

A Phenomenological Understanding of Adjustment in Remarriage: From Individual Transition to Social Acceptance After Divorce

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Article Info

Article type:

Original Research

How to cite this article:

Faraji, F., Keshavarz Afshar, H., & Vaisi, A. (2026). A Phenomenological Understanding of Adjustment in Remarriage: From Individual Transition to Social Acceptance After Divorce. *Journal of Assessment and Research in Applied Counseling*, 8(4), 1-16.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.jarac.6125>



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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study aimed to develop a phenomenological understanding of adjustment in remarriage, from individual transition to social acceptance following divorce.

Methods and Materials: The present study employed a descriptive phenomenological design. The research field comprised all women with experience of remarriage who had referred to the Ofogh Mehr Counseling Center in Shahriar during 2023–2024 to receive family and marriage counseling services. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, and data saturation was achieved after the fifteenth interview. For initial screening, the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985), the ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale (Olson et al., 1989), and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976) were used. Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's method, and the credibility of the findings was enhanced through peer review and member checking.

Findings: The phenomenological analysis resulted in the identification of six main themes and 21 subthemes, which were organized across the individual level (conscious transition and personality characteristics), marital level (communication skills and mutual support), family level (family acceptance and support), and social level (changes in societal attitudes).

Conclusion: Successful adjustment in remarriage results from the dynamic interaction among these four levels, extending from individual transformation to social support. The findings underscore the necessity of adopting a systemic approach in counseling and supportive interventions to enhance the stability and sustainability of remarriages.

Keywords: remarriage, marital adjustment, phenomenology, divorce

1. Introduction

Marriage is one of the most consequential interpersonal and social institutions across the life course, shaping individuals' emotional well-being, social identity, family roles, economic circumstances, and broader patterns of social participation. Although marital relationships can provide emotional intimacy, companionship, social support, and a sense of security, the quality and stability of marriage depend on the capacity of spouses to negotiate developmental transitions, interpersonal differences, external stressors, and changing family responsibilities. Evidence concerning the association between marriage and well-being has consistently highlighted the relevance of marital relationships to subjective happiness and psychological functioning, although the benefits associated with marriage are contingent upon relationship quality and the broader social context in which the marital relationship develops (Kane, 2016; Tao, 2019). Marriage, therefore, should not be understood merely as a legal or demographic status; rather, it represents an evolving relational system whose psychological consequences are determined by the quality of interaction, mutual support, commitment, expectations, and the couple's ability to adapt to internal and external demands.

When marital relationships deteriorate and divorce occurs, individuals are required to undergo a major process of psychological, relational, and social reorganization. Divorce may involve the loss or transformation of attachment relationships, family routines, social identities, economic arrangements, parenting patterns, and relationships with extended family members. It may also challenge previously held assumptions about intimacy, trust, commitment, and marital permanence. Research on troubled marital relationships has demonstrated that chronic marital strain can be associated with profound emotional consequences, including relational disengagement and forms of "emotional divorce," in which psychological separation occurs even when a formal marital bond remains intact (Al-Shahrani & Hammad, 2023; Rasheed et al., 2021). More broadly, marital stress and conflict involve processes extending beyond the couple themselves and may be embedded within economic, family, and social conditions that intensify or buffer relational difficulties (Kwon et al., 2007; Sanctuary, 2023). Thus, divorce can simultaneously represent the culmination of marital distress and the

beginning of a complex period of individual and family transition.

For a substantial proportion of divorced individuals, the post-divorce life course eventually includes the formation of a new intimate partnership or remarriage. Demographic and family research has increasingly recognized remarriage and stepfamily formation as important features of contemporary family life rather than exceptional or marginal family arrangements (Geiger & Livingston, 2019; Sweeney, 2010). Remarriage creates opportunities for renewed emotional intimacy, companionship, economic cooperation, social support, and the reconstruction of family life. At the same time, however, remarriage is structurally and psychologically distinct from first marriage. Individuals entering a subsequent marriage typically do so with personal histories, prior relational experiences, established expectations, and, frequently, continuing responsibilities associated with children and former spouses. Consequently, remarriage cannot simply be conceptualized as a repetition of first marriage. It is better understood as a complex family transition in which new marital bonds must be integrated with preexisting personal, parental, and kinship relationships (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Sweeney, 2010).

The complexity of remarriage becomes particularly evident when children from previous relationships are involved. The new couple may need to negotiate stepparent roles, biological parent-child boundaries, disciplinary responsibilities, loyalty conflicts, relationships with former spouses, and the expectations of extended family members. These processes can create ambiguity concerning authority, belonging, intimacy, and family membership. Stepfamilies therefore develop through processes that differ from those of first-marriage nuclear families, and unrealistic assumptions that closeness, trust, and family cohesion should emerge immediately may themselves become sources of distress (Papernow, 2018, 2023). The development of functional stepfamily relationships often requires time, patience, clear interpersonal boundaries, sensitive parenting arrangements, and realistic expectations regarding the gradual formation of emotional bonds (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Accordingly, successful remarital adjustment involves not only adaptation between two spouses but also the reorganization of a wider family system.

Marital adjustment in remarriage is consequently a multidimensional construct. It involves the ability of partners to achieve a workable balance among intimacy, communication, commitment, conflict management, emotional responsiveness, family roles, sexuality, parenting,

financial responsibilities, and interactions with relatives and former family systems. A systematic review of marital adjustment in remarriage indicates that adjustment is influenced by multiple interacting individual, relational, family, and contextual factors rather than by a single determinant (Santos et al., 2024). Earlier research similarly showed that marital satisfaction within remarried families varies according to characteristics of the marital relationship, the presence and role of stepchildren, and other family-system variables (Bir-Akturk & Fisiloglu, 2009). Studies of remarried Korean couples have also identified a range of interpersonal and contextual factors related to marital satisfaction, illustrating that remarital quality reflects the interaction of personal resources and relational processes (Kim, 2010). Furthermore, evidence regarding couples in stepfamilies indicates that marital satisfaction and relationship stability remain central concerns because the demands associated with stepfamily life may generate additional sources of stress and vulnerability (DeLongis & Zwicker, 2017).

