

Original Article

Exploring factors affecting post-divorce adjustment in Iranian women: A qualitative study

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Abstract

Background: Divorce is a complex, multidimensional concept and its direct and indirect impacts affects thousands of people in Iran each year. However, the concept of post-divorce adjustment in Iranian women has not been studied in detail. The aim of the present qualitative study was to determine the factors contributing to post-divorce adjustment in divorced women.

Methods: A qualitative research was carried out using grounded theory approach, followed by three phases of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The participants consisted of 21 divorced women who were selected using purposive sampling method. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and then interviews were recorded and transcribed for further analysis.

Results: A total of 21 divorced women participated in the current study. The majority of the participants were between 20-30 years old; they were between 17 to 30 years when they married. Also, most of the participants had bachelor's degree (11) and most of them had a job (16). In the primary data coding, 35 open concepts were extracted. These concepts were then reduced into 32 secondary concepts. At the final stage, 6 main categories contributing to post-divorce adjustment were extracted including: (a) demographics, (b) interpersonal, (c) attitudinal, (d) relational, (e) supportive, and (f) coping strategies.

Conclusion: The present study emphasizes the value of lived experiences of divorced women. Based on the findings of our study, it is important to develop a solid support network and provide interventions targeting the quality of life in divorced women.

Keywords: Divorce; Divorced women; Post-divorce adjustment; Qualitative study

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Introduction

Divorce is a common occurrence in our society. According to statistics released in 2015, out of every 1000 marriages, 225 ended in divorce. Also, about half of the divorces happened during the first five years of the marriage. Divorce has been identified as one of the most significant life stresses (1). It is assumed to be a serious life event that causes profound changes in the individual's lifestyle (2),

including anger, grief, financial issues, depression, and influences in the social relationships (3). It has also been demonstrated that divorced women experience declines in their level of health issues and well-being (4, 5). In addition, it is well-known that divorce disrupts social networks and impacts individuals in various social, economic, and psychological dimensions (6).

Divorced people find themselves in a situation that is not understood or shared with those close to them (7). Considering the dominant cultural norms in Iran, with the emphasis on the sacredness of marriage and the high value of preserving the family, it is not surprising that divorced individuals, especially women, find it difficult to cope with the consequences of divorce (8).

The idea of coping resources is a key concept of theories dealing with adjustment to a stressful situation, such as divorce. Coping resources are defined as personal traits and social resources, which are used by different people at the time of severe stress (6). Some researchers, including Kavas (9), showed that in some societies, divorce is associated with various undesirable concepts such as shame, disreputation, and devaluation, which makes the individual internalize negative social attitudes.

Social scientists have explored different factors that would buffer the psychological distress following divorce: age, as it is indicated that younger persons reported better adjustment (10), social support groups, in which people benefit from both receiving and providing empathetic understanding (11), receiving emotional support that one needs, including intimacy and attachment, reassurance, having the feeling that one is loved and cared about (12), receiving guidance, including giving information and advice which could help the person to solve her problems (12), finding a new romantic relationship and life partner (10, 13), level of education, as it is stated that higher level of education helps the person to have more professional skills and control over his/her life (14), initiator status (15, 16), economic resources, which has been found to have a direct relationship with low level of depression (17), and good relationship with children (18, 19).

The prevalence of divorce and its potentially impairing impacts justify the

focuses on the post-divorce adjustment and the factors that may improve the quality of life after divorce. Considering that the qualitative research methods are useful in the deep understanding of the lived experiences of divorced women and since the processes and factors contributing to adjustment to divorce in Iranian women are unknown, the present study was conducted to explore women's perspective of factors contributing to post-divorce adjustment.

Methods

In the current qualitative research, we used ground theory analysis, followed by three phases of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method that relies on data collected from the population who are available to the researchers based on some specific characteristics (20), with maximum variation was used for selecting participants (21). The participants included divorced women living in Arak city, Iran. The main criterion for inclusion of the participants was being divorced from a permanent marriage, signing an informed consent form, having the ability to talk, and to be willing to share personal information with the researchers. Participants were recruited through different channels, including flyers and posters distributed in different settings (educational settings, community associations, clinics and offices under the supervision of State Welfare Organization of Iran), and personal and professional contacts. Flyers described the goals of the research and emphasized the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. We recruited participants until reaching a point of saturation (22) when new data no longer emerged. The final number of participants before the saturation of data was 21. Demographic information of the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' demographic information

Variables		N
Age	20-30	15
	30-40	4
	40-50	2
Age at marriage	17-30	17
	30-40	3
	40-50	1
Education	Diploma or below	6
	Bachelor's degree	11
	Master's degree	3
	Ph.D. degree	1
Duration of the marriage	Up to 1 year	12
	1 to 5 years	6
	5 to 10 year	2
	10 to 15 years	1
Having children	Yes	9
	No	12
Employment	Yes	16
	No	5

Prior to the interview, participants were provided with a written explanation of the purpose of the study and were asked to sign an informed consent form with a copy of the form to keep for themselves. Voluntary participation, leaving any question unanswered if they wished, or their right to withdraw from the study at any time they preferred were also emphasized.

