Original Article

Explanation of the mental experiences of Iranian women on the verge of divorce regarding marital conflicts

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Abstract

Introduction: Conflict is an inevitable matter in marital life. Understanding the mental experiences of couples, especially women, of marital conflicts is very important. Therefore, the present study was designed to explain the mental experiences of Iranian women on the verge of divorce from marital conflicts.

Materials and Methods: According to the five-stage Granheim and Landman's approach, a conventional qualitative content analysis was conducted at the Nursing and Midwifery College of Birjand University of Medical Sciences, Iran, 2020-2021. Seventeen women who were selected through purposive sampling entered the study. Data were collected using unstructured and semi-structured interviews. The data analysis process was performed simultaneously and continuously with data collection according to the steps proposed by Granheim and Landman.

Results: Following the data analysis, two main themes emerged. The first theme was conflict clarification, with two main categories reviewing the roles and exploring behaviors' reasons. The second theme was the multifaceted interaction of mental processes, which included three main categories: emotion-based behavior and perceived self-efficacy.

Conclusion: The findings of this study demonstrated the mental effort of women on the verge of divorce to understand and resolve conflicts. These findings emphasized the importance of teaching logical thinking, emotional intelligence skills, and self-efficacy for women.

Keywords: Divorce, Marital conflict, Women

Introduction

Marital conflict is an inevitable matter. It is usual for spouses to have different needs and viewpoints. Inconsistencies and disputes can arise if these differences are not managed effectively (1,2). Additionally, marital conflict occurs when the partners are unable to understand the issues and, as a result, resolve them (3).

There is no precise data on frequency of marital conflicts. However, increasing rates of divorce in

the world and Iran reflect a high incidence of marital conflicts because the fate of some of these conflicts ends in divorce (4). Marital conflict can involve violence, non-compliance with marital obligations, lack of cooperation in managing life affairs, and quarrel over opposing needs, ideas, beliefs, values, or goals (5,6). These conflicts have a detrimental effect on family members' physical and mental health and ultimately result in the breakup of the marital relationship. Anxiety, depression, aggression, and parental neglect are unfortunate consequences of marital conflicts (7). Furthermore, research indicates that marital conflict can lead to poorer health conditions and the risk of certain diseases, such as heart disease, cancer, and chronic pains (1).

Considering the importance of marital conflicts in family health, researchers have considered it a complex and multidimensional phenomenon (8). The most important dimension is conflict resolution because it affects the couple's relationship and, therefore, the whole family system. Some researchers have examined conflict resolution strategies and have classified these strategies into two categories: constructive and destructive strategies (2,9). They described accepting the other side's point of view, having a conversation about conflict motives, and attempting to resolve the problem as constructive strategies (2). Most of the studies conducted on marital conflicts have affected marital satisfaction and marriage stability (10-12).

However, few researches have focused on couples' mental experiences of marital conflict, particularly among women. Studies show that women are more affected by marital conflicts and experience more physiological and psychological stress (13). Therefore, understanding their experience is very important since the intensity of conflicts causes them to consider divorce. So, the present study aimed to explore the mental experiences of marital conflicts in Iranian women on the verge of divorce.

Materials and Methods

This conventional qualitative content analysis based on the five-stage Granheim and Landman's approach was performed at Birjand University of Medical Sciences. Participants were selected from women on the verge of divorce who were referred to counseling centers under the supervision of the Southern Khorasan Welfare Organization from August 2020 to February 2021. A purposeful sampling method with maximum variability in age, occupation, education, income level, having or not having children, the number of children, and marriage duration was used. Inclusion criteria were being on the verge of divorce, providing written consent, and having the ability to express experiences. Exclusion criteria included participants' refusal to continue participating in the study. Sampling and data collection continued until information redundancy was achieved. Therefore, the new data did not create a new category, and the existing categories also did not change. In total, 17 women on the verge of divorce participated in the study.

