




## A Sociological Study of the Phenomenon of Emotional Divorce in Tehran

Hamzeh. Salemi<sup>1</sup>, Shahla. Kazemi Pour Sabet<sup>2</sup>, Parvin. Savadian<sup>3\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> PhD Candidate in Sociology (Iranian Social Issues), Department of Sociology, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tehran, Iran

<sup>3</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Social Sciences, Faculty of Literature, Humanities, and Social Sciences, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

\* Corresponding author email address: skazemipour@gmail.com

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aims to explore the sociological factors, contextual conditions, structural factors, and social pressures contributing to emotional divorce in Tehran.

**Method:** The study employs a qualitative approach using a sequential exploratory design and grounded theory strategy. A purposive sample of 21 individuals, aged 25-40, with at least a bachelor's degree in psychology, sociology, or related fields, participated in semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using open coding and axial coding processes to identify key structures and indices related to emotional divorce. The participants included university lecturers, teachers, housewives, and private sector employees, ensuring a diverse representation of educated individuals with relevant expertise.

**Findings:** The results indicate that attitudes and values, social and cultural pressure, and social changes are significant causal factors in the occurrence of emotional divorce. Key phenomena identified include changes in emotional relationships, lack of emotional behavior towards the spouse, emotional void, and compulsory living. Contextual conditions such as changes in culture, values, economic conditions, and types of social interactions were influential. Structural factors identified include policies and laws, and social roles. Social pressures, including peer pressure, family opinions, and media influence, were crucial intervening factors. An educational approach was identified as an effective strategy for preventing and managing emotional divorce.

**Conclusion:** Emotional divorce, while not always visible, significantly impacts individuals and society. Understanding its sociological aspects and underlying causes is essential for developing effective prevention and management strategies. Educational programs aimed at improving emotional relationships, communication skills, and stress management can mitigate the negative impacts. Policymakers can use these insights to formulate supportive policies and laws. Further research is needed to generalize findings and explore the impact of emotional divorce on children and other regions.

**Keywords:** emotional divorce, sociological factors, qualitative research, Tehran, family relationships, social pressures, educational intervention.

## 1. Introduction

Every ethnic group and culture has specific customs and traditions for marriage; some are similar while others are different. However, the meaning of this union is similar across all cultures. This union, which initially often comes with the expectation of a lasting relationship throughout life, sometimes leads to opposite outcomes with its associated effects and consequences on human societies. In some cases, there is a temporary separation, while in other cases, the marriage ends in divorce (Eyo, 2018). These cases arise from ignoring the principles of life and lead to individual, familial, and social breakdowns, ultimately resulting in divorce. Therefore, any disruption in marriage directly impacts the family and, consequently, the entire society. One of the processes of divorce is emotional divorce (Rasheed et al., 2021). In emotional divorce, spouses live together compulsorily (Navabinejad et al., 2024), and it is mostly on the rise in developing countries, bringing specific problems. For instance, children of parents experiencing emotional divorce exhibit higher levels of emotional and behavioral problems compared to their peers from legally divorced parents. Moreover, moderate, severe, and very severe levels of emotional and behavioral problems are more prevalent among children of emotional divorce compared to children of legal divorce (Khandandel et al., 2023). This condition leads to symptoms such as anxiety, depression, guilt, dissatisfaction, withdrawal from social activities, and negative attitudes towards oneself, one's partner, and the future (Assr & Abd-elmaksoud, 2021; van Berkel et al., 2024; van der Wal et al., 2024).

Therefore, the problem with emotional separation is that it is an internal issue that is not clearly visible and does not lead to formal separation from the spouse (Jarwan & Al-frehat, 2020). In this situation, the family structure appears to be preserved, but it is empty from within because the positive emotional relationship has been replaced with a negative one (Rasheed et al., 2021). Nevertheless, divorce exists in every society and includes various types and levels (Rasheed et al., 2021; Shiri, 2016).

