Prediction of guilt based on social anxiety and social-emotional loneliness in working women seeking divorce

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A B S T R A C T

The present study aimed to predict guilt based on social anxiety and social-emotional loneliness in working women seeking divorce. This study is applied in terms of its purpose and descriptive correlation type. The statistical population of this study consisted of all working women seeking divorce in Tehran in 2024. 200 people were selected through purposive sampling from the family counseling centers of the judiciary. The research tools included the Guilt Inventory by Kugler and Jones (1992); the Social Phobia Inventory by Connor et al. (2000) and the UCLA Loneliness Scale by Russell (1996). The research data were analyzed using stepwise regression analysis and SPSS-22 software. The results showed that there is a positive and significant relationship between social anxiety and loneliness with guilt at the 0.01 level. Social anxiety PP=0.009, ==0.183) poiiii veyy and at a gggnffaaance vvvel of 0.01 peedeeed gull,, and ocneiiness PP=0.005, ==0.197) poiiii veyy and at a gggnffaaance vvvel of 0.01 peedeeed guilt. In general, the results showed that guilt feelings are predicted based on social anxiety and social-emotional loneliness in working women seeking divorce.

Introduction

Divorce and the resulting disintegration of family structures represent a significant social phenomenon, characterized by increasing prevalence and complex multidimensionality in contemporary societies. The family remains a fundamental sociocultural institution, serving as a cornerstone for societal cohesion and continuity (Shariati & Seyyed Ali Al-Yasin, 2023). While marriages often begin with mutual satisfaction and emotional fulfillment, many relationships deteriorate over time, frequently leading to psychological maladjustment and emotional distress. Empirical data indicate that although most individuals marry at least once in their lifetime, approximately two-thirds of first marriages end in separation or divorce (Yu et al., 2020).

Divorce is often accompanied by a perceived loss of personal control and agency, which can lead to heightened feelings of guilt. Guilt is a complex self-conscious emotion with cognitive and evaluative components. Research shows that women tend to experience higher levels of guilt post-divorce, influenced by both sociocultural and psychological factors. Such feelings often trigger self-reflection and rr itiaal vvll ttt inn ff '''' s mrr ll ddd cccill tt iiii gg. Tee itt sss ity ff gii lt is ll oo ff fcctdd yy rrr eeivdd autonomy, which can influence broader psychosocial outcomes (Aboosaidi Moghadam et al., 2010).
Post-divorce life for women involves multiple forms of deprivation, including loss of social capital built during cohabitation, reduced social influence, weakening of support networks, and social marginalization. These factors often lead to loneliness and increased social anxiety. Common psychosocial outcomes

include social withdrawal, isolation, and weakened family bonds, which may contribute to physical and mental health problems. Sociological perspectives also highlight the ambiguous social status of divorced women, who are neither fully integrated into singlehood nor reinstated within marriage, creating identity uncertainty and social ambiguity (Mohammadi et al., 2018).

Loneliness, defined as a subjective feeling of inadequate social connection, is a major psychosocial challenge after divorce. It is closely linked to separation-related disruptions and feelings of guilt (Hong et al., 2024; Amirbeglu Dariani & Khatoon Marashi, 2021). Divorced women may experience loss of friendships in addition to spousal separation, exacerbating emotional distress and guilt (Sharifi et al., 2023). Conceptually, loneliness can be divided into three related dimensions: emotional loneliness (lack of intimate attachment), social loneliness (lack of social integration), and existential loneliness (awareness of fundamental aloneness) (Adlington et al., 2023).

While temporary loneliness can motivate social reconnection, chronic loneliness is associated with reduced subjective well-being, increased risk of psychopathology, poorer physical health, and higher mortality (Hakshold & Furey, 2024). Consistent with this, Shariati & Seyyed Ali Al-Yasin (2023) emphasize that divorced women often experience multidimensional deprivation, including disrupted social networks, reduced sociopolitical capital, diminished social support, and social exclusion. Loss of societal status and erosion of family and community support further highlight the profound impact of divorce on wmm'' s siii ll itt ggrtt iss sss ss sssss iii ll aaalt..

