

The Lived Experience of Mothers on the Verge of Separation: A Case Study of Isfahan City

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present research aimed to study the lived experience of mothers on the verge of separation and to explore the phenomenon of separation and divorce from their perspective.

Method: It was a qualitative study with a phenomenological method among mothers on the verge of separation in Isfahan city. Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection in this research. Participants included 15 mothers on the verge of separation in Isfahan city in the year 2021, using purposive sampling, and the operations of data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously.

Findings: According to the analysis and the extracted main and sub-categories, the story of mothers on the verge of separation can be narrated within 5 overarching themes. The results of this research, from among 180 thematic sentences from the statements of mothers on the verge of separation about their experiences, eventually classified 5 overarching themes and 15 organizing themes that form the network of themes. The overarching and organizing themes in this research include communication problems (relationships with children, relationships with spouses), parenting (children's financial problems, defective parenting style, child management), emotional and behavioral (emotional and behavioral problems of parents, emotional and behavioral problems of children), psychological, social, and economic support (family, lack of counseling, economic) and exacerbating factors (extramarital affairs, addiction, previous divorce experience, mental disorders, sexual dysfunction).

Conclusions: The results showed that mothers on the verge of separation experience emotions that can affect their well-being and mental health. The findings highlight the necessity for psychologists and social workers to deeply understand the lived experiences of these individuals and to offer therapeutic interventions based on the themes emerged from the current study, focusing on improving their emotional state.

Keywords: Lived Experience, Divorce, Mothers.

1. Introduction

In recent years, marital conflicts have increasingly gained a special status in the realm of marriage and its associated effects, as is evident from the expanding statistics of decisions to divorce, which serve as the most reliable indicator of marital conflicts (Hartati et al., 2021). The decision to divorce results from the intense internal pressure of at least one of the spouses, which can stem from numerous causes. The inability to meet needs and objectives, weak coping strategies, and the inability to manage life events and convey emotions, along with social, legal, personal, and psychological factors, irrational beliefs, diminished intimacy, family adaptability and flexibility, etc., have been considered as causes for the undesirable trend in divorce demands (Raley & Sweeney, 2020). In American society, divorce has become a relatively common solution to dissatisfaction. 41.6% of all marriages and 50% of first marriages end in divorce (Oldham, 2021). In Iran, statistics from the National Civil Registration Organization indicate that the number of marriages recorded in 2020 increased by 4.4% compared to 2019, from 533,174 marriage events in 2019 to 556,731 events in 2020, marking the highest number of divorce incidents recorded over the last 50 years with 183,193 incidents in 2020 (Law et al., 2019). The increase in divorce in Iranian society has led to numerous studies in this area (Hatami, Heidari & Davoudi, 2021). These studies attempt to understand the inclination towards divorce by examining the factors contributing to the dissolution of marriages and its consequences (Vatuk, 2020). Divorce carries numerous negative consequences such as an increased risk of psychological harm, higher rates of fatal car accidents, increasing prevalence of physical illness, suicide, violence, risk of depression and suicide, isolation and low self-esteem, health problems, and lower academic performance for children (Buyukkececi & Leopold, 2021).

Kalantari, Roshanfekr, and Javaheri (2011) categorized the causes of divorce into four groups: social, psychological, familial, and economic factors (Kalantari et al., 2011). Research on the causes of divorce points to various factors such as lack of moral understanding, non-compliance, unemployment, financial and economic problems, addiction, interference by others, educational level disparity, age differences, communication problems, lack of marital skills, family interference, mental illness in one of the spouses, insufficient knowledge of the spouse, forced marriage, lack of urban living skills, sexual dissatisfaction, irresponsibility, and spousal infidelity (Hayati & Soleymani, 2019; Karimi et