Many studies have been conducted on emotional divorce both domestically and internationally, examining its influencing factors (Erbabzadeh et al., 2022; Roshani, 2010; Afshari et al., 2022; Pahlavan et al., 2017) and consequences (Dehghani-Naghash et al., 2019; Roshani, 2010). However, no research has been conducted that examines the phenomenon of emotional divorce from a sociological perspective. Researchers have identified various causes for

divorce and emotional divorce, including religious reasons (Eyo, 2018), family interference, improper upbringing methods, living with the husband's family, the husband's job status, the husband's addiction, living in another city, the husband's second marriage, lack of commitment, infidelity, conflicts and disputes, excessive work and employment, economic and financial problems, lack of sexual satisfaction, lack of sexual awareness, lack of commitment, etc (Bagheri et al., 2022). Thus, it is clear that there has always been debate and contention between sociologists and psychologists. However, explaining this issue and its influencing factors, as well as its consequences, is a significant topic. With the development of social networks, the reduction of social interactions in society, and the spread of individualism, this problem among couples has increased, leading to disappointment in their relationship and emotional separation (Rasheed et al., 2021). On the other hand, in Iran, due to the lack of official sources, it is not possible to provide official statistics on emotional divorce. Recent studies indicate that about 50% of couples are in the stage of emotional divorce. Accordingly, the rate of emotional divorce is considered to be twice the official divorce statistics (Bagheri et al., 2022; Khatibi & Alikhanypor, 2022). Therefore, given that no consistent and comprehensive study exists on the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of this disorder, it can be attributed to the lack of scientific, documented, and sensitive tools for identifying and diagnosing emotional divorce. Thus, the present study attempts to examine this concept from various angles as much as possible and, based on the expressed opinions and perspectives, address the issue. By providing appropriate tools for identifying couples with emotional divorce, it is hoped to prevent official divorce (Mirzadeh Kooohshahi et al., 2019) and curb the increasing rate of social harm.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Study design and Participant

The present study employs a qualitative approach, of the sequential exploratory type, with a model development design. Given the qualitative nature of this research, the paradigm is positivist, the reasoning method is deductive, and the strategy is grounded theory. The statistical population includes couples aged between 25 and 40 years. The criteria for entering the study were: 1. having at least one year of shared living experience; 2. having at least a bachelor's degree in psychology, counseling, sociology, or

related fields; 3. having professional experience in counseling, psychology, sociology, or fields related to divorce and family issues; and 4. having the capacity to establish a polite and respectful relationship with the interviewee and mastery of communication and negotiation skills. Participants were selected purposefully.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

In this study, interviews continued until no new information was obtained. Accordingly, the sample size was 21, and the samples were selected purposefully. Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews. For the interviews, general research questions regarding emotional divorce, its influencing factors, and the outcomes of emotional divorce were posed.

2.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis method in this study is grounded theory, utilizing specific processes including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. To ensure the validity of the research, member checking and participatory research were employed. For reliability calculation, several interviews were selected from the conducted interviews and re-coded at a 15-day interval. By comparing the identified codes at two

different times for each interview, the research reliability was determined through the high level of agreement in the coding stages.

3. Findings and Results

Out of 21 interviewees, 44% were male and 56% were female. Three interviewees were aged between 25-31 years, ten were aged between 32-38 years, six were aged between 39-45 years, and two were older than 46 years. Forty-eight percent of respondents had a bachelor's degree, 38% had a master's degree, and 14% had a doctorate. The reason for selecting educated individuals was that they possess more knowledge and expertise in various fields related to psychology, sociology, and similar subjects, which are directly related to the topic of emotional divorce. Additionally, educated individuals generally have higher communication skills. In terms of employment status, six were university lecturers, six were teachers, two were housewives, and seven were employees of private organizations.

For the analysis of qualitative data, specific processes such as open coding and axial coding were used, and finally, the structures and indices related to the research were extracted. Table 1 shows the open and axial coding of variables.