Divorced women also face social anxiety, often characterized by fear of negative evaluation and scrutiny, which undermines self-esteem and self-concept. This anticipatory fear, combined with negative self-evaluation, contributes to chronic loneliness and guilt (Mirzai et al., 2021). Women with high social anxiety are particularly sensitive to potential social disapproval and may avoid behaviors that could lead to shame or stigma (Mirzai et al., 2021). From a psychosocial perspective, individuals concerned about social judgment frequently experience rejection and social alienation (Gazelle et al., 2016). Cognitive-behavioral models suggest that maladaptive beliefs about social exclusion and rejection play a central role in the development and maintenance of social anxiety (Arban et al., 2024). Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) is clinically defined by intense fear of social or performance situations involving possible scrutiny, accompanied by physiological arousal and avoidance behaviors, leading to significant impairments in social, academic, and occupational functioning (Shin et al., 2022).

Given the strong psychosocial impact of guilt in divorced women, it is crucial to understand the underlying emotional and cognitive mechanisms. Such insight can inform targeted interventions to reduce psychological distress and promote adaptive coping. Therefore, the present study aims to examine the extent to which social anxiety and socio-emotional loneliness predict guilt among employed women undergoing divorce.

Research Method

This study is applied in terms of its purpose, descriptive in design, and employs a correlational methodology. The statistical population comprised all employed women filing for divorce in Tehran during the year 2024. Given that regression analyses conventionally require a minimum sample size of 200 participants to ensure adequate statistical power (Klein, 2016), a purposive sampling method was utilized to select 200 subjects from family counseling centers affiliated with the judiciary system.

Research Instruments

Kugler and Jones Guilt Questionnaire (1992)

The Kugler & Jones Guilt Questionnaire consists of 45 items distributed across three subscales: the guilt state subscale (items 4, 16, 17, 19, 30, 33, 36, 37, 43, 45), the guilt trait subscale (items 1, 3, 7, 11, 13, 15, 18, 22, 24, 25, 28, 32, 38, 39, 42), and the moral standards subscale (items 2, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 12, 14, 20, 21, 23, 26, 27, 29, 31, 34, 35, 40, 41, 44). Responses are measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree (=5) to strongly disagree (=1). Internal consistency indices reported by Kugler and Jones (1992) yielded Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.77 to 0.85 across subscales. Concurrent validity was supported by moderate correlations (r = 0.22 to 0.51) with established guilt and shame scales, incliii gg Hggnn ddd Cii kk's Gii lt ddd mmmenllll e)))))) Bsss ddd Drr kee's Gii lt llll e)))))) ddd the Emotional Self-Awareness and Attribution Questionnaire by Tangeni et al. (1988). Hassanvand (2019)

further reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.76 for this instrument and a concurrent validity coefficient of 0.521 with the Shame Experience Scale.

University of California Loneliness Scale (1996)

Developed by Russell (1996), this instrument comprises 20 items assessing three dimensions: family disconnection (items 2, 4, 9, 12, 16, 18), lack of contact with friends (items 1, 3, 5, 10, 11, 15, 19), and emotional loneliness symptoms (items 6, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14, 17, 20). Respondents rate items on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from never (=1) to always (=4), with several items (1, 5, 6, 9, 10, 15, 16, 19, 20) reverse scored. Total scores range from 20 to 80, with cut-offs indicating mild (20–40), moderate (41–60), and severe loneliness (61–80). The scale demonstrated robust reliability with a test-retest coefficient of 0.89 (Russell, 1996). In an Iranian context, Bahirai et al. (2006) reported a convergent validity coefficient ff 5555 5ia rrr rll tt inn with tee lllll lsss s Ixxxx xxx itt rr lll ssss itt cccy (Crccccc ccs ll)))) ff 8888 based on a sample of 420 university students in Tehran.