al., 2017; Rezaei et al., 2017). International research has identified causes such as lack of communication, role conflicts, lifestyle values, extramarital sexual relationships, sexual problems, personality issues, negative attitudes, specific problematic behaviors, physical and sexual abuse, infidelity, lack of economic support, lack of communication, mental illness, lack of love, and emotional problems (Hartati et al., 2021; Ko, 2019). One issue with past research is that most domestic studies have quantitatively examined the causes of divorce, with less focus on deeply exploring the experience of divorce factors among those on the verge of divorce. Kalantari and colleagues (2011) in a study titled "A Review of Three Decades of Divorce Causes" mentioned that only 7.3% of past research on divorce causes were qualitative, and only 1.1% of data collection methods in past research were through interviews (Kalantari et al., 2011). While the phenomenon of divorce, because marriage, family, and intimate relationships are inseparable parts of daily life, has cultural and social considerations. Phenomenologists believe that divorce should be studied as a phenomenon in its context and milieu, at home, during dinner and lunch times, throughout ceremonies and rituals (Laletas & Grove, 2020) and research outcomes cannot be generalized from one culture to another (Abdullah & Fitrah, 2019); as the causes of divorce vary across different cultures (Kiecolt-Glaser, 2018).

A general look at related journals and reports indicates a vast array of studies that signify the importance of divorce as a major social challenge. Despite numerous studies conducted, according to reports from the Office for the Affected in the Welfare Organization, the general demand for divorce in Iran has increased compared to the past (Banihashemi et al., 2019). The high rate of divorce in societies confirms that many couples are unwilling to stay in unsuccessful marriages that do not meet their expectations in married life (Brown & Wright, 2017). Researchers have examined the causes and consequences of divorce, with most domestic researchers using quantitative methods, particularly with standardized questionnaires (often Western), for data collection. In contrast, international researchers have mostly used qualitative methods with in-depth analysis of their data and less frequently quantitative methods. Numerous studies have been conducted using qualitative methods that lead to a deep understanding of individuals or various segments of society, including structures and functions, with the help of existing foreign theories or the possibility of creating theories for researchers and the academic community. Therefore, due to the lack of

such an approach in research, as well as researchers' inattention to this area and a new perspective on the phenomenon of divorce, another necessity for this study is the special attention to individuals who are on the verge of separation (Mohamadi et al., 2023; Oldham, 2021).

In Iran, and specifically in the city of Isfahan, for several years, both public awareness and sensitivities expressed by community managers indicate a crisis in family and marital life. In such a way that while the rate of marriage is not significantly low, the rate of divorce, especially early divorces, is on the rise. More importantly, couples' visits to counseling centers and their statements significantly indicate a crisis in relationships with others in seemingly stable marital lives. Given the mentioned issues and considering the harmful effects of parental separation on children in various individual, familial, psychological, and social dimensions, and the lack of exploratory and deep domestic research in this area, there is a felt need to deeply address this topic, taking into account the sensitivities of children in these families, especially during adolescence; hence, this research aims to gain a better and more accurate understanding of the lived experiences of parents on the verge of separation through qualitative research. Regarding the use of qualitative method and specifically the phenomenological approach in this research, it is worth noting that divorce does not occur in a vacuum but within a cultural and social context. Moreover, the experience of divorce may vary among different cultures, and even within subcultures of a society. Qualitative research is context-sensitive and examines the phenomenon in the context in which it occurs, making phenomenology the most suitable method for exploring these differences and understanding individuals' experiences of the meaning of divorce. On the other hand, the main issue in applying phenomenology is to answer whether the phenomenon in question needs clarification or not. The meaning of divorce and its consequences for children, despite their importance, have not been sufficiently clarified in past research from the perspective of those experiencing it. In this regard, this research aimed to answer these questions with a qualitative approach through the method of phenomenology: What is the meaning of divorce from the perspective of mothers? What are the lived experiences of mothers on the verge of separation? How do children view their parents' separation? What is the experience of children during this period? What are the damages seen by the children? - In other words, the primary and significant research question was how to

explore the lived experience of mothers on the verge of separation.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design and Participant

This study aimed to investigate the lived experiences of parents on the verge of separation and their perceptions of divorce, utilizing the phenomenological method among various qualitative approaches. In qualitative research, due to time, cost, and depth in practice, studying a large number of individuals is not feasible because the goal is to identify and examine information that must be both precise and profound. Therefore, only a limited number of cases are studied. In this research, individual stories were first collected using semi-structured interviews, then transcribed, and the field texts collected were read several times to identify codes and themes within the stories, which were subsequently "retold." Categorization and coding of data continued in three phases: open, axial, and selective coding until theoretical saturation was reached. The sample size was determined based on theoretical saturation. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants, with the most important criterion being the selection of individuals who could provide sufficient and necessary information to answer the research questions. In 2021, the researcher invited mothers on the verge of divorce from pre-divorce counseling centers in Isfahan to participate in the research.