An important psychological dimension of remarital adjustment concerns the beliefs and expectations individuals bring into their subsequent marriages. Experiences from a previous marriage and divorce can influence beliefs about trust, conflict, commitment, parenting, stepfamily roles, and the probability of relationship success. Such beliefs may function adaptively when they promote realistic expectations and learning from past experiences, but they may also hinder adjustment when they involve rigid assumptions or unrealistic expectations concerning the new spouse and family. Research on the Remarriage Belief Inventory has demonstrated the importance of systematically assessing beliefs about remarriage and stepfamily functioning (Higginbotham, 2005; Higginbotham & Adler-Baeder, 2008). Subsequent research has supported the usefulness of examining remarital beliefs at the dyadic level because the beliefs held by both partners may shape how the couple understands and manages the challenges associated with stepfamily life (Garneau et al., 2016). Related measures designed specifically for couples in stepfamilies further demonstrate the need to assess relational processes using frameworks that acknowledge the distinctive structure of remarried families rather than relying exclusively on assumptions derived from first marriages (Schramm & Higginbotham, 2009).

The relevance of such beliefs is not restricted to Western populations. Cross-cultural psychometric studies demonstrate that remarital expectations and beliefs can be

meaningfully examined in diverse cultural contexts, while simultaneously suggesting that the meaning and structure of these beliefs may be influenced by cultural norms. Research validating remarriage-related measures in Portuguese populations has supported the relevance of remarital beliefs for understanding adaptation among remarried individuals (Santos et al., 2022; Santos et al., 2023). Similarly, research involving Japanese couples has explored the validity and factor structure of stepfamily measures, highlighting both the applicability of established constructs and the need for sensitivity to cultural context (Jikihara et al., 2023). Such findings are important because remarriage occurs within social systems that define culturally acceptable forms of intimacy, parenting, gender relations, family obligation, and post-divorce behavior.

Culture becomes particularly salient in collectivist contexts, in which marriage and remarriage may be evaluated not solely as individual choices but as events involving extended families and broader social networks. Family approval, intergenerational expectations, community norms, and concerns about reputation may significantly influence the remarriage process. Research examining family transitions involving repartnering, remarriage, and stepfamilies in Asian societies has emphasized the importance of contextualizing these experiences within distinctive cultural and family systems (Balachandran & Jean Yeung, 2020). Qualitative work on remarriage in Vietnam has likewise demonstrated that repartnering in later life is shaped by relational, familial, and sociocultural considerations rather than simply personal preference (Nguyen & Pawle, 2021). More recent studies of remarriage following divorce in the Turkish context have similarly drawn attention to the ways individuals negotiate family reorganization, personal needs, and social reintegration within a collectivist cultural environment (Güngör, 2025; Güngör, 2026). These findings indicate that post-divorce adjustment and remarriage must be interpreted within the cultural ecology in which they occur.

Social attitudes toward divorce are particularly consequential for women. In societies where divorce remains associated with negative stereotypes or gendered expectations, divorced women may experience stigma, diminished social status, intrusive judgment, restrictions on social participation, and difficulties in establishing subsequent intimate relationships. A new marriage may therefore involve not only dyadic adjustment but also an attempt to reconstruct social identity and achieve renewed acceptance within family and community networks. Cultural

attitudes toward remarriage have historically been shaped by moral, religious, and institutional understandings of marriage, widowhood, divorce, sexuality, and family continuity, underscoring that remarriage has never been a purely private decision (Benton, 2026). Although the historical and normative meanings of remarriage vary considerably across societies, their continuing influence demonstrates why social acceptance should be regarded as an integral dimension of the remarriage experience rather than as an external background variable.

At the same time, individual development and psychological resources can substantially affect adjustment to a subsequent marriage. Divorce may provide an opportunity for reflection, self-reassessment, recognition of previous relational patterns, clarification of expectations, and development of more adaptive interpersonal skills. Individuals entering remarriage may possess greater awareness of their own needs and boundaries than they did before their first marriage. However, they may also carry fear of repeated failure, mistrust, unresolved grief, heightened sensitivity to conflict, or uncertainty regarding commitment. The capacity to integrate previous experiences without allowing them to dominate the new relationship may therefore constitute an important component of successful adjustment. Research on recoupling in midlife emphasizes that even when a new relationship is experienced as an opportunity for renewed love and companionship, partners often encounter unexpected complexities associated with accumulated life histories, children, finances, former partners, and established patterns of independence (Papernow, 2018). Similar psychosocial issues can also arise in remarriage among older adults, where companionship needs intersect with family reactions, health circumstances, independence, and established social identities (Kakkar, 2026).

Within the marital relationship itself, communication, emotional responsiveness, reciprocal respect, commitment, and partner support may operate as key protective factors. The availability of dyadic support is particularly relevant within stepfamilies, where individuals may simultaneously encounter marital demands and uncertainty regarding stepparent or family roles. Evidence suggests that supportive partner relationships may buffer psychological distress among stepparents, highlighting the importance of the marital dyad as a source of emotional security within the broader stepfamily system (Shapiro & Stewart, 2012). Contemporary clinical approaches to stepfamily couples similarly emphasize strengthening the couple relationship

while helping partners manage boundaries, parenting expectations, loyalty conflicts, and the gradual development of stepfamily relationships (Papernow, 2023). Thus, supportiveness in remarriage should be conceptualized not merely as emotional encouragement but as a set of relational behaviors that enable spouses to manage complex family transitions collaboratively.

Family support constitutes another major contextual resource. Remarried couples are rarely isolated dyads; their adjustment occurs within networks of children, parents, siblings, former spouses, and other relatives. Acceptance from the new spouse's family can reinforce belonging and relational legitimacy, whereas rejection or stigma can intensify insecurity and interpersonal conflict. For women who bring children from a previous marriage into the new family system, the new spouse's acceptance of those children may be especially important because maternal and marital identities must coexist within the same family environment. A spouse's support for the woman's relationship with her children, as well as respectful relationships between stepfamily members, can reduce loyalty conflicts and facilitate family integration (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Santos et al., 2024). The quality of these relationships may therefore have a direct bearing on both marital satisfaction and the subjective experience of adjustment.

