The Effect of Women's Representations and Expectations of Marriage and Their Partners on Emotional Divorce

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to identify the effect of women's representations and expectations of marriage and their partners on emotional divorce. This research is a qualitative study. The sample consisted of 10 women with emotional divorce that were purposefully selected from the clients of a counseling center in East Tehran, Iran. Semi-structured interview was recruited to determine the emotional divorce level and identify marriage representations besides expectations of partners. The interviews were analyzed. The findings indicated that individuals define their interests according to their representations of events and behaviors. Awareness of expectations and representations can help monitor them, through which behavior can be conducted in order to gain intimate relationships in family.

KEY WORDS: Emotional Divorce, Representations, Expectations, Women.

1. INTRODUCTION

In emotional divorce, couples just physically live together, while other kinds of communications are completely cut off between them or are without desire and satisfaction. This is also called "silent" or "mental divorce" [1]. In describing the emotional divorce several criteria are mentioned, including what Sheikhavandi has mentioned in an interview in 2010 to Hamshahri Newspaper: physical separation, keeping different rooms, lack of conversation, lack of affection, sadness, escape and silence, emotional divergence rather than convergence, pretending to be kind among strangers but being lonely in private, non-satisfaction of mental and financial demands, attributing out-of-wedlock sexual relations to each other, distancing in space and place, aggression and violence, poverty leading to lack of means to pay the dowry by husband and lack of support for wife, as well as the cultural gap between the old generation of mother-in-laws and the new generation of sister-in-laws [2]. Rahimi [3] in his article on the website of the Office of Women's Studies has mentioned such criteria as negativism (assessments of each other's deficiencies), ignoring the merits and positive aspects, lack of social security and support, lack of psychological discharge, deterrence from fellowship and lack of responsiveness to the needs including sexual needs.

There are various ideas and theories on the formation of emotional divorce in families. The couple's indifference toward each other and deprivation of affective and emotional support can be due to a variety of reasons. These reasons can be placed in categories and with the help of different theories the cause of emotional divorce can be explained.

According to structural functionalism theory, when members of a family do not come over adaptation and accommodation difficulties and lose its consistency in response to different needs, unknown situations, problems and conflicts rather than solving the problem and trying to protect the family as a community, the primary relationships gradually becomes secondary ones.

One of the reasons of changing secondary or primary relationships into each other is optimistic or pessimistic views that each of the family members (especially partners) can take against each others. Martin Seligman's view can explain this issue. According to Seligman, when family members, especially partners, take pessimistic views to each other's behaviors unconsciously show their pessimism in their behavior to each other. As a result, this behavior (which is a consequence of a cynical look) influences partners' behavior. In this way, the other partner will change his/her behavior too and this in turn will exacerbate his/her pessimism. When this vicious circle continues, its impact on the behavior of each partner continues too, thereby the difference and tension in the family will continually increase. On the trajectory that leads to divorce, it is clear that the shortcomings of the each partners' emotional adequacy will have harsh consequences. When a partner, in a vicious circle of increasing criticism and disdain, put him/herself on the defensive position and keep silent, and become captured by helpless thoughts, the circle itself reflects that there is a disorder in the ability of self-awareness and self-control, empathy and the ability to soothe each other and oneself [4].

If in a family, the representations of family members of each other's behavior be secondary relationships, this representation can change the primary relationships into secondary relationships and eventually cause emotional divorce. According to the Theory Social Representations, Serge Moscovici believes that our representations allow us to internalize the information that exists all around us, and thereby be able to communicate with others and with the environment [5]. One of the representations that couples can take from each other's behavior is about their understanding of their own and others' interests. The representation that other's behaviors are not in one's favor can provide a firm base for emotional

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divorce. The Conflict Theory, with an emphasis on the advantages and disadvantages of behavior, better explain this notion. Marriage and family development process are considered as part of "social system" whose members are in permanent trouble with conflicting interests. Through negotiation and compromise, changes have occurred within family and it has been let to adapt to the required changes [1]. Accordingly, couple's visions and representations of behaviors, speech and family events can be effective on their behavior. Given the importance of these representations, this study aimed to identify and compare the representations and expectations of couples before the onset of emotional divorce (before marriage) and following an emotional divorce. Women were selected for study, because they experience more psychological and social pressure in stages before, during and after divorce.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

2.1. Sample

The population comprised of those married women in Tehran who believed that they were in conflict with their husbands, not only an unresolved conflict but also a deteriorating one throughout time. Women were selected because they suffer more psychological and social pressure in stages before, during and after the divorce. On the other hand, because during the years of the present research (2010-2011) the highest divorce rate was registered in Tehran, the city was selected for study.

