strengthening both individual well-being and couple dynamics.

Given the limitations of this research, it is seen that the sample group of the research consists of participants who have a romantic relationship. In future studies, it may be recommended to use a research design in which the participation of both partners in the sample group can be achieved. However, it can be suggested as another suggestion to conduct research on a single type of relationship (dating, promise/engagement, married) for further studies.

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