

Exploring the Lived Experiences of Couples Experiencing Emotional Divorce: A Phenomenological Study

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1. Round 1

1.1. Reviewer 1

Reviewer:

The sampling procedure requires methodological clarification. The manuscript states that “sampling was conducted using thematic saturation” and that interviews continued until saturation was achieved. Saturation is not a sampling method; rather, it is a criterion used to determine when data collection may reasonably cease. The authors should specify the actual recruitment strategy, which appears to have been purposive sampling, criterion sampling, or purposive criterion-based sampling, and then state that recruitment continued until thematic or meaning saturation was achieved. The manuscript should also describe where and how participants were identified and approached—for example, through counseling centers, community settings, clinics, or referrals—and whether any potentially eligible individuals declined participation.

There is a substantial inconsistency in the reported duration of marriage. In the Methods section, the authors state that “the mean duration of marriage was 13.8 years (range: 5–18 years),” whereas Table 1 contains marriage durations ranging from 7 to 26 years, and the paragraph following the table reports a mean of 13.75 years and a range of 7–26 years. These statistics cannot all be correct simultaneously. The authors should return to the raw demographic dataset, recalculate the mean, minimum,

maximum, and preferably standard deviation, and ensure that identical values are reported in the abstract, Methods section, Table 1, and Results section.

The manuscript states that inclusion required “obtaining a score above the mean on Gottman’s (1998) 20-item unidimensional questionnaire.” This criterion is insufficiently described and raises concerns regarding reproducibility. The exact name of the instrument, its construct, scoring procedure, score range, interpretation, validated Persian version, reliability and validity evidence, and rationale for selecting “above the mean” as the threshold for identifying emotional divorce should be reported. It is also unclear whether “the mean” refers to the theoretical midpoint, the mean from the scale-validation study, or the mean of the present screening sample. Because eligibility for the qualitative study depended on this instrument, the screening procedure must be described with sufficient methodological precision.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria contain unnecessary duplication. For example, the inclusion criteria require “the absence of acute or chronic physical or psychological disorders,” while the exclusion criteria include “the presence of an acute or chronic physical or psychological disorder.” These are essentially inverse formulations of the same criterion. More importantly, the scientific rationale for excluding any participant with a chronic physical condition is unclear, because many chronic medical conditions would not prevent meaningful participation in a phenomenological interview. The authors should distinguish eligibility criteria established before enrollment from discontinuation criteria arising after enrollment and justify exclusions according to their potential influence on participation, communication capacity, or the phenomenon under investigation.

Table 2 contains major numerical inconsistencies that must be corrected before publication. For example, under “Cognitive Factors,” the listed code frequencies are 8, 6, 7, 6, 5, 7, 6, 6, 5, 6, 6, and 7, which sum to 75, not the reported total of 67. Similarly, the frequencies listed under “Emotional Factors” sum to 98 rather than 88; those under “Affective Factors” sum to 158 rather than 151; and those under “Communication Factors” sum to 146 rather than 133. Only the sexual-factor total appears internally consistent. The authors should audit all coding frequencies against the MAXQDA dataset, correct the totals, and verify whether these values represent coded segments, number of participants mentioning each code, or another unit of frequency.

The statement following Table 2 that “the lived experiences of couples experiencing emotional divorce were organized into five overarching themes and 14 meaning clusters” is inconsistent with the table itself. The table appears to contain four cognitive clusters, three emotional clusters, four affective clusters, four communication clusters, and one sexual cluster, yielding 16 clusters rather than 14. The authors should verify the actual thematic hierarchy and ensure consistency among the narrative Results section, Table 2, coding framework, and any MAXQDA outputs. If certain clusters are intended to be merged conceptually, the table should be revised accordingly and the rationale for merging them should be made explicit.

Response: Revised and uploaded the manuscript.

1.2. Reviewer 2

Reviewer:

The paragraph beginning “Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews” should provide considerably greater information about the interview protocol. The manuscript currently states that the questions addressed “the participants’ lived experiences and their perceptions of the meaning of emotional divorce,” but it does not provide the principal interview questions. For transparency and methodological reproducibility, the authors should report several representative core questions and probes, such as questions concerning the onset of emotional distancing, changes in intimacy, communication experiences, emotional reactions, sexual relationships, and perceptions of the future of the marriage. The authors should also specify whether the interview guide was pilot-tested, reviewed by experts, or modified during data collection.

The manuscript reports that interviews were conducted “either face-to-face or online according to participant preference,” yet no information is provided regarding how many interviews were conducted in each modality. Interview modality can influence rapport, disclosure, privacy, nonverbal observation, and the depth of phenomenological data. The authors should report the distribution of face-to-face versus online interviews, identify the secure platform used for virtual interviews where

applicable, explain how privacy was assured, and indicate whether the researchers observed any meaningful differences in interview depth or duration according to mode.

The description of Colaizzi's seven-stage method is generally appropriate, but the manuscript does not explain how phenomenological reduction, researcher reflexivity, or bracketing was addressed. The statement that the researchers performed "repeated reading of the interview transcripts to obtain a comprehensive understanding" is not sufficient to demonstrate management of researcher preconceptions. In descriptive phenomenology, researchers should explicitly address how prior assumptions, professional experiences, theoretical expectations, and beliefs concerning emotional divorce were identified and restrained during interpretation. The authors should describe whether reflexive journals, bracketing notes, peer discussions, or other procedures were employed to minimize premature theoretical imposition on participants' accounts.

The manuscript states that "member checking was conducted with 10 of the original participants," which is particularly relevant because participant validation corresponds closely to the final stage of Colaizzi's method. However, the authors should explain precisely how this process was conducted and what resulted from it. Were participants provided with the exhaustive description, the fundamental structure, the thematic map, or only a brief summary? Did any participant disagree with a theme, propose a modification, or identify an omitted experience? Reporting that member checking occurred without describing whether and how it altered the analysis provides limited evidence of its contribution to credibility.

The trustworthiness procedures require better conceptual organization. The paragraph states that member checking, expert review by three specialists, and documentation of the analytical process were used to enhance "credibility and dependability." These strategies appear to address several distinct dimensions of qualitative rigor, including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and potentially transferability. The authors should organize the rigor procedures under an established trustworthiness framework and specify which strategy supports which criterion. In addition, the claim in the abstract that "24 individuals" participated in the data-analysis process is not adequately explained in the Methods section, where only 12 participants and three external experts are clearly identifiable. The origin and role of the stated total of 24 individuals therefore require clarification.

Ethical reporting is incomplete. The manuscript states that "adherence to ethical principles was a primary priority throughout the study" and describes informed consent, confidentiality, anonymization, and deletion of audio files, but no ethics committee approval or institutional review board information is reported. The authors should provide the full name of the approving institution, ethical approval code, and approval date if applicable. In addition, because the interviews addressed intimate marital and sexual experiences that may provoke distress, the manuscript should explain whether a distress-management procedure or referral pathway to counseling services was available to participants if emotional discomfort emerged during or after interviews.

Response: Revised and uploaded the manuscript.

2. Revised

Editor's decision after revisions: Accepted.

Editor in Chief's decision: Accepted.