Studying Divorced Couples' Lived Experiences of Social and Psychological Factors Influencing Divorce to Propose an Appropriate Conceptual Model

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Article Info

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of divorced couples to identify the underlying social and psychological factors influencing divorce and to propose an integrative conceptual model explaining its process and outcomes. The research adopted a qualitative design using the grounded theory approach based on Strauss and Corbin's systematic method (2008). The statistical population comprised divorced couples residing in Shiraz, Iran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling according to specific inclusion criteria: at least two months and a maximum of five years since divorce, absence of severe physical illness as the main cause of divorce, and willingness to participate. Semi-structured interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was achieved with ten couples. Data were analyzed using three levels of coding—open, axial, and selective—to identify causal, contextual, intervening, strategic, and consequential components of the divorce process. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability were applied to ensure trustworthiness. The results revealed that divorce is not an instantaneous or single-cause event but a gradual, multifactorial, and structured process shaped by the interplay of individual, relational, and sociocultural dynamics. Causal factors included dysfunctional family backgrounds, patriarchal gender beliefs, emotional immaturity, and poor communication. Contextual conditions, such as cultural taboos, social pressure for endurance, and lack of premarital education, intensified the process. Intervening variables, including personality traits, economic dependence, and presence of children, acted as catalysts or inhibitors. Strategies like silence, avoidance, and concealment deepened marital alienation. Consequences spanned psychological distress, social isolation, and in rare cases, identity reconstruction. Divorce in Iranian society represents a multidimensional psychosocial phenomenon rooted in cultural, emotional, and structural inequalities, requiring multi-level interventions that integrate individual, familial, and societal support systems.
Keywords: *lived experience, divorce, social factors, psychological factors, conceptual model*

1. Introduction

Divorce, as one of the most complex social and psychological phenomena, has become an increasingly prevalent issue in both developed and developing societies. It represents not only the legal dissolution of marriage but also a multifaceted process of emotional, social, and cultural disintegration that affects individuals, families, and communities alike (Saroukhani, 2011). Scholars have long emphasized that divorce is not an abrupt or isolated event but rather the culmination of cumulative dysfunctions in communication, emotional regulation, and socio-cultural structures (Abdollahi et al., 2020). From a sociological perspective, the rising rate of divorce in recent decades reflects the broader transformations of family systems, gender roles, and individual autonomy in modern societies (Kalateh Sadati & Sabohi Golkar, 2024). These changes have prompted researchers to explore divorce as both a social construction and a psychological experience shaped by cultural norms and personal meanings.

Within Iranian society, divorce has moved from being a rare and socially condemned occurrence to an increasingly normalized outcome of marital instability. However, it still carries a heavy moral and emotional burden, particularly for women, due to persistent patriarchal norms and traditional gender expectations (Fathi- Ashtiani et al., 2023). Studies on Iranian families indicate that structural inequalities, such as economic dependency, limited emotional education, and inadequate premarital training, often heighten marital vulnerability (Ghasemi & saroukhani, 2014). The family, once considered a sacred institution, now faces pressures arising from modernization, urbanization, and individualism, leading to a redefinition of intimacy and commitment (Saroukhani, 2011).

Internationally, similar trends have been observed, though they manifest differently depending on cultural context. For example, research in Western societies has documented that individualistic values emphasizing self-fulfillment and personal growth contribute significantly to marital instability (Amato & Previti, 2003). In contrast, collectivistic cultures—where family cohesion and social approval hold central importance—often experience divorce as a moral and social crisis rather than a personal failure (Mentser & Sagiv, 2025). Mentser and Sagiv's (2025) cross-cultural research demonstrated that personal and cultural values interact to predict divorce rates, revealing that cultural emphasis on autonomy and equality can both reduce or amplify marital conflict depending on alignment between partners' belief systems.

Empirical research shows that the psychological processes surrounding divorce are as important as the social ones. Divorce frequently triggers profound emotional distress, identity confusion, and long-term adjustment challenges (Millings et al., 2020). In their model of emotional adaptation to relationship dissolution, Millings and colleagues (2020) proposed that individuals who experience lower emotional awareness, poor coping skills, and unresolved attachment issues are more prone to post-divorce distress. Similarly, Lin and Brown (2020) argue that the consequences of divorce are not limited to immediate psychological outcomes but can extend into later life, influencing well-being, social functioning, and health trajectories through what they call the "convalescence model" (Lin & Brown, 2020).

From a health psychology perspective, Elexpuru et al. (2024) conducted a meta-analysis revealing that divorce is associated with significant risks to physical health, including higher rates of chronic illness and mortality. The authors emphasized that psychological stress, lifestyle disruptions, and social isolation serve as mediators linking marital dissolution to adverse health outcomes (Elexpuru et al., 2024). These findings underline the bio-psycho-social dimensions of divorce, which encompass emotional breakdown, social withdrawal, and physiological stress responses.

In the Iranian context, qualitative research has highlighted unique socio-cultural dynamics influencing marital dissolution. Kalateh Sadati and Sabohi Golkar (2024) described the process of "post-traditional divorce" among women in smaller Iranian cities, showing how social change has redefined the boundaries of marital endurance (Kalateh Sadati & Sabohi Golkar, 2024). Their study showed that women's growing awareness of personal rights, combined with persistent patriarchal structures, creates a paradoxical tension between autonomy and conformity. Similarly, Abdollahi et al. (2020) explored the lived experience of divorced couples in Tehran and concluded that divorce often stems from deep emotional detachment, lack of communication, and intergenerational transmission of dysfunctional family models (Abdollahi et al., 2020). These findings align with those of Taghavi Dinani et al. (2020), who found that chronic emotional neglect, lack of empathy, and rigid gender expectations are psychological precursors of marital collapse (Taghavi Dinani et al., 2020).

Comparative analyses indicate that divorce is not driven solely by interpersonal incompatibility but also by broader societal and cultural transitions. The transformation of women's roles in education and employment has introduced new expectations of equality and reciprocity within marriage (Fathi- Ashtiani et al., 2023). When these expectations clash with traditional male-dominated power dynamics, emotional alienation often follows. Mohammad Rajabi et al. (2024) demonstrated that children of divorced parents, particularly those exposed to prolonged parental conflict, exhibit internalized psychological problems such as anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal (Mohammad Rajabi et al., 2024). Their findings underscore the intergenerational impact of marital breakdown on children's emotional development. Complementary evidence by Hosseinzadeh Dashti et al. (2024) also highlights that parental divorce can result in long-term psychological damage to children, including emotional insecurity and disrupted attachment patterns (Hosseinzadeh Dashti et al., 2024).

