Research Article

Causes of Increasing Trend of Divorce in Iranian Community: What Do the Experts Think?

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Abstract

Background: In recent years, Iran has faced an increasing and troubling trend of divorce in all provinces.

Aim: This qualitative study explains experts' opinions regarding causes of divorce over the past decade.

Methods: This study was conducted using grounded theory. The data were collected using a combination of focus group discussion and face-to-face interviews with experts. Group discussions were conducted in four sessions, each averaging 1.5 hours and consisting of five to seven participants. Participants included judges, clergymen, lawyers, psychologists, family counselors, sociologists, and psychiatrists. Data coding, or finding concepts in data, was performed in a three-step sequence which included open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

Results: Causes of divorce were found to fall into one of three categories: socio-cultural, family, and individual factors. Several subthemes included religious commitments, change of attitude towards life, welfare seeking and individualism, interference of families, sexual dissatisfaction, marital infidelity, addiction, and increased competence of women.

Conclusions: Iran's transition from traditional to modern society has led to significant cultural change, and one of the negative consequences of this awakening is an increase in the country's rate of divorce.

Keywords: Iran; Marriage; Marital satisfaction

Introduction

The world has experienced an upsurge in divorce rates in recent years, although the increase tends to be greater and more accelerated in industrialized countries [1]. Divorce is often a consequence of social transformation and modernity [2], especially in countries embracing increased individualism [3], and the phenomenon can lead to a number of physical, mental, and social complications for families, children, and society as a whole [4].

Iran has been no exception to this trend. The divorce rate in Iran has soared in the last two decades, having increased by 45 percent since 2006 to reach a rate of 153 per 1,000 marriages in 2011[5]. A large body of quantitative and qualitative literature is available regarding the etiology of divorce in Western countries [6]; however few studies have focused on divorce in Iran, despite its considerable rise [7]. Providing limited critical analysis of the trend [8], these few studies have recognized major social and cultural changes as the main causes of the increased divorce rate [5].

Although insufficient knowledge is available regarding contributing factors concerning divorce in Iran, existing qualitative studies may provide researchers with sufficient, even important, perspectives [9]. One method of constructing a holistic view of the phenomenon is to interview individuals who possess relevant but diverse expertise in the matter [9].

Objectives

The present study explores causes of an increased divorce rate in Iran by accessing experts' input and opinions.

Methods

The present study used grounded theory as its methodological framework. Focus group discussion (FGD) and face-to-face interview with experts were employed for qualitative data collection. The four focus groups included family court judges, five of whom were clergymen; lawyers with at least five years of experience in marital cases, in which three out of six were female; and seven people active in counseling and couple therapy centers, with degrees in psychology, social work, and counseling. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the judgment of court experts and researchers. Each group discussion lasted an average of 90 minutes.

While in-depth interviews expose an individual's opinions and ideas, focus group discussions reveal their views in terms of whether they agree or disagree with the ideas of others. After greeting and thanking invitees for attending the discussion, the researcher introduced himself in brief. The researcher then asked the invitees to answer the questions without mentioning their names, after which the objective of the study was explained. Participants were assured that results would be registered anonymously, establishing their comfort in group session participation and open dialogue.
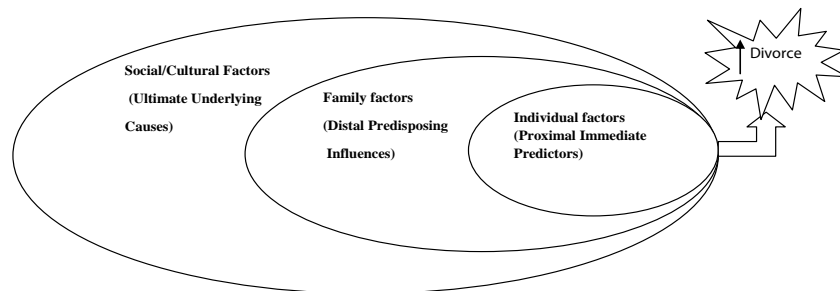
Figure 1: Factors associated with increasing trend of divorce in Iran.