Participants could determine whether the interview could be conducted in their workplace or in a clinic in the city center. Most of the interviews were conducted at the clinic, except for two interviews, which were conducted in the participants' workplace, according to their demands. Based on four pilot cases, interviews were performed by a trained female interviewer. The length of each interview was between 30-80 minutes. During the interview, only the participant and the interviewer were present. The interviewer wrote brief field notes regarding the nature of the interview, her perception of the participants'

responses, and her possible emotional reaction (e.g. raising her voice, crying, etc.). She also recorded the whole interview using a digital voice recorder. The recorded files were then transcribed carefully word by word. Transcriptions were then returned to the participants for further comments; only three transcriptions underwent revision by the participants.

To gather the data, a semi-structured interview was conducted individually for each participant (23). A number of key questions and potential prompts were listed. The interviewer used the same questions for all the participants. Initially, they were asked to answer a few demographic questions such as age, age at marriage, duration of the marriage, education, having children, and employment status. They were then asked to report and evaluate their level of divorce adjustment immediately after the divorce and on the day of the interview based on numbers between 0 and

10 (0 to have no adjustment and 10 to have totally adjusted to the new situation). The interview continued with clarifying and deepening questions such as “What was in your life that helped/worsened the situation?” Deepening questions were asked to clarify what exactly the participants meant by their statements, including: “would you elaborate more?” or “what do you mean?” They were then asked the following questions: “What could you have done or could have been different in your life to improve your divorce adjustment?” Data saturation was discussed within the research team, as the interviewer undertook interviews and research team open-coded them.

Rigour

The trustworthiness of the data was assured through the criterion of a similar study (24). The credibility was evaluated through engagement with the participants and the data, number check, peer check, external check, and constant comparison. The research members had regular meetings and reviewed the process of analyzing the data in numerous sessions. To achieve a better understanding of the phenomenon, we also used field notes.

Data analysis

For the purpose of the present study, ground theory analysis was implemented, followed by three phases of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (25). Coding was done by the first author and was discussed by another interview team on a regular basis. The initial phase was open coding. In this phase, the researcher looks for distinct concepts and categories in the data, which will be the basic units of the analysis. In other words, the data are broken down into first level concepts and second-level categories. In this initial stage, phenomenon, which is the post-divorce adjustment in the present research, is identified, labeled, categorized, and are related together in an outline form. In this step, codes had tags and description, except for where they were self-explanatory. Themes in open coping were identified and

were driven from the codes in a team discussion.

Next, researchers began the second phase, which was axial coding: the researcher had regular meetings to compare the similar codes. In axial coding, the data were put together in a new way. This was done using “Coding Paradigm”, a system of coding that identifies causal relationships between participants. The purpose of this second stage was to build explicit connections between categories and sub-categories - often called “Paradigm Model” (26). In other words, data already broken down into open coding are linked together in a new way. In this stage, attempts are made not to connect the data based on the previous theories.

In selective coding, which was the third and the last coding stage, the researcher sought to select and identify the core category, i.e. the central phenomenon around which all categories are based, and systematically connect it to other categories. This process involves validating those relationships, filling in and developing new categories (26). In other words, in selective coding, the categories are combined to develop a theory and represent the final composition. At the final stage, three available participants were asked to check the finding.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers collected the data after the approval of the research project and obtaining permission from the research committee from the University of Isfahan. Prior to the interview, participants were informed about the objectives of the research and they were asked to complete an informed consent form. To meet the objectives of the study, all the interviews were recorded. Participants were asked to complete a second informed consent form to permit the researchers to audio-record their voice. Prior to the interview, they were also assured that what they shared in the interview would only be used by the researcher for the present study only and no information would be given to anyone else.

After the interview, the audio files were assigned a number for tracking purposes and were specified via codes. Participants were also given a small present to thank them for their participation (Persian version of the book "Rebuilding: When Your Relationship Ends").