The ethics committee of Birjand University of Medical Sciences approved this research proposal (IR.BUMS.REC.1399.160). In addition, the study protocol was confirmed by the General Department of Welfare of Southern Khorasan Province. Therefore, the participants were fully informed of the study protocol and were assured that their names and identity would not be disclosed. Furthermore, the participants were informed that they could abandon the study at any stage. Unstructured and semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. The duration of the interviews varied from 45 to 90 minutes, and the time and place of the interviews were adjusted according to the participants. The interviews were held at the Divorce Injury Reduction Center of Southern Khorasan Welfare Organization and in a quiet and private environment. The researcher began each interview by asking about the demographic characteristics. Then an open-ended and general question was asked, such as "would you, please describe your experience of being on the verge of divorce?" Finally, follow-up questions were asked according to the participants' answers. At the end of each interview session, the interview was carefully reviewed several times and transcribed promptly. The data analysis process was performed continuously and simultaneously with data collection, based on the Graneheim and Landman method (14). Each interview was transcribed verbatim, and the text of the interview was read several times to gain a general perception of its content. The analysis was started

by identifying the units of meaning that could be extracted from the statements. Then, coding was carried out line by line. Next, codes with similar meanings were sorted into subcategories. Depending on the relationships among the subcategories, this large number of subcategories was combined into a smaller number of categories. In the final stage, main themes were identified. MAXQDA software was used to analyze qualitative data. Regarding trustworthiness, credibility was established via member check and peer check. First, the participants were contacted after the analysis and were given a full transcript of their respective coded interviews to determine whether the codes matched their experiences. Then, two faculty members from the College of Nursing and Midwifery at Birjand University of Medical Sciences conducted peer checking.

Results

Seventeen women on the verge of divorce aged 19-51 years (mean age of 33.82 years) participated in this study. Their education levels ranged from primary education to specialized doctorate.

Their marital life duration ranged from six months to twenty-four years (mean duration 10.97 years). Their status varied in terms of the number of children, from childless to a maximum of three with an average of 1.17 children. The demographic characteristics of participants are displayed in Table 1.

Two main themes, including conflict clarification and multifaceted interaction of mental processes, were derived following data analysis. The first theme and related categories are briefly listed in Table 2.

Table 1: The demographic characteristics of participants

ID	Age (Year)	Education	Occupation	Family income level	Marital life duration (Year)	Number of children
1	32	Specialist doctor	Physician	High	10	0
2	34	Bachelor's degree	Housewife	Moderate	11	1
3	22	Bachelor's degree	Teacher	Moderate	0.5	0
4	34	Elementary school	Housewife	Low	13	3
5	29	Elementary school	Housewife	Moderate	15	1
6	30	Associate Degree	Employee	Moderate	3	0
7	22	Diploma	Employee	Moderate	2	0
8	19	Bachelor's degree	Housewife	Moderate	5	0
9	44	Diploma	Housewife	Moderate	24	2
10	45	Elementary school	Domestic jobs	Low	17	2
11	32	Diploma	Domestic jobs	Low	7	1
12	31	Elementary school	Housewife	Moderate	9	2
13	51	Elementary school	Housewife	Moderate	20	2
14	43	Middle school	Housewife	Low	17	3
15	37	Elementary school	Housewife	Low	14	1
16	33	Middle school	Housewife	Moderate	15	2
17	37	Diploma	Housewife	Low	4	0

Table 2: The first theme and related categories

Theme	Categories	Subcategories
Conflict clarification	Reviewing the roles	Identifying their own role
		Paying attention to husband's role
		Investigating the role of families
		Focusing on the others' role
	Exploring behaviors' reasons	Paying attention to the reasons of spouse's behavior

The first theme of this study suggested that participants approached the conflict from various perspectives. They focused on their role and the role of their spouses and others in creating or exacerbating conflict.

They also tried to find explanations for the conflicting behaviors. In this way, the participants attempted to get a clearer picture of the conflict. This theme included two main categories and four primary subcategories. The main categories of this theme were reviewing the roles played and trying to understand behaviors' reasons.

Reviewing the roles

In order to comprehend the conflict, the women analyzed influential roles in establishing or intensifying the conflict. They analyzed their husbands', families', and others' roles. These women paid attention to turning points which led them to seek their roles. Also, they noticed their strategies used and outcomes of role seeking.