**Table 1**

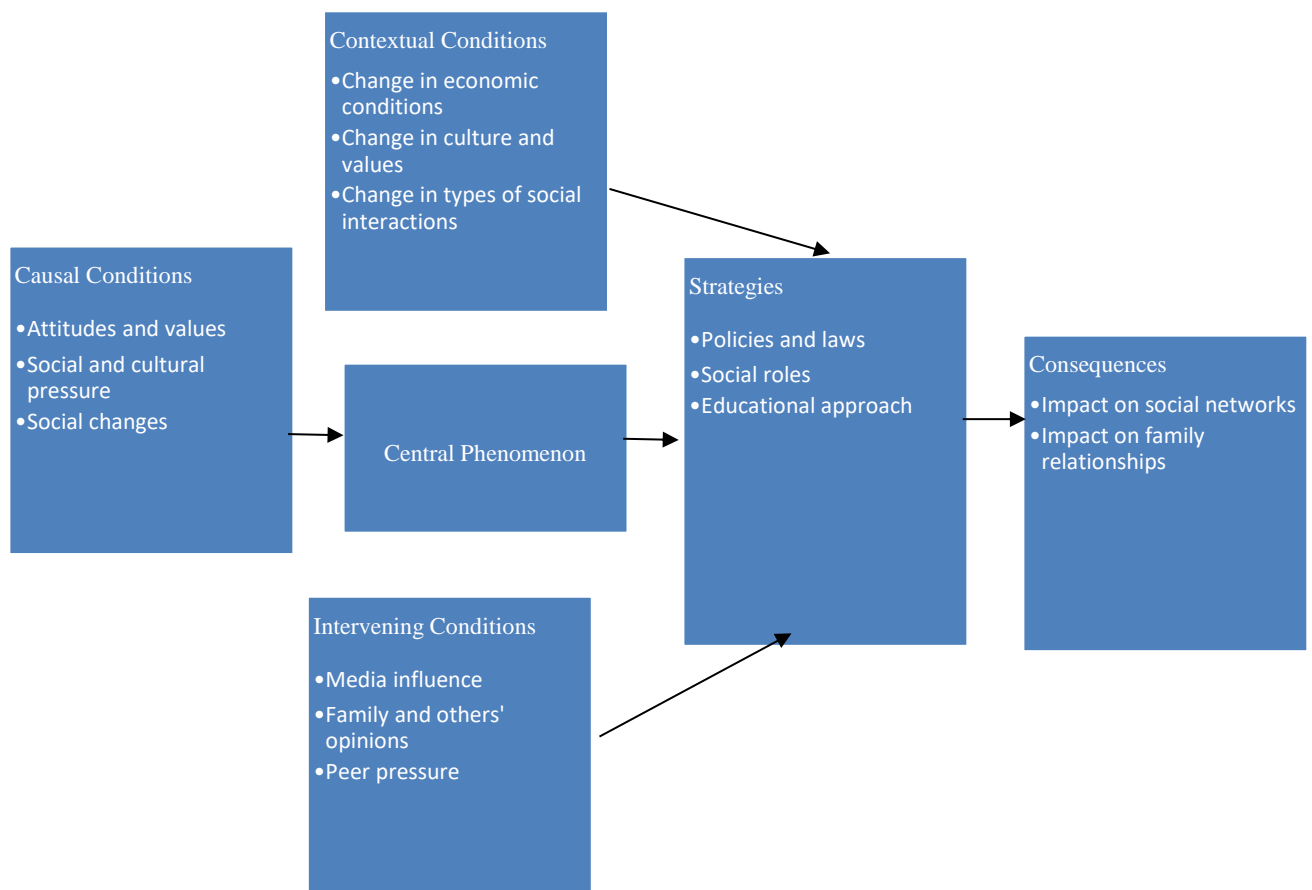
*Results of Open and Axial Coding*

Initial Codes	Categories	Axial Code
Attitude towards marriage	Attitudes and values	Causal factors (sociological)
Conflict in societal attitudes		
Influence of culture and society	Social and cultural pressure	
Cultural and religious pressure		
Societal and family pressure to maintain the relationship	Social changes	
Changes in social interactions and marital relationships		
Change in gender roles		
Change in social structure	Change in economic conditions	Contextual mechanisms (social context)
Disagreement in financial management		
Financial pressure	Change in culture and values	
Change in moral and social concepts		
Change in lifestyle		
Change in social connections	Change in types of social interactions	
Change in social environment		
Violation of women's and family rights	Policies and laws	Structural mechanisms (social structure)
Difficulty of the divorce process	Social roles	
Culture of whistleblowing regarding divorce		
Financial independence		
Gender roles		

Family responsibility		
Training methods to enhance emotional connection with spouse	Educational approach	Strategic factors
Providing awareness of the consequences of emotional divorce for children		
Training life problem-solving skills		
Providing communication skill training		
Idealistic portrayal	Media influence	Intervening factors (social pressure)
Unrealistic portrayal of life		
Influence of society	Family and others' opinions	
Influence of others		
Family expectations		
Seeing successful lives on TV and media	Peer pressure	
Attention to successful emotional relationships of others		
Impact on coworker relationships	Impact on social networks	Consequences of emotional divorce
Loss of social network		
Impact on friendships		
Increased family tension	Impact on family relationships	
Inconsistency in communications		
Increased family tension and impact on children		

**Figure 1**

*Final Paradigm Model*



**4. Discussion and Conclusion**

The present study examines sociological factors, contextual conditions, structural factors, and social pressures related to emotional divorce. Additionally, the results of this

study indicate that emotional divorce is associated with changes in emotional relationships, lack of emotional behavior towards the spouse, emotional void, and compulsory living.