The role of early-life family experiences has been consistently documented as a predictive factor in later marital instability. Dysfunctional parental models—such as emotionally distant or authoritarian households—contribute to individuals' maladaptive relationship patterns in adulthood (Ghasemi & saroukhani, 2014). According to Fathi-Ashtiani et al. (2023), individuals from conflictual or broken families tend to replicate those patterns in their own marriages, often lacking emotional literacy and problem-solving competence (Fathi- Ashtiani et al., 2023). These findings correspond with Amato and Previti's (2003) seminal study, which identified gender, social class, and developmental stage as key moderators shaping people's reasons for divorce (Amato & Previti, 2003). In particular, women tend to attribute divorce to emotional neglect and power imbalance, whereas men often cite external stressors such as financial pressures or incompatibility.

Recent sociological and psychological evidence also points to cultural variations in how divorce is perceived and managed. In societies like Iran, where family reputation and social image carry immense weight, many individuals— especially women—are pressured to "endure and stay" rather than seek dissolution (Kalateh Sadati & Sabohi Golkar, 2024). Such cultural imperatives reinforce the stigma of divorce, leading to emotional suppression, silence, and concealment of marital distress. As Zafeer et al. (2022) showed in their study of Pakistani women, divorcees often face psychological strain, loss of social standing, and economic marginalization, all of which compound post-

divorce adjustment difficulties (Zafeer et al., 2022). This regional evidence parallels Iranian findings and indicates that patriarchal gender norms and collectivistic moral codes exacerbate the suffering associated with divorce.

Furthermore, studies reveal that socioeconomic and educational disparities between spouses constitute significant structural antecedents of marital breakdown. Fathi-Ashtiani et al. (2023) emphasized that unequal social status, class differences, and mismatched educational levels often erode marital harmony by generating unbalanced expectations and communication barriers (Fathi- Ashtiani et al., 2023). In the same vein, Lehrer and Son (2017) documented that shifts in women's educational and professional participation in the United States have transformed marital dynamics, leading to a complex interplay between independence, marital satisfaction, and child outcomes (Lehrer & Son, 2017). This evidence demonstrates that while education can enhance women's autonomy, it can also destabilize traditional marital hierarchies when not accompanied by shared understanding and adaptive communication.

In the realm of emotional and psychological adjustment, Millings et al. (2020) developed a conceptual framework for understanding emotional adaptation after relationship dissolution, noting that recovery depends on the ability to reconstruct meaning and emotional identity (Millings et al., 2020). Similarly, Lin and Brown (2020) argued that recovery after divorce involves a prolonged process of convalescence that requires both internal resilience and external social support (Lin & Brown, 2020). These perspectives echo Iranian evidence showing that divorced individuals often lack institutional or community-based support systems to facilitate adaptation (Abdollahi et al., 2020). The absence of accessible counseling services and public awareness programs perpetuates the cycle of psychological distress.

Moreover, the social meaning of divorce in Iran is undergoing transformation. As Kalateh Sadati (2024) observed, the emerging phenomenon of "post-traditional divorce" reflects a society in transition from collective values toward individual agency (Kalateh Sadati & Sabohi Golkar, 2024). This shift, while empowering some, also leaves many—especially women—caught between new aspirations and enduring traditional constraints. Fathi-Ashtiani et al. (2023) argue that such contradictions generate an emotional duality in modern Iranian marriages: a simultaneous longing for autonomy and fear of social judgment. Ghasemi and Saroukhani (2014) similarly found that the normalization of divorce has not yet translated into

emotional acceptance, as couples continue to internalize guilt and failure (Ghasemi & saroukhani, 2014).

At the same time, global perspectives underscore that divorce cannot be understood solely as an indicator of social breakdown but also as a potential pathway to psychological renewal. In certain contexts, individuals may reconstruct their self-concept, autonomy, and emotional health following divorce (Lin & Brown, 2020). However, as Millings et al. (2020) cautioned, such positive transformation depends on the availability of psychological support, economic security, and cultural acceptance (Millings et al., 2020). In Iran and similar societies, where cultural taboos and gender inequalities persist, the post-divorce adjustment process remains fraught with stigma, isolation, and identity erosion (Hosseinzadeh Dashti et al., 2024).

From a psychological standpoint, divorce represents a crisis that challenges the individual's emotional regulation, coping mechanisms, and meaning-making systems. It disrupts the continuity of identity and belonging, forcing individuals to renegotiate their self-concept and life narrative (Taghavi Dinani et al., 2020). According to Mohammad Rajabi et al. (2024), children of divorced families internalize these emotional disturbances, often mirroring their parents' maladaptive coping behaviors (Mohammad Rajabi et al., 2024). The long-term psychosocial costs—ranging from anxiety and depression to relational distrust—illustrate that divorce is not an isolated event but a socially transmitted emotional condition affecting multiple generations.

Therefore, contemporary divorce research increasingly advocates for a multidimensional approach integrating sociocultural, economic, and psychological frameworks. As Mentser and Sagiv (2025) highlighted, understanding the interaction between personal values and cultural systems is key to explaining cross-cultural variations in marital instability (Mentser & Sagiv, 2025). Similarly, Amato and Previti (2003) emphasized the importance of recognizing the life course and contextual contingencies that shape people's decisions to end marriages (Amato & Previti, 2003). Within Iran's transitional social landscape, the interaction of modern aspirations, traditional constraints, and structural inequalities renders divorce both a personal crisis and a cultural transformation.

In light of these perspectives, the present study aims to explore the lived experiences of divorced couples in order to identify the social and psychological factors contributing to divorce and to propose an integrative conceptual model explaining its underlying processes.

2. Methods and Materials

This study was descriptive–applied in nature and employed a qualitative approach using the grounded theory method based on the systematic approach of Strauss and Corbin (2008). The statistical population consisted of divorced couples residing in Shiraz. Participants were selected through purposive sampling according to specific criteria: a minimum of two months and a maximum of five years since the divorce, the absence of severe physical illness as the main cause of divorce, and a willingness to participate in interviews. The sampling process continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, resulting in interviews with ten couples.