The following inclusion criteria were used to select participants in this study:

1. Mothers must have at least once formally requested a divorce,
2. Decided to separate at least nine months prior,
3. Mothers with a son or daughter aged 4 to 10 years,
4. Volunteer willing to participate in the research.

Exclusion criteria included mothers who did not complete the research process or were found ineligible during the study.

Due to the observance of human and ethical rights, informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality of personal information and statements of the participants was assured, ensuring that no financial, physical, or psychological harm would befall them during the research.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

The data collection tool in this study was semi-structured interviews. The interview questions, designed by the researcher and validated for face validity by experts, were semi-structured. Main questions included: "What was your perception of the events at the time of the divorce request? How did you feel about the separation? What were the problems in your life? What was the main reason for your divorce request?" Clarifying and follow-up questions were also used during the interview, and different questions were asked as each individual presented issues in a unique way. Given the qualitative nature of the method, there is no intention to generalize the results to the population. Generally, generalization is not the primary goal of qualitative research for two main reasons: first, people and environments studied in qualitative research are rarely selected probabilistically and in sufficient numbers; second, in some forms of qualitative research, the goal is to describe a specific group of people or events in a particular context. To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, methods of participant evaluation and external observer review were used. After transcribing the information on paper, it was sent to the interviewees for confirmation of statements and interviews. An external observer also oversaw all stages of the interview to coding, and the data collection and analysis process was reviewed and validated.

Table 1

The Results of Qualitative Analysis

Overarching Themes	Organizing Themes	Foundational Themes	Open Coding (Concept Discovery)	Interviewee Code	
Communication	Relationships with Children	Emotional	Dislike	I10, I6, I5, I1, I7, I3, I1, I5, I5, I2, I10, I3, I4, I1, I5	
			Unkindness		
	Relationships with Spouses	Behavioral	Excessive Dependency		
			Physical Abuse		
		Emotional	Swearing		
			Throwing Household Items		
	Marital		Sexual Distance		Indifference
					Lack of Affection
		Neglect			
		Disrespect			
Parenting	Children's Financial Issues	-	Not providing expenses	I1, I8, I3, I5, I4, I2, I1, I1, I5, I2, I5	
			Hunger		
	Defective Parenting Style	Aggressive	Physical Abuse		
			Verbal Conflict		
		Pushing Children			
		Psychological Torture			

2.3. Data Analysis

After conducting interviews, all discussions were transcribed, and the writings were organized into meaningful sentences regarding the mothers' experiences on the verge of separation.

3. Findings and Results

The results of this study were organized from 180 thematic sentences from the statements of mothers on the verge of separation about their experiences and ultimately classified into 5 overarching themes, 15 organizing themes, and 20 foundational themes that form the thematic network. The overarching and organizing themes in this research include communication problems (relationships with children, relationships with spouses), parenting (children's financial problems, defective parenting style, child management), emotional and behavioral (emotional and behavioral problems of parents, emotional and behavioral problems of children), psychological, social, and economic support (family, lack of counseling, economic) and exacerbating factors (extramarital affairs, addiction, previous divorce experience, mental disorders, sexual dysfunction).

Table 1 presents themes along with subgroups and concepts (exemplary quotes) from the statements of mothers on the verge of separation.