Throughout each session, the interviewer avoided expressing his or her personal ideas in an effort to allow all participants to take part in open discussion and to interact unreservedly with each other. In instances of deviation from the main topic, participants were respectfully asked to return to the initial conversation. Conducted by three psychiatrists and two sociologists, each face-to-face interview lasted an average of 40 minutes, was recorded with the informed consent of the interviewees, and was fully transcribed from audiotape.

Although no software was used to analyze the resulting qualitative data, researchers employed open coding conceptual labeling as well as axial and selective coding for category and theory building. A separate group of researchers encoded interviews to determine dependability. Data collection, implementation, registration, and allocation of time were calculated and executed in such a way as to maximize accuracy and efficiency. To assure transferability of the information, the data obtained through this analysis were confirmed by an expert in the field who had not participated in the study.

Results

Based on a theoretical analysis of the interviews, three themes and 16 subthemes were identified as factors related to an increased divorce rate: Ultimate underlying causes (social and cultural factors), distal predisposing influences (family factors), and proximal immediate predictors (individual factors) (Figure 1).

Ultimate Underlying Causes: Social and Cultural Factors

Religious commitments

Religion was discussed as the most important cause of divorce. Participants expressed that a lack of religious beliefs, brought on by a rapid adoption of Western culture, was the major reason behind the increased divorce rate in the country.

The foundation of Iranian culture is the adherence to religious beliefs. A fading of those beliefs can have a catastrophic effect on a country whose culture depends on them. When the foundation of marriage is weakened, factors such as addiction, irritability, and disloyalty threaten to disrupt that culture.

I think divorce is like the side effect of an illness in the society which can be called 'fading religious beliefs.

Changing of attitudes towards cohabitation

Several participants voiced concern that the traditional Iranian society was converting to a modern mindset.

The phenomenon of cohabitation, whether by the unmarried or divorced, is considered white marriage, and the practice is inconsistent with the cultural and religious beliefs of Iran.

Although Iranian society does not recognize the offspring of this lifestyle, it is one that has become increasingly prevalent, demonstrating a blatant disregard for traditional values which once ruled unchallenged.

An evolution of values and attitudes is the likely culprit of this cultural transformation, which has ushered in such historically unheard of practices such as divorce celebrations.

While divorce traditionally brought shame to Iranian citizens until less than a decade ago, parties exalting the rite are now commonplace, and divorce as an institutions no longer considered taboo.

Many Iranians fear that the country and its culture will undoubtedly see an even steeper uptick in divorce rates as a feature of the postmodern Iran.

Welfare-seeking and individualism

In individualistic cultures, citizen scan tend to pursue their own interests without considering the interests of their spouse or families. In the most drastic of scenarios, marriage is considered a hindrance to such self-fulfillment.

The joy that comes from loyalty to and from a person is considered less important, replaced instead by a need for self-preservation and social climbing. A woman, for instance, may be expected to update the model of her mobile phone, jewelry, and car every year to keep pace with her friends. If her husband does not purchase a car for her and her material needs are not fully met, family dispute scan result.

Forgiveness and patience tend to lose their significance in a culture where individuals desire only to "get ahead."

Economic problems

Economic pressures were among the factors mentioned most by interviewees.

Poverty and financial burdens can put a strain on love and marriage, and women, in particular, are loath to endure substandard economic conditions.

If a woman's financial requirements are not satisfied at home, many will seek to satisfy them through different ways.

Virtual networks

Participants agreed that the introduction and overuse of social

networks has become an epidemic, and mentioned that cell phones, Internet access, and virtual networks are among the factors resulting in mistrust and emotional detachment.

A spouse who was not satisfied with the affection he or she received at home could, with the click of a mouse, become a member of a social exchange in which he or she feels welcome and emotionally charged.