"At the time, when I was in bad condition [being kicked out of the house], I was interested to know what I had lacked emotionally and responsibly? What kind of woman he wants who was not his wife? It was a question for me. I wanted to know what my fault that I deserved such behavior was." (A 30-year-old woman married for three years)

Participants acknowledged that after the crisis period subsided, their attention shifted from their role to that of their spouse in life's problems. They found that sometimes the spouse's behavior sets the stage for conflict. Therefore, these women also addressed the role of the husband's behavioral problems.

"He was so indifferent to various issues in life that I had to compensate for his indifference by making hasty decisions or behaviors. Therefore, he was accusing me of being intolerant. While his behavior was exacerbating some of my characteristics that were causing discord". (A 32-year-old specialist)

To better understand life problems, participants focused on the role of the spouse's family. These women considered non-peaceful behaviors, cultural differences, and an unhappy atmosphere in the spouse's family as underlying factors of current conflicts.

These women also found that inconsistency, indifference, one-sided bias, and lack of continued support from their husbands' families made their problem-solving efforts more difficult.

"I asked my husband why he had not told me about the insignificance of Hijab for his family? I told him, in these circumstances, I have no idea how in the future, I would teach my children about discerning between a Mahram and a non-Mahram. This was a point of contention between us". (A twenty-two-year-old woman with six months of marriage)

Participants focused on the role of their families in creating the current conditions of marital life. They stated that the family had failed to teach them the basics of life. The studied women believed that their families have been inattentive to the importance of rational choice in marriage. These women also found that the family's cautious approach has been caused them to feel unsupported in the face of their husbands' abuse.

"My family did not react to my husband's abuse for the sake of my children.

If they had a little mercy on me and supported me, my life would not be like this. He would not have dared to misbehave with me if my family had been dealing with his abuse since the beginning of my life". (A 51-year-old woman with primary education)

Participants also explored other people's roles, such as neighbors, friends, marriage mediators, dispute resolution mediators, local institutions, and specialized centers.

These women found that the mediators have behaved in a non-committal manner. However, the behaviors of others have also been free of benevolence and because of willingness to interfere. In addition, the local institutions have had a superficial look at problems, and the supporting role of specialized centers has not continued.

"Why do drug rehab centers require people after quitting an addiction to come to them on their own? They do not go to the center but rather to the drug butler's residence.

My husband is one of the many addiction quitters who have been abandoned. At first, these centers assured us that if we called them and asked for help, they would come and return them to the drug rehab facility, but they did not keep their promise". (A 45-year-old woman married for 17 years)

Exploring behaviors' reasons

To comprehend marital problems, participants paid attention to the reasons behind their own and their husbands' behaviors.

They investigated the reasons for their behaviors, ignorance, and lack of knowledge. They justified their behaviors by reasons such as attempting to keep the marital relationship, simplistic thinking, being forced, and having a tendency to modify their husbands. These behaviors sometimes provided the ground for conflict.

"When I married him, I knew that he was addicted. My sisters advised me not to marry him, but I persevered since I believed we could live together. I expected it to be so simple. I think that taking such an important issue easy drove me to encounter all of these difficulties". (A 32-year-old woman with a diploma)

Participants also paid attention to their husbands' explanations for their behaviors, including physical fatigue, emotional boredom, family expectations, childhood learning, pain alleviation, lowered life pressure, and intolerance of opposition.

"My husband would curse and become enraged for the simplest thing, uttering the most heinous words. I greatly suffered from his behavior. Then I would see him readily say: I grew up like this since I was a child, and I will not change". (A nineteen-year-old woman married for five years).

The studied women also evaluated their husbands' justifications for their behaviors. Their husbands' reasons were unclear, incomprehensible, unjustified, and constantly changing.

"Sometimes he used opium, then he would say that because you did not obey me, I do this. It was clear for me that he was looking for an excuse." (A 37-year-old woman married for four years)

Participants also made hypotheses concerning the reasons for their husbands' behaviors.