Emotional and Behavioral Aspect	Child Management	Behavioral	Neglect	I4, I2, I1, I6, I1, I3, I1, I2, I1, I7, I5
			Ignorance	
			Irresponsibility	
			Swearing	
			Stubbornness	
	Parents' Emotional and Behavioral Component	Custody	Child Custody	
			Lack of Mental Peace	
			Excessive Psychological Fatigue	
			Feeling of Loneliness	
			Leaving Home	
Support (Psychological, Social, Economic)	Children's Emotional and Behavioral Component	Emotional Restraint	Not Expressing Feelings	I1, I2, I4, I5, I2, I6, I10
			Anger	
			Physical Fights and Arguments	
			Threatening Each Other	
			Contrariness	
	Family	Fear	Fear of Divorce	
			Fear of Losing Children	
			Fear of Loneliness	
			Pessimistic Thoughts	
			Expecting the Worst in Life	
Exacerbating Factors	Family	Anxiety	Excessive Worrying	I7, I3, I9, I2, I2, I9, I3, I1, I4, I2, I10, I3, I4, I1, I5
			Nail Biting	
			Depression	
			Masturbation	
			Children's Academic Decline	
	Lack of Counseling	Emotional Void	Children's Defiance and Aggression	
			Sleep Disorders	
			Nightmares	
			Bedwetting in Sleep	
			Being Unkind	
	Economic Issues	Family Support	Envy Others	I7, I3, I9, I2, I2, I9, I3, I1, I4, I2, I10, I3, I4, I1, I5
			Lack of Family Support	
			Family Interference	
			Collapse of Life	
			Discontinuation of Financial and Emotional Support	
	Extramarital Relationships	-	Creating a Void in Life	
			Not Seeking Counseling	
			Rejecting Counseling	
			Not covering living expenses	
			Concealment	
	Addiction	-	Connecting with others secretly	I7, I3, I9, I2, I2, I9, I3, I1, I4, I2, I10, I3, I4, I1, I5
			Alcohol addiction	
			Drug addiction	
			Second marriage	
			Severe obsession	
	Previous Divorce Experience	-	Depression	
			Pessimistic and suspicious	
			Masturbation	
			Watching pornography	
	Mental Disorders	-		
	Sexual Disorders	-		

As observed in Table 1, all extracted overarching, organizing, and foundational themes from in-depth interviews with mothers on the verge of separation are presented.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

As the results indicated, out of 180 thematic sentences extracted from interviews with mothers on the verge of separation, 5 overarching themes, 15 organizing themes, and 20 foundational themes that form the thematic network were classified. The overarching and organizing themes in this study include communication problems (relationships with children, relationships with spouses), parenting (children's financial issues, defective parenting style, child management), emotional and behavioral (emotional and behavioral issues of parents, emotional and behavioral issues of children), psychological, social, and economic support (family, lack of counseling, economic) and exacerbating factors (extramarital affairs, addiction, previous divorce experience, mental disorders, sexual dysfunction).

Although qualitative research is exploratory and seeks new findings to advance the research literature, these results should be consistent with previous studies. Therefore, it is necessary to compare the results with previous research along with the necessary implications that this study may have achieved in examining the divorce process. It can be said that these women, in transitioning through the stages of divorce, have undergone three phases with fluctuations (Reynoso, 2018). The first phase is pre-divorce decision-making, where women initially faced a set of challenges and crises in life. At the outset, all participants tried to preserve their marriage and chose or accepted divorce as a last resort after (Schaan et al., 2019) their strategies for sustaining marital life failed. Women's strategies for marital survival are consistent with what Herman (1974) refers to as "bargaining," including accepting a rival, undergoing circumcision, hysterectomy, etc. (Herman, 1974).

In the decision-making stage for divorce, women either accepted divorce or played an active role. The determining factor at this stage was the element of reflexivity as considered by Giddens in facing challenges, which had a significant impact on women's actions. Despite being aware of the negative, and rarely positive, consequences of their future, they decided to divorce. In other words, reflexivity overshadowed even negative perceptions of the future of divorce, and these women, despite knowing the consequences of such a decision, took the risk and set aside previous interpretations of a passive and accepting role. Besides reflexivity, family variables also influenced women's actions in divorce.

Feelings of anger, fear, pessimism, and anxiety experienced by mothers on the verge of separation could originate from the negative consequences of divorce for children and abandoning culturally accepted definitions of

being a good mother and spouse (Kiecolt-Glaser, 2018; Ko, 2019). Or, as Emery (1994) suggests, it goes back to their sense of duty and responsibility. Some mothers perceived themselves as victims, strongly criticizing and expressing dissatisfaction with their significantly worse position compared to men. Feeling victimized, especially for those who did not initiate the divorce and felt rejected and out of control (Emery, 2011).