Social Anxiety Questionnaire by Kanwar et al. (2000)

This instrument includes 17 items categorized into three subscales: fear (items 1, 3, 5, 10, 14, 15), avoidance (items 4, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, 16), and somatic symptoms (items 2, 7, 13, 17). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale from not at all (=0) to extremely (=4). Kanwar et al. (2000) reported a high internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.94 and satisfactory construct validity. Hassanvand et al. (2010; cited in Hassanvand Amozadeh, 2012) further documented subscale reliability coefficients of 0.74, 0.75, and 0.75 for fear, avoidance, and somatic components, respectively. Convergent validity was supported by moderate correlations with the Cognitive Error Questionnaire (r = 0.35), the Self-Esteem Rating Scale (r = 0.58), and the Symptom Inventory-90 (r = 0.70).

Implementation Method

Data collection was carried out after obtaining approval and coordination with the affiliated university. The questionnaires were digitized and distributed online. Invitations to participate, along with a survey link, were shared through various family counseling centers. Eligible women who agreed to participate accessed the link and completed the questionnaires voluntarily. Data collection concluded once the predetermined sample size was reached, and the dataset was extracted for analysis.

Data analysis included both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics summarized demographic characteristics and measures of central tendency, including means and standard deviations. 8ff rr ttt ill aaalyees gggnn with rrrr '''' s rrr r.. tt inn eeeffiii ttt s to aaamiee ii vrr itt e rll tt iiiiii ii between variables. Assumptions for regression analysis—including normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and absence of multicollinearity—were then evaluated. Hierarchical regression models were conducted, and their goodness-of-fit and predictive validity were assessed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 22.

Findings

In the present study, 19 (9.5%) of the participants were under 25 years old, 85 (42.5%) were 26 to 30 years old, 39 (14.5%) were 31 to 35 years old, 30 (15%) were 36 to 40 years old, and 27 (13.5%) were over 46 years old. 86 (43%) of the participants had been living with their spouses for less than 5 years and 114 (57%) for more than 6 years.

Table 1- Correlation matrix of research variables.

Variables	1	2	3
1. Social anxiety	-		
2. Feeling lonely	0.141*	-	
3. Feeling guilty	0.210**	0.223**	-

*P<0/05, **P<0/01

Table 1 shows that there is a positive and significant relationship between social anxiety and feelings of loneliness and guilt at the 0.01 level.

Table 2- Simultaneous regression in predicting guilt feelings.

Dimensions of variables	b	SE	β	t	Sig
Step one					
1. Social anxiety	0.213	0.083	0.210	3.02	0.003
F(1,198)=9/29 & P=0.003				R^2=0.210 & adjR^2=0.039	
Step two					
1. Social anxiety	0.218	0.082	0.183	2.65	0.009
2. Feeling lonely	0.262	0.091	0.197	2.86	0.005
F(1,197)=8.06 &P=0.005		R^2=0.287 & adjR^2=0.073		Watson camera=1.96	

Table 2 shows that in the first step, the value of the squared multiple correlation (R2) was 0.210, and in the second step, with the inclusion of loneliness, its value reached 0.287; this means that social anxiety and loneliness explain 28 percent of the changes in guilt.

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Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of the present study was to predict guilt based on social anxiety and social-emotional loneliness in working women seeking divorce. The results showed that social anxiety predicts guilt in working women seeking divorce. Social-emotional loneliness predicts guilt in working women seeking divorce. These results are consistent with the findings of Shariati and Seyyed Ali Al-Yasin (2023).

The findings indicate that social anxiety is a significant predictor of guilt among employed women seeking divorce. This relationship can be conceptualized through a subtype of guilt commonly observed in individuals with social anxiety disorder, characterized by pervasive self-criticism and diminished self-efficacy during introspective evaluations (Davari & Ahmadi, 2019). Under stress, socially anxious individuals tend to develop maladaptive negative self-schemas, which impede adaptive coping strategies. Consequently, they exhibit heightened vulnerability to psychological distress, with neuroticism and hopelessness frequently co-occurring. individuals high in neuroticism often experience profound lllll ll eeesss ssssssmitt ic cggii tiaaa aaaaa lif''m maii ggs sss s sssll witrrr llll (Kim & A)))))))))