The data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview. The interviews began with general questions about factors contributing to divorce and were followed by probing questions when necessary. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and then transcribed verbatim. To ensure credibility and validity, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four trustworthiness criteria—credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability—were applied. Accordingly, procedures such as participant validation, expert review by supervisors and advisors, external auditing, and providing a rich description of the context and participant characteristics were implemented.

Data were analyzed using a three-step coding process, including open, axial, and selective coding. During open coding, concepts were extracted, and initial categories were formed. In the axial coding phase, the core phenomenon and its relationships with causal, contextual, and intervening conditions, as well as strategies and consequences, were examined. In the selective coding phase, the main category of the study was developed, and its connection with other categories was explained. All ethical considerations—including obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and preserving the participants' right to withdraw freely—were fully observed.

3. Findings and Results

During the open coding phase, all textual data from the interviews were carefully reviewed, and initial concepts were extracted. Open coding was conducted to capture all possible concepts without prior theoretical assumptions. In

this stage, 100 initial codes were obtained, which after refinement and consolidation, were grouped into 34 preliminary conceptual categories.

Table 1

Open Coding

No.	Sample Participant Quotation	Initial Code	Conceptual Interpretation
1	Many times when I spoke, he acted as if he didn't hear me at all.	Emotional neglect	Ignoring the need to be heard in the relationship
2	During arguments, I always gave in, and he never once said maybe you're right.	Chronic blaming	Egocentrism in conflict resolution
3	He said, "You don't understand anything; marrying you was a mistake."	Continuous humiliation	Undermining the spouse's self-esteem
4	His mother was everywhere—even once entered our bedroom without knocking; I had no privacy.	In-law interference	Lack of boundaries in couple's autonomy
5	Whatever I said, he'd reply, "My mom told me so," never his own opinion.	Cognitive dependence on mother	Lack of decision-making independence
6	When he lost his job, he started complaining and became irritable.	Anger after financial failure	Psychological vulnerability during economic crisis
7	He said, "If you go to counseling, I'll divorce you."	Resistance to counseling	Denial of the need for professional help
8	I worked all night while he only spent money.	Economic injustice	Imbalance in financial participation
9	He was always silent, couldn't talk about problems.	Communicative avoidance	Deficiency in couple communication skills
10	He always made decisions; I only had to follow.	Decision-making dominance	One-sided power structure
11	Once, during an argument, he broke a window; our child wet the bed out of fear.	Behavioral violence in conflict	Failure in anger regulation
12	He said, "Everything you do is for the child, not for me."	Emotional transfer from spouse to child	Emotional detachment between partners
13	We didn't know each other; it was an arranged marriage.	Marriage without prior acquaintance	Partner selection based on cultural pressure
14	While shopping, he said, "Call my mom and ask what to buy."	Mother-dependent decision-making	Immaturity in family independence
15	After losing his job, he withdrew from everyone and became depressed.	Post-unemployment depression	Psychological outcome of economic crisis
16	My parents were the same way; maybe I'm repeating their pattern.	Divorce pattern in family of origin	Intergenerational transmission of conflict
17	He wanted a servant, not a partner.	Instrumentalization of spouse	Objectification in marital role
18	He said, "You just listen; I'm the man."	Gender authoritarianism	Patriarchal power structure
19	Everything was just for show; no one was happy at home.	Superficial relationship	Emotional disconnection within the family
20	Whenever I wanted to discuss things, he acted on his own.	Lack of shared decision-making	Absence of mutual communication
21	He said women should only raise children and not work.	Restricting women's employment	Reduction of women's role to motherhood
22	For minor issues, he would pack and go to his mother's house.	Repeated withdrawal	Behavioral instability during crisis
23	From the start, I knew she wasn't the right one, but it was too late.	Early mistrust	Lack of foundational trust in partner selection
24	During arguments, he said, "Do whatever you want, I don't care."	Chronic indifference	Emotional passivity toward conflict
25	He hit me once during engagement, but no one took it seriously.	Ignoring early violence	Family tolerance toward warning signs
26	He said men shouldn't help at home; men are breadwinners.	Male role stereotype	Traditional beliefs about masculinity
27	He didn't want children, said they'd ruin his life.	Family value conflict	Divergent attitudes toward parenting
28	When I suggested therapy, he said, "Are you crazy?"	Stigmatizing psychological help	Negative view of mental health services
29	He said I should be like his mother; even gave her a house key.	Comparing wife to mother	Erasure of feminine identity in marriage
30	We never went out or traveled—just home and silence.	Lack of positive shared experiences	Absence of relational reinforcement
31	He blamed me for everything and never took responsibility.	Responsibility projection	Avoidance of accountability in conflict
32	Despite good income, he was stingy with me.	Emotional and financial stinginess	Control through deprivation
33	When our child was sick, he said he couldn't take leave.	Neglecting family priorities	Parental irresponsibility