The Iranian context provides a particularly important setting for investigating these processes. Remarriage after divorce occurs at the intersection of individual preferences, gender expectations, family involvement, social attitudes toward divorce, parenting responsibilities, and culturally embedded beliefs about marriage. A recent systematic qualitative review of remarriage after divorce in Iran identified multiple challenges and concerns surrounding the experience, indicating that individuals must navigate psychological, interpersonal, familial, and social obstacles when forming a subsequent marital relationship (Ayadi et al., 2025). At the same time, qualitative research examining the stability of remarriage in Iran has identified multiple components contributing to the maintenance of subsequent marriages, suggesting that successful remarriage is produced through a complex interaction of personal, marital, familial, and contextual factors (Baharami-Nejad et al., 2025). These findings underscore the need to move beyond an exclusively deficit-oriented perspective that views remarriage primarily through its risks and difficulties and to investigate how individuals who have achieved relative adjustment actually understand and construct that adjustment.

This distinction is theoretically and clinically important. Much of the literature on remarriage and stepfamilies has appropriately identified instability, conflict, role ambiguity, stress, and relationship vulnerability. However, focusing exclusively on risk factors may provide an incomplete understanding of remarriage. Studying women who report relative marital satisfaction and adjustment can reveal processes of resilience, learning, self-development, relational competence, support utilization, and social adaptation that might otherwise remain obscured. Such knowledge can inform premarital counseling for individuals considering remarriage, couple therapy for remarried partners, interventions for stepfamilies, and psychoeducational programs designed to facilitate realistic expectations and healthier relationship patterns. The growing body of research on remarital beliefs, stepfamily assessment, and relationship adjustment provides useful conceptual foundations for these interventions (Garneau et al., 2016; Jikihara et al., 2023; Santos et al., 2022). Nevertheless, standardized measures alone cannot fully capture how individuals subjectively interpret the transition from divorce to a new marriage or how they assign meaning to the personal and social conditions that support adaptation.

A phenomenological approach is particularly suitable for addressing this gap because successful adjustment in remarriage is not merely an observable outcome or questionnaire score; it is also a lived experience. Women may interpret similar marital circumstances differently depending on their previous marriages, expectations, personal growth, relationships with children, interactions with the new spouse, family acceptance, and experiences of social judgment. Quantitative indicators can identify associations among variables, but they are less suited to revealing how these factors are experienced, interconnected, and given meaning in everyday life. Furthermore, findings from different cultural settings indicate that the remarriage process cannot be fully separated from the social meanings attached to divorce, gender, age, family obligation, and subsequent partnership formation (Balachandran & Jean Yeung, 2020; Güngör, 2026). A descriptive phenomenological investigation can therefore illuminate the structure of adjustment as experienced by women themselves while minimizing the imposition of predetermined theoretical categories.

Despite the expanding literature on remarriage, several gaps remain. Existing studies have contributed substantially to understanding remarital satisfaction, beliefs about remarriage, stepfamily dynamics, partner support, and

family stress (Bir-Akturk & Fisiloglu, 2009; DeLongis & Zwicker, 2017; Kim, 2010). Research has also provided increasingly sophisticated measurement tools for investigating stepcouple and remarriage processes (Higginbotham & Adler-Baeder, 2008; Schramm & Higginbotham, 2009), while contemporary reviews have emphasized the multivariate nature of marital adjustment in subsequent marriages (Santos et al., 2024). Nevertheless, relatively less is known about how women who have experienced divorce and subsequently established comparatively adjusted remarriages describe the process through which this adjustment became possible. In particular, the interconnections among post-divorce personal transformation, characteristics of the new spouse, marital interaction, acceptance of children, extended-family support, and changing social attitudes require closer examination from the perspective of those who have directly lived through these transitions.

Accordingly, examining adjustment in remarriage as a multilevel lived phenomenon may provide a more integrated understanding of how personal transformation becomes connected with dyadic functioning, family-system adaptation, and social reintegration. Such an approach is consistent with the broader recognition that remarriage involves the formation of new relational ties while individuals remain embedded in preexisting histories, bonds, and cultural systems (Balachandran & Jean Yeung, 2020; Sweeney, 2010). It also recognizes that the path toward marital stability may differ considerably among individuals and cultural settings, making participants' own descriptions essential for developing culturally responsive psychological interventions and counseling practices. Therefore, the present study aimed to phenomenologically understand adjustment in remarriage among women after divorce, with particular attention to the transition from individual adaptation to marital, familial, and social acceptance.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study was conducted using a descriptive phenomenological approach, which aims to explore and describe individuals' lived experiences in relation to a particular phenomenon. In this study, the research focused on exploring the lived experiences of remarried women regarding adjustment to the new circumstances of marital life. Because phenomenology relies on individuals' direct and personal perceptions of an event or phenomenon, an

attempt was made to explore the women's subjective and emotional experiences through open dialogue, without judgment and independent of theoretical presuppositions. Throughout all stages of the study, the researcher applied the principle of *epoché*, attempting to bracket personal understandings of the subject and to focus exclusively on describing the dimensions emerging from the participants' accounts. The study population consisted of all women with experience of remarriage who had referred to the Ofogh Mehr Counseling Center in Shahriar during 2023–2024 to receive family and marriage counseling services. This center was selected as one of the active centers providing family psychological services because a considerable number of women with remarriage experience had sought services there during the study period. Criterion-based purposive sampling was employed to select individuals who had direct lived experience of the phenomenon under investigation. Data saturation was determined through in-depth and iterative interviews; after the fifteenth interview, no new information emerged, and the final sample was therefore determined to comprise 15 participants.

The participant-selection process was conducted in several stages. In the first stage, an announcement was posted at the counseling center explaining the purpose and nature of the study and inviting women with experience of remarriage to participate. Thirty-five women voluntarily expressed willingness to participate. In the next stage, they were provided with verbal explanations regarding the study objectives and data confidentiality, and an initial demographic screening was conducted. Subsequently, three validated psychological questionnaires were administered to preliminarily assess levels of life satisfaction and marital adjustment. The first instrument was the Satisfaction With Life Scale developed by Diener et al. (1985), which assesses an individual's overall satisfaction with the quality of life. The second instrument was the Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire developed by Olson et al. (1989), which evaluates various dimensions of marital interactions, including emotional communication, conflict resolution, and agreement. The third instrument was the Dyadic Adjustment Scale developed by Spanier (1976), which assesses four dimensions: cohesion, satisfaction, consensus, and affectional expression. Women who obtained scores above the mean on all three measures were selected for inclusion in the qualitative phase because above-average scores indicated satisfaction and a degree of successful adjustment within the second marriage. This procedure made it possible to focus on achieving an in-depth understanding of how

adjustment occurs rather than concentrating primarily on dysfunction or pathology.