All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation (institutional and national) and the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000.

Results

In the present study, phenomenon - which is the main idea, event or incident toward which a series of actions and interactions are guided - was the post-divorce adjustment. In the primary data coding, 35 open concepts were extracted. These concepts were then transformed into 32 secondary concepts. At the final stage, 6 main categories contributing to post-divorce adjustment were extracted. It is worth noting that in social settings, there are numerous factors affecting an incident and it is impossible to take them all into account. Regarding adjustment to divorce, it is important to bear in mind that there is not just a specific reason to improve post-divorce adjustment. In the next section, participants' quotations are presented and identified observing and protecting participants' confidentiality. The primary Axial Coding included: (a) demographics, (b) interpersonal, (c) attitudinal, (d) relational, (e) supportive, and (f) coping strategies.

A) DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS

Data analysis showed that there are a number of factors contributing to adjustment to divorce which can be categories under the title 'demographics' including age, education, children, living place, income, the length of the marriage, time passed since the divorce, time of the separation, and spirituality and religion.

1. Age. Age can be an important factor in the post-divorce adjustment process for women. A 35-year-old participant said: *"divorce was like a flood in my life. Everything was destroyed, especially for me at the age of 35. I was not young anymore. The adjustment was difficult for me."* The results showed that younger women reported more positive experiences after divorce; they declared it was easier for them to adapt to the new life. It was noted by participants that younger age meant having the opportunity to continue higher education, finding a job, and opportunity to get married again. Adjusting to the new lifestyle, which demands accepting new roles and doing the new things all alone, makes it harder for a woman to adjust at an older age.
2. Education. Some participants pointed out the positive impact of education on facilitating the process of adaptation to the life after divorce. A 28-years-old woman indicated that: *"After the divorce, I emphasized more on my education. I studied more, and I obtained higher scores. This was exactly what I needed. Something to make me busy and to give me the feeling that I am useful."* In general, education can help the person obtain a higher level of involvement to the social setting and improve her self-concept.
3. Children. The present study showed that divorced women with children reported a lower level of adjustment compared to those who did not have a child. A 35-year-old divorced woman who had a daughter said: *"For me, no matter how convenient adjustment is, the loss of my son, who is now in the custody of his father - is like a bitter poison even in the happiest moments of my life."*

4. Living place. Findings suggest that a home to live in is an effective factor in divorce adjustment, *"My father has provided me with a home; it was small, but it was better to be with family, not to say it was undesirable, but when I am alone at home, it is as if I have my previous independence."*
5. Income. Financial security was identified as a contributing factor to divorce-adjustment. Income does not guarantee divorce-adjustment, but financial issues will make adjustment more difficult. One participant stated: *"Everything changes since I found the job I am doing now. With the money I can earn, life is easier to cope with."*
6. The length of the marriage. Duration of the marriage can have a significant effect on the level of adjustment that a person experiences after divorce. Many participants believed the shorter the marriage is, the easier it is to adapt to the life after divorce. A 41-year-old woman said, *"We were together for 10 years, as if, we grew up together. I knew him better than his mother did."*
7. Time passed since the divorce. Some participants, like Zahra, believed the passage of time can take the edge off of acute pain, *"It was really difficult during the first few months. As time went by, I learned how to cope with it more effectively."*
8. Time of the separation: Breakup after the religious engagement or the wedding. It was mentioned in the interview that the time in which the divorce happens plays a crucial role in divorce-adjustment. One participant said, *"we were going to have our wedding two years after our engagement. I am so happy we didn't get married. After the wedding, the divorce would be more difficult to deal with, especially for a non-virgin girl."*
9. Spirituality and religion. Culturally speaking, religion and spirituality are two components of Iranian lives. These

two concepts are mostly functional at the time of despair and crisis. Talking about divorce-adjustment, a participant claimed *"I was not very religious before my breakup. After the breakup, I understood I needed the almighty. I prayed more and talked to Allah more often. Every time I did so, I found refinement and relaxation in my heart."*

B) INTERPERSONAL FACTORS

Factors cited under interpersonal factors include opposite gender role, attachment to a former spouse, forgiving the ex-partner, perceived future, perceived strength, and perceived stress.