As a result of increasing infidelity, men and women feel compelled to cross boundaries of trust in order to ascertain the faithfulness of their own spouse. Virtual networks have provoked mistrust between wives and husbands and led to the overall mental and emotional exhaustion of couples.

Satellite movies

Many participants suggested that the production of satellite movies incited a weakened familial foundation, whether intentionally or otherwise.

When an individual does not in his or her own life the relationships and behaviors portrayed in movies, he or she attempts to emulate those behaviors as attainable realities.

Many satellite movies depict a positive outcome for marital transgressions, indicating that disloyalty can lead to a stable, if not improved; family life. Such an inaccurate portrayal of the realities of familial unfaithfulness can damage the interpretation of spousal vows and duties.

Movie dubbing can ultimately result in the unrealistic expectation that engagement in extramarital affairs is an acceptable, and even commonplace, behavior.

Distal Predisposing Influences: Family Factors

Familial upbringing

Not every family teaches its children to respect and be considerate of others:

The youth of today have been raised in a child-centric environment in which parents defer to and coddle their children. These children have grown into adults who have underdeveloped coping mechanisms and are incapable of delayed gratification. Having maintained the lifestyles and mentalities of their upbringing, these young adults find it difficult to function properly in marriages.

Individuals who feel little accountability to their spouses and families are more likely to dismiss their responsibilities at home in favor of a free, social, and impulsive lifestyle.

Familial interference

Every participant acknowledged families' interference as the most influential factors in couples' lives.

In the past, families lived together, and somehow the result was less parental interference. Nowadays, although families live far from each other and parents see their children less frequently, parental interference has actually increased. Mothers are concerned with what their children have eaten, where they have gone, and what they have done.

In the past, if a woman left her husband to return to her father's

home, she would have found no support from either environment.

Parental interference has become more ubiquitous because children do not enjoy the same economic independence, and as a result their decisions are often dictated by their families.

Proximal Immediate Predictors: Individual Factors

Sexual relationship dissatisfaction

Participants agreed that a major incentive of marriage is the sexual relationship one has with their spouse.

One woman in a counseling center revealed that she never reached orgasm while making love to her husband, but that she climaxed often with her sexual partner.

Sexual violence portrayed in and resulting from pornographic movies had contributed to the increase in divorce. One referee expressed that her husband would frequently watch pornographic movies, and would then ask his wife to engage in sexual behavior similar to that of the porn actresses; if she did not obey him, he would beat her.

Despite an abundance of information discouraging the consumption of pornographic materials, another reason for the decline in marital contentment is that watching pornographic movies gives couples unrealistic expectations for their bedroom experience.

The sexual expectations and proclivities of younger generations have changed as a result of the culture transformation, and their tastes are not compatible with Iranian culture and tradition.

Emotional coldness

Participants considered the fulfillment of emotional needs to be one of the major factors contributing to a stable marriage; therefore, a marriage with no emotional relationship is unlikely to involve mutual appreciation and will ultimately dissolve:

One woman said, "I left home many times to meet somebody in the street that tells me that he loved me very much and compliments my beauty. I knew those were superficial and sheer lies, but I had never heard such words in my life and I was ready to get into even ten cars to hear some of these words."

The compounding challenges of a modern life, such as paying rent or mortgages and funding children's educations, can lead to a breakdown in emotional connection and, ultimately, destroy a marriage.

Marital infidelity

Unsurprisingly, participants indicated that the existence of extramarital relationships leads to divorce:

In one example, a woman described gaining the attention of a man who told her, "How beautiful you are! Have you had your hair dyed?"Having experienced the rush of flattery and recognizing that men could, in fact, be perceptive, she realized that her husband had been indifferent to her. The following day, the woman said to the man, "That shirt looks good on you," and an affair began.

Illicit relationships are no longer considered taboo;

As one woman/man openly says, "As my husband/wife had some relationships out of home and he did not satisfy me at home, I also looked for the relationships outside of our marriage."