The final sample was selected according to specific inclusion criteria. Eligible women were required to have been remarried for at least one year so that their experiences had attained relative stability and were no longer dominated by the initial emotions associated with the new marriage. They were also required to have at least one child from either their current or previous marriage so that diverse family roles and responsibilities associated with being both a mother and a spouse would be reflected in their adjustment experiences. In addition, participants were required to have relatively satisfactory general psychological health, to have no severe psychological disorders, and not to be taking intensive psychiatric medication. Informed willingness to participate in the interview, the ability to express feelings, and consent to audio-recording of the session were also inclusion criteria. Conversely, women who were undergoing another divorce, were experiencing acute emotional difficulties, or withdrew from further participation were excluded from the study.

2.2. Instruments

In this study, data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The research interviews were conducted over a six-month period, and each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. To foster a sense of safety and trust, the interviews were conducted in a quiet, appropriately equipped room at the Ofogh Mehr Counseling Center. The physical arrangement and acoustic conditions of the room were designed to facilitate open and comfortable conversation. At the beginning of each session, the researcher again explained the purpose of the study and how the data would be used, emphasized the participant's right to withdraw at any time, and subsequently obtained written informed consent. In accordance with ethical principles, all interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission and were then transcribed verbatim. Alongside the interviews, detailed field notes were recorded regarding participants' facial expressions, tone of voice, pauses, and emotional reactions for use during the interpretation of the data.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured and open-ended format so that participants could freely express their feelings and perceptions. The general research questions were designed around participants' perceptions of adjustment following remarriage and the factors affecting such adjustment. Interviews began with broad and gradually

developed questions to help participants feel comfortable, after which progressively deeper questions were asked. Examples of the key questions posed in most interviews included: “How did you cope with remarriage and the issues that followed it?”, “What factors contributed most to your adjustment after remarriage?”, and “What personal or inner characteristics helped you remain flexible when facing the challenges of your new marriage?” Following each response, the researcher used probing questions, as necessary, to elicit further descriptions of situations, feelings, or real-life examples. In some cases, the interview had to be conducted across two sessions so that participants could describe their experiences fully and comfortably. All audio recordings were reviewed after each session and converted into written transcripts. To ensure accuracy, the researcher listened to each audio recording several times to verify the accuracy of the transcription, after which the data were analyzed.

2.3. Data analysis

Data were analyzed using Colaizzi’s method. This method consists of seven stages and enables the identification of overarching themes and shared experiences among participants. First, each transcript was read repeatedly to obtain an overall understanding of the participants’ experiences. Next, significant statements and propositions directly related to the phenomenon of adjustment following remarriage were extracted. In the

subsequent stage, the researcher formulated the implicit meanings of each significant statement to clarify its underlying concept. These meanings were organized into preliminary categories and were subsequently grouped into fundamental themes according to their similarities and differences. After the main themes had been identified, a comprehensive and coherent description of the phenomenon under investigation was developed, leading to an overall understanding of the experienced meaning of adjustment. In the final stage, the findings were presented to several participants to verify the accuracy of the interpretations, and they confirmed that the findings accurately reflected their experiences.

Data analysis was conducted continuously and concurrently with data collection. Following each interview, the researcher recorded initial impressions in a reflexive research journal so that the research process could be dynamically adjusted toward greater conceptual depth. To enhance the credibility of the data, expert peer review was employed. Specifically, an independent researcher with expertise in qualitative research separately coded a portion of the interview transcripts, after which the results of the two analyses were compared to examine semantic convergence.

3. Findings and Results

The demographic characteristics of the study participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Study Participants

Participant No.	Age (years)	Duration of Remarriage (years)	Number of Children	Educational Level	Employment Status	How the Participant Met Her Current Spouse	Economic Status
1	32	2	1	Bachelor’s degree	Employed / Administrative employee	Workplace	Moderate
2	41	5	2	High school diploma	Homemaker	Family acquaintance	Low
3	37	3	2	Bachelor’s degree	Employed / Teacher	Mutual friends	Moderate
4	35	4	1	Master’s degree	Employed / Psychologist	Workplace	High
5	40	6	3	High school diploma	Homemaker	Relatives	Low
6	30	2	1	Associate degree	Employed / Salesperson	Social environment	Low
7	33	3	1	Bachelor’s degree	Employed / Government employee	Introduced by an acquaintance	Moderate
8	38	7	2	Master’s degree	Employed / University lecturer	Academic setting	High
9	42	8	3	High school diploma	Homemaker	Relatives	Low

10	45	10	3	Bachelor's degree	Self-employed	Local acquaintance	Moderate
11	36	2	2	Bachelor's degree	Employed / Accountant	Online social networks	Moderate
12	31	5	1	Bachelor's degree	Homemaker	Educational setting	Moderate
13	39	6	2	Associate degree	Homemaker	Family acquaintance	Low
14	34	4	2	Bachelor's degree	Employed / Nurse	Introduced through friends	High
15	43	9	3	High school diploma	Homemaker	Residential neighborhood	Mo

The 15 women who participated in the study ranged in age from 30 to 45 years, with a mean age of approximately 37 years. The mean duration of remarriage was estimated at 4.7 years. Most participants had at least a bachelor's degree, and more than half were engaged in either part-time or full-time employment. Regarding economic status, eight participants reported a moderate economic status, four reported a low economic status, and three reported a relatively favorable economic status. The diversity in the ways participants had met their current spouses indicates that remarriage experiences within this group were not confined

to a particular social pattern, but extended across workplace settings, family networks, online social networks, and introductions through acquaintances.

Phenomenological analysis of the experiences of the 15 participating women, all of whom had remarried following divorce and demonstrated a relative degree of marital adjustment, resulted in the identification of six main themes and 21 subthemes. The extracted themes were organized across individual, marital, family, and social levels of analysis, revealing a multilevel structure of factors affecting adjustment in remarriage.