34	When I was upset, he said, "You're too sensitive."	Emotional invalidation	Devaluing the partner's emotional experience
35	When I mentioned separation, he said, "Get lost."	Aggressive responses to separation threats	Lack of rational dialogue capacity
36	I once joked, "What if I die?" He said, "That'd be great."	Total psychological rejection	Emotional severance through aggression
37	Even during childbirth, I was alone; he didn't come.	Absence of vital support	Denial of supportive role in crises
38	My family told me not to divorce, but I didn't care anymore.	Resistance to social pressure	Individual decision for liberation
39	In court, I told myself I'd never go back, even if I died.	Complete loss of hope	Irreversible emotional rupture
40	At first, I thought maybe I was the problem.	Internalized blame	Erosion of self-confidence
41	I only felt peace when he wasn't home.	Calmness in absence of spouse	Spouse's presence as source of stress
42	He said, "If you divorce me, you'll regret it."	Threat after divorce request	Control through intimidation
43	He said women should endure suffering; that's life.	Passive acceptance of pain	Reproduction of victimhood ideology
44	One day he said, "You never deserved life."	Identity destruction	Attack on partner's self-worth
45	He respected his family more than me.	Distributive injustice in respect	Lack of psychological support
46	I never understood why he married me.	Unanswered motive for marriage	Existential doubt about partner choice
47	He never spent time with our child, said he was tired.	Parental irresponsibility	Avoidance of paternal duties
48	I was afraid to ask where he was, even when I knew he was cheating.	Fear of confrontation	Psychologically unsafe relationship
49	He bought for himself but said no money for me.	Financial discrimination	Emotional-economic inequality
50	He said a good wife stays silent and raises kids.	Traditional gender expectations	Denial of women's personal needs
51	My father said I failed as a wife; now I'm imprisoned at home.	Conflict between norms and lived experience	Generational value rupture
52	He wouldn't let me contact my family.	Cutting off from family of origin	Emotional isolation and control
53	When I cried, he laughed and mocked me.	Mocking emotions	Emotional rejection and humiliation
54	I kept thinking maybe I'm the problem.	Self-blame due to neglect	Cognitive–emotional weakening
55	When I was happy, it made him angry.	Intolerance of partner's joy	Conflict in positive emotional cycles
56	He confided in friends but not me.	Emotional intimacy outside marriage	Emotional displacement
57	When I got MS, he never asked how I was.	Lack of emotional support in illness	Indifference to spouse's health
58	He said men have the right to hit disobedient wives.	Belief in legitimate violence	Internalized authoritarian view
59	He hid everything—his phone, bank account, whereabouts.	Chronic secrecy	Lack of transparency and trust
60	He said women must obey; having opinions is disrespectful.	Denial of women's autonomy	Cognitive and emotional control
61	At gatherings, he embarrassed me in front of others.	Public shaming	Social humiliation and disrespect
62	When I suggested a psychologist for our child, he said it's nonsense.	Denying child's mental health	Neglect of developmental needs
63	He said I quit my job because I was incapable.	Degrading working women	Patriarchal ideology vs. female competence
64	He said, "If you divorce, everyone will know you're weak."	Reputational threat	Social-shaming pressure
65	He promised to buy a house if I stayed.	Manipulative persuasion	Coercive bargaining to continue marriage
66	He mocked my looks, said I wasn't attractive anymore.	Body criticism	Appearance-based humiliation
67	He said I was jealous of his mother.	Reversal of blame	Denial and psychological inversion
68	He never thanked me for anything.	Lack of appreciation	Devaluation of partner's efforts
69	I talked about the future; he only talked about the past.	Inability for shared vision	Temporal stagnation in relationship
70	He continued life without forgiving me.	Living in silent resentment	Emotional stagnation without repair
71	After every fight, I had to reconcile even if not at fault.	Unequal conflict repair	One-sided reconciliation cycle
72	He said men should never apologize.	Traditional masculinity norm	Gendered dominance in resolution
73	He didn't let me choose my wedding dress.	Denial of personal agency	Parental control over personal autonomy
74	He said, "I'm the man; you just obey."	Denial of equality	Authoritarian marital structure
75	He never asked what I wanted.	Neglecting partner's needs	Exclusion of women's desires
76	I always felt like a stranger at home.	Psychological alienation	Lack of emotional belonging
77	He said, "Don't let guests know we have problems."	Hiding family conflict	Image-centered relationship
78	He said he alone would raise the child.	Excluding mother's parenting role	Unilateral control in parenting
79	During a fight, he said, "Take the kid, I don't want him."	Rejection of parental duty	Paternal detachment under stress
80	After divorce, he said he still loved me but kept hurting me.	Unhealthy dependent love	Contradictory emotional behavior
81	He felt threatened by my independence.	Threatened masculinity	Traditional male role conflict
82	He never asked my opinion, only gave orders.	Ignoring spouse's voice	Exclusion from decision-making
83	When I was upset, he said, "Go to sleep."	Emotional suppression	Denial of internal experience
84	He never bought me flowers or celebrated birthdays.	Romantic indifference	Absence of symbolic affection
85	He said no real man goes to counseling.	Gender labeling of therapy	Cultural taboos in male help-seeking

86	When he had money, he spent only on himself.	Self-centered consumerism	Neglect of relational equity
87	He told my mother I'm worthless, just pretty.	Demeaning female worth	Reducing woman to appearance
88	When our child was sick, he refused to pay for treatment.	Parental cruelty	Indifference to child's suffering
89	He said, "All women in our family endure; why can't you?"	Offensive comparison	Undermining individuality
90	He expected me to smile even when I was hurting.	Forced emotional display	Denial of authentic emotion
91	He said men never admit mistakes.	Male resistance to error	Idealized invulnerability
92	He only saw things from his own perspective.	Extreme egocentrism	Inability for perspective-taking
93	When I cried, he looked away and said, "Stop it."	Emotional unresponsiveness	Lack of empathy
94	He forgot my birthday, said it's childish.	Neglecting symbolic rituals	Emotional neglect in intimacy
95	He said marrying you was a mistake.	Expression of regret	Verbal destruction of relationship
96	After divorce, he never asked about our child.	Complete paternal neglect	Post-divorce disconnection
97	Returning to my parents' home, I felt alive again.	Feeling of liberation	Psychological recovery after divorce
98	He was always with his friends, ignored me.	Neglect of spousal role	Interpersonal–social role conflict
99	In public, he always embarrassed me.	Public humiliation	Social undermining of partner
100	From engagement to divorce, he never said "I love you."	Emotional deprivation	Absence of verbal affection
101	He was unkempt and smelled bad; I couldn't get close to him.	Neglect of personal hygiene	Loss of sexual attraction and physical intimacy

Open coding, as the first step in qualitative data analysis, plays a foundational role in uncovering the latent concepts embedded in participants' narratives. In this stage, the researcher, without theoretical preconceptions, carefully and sensitively reviews the interview transcripts and converts meaningful statements into analyzable conceptual units (codes). In this regard, according to Table (1), 101 open codes were extracted from the raw interview data. These codes not only reflect behavioral and experiential instances but also carry cognitive, emotional, structural, and cultural patterns that culminated in the collapse of marital relationships. Analysis of the codes indicates that, in the lived experience of these couples, divorce was not a sudden or mono-causal phenomenon; rather, it was a gradual, multifactorial, and complex process.