The sample consisted of 10 subjects who were purposefully chosen. In purposive sampling, the intention of the researcher, according to the purpose of the study, is the selection of cases that have much information about the problems and conflicts of married life. In this type of sampling, the goal is not to select a sample that accurately represents the defined population; rather, the aim is to achieve a deep understanding of the subject through studied cases [6]. Purposive sampling was conducted on the clients of a counseling center in East Tehran with the desired characteristics.

2.2. Instrument

A researcher-made questionnaire to detect and identify representations of emotional divorce was conducted by the researchers and its face validity was evaluated by specialists. Since the researchers were not trying to generalize the results, the reliability of the questionnaire was not necessary.

2.3. Implementation Method

This study was a post-event research. The research method was qualitative. Based on the subject of the study, it appears that collecting data through qualitative method, interviews are most appropriate, subjects' responses closer to reality, and the possibility of gaining information is much higher. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were recruited for data collection.

To consider ethics and attract subjects' cooperation, before implementing tests some information about the issue -as far as were not effective on the results of the study- were supplied to the subjects. They were also assured that their information will not be analyzed individually, and they can be removed from the sample any time they wanted to.

3. RESULTS

Descriptive information about the sample is shown in Table 1.

The entire sample group had at least one child. Initially, emotional divorce level was determined by conducting a semi-structured interview. Thus, the extent to which each of the participants experienced emotional divorce was found; besides, the characteristics of each group (in terms of emotional divorce) and the extent to which these features were shown was also identified. After analyzing the interviews, three groups with severe, average and low emotional divorce levels were detected.

Table1. Sample Descriptive Information

Sub. No.	Age	Employment status	Education	Partner's education	Couples' age gap (years)
1	35	employed	BA/BSc	BA/BSc	6
2	32	housewife	BA/BSc	BA/BSc	6
3	38	employed	Associate degree	BA/BSc	2
4	30	employed	BA/BSc	High school diploma	5
5	39	housewife	Associate degree	High school diploma	5
6	29	housewife	BA/BSc	Associate degree	3
7	48	housewife	Associate degree	Associate degree	7
8	27	employed	Associate degree	Associate degree	8
9	42	housewife	BA/BSc	High school diploma	6
10	54	employed	BA/BSc	Associate degree	5

4. DISCUSSION

After analyzing the interviews, three groups with severe, average and low emotional divorce levels were detected.

4.1. Severe Emotional Divorce

Severe emotional divorce is when the two partners (for this study wives only) have little or almost no dialogue (conversation), do not express their emotions to each other, are sad, and keep silent before each other, have emotional divergence rather than convergence, pretend to be kind among strangers but being lonely in private, are not satisfied of mental and financial demands, attribute sexual relations out of wedlock to each other, make a distance in space and place, only see each other's negative features rather than positive ones, there is aggression and violence among them, are mostly indifferent and silent to each other's behavior and speech to prevent aggression. In other words, this group almost showed all the features of emotional divorce to a large extent (both in intensity and frequency). Subjects 7 and 10 almost showed all the above-mentioned features.

"I do not say I'm short of money. In fact, I never did say. Because if I ask him for money we will have problem soon after, and he will get angry. What do you want money for? There is no such a thing as you and me, he says." (Subject No. 10).

"I bore problems. Many I suffered. I cannot say anything to him because he does nothing." (Subject No. 7).

The couples had extremely short conversations and those rare ones they had were limited to the information the wife provided. In these cases, the wife started the conversation but the couple had no desire to continue and thus termination followed without any result.