Table 2

Framework of Themes and Categories Extracted From the Qualitative Analysis of Adjustment Experiences in Remarriage

Level / Category	Subcategory	Open Codes
Individual Level – Transition From Divorce to Remarriage	Conscious choice	Selection based on specific criteria; receiving premarital counseling
	Increased awareness	Increasing awareness through reading; increasing awareness through watching films; increasing awareness through the Internet and social media; communicating with individuals who had shared experiences of divorce; drawing on the experiences of individuals with similar divorce experiences; increased self-awareness
	Personal recovery and growth	Recovery from the adverse effects of divorce; receiving individual counseling; increased self-confidence; acquiring communication skills; increased assertiveness
	Experience gained from the past	Drawing on experiences from the previous marriage; avoiding repetition of past mistakes
Individual Characteristics	Personal traits	Cognitive maturity; kindness; patience; being less sensitive; coping with life problems; self-control; honesty; understanding one's spouse; respecting the spouse's family; understanding the spouse's circumstances
Spouse Characteristics	Acceptance of child/children	Acceptance of the child/children; respect for the child/children; emotional relationship with the child; valuing and showing affection toward the child/children; meeting the child's/children's needs
	Personal traits	Responsibility and provision for household needs; absence of substance addiction; exercising and valuing physical health; kindness; faithfulness; attention to personal hygiene; not being miserly; nonviolence; physical attractiveness; sociability; calmness; good temperament
	Absence of controlling and coercive behavior	Respecting the spouse's right to work; respecting the spouse's right to pursue education; not restricting the spouse
	Favorable socioeconomic status	Higher education; financial capacity; high cultural level
	Spousal skills	Enhancing the spouse's self-confidence; accompanying the spouse; providing emotional reassurance; respecting the spouse's interests; expressing appreciation and gratitude toward the spouse; helping with household chores; trusting the spouse; understanding the spouse; considering the spouse's opinions and engaging in consultation
	Supportiveness	Spousal support; supporting and encouraging the spouse's personal advancement; encouraging continuation of education; supporting the spouse in interactions with the family; financial support for the spouse

Spouse Characteristics	Positive verbal and interpersonal behavior	Praising the spouse in front of family members; speaking kindly; showing respect and appropriate behavior toward the spouse within the family and other social settings; courteous behavior; respecting the spouse; respecting the spouse's family
	Expression of love	Expressing affection toward the spouse; giving importance and attention to the spouse; remembering important dates; buying gifts for the spouse; surprising the spouse in pleasant ways; expressing love and affection on social media; prioritizing the spouse
Marital Level – Marital Skills	Intimate communication skills	Mutual understanding; mutual respect; knowing one another; constructive dialogue; mutual trust; companionship; helping one another; reciprocal expressions of love; providing reassurance to one another
	Acceptance	Mutual acceptance; acceptance of each other's interests
	Boundary setting	Maintaining personal boundaries; maintaining marital boundaries
	Satisfactory relationships with families	Respecting families; maintaining relationships with families
	Sexual relationship	Meeting sexual needs (Participants 5, 8, and 12)
Family Level	Acceptance	Acceptance of divorce; acceptance of the child/children; absence of stigmatization associated with divorce
	Sociocultural level	High cultural level of the spouse's family; sociocultural similarity between the two families
	Positive interpersonal behavior	Respecting their child's spouse; supporting their child's spouse
Social Level – Change in Societal Attitudes Toward Divorce	Social acceptance of divorce	Public acceptance of divorce; absence of stigmatization associated with divorce
	Social maturity	Increased societal understanding of divorce
	Transition away from traditional attitudes	Changes in traditional views regarding divorce
	Changes in gender-based attitudes	Avoidance of labeling divorced women in society

The following sections present these themes using selected quotations from the participants.

1. Conscious and Self-Directed Transition From Divorce to Remarriage

This key theme emphasizes the active intrapersonal processes through which women reconstructed themselves and deliberately chose a different pathway before entering and during remarriage. This conscious transition was manifested in four subthemes: 1—Conscious choice: Participants emphasized the importance of establishing clear and rational criteria for choosing a new spouse, in contrast to their previous marital experience, as well as receiving premarital counseling. For example, Participant 2 stated: “I had criteria, and I wanted to make the choice myself, something that had never happened at all in my previous life.” Participant 9 also considered premarital counseling to be highly influential. 2—Increased awareness: Participants used various means to acquire greater awareness regarding remarriage, including reading books, watching films, searching online and using social media, and, most importantly, communicating with individuals who had shared experiences of divorce. Participant 7 stated: “I used other people's experiences... I saw what their lives had been like, and that really helped me.” 3—Personal recovery and growth: The women emphasized efforts to recover from the adverse effects of divorce, receive individual counseling,

and particularly acquire communication skills and greater assertiveness as foundations for adjustment in their new marriages. Participant 5 explained: “I tried to improve my communication literacy and be able to understand other people... how I should communicate.” 4—Experience gained from the past: Drawing lessons from the previous marriage and avoiding repetition of earlier mistakes were described as decisive factors. Participant 9 stated: “The dos and don'ts that I had learned from my previous experience... helped me become a better person.”

2. Personality Characteristics Facilitating Adjustment in the Self and Spouse

This theme refers to intrapersonal traits and qualities that provide a foundation for constructive interaction. At the individual level: Characteristics such as cognitive maturity, patience, reduced sensitivity to minor issues, self-control, and honesty—particularly complete disclosure regarding the past—were considered important. Participant 2 emphasized “not hiding anything from the beginning,” while Participant 8 identified “not getting angry quickly and not unnecessarily shouting about everything” as factors contributing to adjustment. At the spouse level: A broad range of positive characteristics in the new spouse was considered crucial for creating security and satisfaction. These included responsibility, psychological and physical well-being, such as absence of substance addiction and engagement in

exercise, kindness, calmness, good temperament, and physical attractiveness. In addition, the absence of controlling behavior and respect for the spouse's autonomy, including the right to work, study, and engage in social relationships, were repeatedly identified as positive distinctions from the previous marriage. Participant 3 stated: "I am allowed to continue my education and work... he recognizes my rights."