A substantial portion of the initial codes clustered around communicative dysfunctions such as emotional invalidation, repeated humiliation, chronic indifference, recurrent withdrawal, and avoidance of dialogue. These codes show that most of these relationships suffered from a "relationship without communication" pattern; that is, despite physical cohabitation, the emotional and psychological relationship had effectively dissolved. Many participants reported experiences of psychological, verbal, and even physical violence, which were reflected in codes such as "public humiliation," "shaming," "belief in legitimate violence," and "identity erosion." These codes point to structural domination within relationships that was often consolidated on the basis of gendered assumptions and male authoritarianism. In a considerable segment of the interviews, participants complained about direct or indirect interference by the spouse's family or their own parents. Codes such as "mother-in-law interference," "cognitive dependence on parents," and "humiliation by the spouse's

family" indicate that many couples lacked healthy boundaries between the marital subsystem and the family of origin. Many male participants held highly traditional views regarding the woman's role in the family; thus, codes such as "erasure of women's agency," "demeaning employed women," "decision-making domination," and "denial of intellectual independence" capture this perspective. Such inequality produced not only a power gap but also a rupture of mutual respect. In parts of the interviews, codes such as "egocentrism," "childish sulking," "nonresponsiveness to the spouse's distress," and "explosive reactions" recurred repeatedly. These codes represent deficits in emotion regulation skills, self-awareness, empathy, and responsibility-taking on the part of both partners. In effect, low psychological maturity severely impaired problem-solving capacity.

Deep manifestations of relational crisis included rejection of the child, taunting the mother for the child's condition, and indifference toward the child's illness or mental health. Codes such as "parental cruelty," "marginalizing the mother in child-rearing," and "denial of the child's mental health" indicate that divorce, in many cases, involved not only marital rupture but also paternal or maternal rupture. Codes such as "economic injustice," "financial discrimination," "emotional and financial miserliness," and "self-centered consumerism" show that inequality in providing or managing financial resources strongly affected satisfaction with marital life. These codes frame the economy not merely as an external factor, but as a power instrument within the relationship. Finally, a subset of codes—such as "absence of shared goals," "inability to build a shared future," "living in the silence of resentment," and "feelings of emptiness"—reflect the reality that relationships ending in divorce were not only drained of emotion but also deprived of meaning

and purpose. When meaning is removed from a relationship, even habit cannot ensure its durability.

Overall, the analysis of open codes offers a deep view of the gradual collapse of marital relationships within a specific sociocultural context. These codes show that, in the couples' narratives, divorce is experienced as the natural end point of a gradual process of erosion, exclusion, domination, silence, and demoralization. The concepts extracted at this stage formed the basis for categorization in axial coding and the design of the final conceptual model. After identifying the open codes, the open codes were classified and refined within the elements of the grounded theory paradigm, which are discussed below.

Primary consequences are mainly concentrated on the individual's mental, emotional, and social health and appear immediately after divorce. These consequences are more intense within the cultural context of Shiraz, especially for women, because divorce is often regarded in this community as a "failure" or "stigma." Secondary consequences are deeper and longer-term effects that may persist for years after divorce. These consequences impact not only the individual but also children and even subsequent generations.

• The role of gender and culture: Women face compounded challenges in this process, including economic vulnerability, social isolation, and cultural pressures to remarry. These factors make the consequences of divorce substantially heavier for women.

• Potential for positive transformation: In rare cases, divorce can lead to identity reconstruction and the attainment of independence; however, this requires adequate social and psychological support.

This analysis shows that divorce, in the lived experience of couples from Shiraz, is a multidimensional phenomenon that necessitates supportive interventions at individual, family, and social levels. Without such support, the consequences of divorce can turn into a cycle of distress and maladjustment in the lives of individuals and the community.

Overall, in the couples' lived experience, divorce produces a chain of multilevel consequences ranging from anxiety, shame, and isolation to identity reconstruction or collapse. Although some consequences can be positive and rehabilitative, most stem from the absence of social support, cultural pressures, and structural gender inequality. These consequences are especially more severe, more widespread, and longer-lasting for women. The qualitative analysis of the data in this study—using the grounded theory approach and the Strauss and Corbin paradigm model—led to the identification of a complex network of causal, contextual, intervening, strategic, and consequential factors that contributed to the formation, maintenance, and eventual breakdown of the marital relationship. Divorced couples' perceptions of their experiences are not simple or linear narratives but reflections of the interweaving of cultural, psychological, structural, and emotional components within the Iranian social context.

Analysis of the paradigm elements of divorce indicated that this phenomenon results from multilayered interactions among causal factors (such as dysfunctional family patterns, traditional beliefs, and lack of communication skills), contextual conditions (such as the social taboo of divorce, cultural pressures, and lack of psychological support), and intervening conditions (such as personality characteristics, financial dependency, and the presence of a child). In such a context, couples often adopted ineffective strategies—such as silence, avoidance, one-sided accommodation, or concealment—and only in a limited number of cases was divorce chosen as a last resort. The consequences of this process emerged at two levels: primary (depression, anxiety, psychological breakdown, and harm to children) and secondary (social isolation, distrust of relationships, and reproduction of ineffective parenting styles). In rare instances, it led to identity reconstruction and independence. Therefore, divorce is not a simple individual decision but the product of complex interactions among cultural, social, and psychological structures that can provide grounds for revising supportive and educational policies.