Core features of social anxiety include a negatively biased self-concept and low self-esteem, engendering an intense fear of failure. This fear manifests behaviorally as risk avoidance and reduced engagement with lif''s aaal.gggss, rrr iiiii ii lly aaaeerttt igg ftttt illll imttt il —ddd rrr ttt ttt igg a yyll e ff fii lrr e and diminished self-worth. Self-deprecatory attitudes contribute to a maladaptive self-image, characterized by perceptions of inadequacy and self-rejection. Individuals with social anxiety often experience a marked incongruence between their real and ideal selves, impeding flexible self-reflection—essential for constructive behavioral regulation. Consequently, they display heightened reactivity to internal stimuli such as intrusive thoughts, distressing images, and negative memories, resulting in entrenched avoidance behaviors aimed at mitigating anxiety-provoking situations. However, such avoidance disrupts the development of self-acceptance and self-compassion, maintaining the psychopathological cycle (Moroz & Dunkley, 2019).

Additionally, cognitive schemas centered on rejection and abandonment contribute to social losses, including diminished support networks and impaired formation of intimate relationships due to pervasive fears of rejection and avoidance behaviors. These maladaptive schemas undermine stable internal representations of self and others, reducing coping efficacy and social support-seeking, and perpetuating social isolation (Mohammadifar et al., 2013; Scott et al., 2009; Gainer et al., 2016).

Research conceptualizes social isolation and withdrawal as cognitive-behavioral responses to threats to self-identity and self-esteem (Yuji et al., 2012). Social isolation, as a style of avoidance, often emerges from experiences of rejection, emotional deprivation, and abandonment. It functions as a maladaptive coping mechanism, characterized by evasion of social interactions and distressing thoughts or memories (Aftab, 2016; Girard et al., 2017). Fundamentally, it stems from perceived lack of interpersonal significance and belonging, compounded by loneliness, fostering withdrawal and anhedonia. Feelings of being burdensome generate self-loathing and guilt, reinforcing avoidance behaviors (Lawas et al., 2018).

The resulting psychological discomfort and sadness adversely affect social functioning, often culminating in sustained withdrawal from social engagement (Zikic et al., 2009).

The results also indicate that emotional-social loneliness significantly predicts guilt among employed women seeking divorce. Emotional-social loneliness reflects the absence of positive, supportive, and fulfilling interpersonal relationships, signaling deprivation of the fundamental human need for intimacy. Dissatisfaction with relational quality intensifies feelings of loneliness, often rooted in deficiencies within social support networks and limited access to meaningful relationships with relatives or spouses.

In marital contexts, emotional loneliness undermines intimacy, trust, and reliability, threatening the formation and maintenance of close bonds. Marital dissatisfaction often increases the desire for intimacy, and unmet needs can lead to compensatory behaviors, including extramarital involvement. Marriage is widely regarded as a primary avenue for fulfilling needs for love and belonging; disruptions in this domain produce feelings of failure, frustration, and heightened loneliness. Many individuals enter marriage seeking relief from loneliness, equating marital union with social and emotional connectedness. Persistent loneliness intensifies negative emotional states—such as anger, bitterness, and rejection—which can precipitate relational breakdown and eventual separation or divorce.

This study relied on self-report measures, introducing potential biases such as social desirability. Moreover, the non-random purposive sampling limits generalizability. Future research should incorporate qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews, to explore additional psychosocial determinants of guilt among women seeking divorce. Employing randomized sampling techniques would enhance external validity and broader applicability of findings.

The findings have important implications for practitioners in counseling and clinical psychology, particularly in divorce-related interventions. Mental health professionals working with divorced women should prioritize the assessment and mitigation of emotional-social loneliness to enhance resilience and rcccc e mll aaatt ive gii lt. aaakllll rrr s in wmmi'' s aaalth ddd wll l-being are encouraged to implement supportive programs, such as life skills and communication training, through accessible formats (e.g., brochures, booklets, workshops). Such interventions can alleviate emotional-social loneliness and social anxiety, facilitating psychological adjustment and reducing adverse outcomes associated with divorce, including pervasive guilt.

Resources

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