3. Quality of Interaction and Marital Relationship Skills

This theme constitutes the core of successful adjustment and focuses on reciprocal behaviors and deliberate relationship skills within married life. Intimate communication skills: Mutual understanding, mutual respect, constructive dialogue, and trust were repeatedly identified as pillars of the relationship. Participant 13 emphasized "complete trust," whereas Participant 11 emphasized resolving conflicts through conversation. Supportiveness and active spousal involvement: Participants highly valued receiving emotional support, encouragement for personal development and education, and support from their spouses in interactions with their spouses' families. Participant 5 felt that she "had someone dependable to rely on," while Participant 8 referred to her spouse's support during family gatherings. Expression of love and commitment: Tangible and everyday affectionate behaviors, including attention, gift-giving, expressions of appreciation, and prioritizing the spouse, strengthened participants' feelings of being loved and secure. Participant 11 referred to "beautiful words" and "romantic posts on social media," while Participant 9 referred to "being given priority." Marital commitment was clearly identified as a trust-building factor. Healthy boundary setting: Maintaining personal and marital privacy and avoiding disclosure of private issues outside the relationship were considered essential to feelings of security and respect. Participant 1 explained: "We respect each other's personal boundaries... so to speak, we do not cross them." Satisfactory sexual relationship: Fulfillment of sexual needs was identified as an integral component of intimacy and overall marital adjustment.

4. Acceptance and Support From Families

The attitudes and behaviors of the families of origin, particularly the spouse's family, played a decisive role in reducing or increasing pressures on the new relationship. Unconditional acceptance: Acceptance of the divorce without stigmatizing the woman, and in some cases complete acceptance of children from the previous marriage

by the spouse's family, were repeatedly described as highly valuable. Participant 13 stated: "My husband's family accepted my divorce... they do not consider me inferior to their son." Participant 4 similarly expressed satisfaction with her child's acceptance by her spouse's family. Cultural level and similarity: A high cultural level within the spouse's family and sociocultural similarity between the two families provided a foundation for mutual understanding and facilitated acceptance. Positive behavior and practical support: Respect and practical support from family members toward the newly remarried woman enhanced feelings of belonging and security.

5. The Moderating Role of Society and Culture

Participants clearly perceived the influence of broader sociocultural changes on their personal experiences. Changes in societal attitudes toward divorce: Most women believed that, compared with the past, traditional and stigmatizing attitudes toward divorce and divorced women had become less pronounced in society. This change in attitude had substantially reduced the psychological and social pressures experienced by the women and their families. Participant 11 explained: "The culture of society has changed... people's level of understanding has increased... they have become more open-minded about this issue." Participant 4 similarly stated: "It isn't like it used to be anymore... not everyone really looked at me as if to say, 'She's divorced.'" Social maturity: This attitudinal shift was interpreted as an indication of increased societal understanding and greater social awareness, thereby enabling individuals to live more normally following divorce.

4. Discussion

The present study aimed to develop a phenomenological understanding of adjustment in remarriage among women after divorce, with particular attention to the transition from individual adaptation to marital, familial, and social acceptance. The findings revealed six main themes and 21 subthemes organized across individual, marital, family, and social levels. Overall, the participants' experiences indicated that successful adjustment in remarriage is not the consequence of a single personal characteristic or relational factor; rather, it emerges from the dynamic interaction of individual reconstruction after divorce, adaptive characteristics of the woman and her spouse, effective marital interaction, acceptance and support from families, and more favorable social attitudes toward divorce and

remarriage. This multilevel pattern is consistent with contemporary conceptualizations of remarital adjustment as a complex process involving individual, relational, family-system, and sociocultural components (Santos et al., 2024; Sweeney, 2010). It also supports findings from the Iranian context showing that remarriage stability is influenced by multiple interconnected psychological, relational, familial, and contextual factors rather than by isolated variables (Ayadi et al., 2025; Baharami-Nejad et al., 2025).

The first major finding concerned a conscious and self-directed transition from divorce to remarriage. Participants described successful adjustment as beginning before the new marriage itself, through deliberate partner selection, increased awareness, personal recovery, counseling, acquisition of communication skills, greater assertiveness, and the use of lessons learned from the previous marriage. This finding suggests that divorce was not experienced solely as a disruptive event but, for some women, also became a context for reflection and psychological reorganization. The women appeared to enter remarriage with greater clarity regarding their needs, expectations, relational boundaries, and criteria for choosing a partner. Such findings are compatible with research indicating that remarriage is shaped by prior marital experiences and by the beliefs and expectations individuals bring into a subsequent relationship (Higginbotham, 2005; Higginbotham & Adler-Baeder, 2008). The Remarriage Belief Inventory literature further demonstrates that expectations regarding remarriage and stepfamily life are important because unrealistic beliefs may undermine adaptation, whereas more realistic and flexible expectations may support relationship functioning (Garneau et al., 2016; Santos et al., 2022).

The emphasis participants placed on learning from the previous marriage is also consistent with the view that remarriage differs qualitatively from first marriage because individuals enter the relationship with accumulated relational histories. Papernow has emphasized that recoupling involves not only hope for a new beginning but also the presence of prior experiences, established habits, children, former partners, and expectations that may complicate the development of the new relationship (Papernow, 2018). In the present study, however, previous experience often functioned as a resource rather than only as a burden. Participants described avoiding prior mistakes, seeking counseling, clarifying expectations, and intentionally improving relational skills. This may help explain why those who had achieved relative adjustment viewed their prior experiences as a form of experiential

knowledge. Similar qualitative findings from collectivist contexts suggest that post-divorce remarriage often involves deliberate reconsideration of previous choices and efforts to reconstruct both personal and family life (Güngör, 2025; Güngör, 2026). The present findings therefore suggest that successful remarital adjustment may depend partly on whether previous marital experience is processed constructively rather than carried forward as unresolved fear, mistrust, or rigid expectations.