A comparison of the present study's results with the study by Mirzadeh Koohshahi et al. (2019) shows similarities. Both studies demonstrate that the dimensions of emotional divorce include compulsory living, lack of emotional behavior towards the spouse, and emotional void (Mirzadeh Koohshahi et al., 2019). However, the present study also considers changes in emotional relationships as another dimension of emotional divorce.

No similar studies were found regarding other factors.

Based on the results obtained, attitudes and values, social and cultural pressure, and social changes play significant roles as causal factors in the occurrence of emotional divorce. Changes in emotional relationships, lack of emotional behavior towards the spouse, emotional void, and compulsory living are identified as the central phenomena of emotional divorce. Contextual conditions such as changes in culture and values, economic conditions, and types of social interactions are influential background conditions. The social structure, including policies and laws, and social roles, are identified as structural factors in the occurrence of emotional divorce. Social pressures, including peer pressure, family opinions, and media influence, are important intervening factors in the process of emotional divorce. An educational approach is identified as an effective strategy for preventing and managing emotional divorce. The impact of this approach on family relationships and social communication networks, as well as the impact on social interactions, are identified as consequences of emotional divorce.

## 5. Suggestions and Limitations

Given the results obtained in this study, it is essential to examine all social, cultural, emotional, and structural aspects of emotional divorce, especially in Tehran. Understanding the factors influencing the occurrence of emotional divorce and its sociological impacts is important. These results can assist family counselors and psychologists in providing the best strategies for preventing emotional divorce and enhancing marital quality. Additionally, they can play a crucial role for policymakers in formulating policies and laws related to marriage and divorce.

Based on the results obtained, the following recommendations are made:

Providing educational programs to couples to improve and strengthen their emotional relationships, communication skills, and management of social pressures can be beneficial.

Enhancing sexual satisfaction in marital life can help reduce compulsory living and lack of emotional behavior towards the spouse. Education and counseling in gender and sexual satisfaction can control these dimensions.

Changes in social life and economic conditions can lead to compulsory living and emotional void. Training stress and anxiety management skills can help control these negative impacts.

Economic programs and financial education can improve the financial life of families and reduce economic pressures. By providing financial guidance and education, couples can enhance their financial management skills and make better decisions regarding family financial matters.

Encouraging effective and respectful communication between couples can help prevent emotional voids and improve relationship quality. Conducting workshops and educational sessions on communication skills can achieve this goal.

Providing information and statistics on the negative impacts of emotional divorce on families and society will encourage the community to support marital relationships and promote a culture of stability in families.

Given the impact of social roles on the process of emotional divorce, promoting women's employment and changing gender roles can strengthen the economic and social position of couples and reduce the likelihood of emotional divorce.

Enhancing self-confidence and personal values in individuals so that they can cope with social pressures and increase confidence in their life decisions.

Considering the positive or negative impact of social networks on couples' relationships, promoting balanced and constructive use of social networks and educating couples on selecting content, timing, and duration of social network use.

Encouraging couples to respect privacy and confidentiality in family and marital relationships. This increase in personal space can have a positive impact on marital relationships.

This study, like other studies, faced limitations, which are outlined below.

The sample size in the present study is not sufficiently large; therefore, the results should be interpreted with caution when generalizing the findings to a broader population.

The present study was conducted only in Tehran, which may mean that the results cannot be generalized to other regions.

Some important variables may have been excluded due to limitations such as time or resources.

To further develop and deepen future research on emotional divorce, the following suggestions are provided:

Conducting a quantitative study using the present research model.

Conducting comparative studies in other cities in Iran with characteristics similar to Tehran to correlate spatial factors with the occurrence of emotional divorce.

Investigating the impact of emotional divorce on children in terms of behavior, education, and psychology, and providing supportive strategies.

Examining the effectiveness of various intervention methods such as counseling, education, and group sessions on reducing the main factors of emotional divorce.

Comparing the results of the present study on emotional divorce with related research on legal divorce to identify differences and similarities.

#### Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

#### Declaration

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

#### Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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#### Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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#### Ethical Considerations

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

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