Addiction

Drug abuse leads to men's unemployment and economic problems among families, not to mention the physical threat it poses to family members.

Addiction to crystal meth, in particular, leads to severe violence at home, to the extent that women prefer that their husbands are addicted to the less potent opium.

Addiction also continues to increase among women, and it has played a major part in separation and divorce in Iran.

Women, particularly in beauty salons, are told that the consumption of crystal meth can improve their body, beauty, and the condition of their skin.

Mental diseases

Several participants noted that mental instability is a contributing factor in many dissolved marriages, saying:

Diseases such as depression and anxiety have highly prevailed. Such disorders are sometimes hidden; they remain untreated, and lead to marital disputes and divorce.

A depressed or bipolar man who is unaware of his mental disease and is not undergoing treatment might become bored with his wife, children, or job, leading to unemployment, marital disputes, and, ultimately, divorce.

Divorce could potentially be prevented by the detection and treatment of mental illnesses. One woman confirmed this theory, saying, "Her husband has treated her better and their marital life has improved since she started consumption of an anti-depression medicine."

Lack of life skill knowledge

Several interviewees stated that individuals who have not adopted and developed necessary life skills or reached intellectual maturity tend to encounter more problems in their marriages:

Immature men may be prone to shout or break objects in order to elicit a desired reaction or to satisfy their needs.

Couples who have not refined their communication skills, learned how to criticize constructively, or mastered the art of compromise and problem-solving are less likely to be able to cope in a relationship that demands maturity and level-headedness.

Increased empowerment of women

Nowadays, women enjoy more financial independence than their traditional counterparts.

The financial independence, coupled with the knowledge of their legal rights, has increased their confidence and led them to seek official redress for even minor injustices.

When a woman earns her own money and understands her rights, she is inherently less likely to obey her husband, which conflicts with traditional marriage roles and expectations in Iran.

Marriage at a younger age

Most marriages—and, consequently, divorces—occur at younger ages when an individual's personality has not yet fully formed.

As a couple grows together, each begins to recognize their individual expectations and what they each want from their lives.

Many young people are not qualified for marriage or parenting, in terms of both economic stability and social maturity, especially given their increased dependency on parental resources in recent years.

Discussion

Qualitative expert interviews are one of the most popular research methods in health and social science research. This study explored the factors related to the increasing rate of divorce in Iranian society using experts' opinions of different scientific fields related to the divorce phenomenon in Iran. The factors ranged from minor individual factors to major societal ones. The macro level included large-scale environmental and societal factors, while minor factors involved the biological, psychological, and genetic traits of individuals. While sociologists, anthropologists, and politicians tend to favor macro-level factors as explanatory elements, psychologists and family therapists are more interested in micro-level contributors.

The themes observed in this study can be interpreted within the framework of "The Theory of Triadic Influence (TTI) Ecological System" [11], which suggested that personal factors are nested within family and community factors, and that these factors are further embedded within socio-cultural factors. Although personal factors are highly influenced by family and cultural factors, people have more power to change them. On the other hand, they have little influence over their environment in terms of changing and controlling larger socio-cultural factors. According to Toth and Kemmelmeier [1], "Divorce rates are best viewed as a product of social and cultural transformation."

Iranian society is in the midst of a transition from traditional societal norms to Western modernism. In modern societies, people tend to be less committed to religious principles, and individualism is dominant over collectivism [12]. Individualism is recognized as the key to transforming societies in the 21st century, and, unfortunately, it is also closely related to higher divorce rates [1]. An American study showed that divorce rates in different states are correlated to the increase of individualism [13], and studies have shown that Iran is increasingly trending toward personal independence and individualism [14].

In individualist societies or "*me first*" generations, personal egoism and the breakdown of social adhesion dissolve an individual's delayed gratification, as people of this society tend to emphasize their immediate rights rather than their societal and familial duties [15]. Marriage is essential in these eroding cultures, as it satisfies the needs of an individual, encourages personal growth, and reiterates the importance of loyalty and interdependence [15].