A second important finding involved personality characteristics that facilitated adjustment in both the women and their spouses. Participants emphasized cognitive maturity, patience, self-control, honesty, kindness, reduced reactivity, understanding the spouse's circumstances, and respect for the spouse's family. In their descriptions of the new spouse, responsibility, emotional stability, kindness, good temperament, physical and psychological health, and respect for personal autonomy were especially prominent. These findings are consistent with studies showing that marital satisfaction in remarried couples is associated with personal and relational resources and cannot be understood independently of individual characteristics and couple functioning (Bir-Akturk & Fisiloglu, 2009; Kim, 2010). The importance of self-control and reduced emotional reactivity may also be interpreted within the broader literature on marital stress, which suggests that the way individuals respond to stressors affects relational functioning and marital stability (Kwon et al., 2007).

Honesty and openness about the past appeared particularly important in the participants' narratives. Given that remarriage follows an earlier relationship and often includes complex personal and family histories, concealment may create uncertainty and undermine trust. By contrast, transparent communication can facilitate realistic expectations and a sense of safety. This interpretation is consistent with research on remarital beliefs and dyadic adjustment, which emphasizes that mutual expectations and shared understanding are central to stepcouple functioning (Garneau et al., 2016). The finding that women valued spouses who were noncontrolling and supportive of their employment, education, and social participation is also noteworthy. It suggests that perceived autonomy and respect may constitute important corrective experiences when the previous marriage involved greater restriction or relational imbalance. In the Iranian context, where remarriage may intersect with traditional gender expectations, such autonomy-supportive behavior may have particular

importance for women's psychological security and marital satisfaction (Ayadi et al., 2025).

The third and perhaps most central theme was the quality of marital interaction and relationship skills. Participants repeatedly referred to mutual understanding, respect, constructive communication, trust, emotional reassurance, collaboration, affection, appreciation, and conflict resolution through dialogue. These findings are consistent with the broader remarriage literature, in which the quality of the couple relationship is regarded as a central determinant of adaptation in stepfamilies (DeLongis & Zwicker, 2017; Santos et al., 2024). The findings also support clinical models of stepfamily functioning that place the couple bond at the center of successful family reorganization. Papernow emphasizes that remarried couples face pressures that may arise from parenting, loyalty conflicts, former spouses, children, and extended family members, and therefore require particularly strong couple communication and boundary-management skills (Papernow, 2023). In the present study, women who described successful adjustment appeared to experience their spouses as emotionally available allies with whom problems could be managed collaboratively.

Spousal support emerged as a particularly salient component of this theme. Participants described emotional support, encouragement for education and personal development, financial support, support in interactions with family members, and a sense of having a dependable partner. This finding aligns closely with evidence that dyadic support can buffer distress in stepfamily contexts (Shapiro & Stewart, 2012). In remarriage, support may be especially consequential because individuals often confront multiple simultaneous tasks, including redefining marital roles, integrating children, negotiating relationships with extended family, and managing social reactions to remarriage. A supportive spouse can therefore serve as both an emotional resource and a structural ally in managing these demands. Research on marital stress similarly suggests that relational support can mitigate the adverse effects of external pressures on marital functioning (Sanctuary, 2023). The present findings expand this literature by showing that women experienced support not only as emotional comfort but also as active advocacy, encouragement, practical cooperation, and respect for their development.

The participants also emphasized expressions of love and commitment through everyday behaviors such as verbal affection, remembering important dates, buying gifts, expressing appreciation, prioritizing the spouse, and

demonstrating affection publicly or through social media. Although these behaviors may appear routine, their phenomenological significance was considerable because they communicated recognition, value, and relational security. This is compatible with research showing that marital satisfaction is closely linked to the perceived quality of the couple relationship and the degree to which partners experience emotional connection and responsiveness (Kim, 2010; Tao, 2019). The role of commitment may be even more important after divorce, because individuals may enter a new relationship with heightened sensitivity to abandonment or repetition of previous relational failures. Thus, repeated demonstrations of affection and commitment may operate as signals of stability in the new marriage.

Healthy boundary setting was another important relational component. Participants emphasized respecting personal boundaries, protecting marital privacy, and avoiding the disclosure of private marital issues to outsiders. This finding is strongly consistent with stepfamily theory, which identifies boundary clarity as a major developmental task in remarried families (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Papernow, 2018). Unlike first-marriage families, remarried families often include overlapping relational systems involving biological children, stepchildren, former spouses, and extended family members. In such circumstances, poorly defined boundaries may create conflict, role ambiguity, and loyalty tensions. The women's emphasis on protecting the couple relationship therefore appears to reflect an adaptive effort to establish the new marriage as a distinct and legitimate relational unit while maintaining appropriate connections with other family members.

A satisfactory sexual relationship was also identified as a component of marital adjustment. Although this issue was less extensively elaborated than communication or support, participants considered fulfillment of sexual needs an integral part of intimacy and relationship satisfaction. This finding is consistent with the broader understanding of marital adjustment as a multidimensional construct that includes emotional, communicative, and sexual dimensions (Santos et al., 2024). It also reinforces the importance of considering remarital adjustment in a holistic manner rather than reducing it to the absence of conflict. For remarried women, sexual intimacy may contribute to emotional closeness, mutual acceptance, and the reconstruction of trust within the new relationship.

The fourth major finding concerned acceptance and support from families, particularly the spouse's family. Participants described acceptance of their divorce history,

respectful treatment, support for the new marriage, and, importantly, acceptance of children from previous marriages. These experiences reduced feelings of stigma and enhanced belonging and security. This finding is highly consistent with family-systems perspectives emphasizing that remarriage involves the reorganization of multiple relational subsystems rather than merely the union of two individuals (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Sweeney, 2010). The formation of stepfamilies requires the integration of prior and current family relationships, and acceptance by relatives can facilitate this process. Conversely, rejection by the spouse's family may reinforce a woman's sense of marginality and create chronic pressure on the couple relationship.

The acceptance of children from previous marriages appeared especially important. This finding is consistent with studies demonstrating that stepchildren and stepparent-child relationships have important implications for remarital satisfaction and family functioning (Bir-Akturk & Fisiloglu, 2009; DeLongis & Zwicker, 2017). When a woman remarries while retaining maternal responsibilities, acceptance of her children may be experienced as inseparable from acceptance of herself. A spouse or family who rejects the child may generate loyalty conflicts and threaten the stability of the new marital bond. By contrast, emotional acceptance, respect, and practical support for children can reduce relational tension and facilitate stepfamily integration. Clinical literature similarly emphasizes that successful stepfamily development requires patience and realistic expectations regarding the gradual formation of new family bonds (Papernow, 2023).