These reasons included fear of others' judgments, bad friends, and workplace pressures. Additionally, they attributed their spouse's behaviors to different factors such as inherent characteristics, irresponsibility, disinterest in marital life, desire for pleasure, role stress, a lack of comprehending the problems, and projection. Furthermore, these women mentioned financial stability, addiction, and loss of sanctity.

"We had our own home and car; he was employed and had a fixed salary. I thought that he used drugs to complete his pleasure, because we had no problem." (A 34-year-old woman with three children)

Participants investigated several influential roles in causing and worsening conflict or avoiding conflict resolution. They also sought to explain their own and their husbands' behaviors following the conflict. As a result, they attempted to elucidate the causes of the conflicts.

Multifaceted interaction of mental processes

Participants analyzed their reactions to marital conflicts and found that they made decisions based on a set of values, emotions, and perceptions when they were in conflict. This theme was divided into three major categories and seven subcategories. The major categories were consideration of the aspects of behavior, emotion-based behavior, and perceived self-efficacy.

Consideration all aspects

Participants attempted to select strategies for conflict resolution that would keep the condition from growing more complicated and life achievements from losing. Furthermore, to prevent some injuries, these women attempted to maintain the family structure. Other factors that influenced participants' reactions to marital conflicts were observing socio-cultural considerations and adherence to values.

"I was tolerating my husband's misbehavior, and I did not get divorced because my daughters had grown up, and I thought that if I got divorced, my daughters' safety would be endangered. Despite being an irresponsible person, my husband's presence in the family causes others to do not dare to harassment, including my daughters". (A 43-year-old woman with three children)

"My husband was unfaithful to me and that made me so sad. Some people advised me to retaliate for his behavior but I did not, because I thought maintaining my worth is more important to me." (A 19-year-old woman married for five years)

Emotion-based behavior

The studied women's behaviors were sometimes based on emotions such as self-punishment,

retaliation, and protest against their own forced marriage.

"During the first month, I realized that I have made a mistake in choosing my spouse and that it was useless to continue marital relationship. As it was my own fault, I forced myself to pay for my mistake." (A 34-year-old woman having a child)

"Although patience is very important in marital life, but I could not behave in a patient manner because he was not my choice and I did not love him. I was forced to marry him." (A 33-year-old woman married for 15 years)

Perceived self-efficacy

Participants explained some of their responses to marital life problems with perceived self-efficacy. They found that poor self-efficacy lowered their ability to effectively identify, follow, and manage troublesome circumstances. However, in some cases, life problems improved their self-efficacy and led to more adaptive responses to life problems.

"After I got married, my husband asked me to stay at my father's home instead of going to my new home and taking care of my mother, who could not do her job due to a stroke. I thought maybe he was saying it out of benevolence, and the problem was that I could not understand what he was saying. Although I was upset, I obeyed with complete simplicity. I later found out that he had two other wives beside me". (A 31-year-old woman with two children)

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the mental experiences of Iranian women on the verge of divorce regarding marital conflicts. Two main themes were derived from the data analysis: 1) conflict clarification and 2) multifaceted interaction of mental processes. A review of studies on marital conflict shows that they mainly focus on factors affecting conflict. One of these is a study conducted in 2021, and data were collected from 390 people through interviews and questionnaires (1). In addition, another study that can be mentioned was performed in 2020 on 32 couples using semi-structured in-depth interviews (12). Furthermore, another study in this field was done on ten people through interviews in 2020(15). Also, a study was conducted in 2020, and 12 couples with marital conflicts and 12 couples with marital satisfaction were interviewed (16).

Furthermore, the consequences of unresolved conflicts have been the subject of some other studies. For instance, in 2019, these consequences were investigated through interviews with 63 people (17). In addition, some studies have addressed conflict resolution approaches.

Among these studies, we can mention a study performed in 2018 on 750 couples by using the Conflict Resolution Behavior Questionnaire (1,2). According to what was stated, we did not find studies on mental experiences related to marital conflicts. Therefore, the findings of this study were compared to the findings of other studies that were somewhat similar.