Figure 1

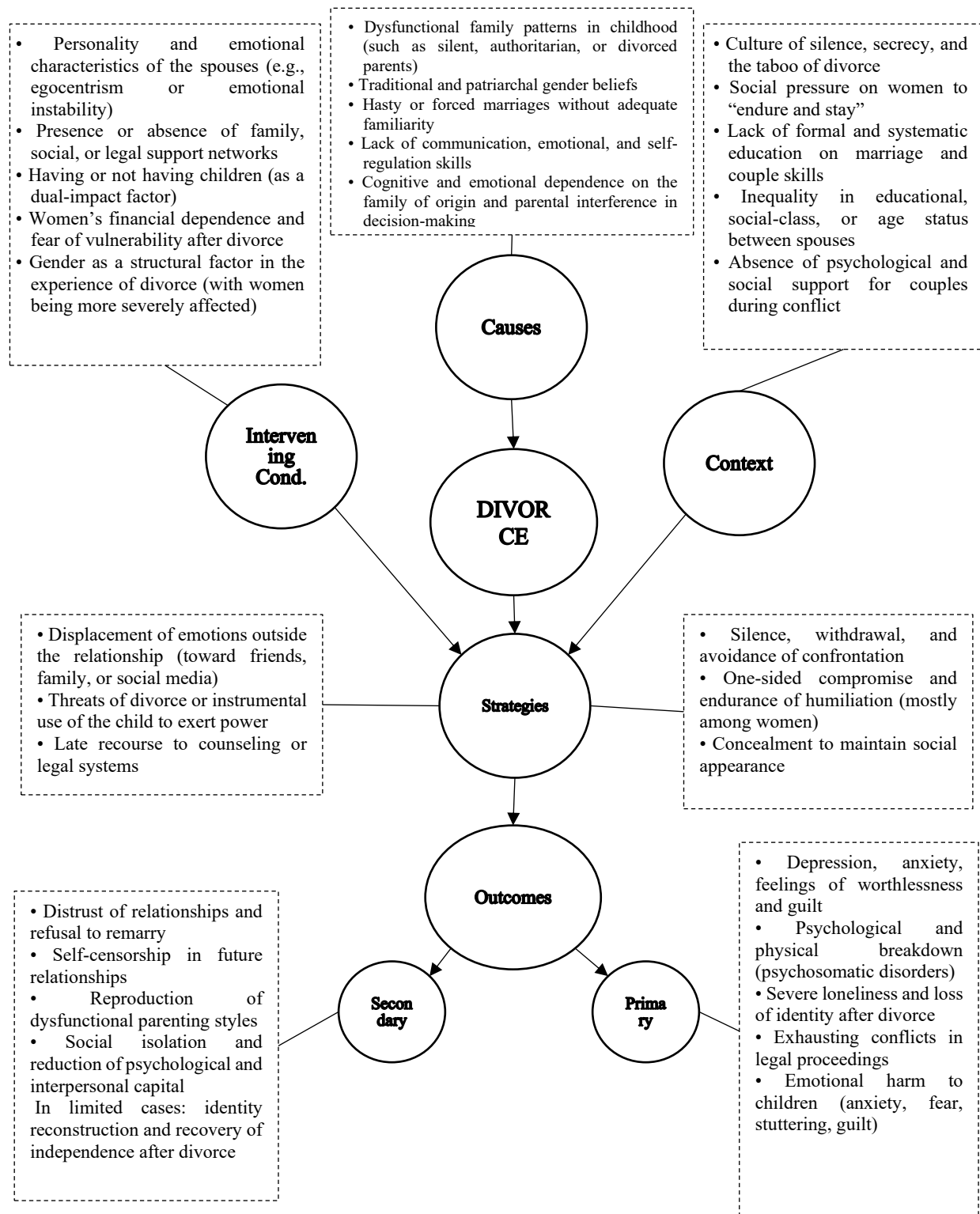*Strauss and Corbin's Paradigm Model: Conditions, Strategies, and Consequences*

Figure (1) represents a comprehensive theoretical model derived from qualitative data using the grounded theory method. The model analyzes divorce not as a single event but as a multilayered, gradual, and structured process within a causal–contextual–intervening–strategic network. The model's structure is built on the Strauss and Corbin framework and shows how diverse factors, in dynamic interaction, lead to the breakdown of the marital relationship.

Causal conditions: This section delineates hidden yet decisive roots of marital crisis. Dysfunctional family patterns in childhood, traditional gender attitudes, lack of emotional skills, dependence on the family of origin, uninformed marriages, and low psychological literacy were identified as foundational elements in the formation of crisis. These factors effectively "plant the seeds of divorce" in individuals' minds and psyches prior to marriage.

Contextual conditions: At the contextual layer, what waters and activates these seeds are a patriarchal culture, social pressure to preserve the appearance of the relationship, lack of premarital education, and gaps in social and institutional support. These factors lend "endurance" to already damaged marital relationships and turn separation into a belated yet unavoidable decision.

Intervening conditions: Factors such as the spouses' psychological characteristics, level of awareness and education, the presence of a child, women's economic dependency, support or lack of support from others, and systematized gendered views function as "catalysts" or "brakes" that accelerate or delay the path toward divorce. At times, these conditions operate covertly, subtly reshaping decision-making trajectories.

Strategies: This section presents couples' behavioral and emotional responses to crisis. Strategies such as silence, one-sided accommodation, sulking, concealment, displacement of emotion outside the relationship, or threats of divorce deepened the crisis rather than solving it. This part demonstrates how even imperceptible everyday actions can gradually wear down and drain the relationship.

Consequences: At the end of the model, the primary and secondary consequences of divorce are depicted, ranging from feelings of emptiness, depression, and lack of identity to distrust in relationships, reproduction of ineffective parenting styles, and, in rare cases, identity reconstruction after liberation. These consequences are not only individual but also intergenerational and social.

In sum, Figure (1) is not merely a conceptual diagram but a psycho-social map of the lifeworld of divorced couples. The model shows that divorce is not the product of accident or infidelity alone; rather, it is the outcome of a complex interweaving of beliefs, structures, emotions, and cultural conditions. Therefore, any intervention for preventing or managing divorce must operate simultaneously at multiple levels (structural, individual, educational, and supportive). This model is the theoretical crystallization of lived experiences—a scientific voice for the hidden pains that have taken shape in the silence of domestic walls.

To assess the validity of the model, experts were invited to complete the Delphi technique questionnaire within a one-week period. As a result, 11 experts participated in this phase of the study. Although, according to the general rule of the Delphi method, the opinions of experts and any subsequent modifications to the model are usually redistributed among all participants to gather further feedback and achieve a relative consensus, in this stage—given that prior to the validation phase, several discussions and consultations had already been conducted with a number of experts regarding the drafted model and most deficiencies had been addressed—the majority of the experts agreed with the framework and content of the proposed model. Their feedback did not result in major or fundamental changes to the model.

Therefore, after ensuring a relative consensus among the experts, a researcher-made instrument with a five-point Likert response scale was distributed for ranking the model. The results derived from data analysis are presented in Table (2).