The psychological exhaustion of these mothers results from not moving on from the previous stage and feelings of guilt and blame. This feeling of burnout and devaluation was common among mothers who perceived themselves as victims of the divorce process. This condition is significantly worse for mothers who have gone through triple divorces, being sidelined without any consultation, like a commodity. The feeling of emotional void typically emerged when individuals attributed a significant part of the current situation and their inability to cope with it to themselves. The emotional void significantly affects this. In the final stage of the divorce process, a limited number of mothers experienced personal growth and self-improvement. These mothers rebuilt themselves, came to terms with the past, and adapted to the current situation. Key factors facilitating such a process include variables like financial and emotional support from the family, financial independence, not having children, and actualization in the divorce process.

These experiences, according to Rosenberg (1998), have formed a perception in women that is often negative and passive, manifesting as a sense of helplessness in mothers unless they have played an active role in the separation, leading to the formation of an active and independent self and resulting in self-satisfaction (Rosenberg, 1965).

Separation has had a range of social, internal, and economic consequences for mothers. The experience of mothers in dealing with these issues has shaped their perception of separation. Such a perception has been challenging and unpleasant throughout the separation process for those mothers who did not play a role in choosing separation and divorce, and has been a liberating factor for mothers who initiated the separation and reassessed their past.

Behavioral reactions to separation initially manifested as emotions and initial states, then mothers tried several alternatives. In this study, mothers usually acted in accordance with culturally accepted definitions and in harmony with what is expected of mothers during distress and sadness, showing their reflections through crying in the

initial stages, in line with some previous findings (Raley & Sweeney, 2020).

However, some of these mothers sought alternatives to rebuild themselves. Continuing education, working, and financial independence were among these tests, creating the foundation for a new identity for some of the mothers in Isfahan under study.

Finally, in examining the nature of the lived experience of mothers on the verge of separation, it must be noted that the consequences of divorce and the issues mothers face post-divorce both require therapeutic measures and attention from governmental organizations and NGOs to prevent the involvement of mothers on the verge of separation in these issues from exacerbating their crisis.

These mothers, to adapt to separation, should be involved in therapeutic requirements titled couple therapy, group therapy, and support programs in the separation process. Especially since these mothers have lost all their supportive resources, which were effective in their self-discovery and adaptation. Therefore, their absence has affected the delay in adapting to separation.

Another point is that being an applicant in the matter of separation, in addition to affecting individuals' emotions, significantly influences adaptation to separation and coping with the reality of separation. However, this is difficult for mothers who were not applicants for separation and considered themselves victims of the divorce process. Findings from other studies also confirm that the experience of divorce is harder for those who were not applicants for separation compared to those who were (Baum, 2007).

5. Suggestions and Limitations

Although the research faced limitations, such as the small number of participants and being confined to a specific method and time, it can be said that this study represents a part of the experience of mothers on the verge of separation in Isfahan. While presenting the results statistically is not possible and the limitation in generalizing the results is characteristic of qualitative research, the stories told by mothers always reveal meaningful aspects of separation that are reliable for future research and therapeutic applications in the marital domain. These stories highlight the role that marriage and intimacy play in life and the struggles and pain that occur with the end of marriage. Also, by reviewing the entire experience of separation, it's possible to understand the value of personal growth for participants and that they need to restart their relationships. Therefore, this study

presents a different perspective on separation, including dealing with psychological stress and the recovery that separation provides. It is recommended that organizations and officials related to family affairs take significant steps towards the psychological well-being of the family in dealing with and interacting with mothers on the verge of separation. Given the rising divorce rates and the increasing presence of mothers on the verge of separation in society, it seems essential to address this issue, as the continued social exclusion of mothers could lead to serious social and economic harms for them, their children, and the entire society.

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Declaration of Interest

According to the authors, this article has no financial support and no conflicts of interest.

Authors' Contributions

All authors made substantial contributions to the research process, covering various aspects from study design to data handling and manuscript preparation.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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