Cultural and socioeconomic similarity between families was also perceived as facilitating adjustment. Participants suggested that comparable cultural backgrounds and higher levels of family understanding made acceptance easier. This observation is compatible with research emphasizing the contextual nature of remarriage and stepfamily formation, particularly in societies where family networks remain strongly involved in marital life (Balachandran & Jean Yeung, 2020). In collectivist contexts, remarriage may require not only dyadic compatibility but also negotiation between family systems. Recent research from Turkey similarly demonstrates that family reorganization and social reintegration after remarriage are closely linked to wider family and cultural expectations (Güngör, 2026). The current findings indicate that, in such settings, family acceptance may function as a form of social validation that helps legitimize the new marriage.

The fifth major finding concerned the moderating role of society and culture. Participants perceived that negative social attitudes toward divorce and divorced women had diminished compared with the past, and they experienced this change as reducing psychological and social pressure. This finding is particularly important because it locates remarital adjustment beyond the individual and family levels. Social stigma can shape self-concept, opportunities for repartnering, family reactions, and the legitimacy attributed to a subsequent marriage. Research in collectivist settings similarly shows that social reintegration after divorce and remarriage is closely connected to community norms and public perceptions (Güngör, 2025; Güngör, 2026). In Iran, previous research has also identified social and cultural challenges as significant components of the remarriage experience after divorce (Ayadi et al., 2025).

The perceived decline in stigma may represent a broader transition in societal understandings of divorce. Participants interpreted this change as evidence of greater social maturity and declining adherence to rigid traditional judgments. Such a pattern is consistent with demographic and social changes in contemporary family life, in which divorce, repartnering, and remarriage have become increasingly visible family transitions (Geiger & Livingston, 2019; Sweeney, 2010). At the same time, the historical significance of remarriage demonstrates that attitudes toward subsequent unions are deeply embedded in moral, cultural, and institutional traditions (Benton, 2026). Therefore, the participants' perception of changing attitudes should not be interpreted as the complete disappearance of stigma, but rather as a gradual cultural shift that may make remarriage more socially manageable.

Taken together, the findings suggest that adjustment in remarriage is best conceptualized as an ecological and developmental process. At the individual level, women described self-awareness, learning, recovery, and deliberate decision-making. At the marital level, communication, trust, support, affection, autonomy, sexual satisfaction, and healthy boundaries were central. At the family level, acceptance by relatives and integration of children were critical. At the societal level, reduced stigma and greater social acceptance facilitated reintegration. This multilevel interpretation is broadly consistent with systematic evidence showing that marital adjustment in remarriage is determined by a constellation of personal, relational, stepfamily, and contextual factors (Santos et al., 2024). It is also consistent with cross-cultural research demonstrating that remarital experiences must be understood in relation to the cultural

environments in which families are reorganized (Balachandran & Jean Yeung, 2020; Jikihara et al., 2023; Santos et al., 2023). The findings therefore reinforce the value of systemic approaches to counseling and intervention rather than approaches focused solely on the individual woman or marital dyad.

5. Conclusion

Much of the traditional literature has emphasized greater instability and complexity in remarried and stepfamily relationships, which are undoubtedly important concerns. However, the present findings demonstrate that women can actively construct adaptive remarriages through reflection, relational learning, support utilization, and boundary development. This perspective is compatible with recent Iranian findings identifying components that contribute to the stability of remarriage (Baharami-Nejad et al., 2025). It also aligns with evidence that beliefs, expectations, and relational resources can be assessed and potentially modified through intervention (Garneau et al., 2016; Santos et al., 2022). Accordingly, remarriage should not be conceptualized simply as a repetition of previous marital risk but as a distinct developmental transition in which prior experiences may be transformed into resources for more adaptive relational functioning.

6. Limitations & Suggestions

The present study had several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the sample consisted of only 15 women who had experienced remarriage and had achieved a relative level of marital adjustment, all of whom were recruited from a single counseling center in Shahriar. Consequently, the findings may not represent women who experience severe conflict, unstable remarriages, repeated divorce, or no engagement with counseling services. Second, the use of purposive sampling and phenomenological interviews necessarily prioritizes depth over statistical generalizability. Third, the study included only women, and the experiences of remarried men, current spouses, stepchildren, and extended family members were not examined. Fourth, the data were based on retrospective self-report and may therefore have been influenced by selective recall or socially desirable presentation. Finally, because the study focused on relatively adjusted remarriages, it may have captured more adaptive pathways while underrepresenting structural barriers and persistent sources of distress.

Future studies should investigate remarital adjustment using larger and more diverse samples drawn from multiple cities, socioeconomic groups, cultural backgrounds, and service settings. Comparative qualitative studies could examine women in stable and unstable remarriages, while dyadic studies could include both spouses to identify convergent and divergent perceptions of adjustment. Research including children and extended family members would also provide a more systemic understanding of stepfamily adaptation. Longitudinal designs are recommended to examine how adjustment changes from the early stages of remarriage through later family development. Mixed-method studies could integrate phenomenological findings with measures of marital satisfaction, attachment, communication, resilience, stigma, and family functioning. It would also be useful to examine differences associated with the number and residence of children, length of time since divorce, age at remarriage, socioeconomic status, and the presence of ongoing relationships with former spouses.

In practice, counseling programs for individuals considering or entering remarriage should address the transition as a multilevel process rather than focusing only on couple compatibility. Premarital and remarital counseling can help individuals clarify expectations, process unresolved experiences from previous relationships, identify maladaptive relational patterns, strengthen communication and conflict-resolution skills, and establish realistic boundaries with former spouses and extended family members. Couple interventions should also explicitly address autonomy, emotional support, affection, sexual intimacy, financial expectations, parenting roles, and acceptance of children from previous marriages. Family-based interventions may be valuable when resistance or conflict from relatives interferes with the new marriage. Finally, community education and professional outreach can contribute to reducing stigma toward divorced and remarried women and promote a more supportive social environment for the development of stable subsequent marriages.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who cooperated in carrying out this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

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

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed in this article.

Declaration

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

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