According to Table (2), the percentage of expert agreement in all listed items exceeded 80% out of 100%. Moreover, the mean agreement scores hovered around 4. Given that the experts' response scale ranged from 1 to 5, the maximum possible agreement score for each indicator was 5. Therefore, obtaining an average score of 4 is considered highly satisfactory, as in some indicators the mean approached 5. For example, for the indicator "appropriateness and comprehensiveness of contextual conditions for the target group," the mean expert agreement score was 4.9 out of 5, equivalent to 100%, indicating excellent consensus among the experts.

Table 2

Validation of the Proposed Model Using the Fuzzy Delphi Technique

No.	Criterion	Mean Agreement	Agreement Percentage
1	Comprehensiveness	4.2	82
2	Exclusiveness	4.4	90
3	Clarity of the model	4.7	92
4	Desirability of relationships among factors and components	4.6	90
5	Consistency and coherence of model sections	4.6	90
6	Compatibility of the model with Iranian couples	4.7	96
7	Compatibility of the model with Iranian culture	4.8	98
8	Appropriateness and comprehensiveness of causal conditions for the target group	4.6	90
9	Appropriateness and comprehensiveness of contextual conditions for the target group	4.9	98
10	Appropriateness and comprehensiveness of intervening conditions for the target group	4.7	92
11	Appropriateness and comprehensiveness of strategies for the target group	4.6	90
12	Appropriateness and comprehensiveness of outcomes for the target group	4.6	90
Overall model validity	4.62		91.5

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this qualitative study provide a nuanced understanding of divorce as a multidimensional process shaped by interconnected social, psychological, and cultural determinants. Analysis of the participants' lived experiences revealed that divorce is neither an abrupt nor a singularly caused phenomenon but rather the culmination of long-term emotional erosion, communicative breakdowns, structural inequalities, and socio-cultural pressures. The model extracted from the data, based on Strauss and Corbin's paradigm framework, highlighted five principal dimensions: causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening factors, coping strategies, and short- and long-term consequences. These components collectively demonstrate that marital dissolution in Iranian society emerges from a complex interaction between internal psychological dynamics and external sociocultural structures, aligning with previous empirical and theoretical studies (Abdollahi et al., 2020; Fathi- Ashtiani et al., 2023; Kalateh Sadati & Sabohi Golkar, 2024).

One of the core findings concerns the causal conditions of divorce, which included dysfunctional family backgrounds, traditional gender beliefs, emotional immaturity, and lack of communication skills. Many participants described replicating maladaptive relational models observed in their family of origin—patterns characterized by emotional distance, authoritarian control, or parental conflict. These observations align with prior research showing that family-of-origin dysfunctions significantly predict marital instability and divorce proneness (Fathi- Ashtiani et al., 2023; Ghasemi & saroukhani, 2014). According to social learning and attachment theories, individuals internalize early relational experiences that shape their expectations and behaviors in adulthood, often perpetuating intergenerational cycles of relational conflict. Participants' accounts of emotional neglect and poor conflict management support the argument that emotional illiteracy and insufficient self-regulation skills are critical psychological precursors of marital breakdown (Taghavi Dinani et al., 2020). Furthermore, as reported by Amato and Previti (2003), men and women often attribute different meanings to marital distress—while women cite emotional deprivation and power inequality, men more frequently emphasize incompatibility or external stressors (Amato & Previti, 2003). The present study corroborates this gendered differentiation in the perception of marital strain, reflecting broader socio-cultural expectations of masculinity and femininity within Iranian family structures.

The contextual layer of the model illustrates how divorce unfolds within a cultural matrix that both constrains and perpetuates marital conflict. Participants emphasized the "culture of silence" surrounding marital distress, in which family members, particularly women, are socially pressured to tolerate suffering to maintain appearances. This social expectation of endurance has been widely documented in Iranian and other collectivistic societies, where divorce remains stigmatized despite increasing rates (Kalateh Sadati

& Sabohi Golkar, 2024; Zafeer et al., 2022). The social taboo against divorce reinforces emotional suppression and inhibits help-seeking behaviors such as counseling or mediation, effectively deepening the cycle of alienation and resentment (Abdollahi et al., 2020). In such contexts, patriarchal norms act as powerful structural determinants that restrict women's autonomy, forcing them to remain in psychologically harmful marriages. The results resonate with Mentser and Sagiv's (2025) cross-cultural findings showing that cultural values and personal beliefs interact to predict divorce risk, with greater alignment between partners' value systems reducing marital discord (Mentser & Sagiv, 2025). However, when individual aspirations for autonomy and equality clash with entrenched patriarchal systems, emotional detachment and conflict intensify—a theme recurrent across participants' narratives.

Intervening conditions—such as personality traits, educational disparities, economic dependency, and presence of children—further complicated the divorce process. Many women reported feeling financially and emotionally entrapped, indicating that economic dependency and lack of institutional support delayed their decision to seek separation. This observation aligns with prior Iranian studies that emphasize the pivotal role of economic insecurity and gendered power asymmetry in perpetuating marital crises (Fathi- Ashtiani et al., 2023; Ghasemi & saroukhani, 2014). Furthermore, differences in educational attainment and social class between spouses were recurrent themes that undermined marital cohesion, consistent with Amato's (2003) findings that social class disparities amplify conflict through mismatched expectations and life goals (Amato & Previti, 2003). At the psychological level, participants described partners exhibiting traits such as egocentrism, low empathy, and emotional volatility, reflecting findings from Millings et al. (2020) that underscore the role of emotion regulation and attachment security in post-relationship adaptation (Millings et al., 2020). In contrast, participants who demonstrated self-awareness and adaptive coping mechanisms reported more constructive recovery experiences after divorce, supporting Lin and Brown's (2020) assertion that emotional resilience mitigates the long-term impact of marital dissolution (Lin & Brown, 2020).