As the subjects discussed, the distance created between husband and wife (according to the theory of structural functionalism) leads to the conversion of intimate and friendly relationship between the couple (primary relationship) into a secondary cold one. This secondary relationship can be a reason for aggression between couples.

The continuation of a secondary cold relationship between a couple causes a reduction in conversion, an extreme increase in expectations and representations, and through understanding different and contradictory meanings of events and situations and having its impact on marital life, they contribute to be in conflict with each other (theory of symbolic interaction).

4.2. Average Emotional Divorce

Individuals with this type of emotional divorce indicated lower criteria of emotional divorce in their interviews. The number and intensity of the characteristics of these individuals were less than those with severe emotional divorce and more than those with low emotional divorce. Subjects 1, 4, 5, 6, and 8 revealed average emotional divorce features.

"He hates talking too much. He hates retelling a story which is not related to any of us; he thinks it's useless. He says: what's the use of retelling such a story?! When I tell him about my things-to-do, sometimes he says you decide when to cease." (Subject No. 8).

"I ask him to do me things, but he never does ... whatever I do, he complaints about, and says why did you do that? I wonder what I can do!" (Subject No. 5).

A woman's representation of neglect may be associated with the concept of 'insecurity' for her. It makes her concerned, impact on her behavior and increases the intensity of emotional divorce. Failure to satisfy the psychological needs of women may also influence their behavior with their partners, so it is not unexpected that couples gradually suffer a greater distance. Distant couples have rarely conversations. Even in some cases, couples cite justifications for it such as the man may show signs of unwillingness to discuss.

Conversation between couples in this group was more than the previous one (minimum, about 15 to 25 minutes a day). Although the members of this group speak a few minutes more than the previous one, they spend long hours of silence together. This silence following failure to meet financial and mental health (especially mental needs) does not help lose thinking gaps and approach mentalities. In this group, when a woman sees her own interests at risk, tries to meet her benefits in any way, even using arguments (conflict theory).

4.3. Low Emotional Divorce

In this group, emotional divorce criteria have much less intensity than the severe group, but with little difference with the average one. These individuals seem to be relatively satisfied with their life, while may also have important conflicts with their partners. Subjects 2, 3 and 9 were with low emotional divorce.

"Fortunately, my husband does not expect too much, because I'm independent in my activities; I go all the way on my own. He knows that I go all the way, he never felt a need to tell me what to do." (Subject No. 3).

The subjects of this group are completely indifferent to the desires and demands of their husbands, and know themselves as 'complete' humans. In this context, wife's 'profit-seeking' is quite evident and she is successful at obtaining it too (conflict theory). There is no satisfaction of psychological needs on both sides. When defining the characteristics of their partners, the subjects of this group used negative expressions, but applied fewer and milder negative attributions as compared to those with severe emotional divorce. Thus, according to 'conflict theory' it seems that partners are seeking their own benefits and do not care about a primary relationship.

"Married life means a comfortable life with a man, both emotionally and financially. Everything must be provided." (Subject No. 6).

4.4. Analysis of Representations and Expectations of Marriage and One's Partner (Before Marriage)
"Married life means a comfortable life with a man, both emotionally and financially. Everything must be provided." (Subject No. 6).

Most common expressions in defining married life are about "sharing everything, loyalty, patience, understanding, mutual trust, having children, etc."

Subjects also have expressed their expectations of their partners with phrases such as: "meeting the financial needs, higher ethics, respect for wife and her family, and integrity".

Some of the titles used to define married life are related to the expectations that a woman has of her husband. This expectation can exist on both sides (man or woman), but according to the answers subjects expressed about their expectations of their partners, it is clear that this conception of married life is consistent with subjects expectations of their partners. Furthermore, in the definitions given by subjects notions of both material and immaterial images were found.