The present study examined, in part, the impact of religious beliefs on the rate of divorce. Religious commitment is found to have an inverse relationship to the probability of divorce, to the extent that the less religious a marriage, the higher the probability of divorce [16]. Durkheim suggests that a society's transition from pluralism to individualism reduces its religious conscience [17] and the resulting cultural condition ultimately leads, directly or otherwise, to divorce.

In addition to religion, participants emphasized the effect

of satellite television and the Internet on cultural and individual mindsets, highlighting both mediums' destructive impact on families' behavior. Studies have also shown that satellite television accelerates the adoption of a Western lifestyle in Iran, which, as mentioned previously, tend to accompany increased rates of divorce [18].

Economic problems were among the factors impacting marital dissolution, in Iran as well as in neighboring countries [19]. Participants agreed that low income undoubtedly contributes to an unstable family foundation [20].

Families were also recognized as influencing the trend of increased divorces in Iranian society in two ways: style of upbringing and parental interference. Many families raise their children in a way that prevents younger generations from adopting suitable coping mechanisms for married life. Unable to bear hardships or opposition, they become extremely stubborn and inflexible, and ultimately their marriage dissipates. Compounding the problem is the fact that marriage tends to occur at younger ages, when individuals' personalities and physical brains are not yet fully developed. Participants in the present study corroborated the results of prior research, suggesting that marrying young tends to promote divorce [21].

In terms of familial interference, once married, the new couple does not live in the same house as their parents as Iranian couples have historically done. Islamic religious doctrine prohibits parents from interfering with the marital affairs of their children, and Imam Hossein went as far as to declare that the undue interference of parents into their children's affairs was similar to cutting their body into pieces. Nonetheless, due to an increased dependency of adult children on their parents, families tend to interfere more with the private affairs of their married offspring. This interference can take a toll on a budding marriage; in fact, a cross sectional study among Iranian individuals found that males considered familial interference to be the main cause of divorce [22].

A lack of sexual satisfaction is another factor which contributes to the decline of stable marriages. Iranian society is shifting from its traditional value-based culture toward a culture of individualism; it is accompanied by an ideology of instant gratification, particularly in terms of sexuality. Couples find that if their sexual predilections are not satisfied, the foundations of their marriage become weakened. Sexual dissatisfaction correlates to marital dissatisfaction [7], and provides the foundation for disloyalty and emotional detachment. A rapidly modernizing and sexualized culture which is moving away from traditional values will undoubtedly accelerate the rate of divorce.

Addiction has plagued Iranian society in numerous social and cultural infrastructures [23]. Considered "a ruinous plague," interviewees divulged that addiction maintains a close relationship with marital disputes and divorce in Iran. Proper diagnosis and treatment of mental illnesses, coupled with the active development of critical life skills, are thought to be control mechanisms for the spread of divorce.

Finally, participants agreed that the financial independence and employment of women has contributed to the divorce rate incline. A similar situation was explored in a qualitative research conducted in Turkey [19]. Since the Islamic Revolution, women's confidence and self-awareness have improved, and the percentage of college-educated women presently exceeds that of men. In many occupations such as the education and health systems, the number of women also exceeds that of men. Several studies have confirmed that the probability of divorce is higher among employed women [24], due not to the income itself, but to the fact that financially independent women do not feel trapped by an unhappy marriage in the same way traditionally dependent women might [25].

In order to explore this topic further, the authors suggest that future quantitative research might contribute to the qualitative results of the present study. Research should focus on individuals' perceptions of divorce, as well as personal reasons for severing a marriage. Additional focus should be given to the relationship between religious commitment and divorce.

The results of this study align with the Theory of Triadic Influence in explaining the etiology of divorce in an Iranian setting. In terms of the three levels of causes contributing to divorce in Iran, our findings suggest that socio-cultural changes and a movement toward a modern and individualistic society has gradually dissolved many Iranian traditions and behaviors, including the once sacred bond of marriage.

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