1. Opposite gender role. For women, the time after the divorce is the time of crucial changes. This is the time that they have to learn and do things they would rely on their husbands to do. This is especially true for women with traditional roles: *"After the divorce, you have to be both man and woman. There is no one to do the things around the house and after divorce, you normally don't have that much money to ask someone to do things for you. I am a handy man now (laughing)!"*
2. Attachment to ex-partner. The level of perceived attachment to the former spouse determines the level of adaptation. A 34-year-old participant believed, *"We were not close at all. We were like two roommates. When I think about how emotionless he was, I find it more rational to be divorced than to still be with him."*
3. Forgiving ex-partner. Forgiving ex-partner was identified as another post-divorce adjustment, *"You know what my good characteristic is? I forgot everything he did to me. Thinking about bad memories makes us think about revenge."*
4. Perceived future. The future from the perspective of the divorced women was another post-divorce factor,

"I knew a better future was waiting for me. I knew I was going to overcome all the limitations, I was going to have a better Job, I could continue my education..."; "My husband deprived me of all my rights. After the divorce, I knew everything would be fine. I knew I could continue my education, I knew I could find a job and I could even find a better husband!"

5. Perceived strength. Data analysis demonstrated that perceived strength was cited as another post-divorce factor, *"I was a Ph.D. student. I could find a proper job ... I always respected him but I did not receive that respect I wanted. I knew I had the ability to live without him."*
6. Perceived stress. Another post-divorce factor indicated by the participants is perceived stress, *"During the two months I was married, I was experiencing lots of pressure. Now, I am happy... It ended so that I could start a new life."*

C) ATTITUDINAL FACTORS

There are five themes under this classification: initiator status, the attitude of the family about divorce, the attitude toward divorce, confidence in the decision, and attitude toward the person guilty for the incident.

1. Initiator status. Initiator status was identified as an important factor for the participants in the present study. *"I have made my decision. I knew I had to do it. After what he did to me... I knew divorce would be the end of our relationship, but I am happy I was the one who put a step forward."*
2. The attitude of the family. What family thinks about divorce and how they see it determines the post-divorce adjustment in women, as well: *"My Family supported me? They all supported my decision and constantly*

remind me to forget what others might think."

3. The attitude toward divorce. Attitude toward divorce is another post-divorce factor cited by the participants, *"Divorce helped me improve my life. Every time I think about the good things that happened to me after divorce, I am more confident about the decision I made."*
4. Confidence in the decision. Another cited factor for post-divorce adjustment was confidence in the decision to get the divorce, *"I made this decision all by myself, now that I am thinking again, it was the best decision to end that relationship."*
5. Whose fault was it? The idea of who is to be blamed for the incident of the divorce is another factor for post-divorce adjustment, *"It is all his fault. I did not have to do anything with that. If I were guilty, I would have had such a hard time dealing with it... I know he does suffer from what he did to our relationship"*

D) RELATIONAL FACTORS

Relational factors cited by the participants as a post-divorce adjustment factor include life quality before the divorce, new romantic relationship, unfinished relationship, and focusing on parenting issues.

1. Life quality before the divorce. According to the participants, quality of life before the divorce was also an influential factor, *"I had lots of problems. He imprisoned me in the house. Finally, I understood he was cheating on me..."; "In order to pay his debt, my father forced me to marry my ex-husband. I was 17 and I was his second wife. Every single minute of that life was a torture. When I think about that time, I feel really happy I am divorced."*

2. New romantic relationship. Having a new life partner also emerged as a significant factor. *"He is the only person that I care about. I am now profoundly in love with him. Since I met him, life is easier."*
3. Unfinished relationship. Based on the responses, it appears that unfinished relationship with a former partner is a crucial factor in divorce adjustment. *"I was always hoping to get back together with him. One day, a friend told me my ex-husband was getting married. Since that day, I started reconstructing my life."*
4. Focusing on parenting issues. Participants also indicated that focusing on parenting is also an important post-divorce factor. A divorced mother with the custody of the child indicated that she had to work two shifts to pay for their livings but she did not regret having the child. She said having the child around would help her be more cautious about the child and supervise his behavior, *"My 14-year-old son still wets the bed. Since my divorce and my custody, he is more relaxed. If he were not with me, I wouldn't know what to live for. I would have always been worried about him."*

E) SUPPORTIVE RESOURCES

1. Tangible. This kind of support is provided by other people or organizations through providing financial support and material goods or services. A 31-year-old participant who was using services provided by the Well-Fare Organization of Iran stated, *"If it were not for them, I did not know what to do. I did not have anyone to support me, but their help and the services they provided until I find my current job helped me find my place and be more concentrated on my future."*
2. Informational. *"A friend of mine is a lawyer. She reded before and after my divorce. If it were not for her help, I*

would be so devastated that I could not have my rights."