4.5. Analysis of Representations and Expectations of Marriage and One's Partner (After Emotional Divorce)
"I think that life is really good. It is very beautiful; however I wish that God has given us a life that did not hurt us. Anyway, life brings us problems. It is a reality, but in God I trust for all the problems I have. God is my only support; I know that God is so merciful, no matter how difficult and hard life is. And know I finally solve all my problems. And if there is any faith in God, in one way or the other difficulties will easily fade away. Besides we should try our best to deal with problems." (Subject No. 7).

Subjects expressed their expectations of their partners with phrases such as: "meeting financial needs, higher ethics, respect for wife and her family, and reliability".

According to the results, when subjects' expectations and representations of married life before marriage is oriented towards financial goals, personal interests and lack of primary relationships, unconsciously they tend to secondary a relationship and emotional divorce. Emotional divorce is much influenced by the extent and severity of representations and expectations of getting married to have a warm relationship. Although at first (before marriage) the subjects of the three mentioned groups reported relatively similar conditions, but their representations of married life and expectations of their partners have changed throughout married life and experienced different rates of emotional divorce.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Study results indicated that in some cases, representations and expectations have changed throughout married life. However, at first (before marriage) individuals may expect to increase intimacy, but throughout married life and in response to environmental conditions these representations can deviate to personal interests (conflict theory) - not group (family) benefits. In other words, individuals -facing family and environmental circumstances- define their interests (conflict theory) with respect to the accounts of the events and behaviors (theory of symbolic interaction, Seligman optimistic and pessimistic theory). Awareness of one's representations orientation can help have an informed control over expectations and representations, and consequently conduct behavior in order to increase a primary relationship in the family. Therefore, by monitoring the representations and behaviors partners relationships in family can be improved and prohibit emotional divorce.

As a community, family is formed of a number of people who live together. Family members have interactions with each other and interpretations for the behaviors and what happens in the family (subject). They take special meanings, do judgments and assessments and then, according to their information, knowledge and culture start to interpret (evaluation or conversion). Then, using the representations (perceptions), show behaviors in response to the behavior they have evaluated. The other partner will in return have a representation of this behavior which has been formed in response to the previous behaviors. In this way, perhaps it can be said that all the behaviors that occur in such a family are influenced by understanding and representations of each other's behavior. Wrong representations can lead to behaviors that provoke inappropriate behavior on the opposite side. Thus, the necessity of correct understanding and representation of behaviors in a family is identified.

According to the theory of structural functionalism, when couples cannot manage to deal with the settlement of their problems, family cohesion is endangered. If in the face of problems and adversities of married life, warm and friendly relations between couples (primary relationship) change into tense, indifferent and formal relations (secondary relationship) couples' interactions will be placed on the verge of emotional divorce. Although all couples experience problems and weak points in their life, not all marriages result in emotional divorce. So, maybe individuals' representations of events, environment and their partners play a more effective role. According to Seligman, it is the couple's optimism and pessimism towards each other which can have a significant impact on their interactions. The couple's optimism and pessimism about the events and the behavior of their partner even can influence their opinion about what is in the interest of the family and their own (conflict theory). If any of the couples believe that family prosperity or peace is not separated from the prosperity and tranquility of any of the family members, and the benefit of each member is related to the benefits of the whole family, especially the partners, it is expected that this belief would influence the whole family relationships and does not put the benefit of a member in conflict with other's. These beliefs are also applied about the meaning of symbols, situations and events. If each partner believe that the conduct of the other is in conflict with his/her own interests (conflict theory), so all the gestures, words, or even facial expressions (theory of symbolic interaction) mean to him/her what his/her representation accommodate most with (theory of social

representation). This pessimistic view (Seligman) will replace primary relationship by a secondary one (theory of structural functionalism).

Thus, although each of the above-mentioned theories tries to explain the formation of emotional divorce, it seems that all of them are influenced by the representations and interpretations of couples. It is possible that two have families by the same situation, but only one of them experience emotional divorce. It seems that social representations -through interpretation of happenings- can in the course of life influence families and change warm and friendly relations into cool ones. These representations and perceptions can influence family interactions and lead to conflicts in the family through interpreting interests. Hence, it is suggested that during pre-marriage trainings, the couple's be trained in the effect of their perceptions and representations of married life, and thus prevent emotional divorce.

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