The strategies employed by couples in response to marital distress were predominantly maladaptive and emotion-avoidant. Common coping mechanisms included silence, withdrawal, one-sided compromise, and concealment, reflecting a lack of open communication and joint problem-solving. These strategies failed to address underlying issues and instead reinforced emotional disconnection and resentment. Such patterns echo earlier research highlighting avoidance and denial as primary dysfunctional strategies among Iranian couples facing marital conflict (Abdollahi et al., 2020; Taghavi Dinani et al., 2020). Moreover, cultural imperatives to maintain family honor and avoid public disclosure often drove couples to conceal emotional turmoil, consistent with Kalateh Sadati's (2024) description of "performative endurance," where couples sustain an image of normalcy while experiencing internal collapse (Kalateh Sadati & Sabohi Golkar, 2024). These behaviors align with Lehrer and Son's (2017) broader demographic analysis showing that the intersection of cultural norms and gender expectations profoundly influences marital stability and its public visibility (Lehrer & Son, 2017).

The psychological and social consequences observed in this study mirror those identified in international and domestic literature. Participants reported depression, anxiety, identity confusion, and social withdrawal immediately following divorce, consistent with Elexpuru et al.'s (2024) meta-analysis linking divorce to significant psychological and physical health deterioration (Elexpuru et al., 2024). Many participants also expressed somatic symptoms and psychosomatic distress, supporting the notion that chronic emotional conflict within marriage can have physiological manifestations. The accounts of divorced parents describing their children's anxiety, guilt, and withdrawal align with the findings of Hosseinzadeh Dashti et al. (2024), who identified emotional insecurity and behavioral problems as dominant consequences of parental separation among Iranian children (Hosseinzadeh Dashti et al., 2024). Similarly, Mohammad Rajabi et al. (2024) demonstrated that children from emotionally conflicted divorced families are more prone to internalizing disorders such as depression and social inhibition (Mohammad Rajabi et al., 2024). These findings collectively confirm that divorce extends far beyond the dissolution of marital ties; it constitutes a psychological rupture that reverberates across generations.

Another noteworthy dimension emerging from this study is the paradoxical experience of liberation and loss among divorcees. For some participants, divorce signified an opportunity for self-redefinition and psychological renewal, whereas for others, it represented profound grief and social exclusion. This duality reflects the ambivalent cultural meaning of divorce in transitional societies like Iran, where modern values of self-realization coexist uneasily with traditional expectations of endurance (Kalateh Sadati &

Sabohi Golkar, 2024). Similar ambivalence has been documented by Zafeer et al. (2022) among divorced women in Pakistan, where divorce simultaneously signifies personal emancipation and social stigma (Zafeer et al., 2022). Millings et al. (2020) proposed that successful emotional adaptation to relationship dissolution requires meaning reconstruction, self-compassion, and redefined identity—a process hindered by cultural shame and lack of institutional support (Millings et al., 2020). Participants' testimonies of isolation and internalized guilt further corroborate this model, underscoring the need for culturally sensitive psychological interventions.

Moreover, the results of this study highlight the importance of integrating sociocultural perspectives with psychological frameworks to understand marital breakdown. Divorce in Iranian society operates at the intersection of structure and agency: individual desires for autonomy collide with collective moral codes that stigmatize separation. The coexistence of these conflicting value systems creates a liminal psychological state characterized by ambivalence, self-doubt, and moral fatigue (Mentser & Sagiv, 2025). Consistent with Fathi-Ashtiani et al. (2023), who identified social transitions and value transformations as key macro-level factors influencing divorce trends, the present findings demonstrate that divorce should be viewed as a sociocultural adaptation process rather than a mere failure of the marital system (Fathi- Ashtiani et al., 2023). The persistence of taboos surrounding counseling, coupled with inadequate institutional support, continues to exacerbate psychological suffering and inhibit recovery. Lin and Brown's (2020) convalescence model aptly captures this pattern: individuals require both internal coping resources and social scaffolding to recover from marital dissolution (Lin & Brown, 2020).

Finally, the grounded model derived from this study extends the existing literature by articulating how macro-level cultural pressures, micro-level emotional patterns, and meso-level relational dynamics interact to produce the phenomenon of divorce. The convergence of these levels confirms Saroukhani's (2011) argument that divorce in Iran must be understood as a "social symptom" reflecting wider structural tensions rather than merely an individual event (Saroukhani, 2011). The present findings also reaffirm Amato's (2003) conclusion that divorce is an adaptive response to unmet emotional and relational needs in societies undergoing modernization (Amato & Previti, 2003). By mapping participants' experiences across emotional, behavioral, and structural dimensions, this study contributes

an integrated conceptual framework for understanding divorce as a dynamic psychosocial process rather than a static outcome.

Despite its depth, this study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the qualitative sample was limited to divorced couples residing in Shiraz, which may constrain the generalizability of the findings to other cultural or socioeconomic contexts in Iran. Variations in urbanization level, regional traditions, and economic conditions could produce different experiences of marital breakdown. Second, the reliance on self-reported narratives introduces the possibility of recall bias and emotional distortion, as participants' recollections are shaped by their current emotional states and retrospective reinterpretation. Third, while the study applied rigorous trustworthiness criteria (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability), it did not include triangulation with quantitative measures, which might have enhanced analytical robustness. Finally, the study primarily focused on heterosexual marriages, thereby excluding diverse family forms and contemporary patterns such as cohabitation or remarriage that might offer additional insight into marital instability.

Future studies should adopt mixed-method or longitudinal designs to examine how psychological and cultural factors interact over time to influence marital satisfaction and dissolution. Expanding the geographic scope to include both urban and rural populations would provide a more comprehensive understanding of regional differences in divorce experiences. Moreover, comparative studies between divorced and non-divorced couples could identify protective factors that promote marital resilience in similar socio-cultural environments. Future research should also investigate the role of emerging variables such as digital communication, social media dynamics, and gender identity transformations in shaping marital relationships. Finally, cross-national studies involving other Middle Eastern or collectivistic societies could clarify how cultural similarities and divergences influence the meaning, process, and consequences of divorce.

At the practical level, the findings underscore the urgent need for culturally tailored interventions targeting couples, families, and communities. Policymakers should prioritize the institutionalization of premarital education programs focusing on emotional literacy, communication skills, and conflict resolution. Mental health professionals should develop therapeutic approaches that account for the cultural stigma and gendered power structures influencing marital

dynamics. Moreover, establishing accessible family counseling centers and post-divorce support networks can facilitate healthier adaptation for both adults and children. Finally, public awareness campaigns addressing the normalization of seeking psychological help could play a transformative role in dismantling the culture of silence surrounding marital distress and fostering resilience within families and society.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

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In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

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