3. Emotional. According to the responses provided by the participants, emotional support had a clear influence on post-divorce adjustment, *"My friend, Sahar, was always with me. She never left me alone. When I needed someone to talk to or cry my emotions out, she was there."*

F) COPING STRATEGIES

In the present study, a number of coping strategies were identified to directly affect the post-divorce adjustment process, including financial management, professional help, meaningful activities, and leisure and entertainment.

1. Financial Management. Poverty is one of the reasons for the divorce of many women and financial management would be a useful strategy after divorce, *"After the divorce, I started buying the things I really didn't want. Maybe it helped me take my mind off my divorce. But it was not worth it. I started to have more financial management without which, I would have been in lots of trouble."*
2. Professional Help. Using professional help from professionals like social workers, psychologists, and counselors, participating in recovery workshops and supportive groups, and reading professional resources is cited by many participants as a post-divorce adjustment factor, *"I visited a psychologist, though I first thought that it was useless; I found it to be of great importance for my life to get better."*
3. Meaningful activities. Having some meaningful activities also appeared to be a beneficial factor for divorce adjustment: *"I have always been interested in the Red-Crescent. I always wanted to help other people. Since I started working at the Red-Crescent, life has a new meaning. I am not the depressed person I used to be anymore"; "After the divorce, I got to*

know a few people working to preserve the environment. It was for free but working toward a goal was helping me forget my problems."

4. Leisure and entertainment. many participants claimed that leisure and hobbies, including social activities, sports, as well as cultural and educational activities were effective in divorce-adjustment, *"I started swimming. I passed more times with my family and friends. I experienced my first vacation abroad after my divorce."*

Discussion

The current qualitative study investigated the factors affecting post-divorce adjustment in Iranian women. Findings showed that these factors can be classified into six main categories: (a) demographics, (b) interpersonal, (c) attitudinal, (d) relational, (e) supportive, and (f) coping strategies. Findings were observed to be largely consistent with the pre-existing international literature. It should be noted that many of the 32 factors and 6 core categories identified in the present study shared a number of similarities with the 15 factors identified as positive factors contributing to divorce adjustment by Chan Lai Cheng et al (27) and the 17 factors identified by Veevers (28). It is worth mentioning that divorced women stated that these factors are effective only if they are provided together: more factors result in higher level of divorce adjustment.

In many countries, in contrast to western societies, divorce is still considered a deviant behavior (29) and people in these societies are blamed for their action and face repeated social sanctions (30). Being divorced will affect divorced women's self-concept as well as her self-efficacy. It is shown that those who score higher in self-efficacy measures show substantially fewer symptoms of depression (31). Because women generally rely on their husbands for some chores around the house, and this dependence is higher in traditional families,

after divorce women are faced with the challenge to survive on their own. Having negative attitudes toward divorce, especially considering the importance of social justice, will affect person's perception of her self-efficacy.

In Iranian society, being divorced - particularly for women - means deprivation of certain rights. Participants believed being a divorced woman resulted in limitation of their social activities, *"There is a great difference when you are a married woman looking for a job or a recently divorced woman looking for a job to pay for your expenses.* In other words, social injustice is aggravated against divorced women as compared with single or married women.

Participants also mentioned a problem they were dealing with *"on a daily basis"*. A 34-years old divorced woman told the researchers that *"You know what makes it hard for us to adjust to our new life after divorce? The disgusting idea some men have about women. They think being a divorced woman means you are available for everything; you are ready to be the second wife of a 60-year-old man or will accept to be the temporary wife of another. This bothers me the most."* Divorced participants in the present research believed that they did not have control over a number of factors so as to be able to obtain a higher level of adjustment to their divorce, e.g. being marginalized from family, friends, and society. A 28-year-old divorced woman pointed out: *"After the divorce, you lose all your married friends. One of my friends I have known for 13 years always makes excuses to hang out with me. Probably, her husband is afraid that my friendship will affect his life and my friend thinks that I am a potential threat to her marriage!"*

The aim of the current study was to determine the factors affecting post-divorce adjustment in Iranian women emphasizing the value of lived experiences of divorced women. Many of the participants of the study claimed that they were not

psychologically prepared for a divorce. Many also reported that, despite the time passed since their divorce, they were still trying to adapt to the new situation. Based on the findings of the present study, it is important to develop a solid support network and provide interventions targeting the quality of life in divorced women before and after finalization of the divorce.

Conflict of interest

Authors declare no conflict of interests.

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