This study showed that participants tried to understand their marital conflicts. Researchers believe that life problems vary in structure, complexity, and dynamism. Some problems are well-defined, which means that the type of problem and strategies for solving the problem is straightforward. Undefined problems, on the other hand, have unpredictable solutions. People in marital life mainly face problems that are not well defined. Therefore, it is important to understand the problem (15) correctly. In this study, participants tried to determine what was going on by examining roles and reasons for behaviors. According to some researchers, the first step in conflict management is to recognize the problem. In this step, people try to learn more about the problem. In addition, following the conflict, an essential skill that can help couples rebuild their relationship is clarification (15). In this study, participants made a mental effort to clarify their marital life problems.

The studied women tried to figure out which roles were effective in making and worsening the conflicts or what kept the conflicts from being resolved. These women were looking for the blame. It is believed that a set of reasons, events, and factors work together to make a problem happen. If a person, regardless of this issue, seeks to find a specific culprit, cognitive error, which is one of the important analytical errors of human beings, occurs. Trying to find a culprit may lead to over-attributing problems to people and thus make it difficult to understand the truth. Trying to find a specific and close cause is one of the

serious obstacles to developing a systemic attitude. The importance of systemic thinking is that it helps a person consider her/his responsibility in life events to gain a deep insight into the problem (16). The findings of this study showed that participants paid attention to different roles in the occurrence of conflicts. However, it is essential to help these women avoid deviating from systemic thinking.

The current findings revealed that participants paid attention to the reasons behind their behavior and that of their husbands to understand marital conflicts. Paying attention to the motivation of one's own and others' behaviors to understand and interpret these behaviors is one of the important issues in social psychology (17). When people examine the causes of their own and other's behavior, they use explanations called attribution (18). Attribution is a crucial cognitive process in social interactions (17). According to Heider (1958), just as scientists employ causal principles to comprehend the physical world, individuals use attribution to understand behaviors in everyday life (18). The results of some studies also show that scientists working in artificial intelligence have concluded that to build explainable models, it is important to pay attention to the reasons for human behavior (17). Participants in the present study attributed their behaviors. They also assessed the attributions of their husbands and made hypotheses on the reasons behind their husbands' behaviors. The human is a complex being, and a set of intertwined factors form his behaviors. Therefore, women need to be aware that the reasons for human behavior in many cases cannot be said with certainty. This insight will enable them to be more flexible in their attributions.

The studied women experienced that their responses to marital conflicts were formed by the mutual influence of values, emotions, and perceptions. Some researchers have examined the role of beliefs and desires in human behavior. They have found that developing knowledge about the impact of values on behavior could provide a deeper understanding of how behavior is formed. (19). Some studies have also considered the effect of cognitive assessment on emotions. These studies show that the mind is the scene of a battle between the opposing forces of reason and emotion and that human perception of

the world is shaped by the influence of these different mental states. Human brain imaging also reveals that the centers of emotion and cognition in the brain have very close interaction, which may help explain the complexities of human behavior (20).

Participants described some of their behaviors in dealing with conflicts to be the result of considering all aspects. Before a behavior, they thought about the possible consequences and their compatibility with social and emotional norms. The results of a review study in decision-making also show that adapting choices to values is a sign of rationality. In other words, it is logical to be considered values when deciding on a solution to one's problems (21). A qualitative content analysis study was also conducted to obtain a clear picture of how health services are provided. The results showed that rational decisions had to be made to improve the situation. In this regard, the researchers concluded that different options should be compared, and the possible consequences of each option should be considered. Every decision has positive and negative effects on an individual and others, both short and long term. Predicting the effects of any action prior to performing it reduces the likelihood of a mistake (22). In this way, the participants' consideration of all aspects represented their attempt to make a rational decision. If they had the necessary intellectual help, an attempt might have resulted in desired outcomes.

In the experience of the studied women, sometimes their responses to the marital conflict were accompanied by the dominance of emotions. In a study conducted in 2018, 40 participants were assessed with the Edinburgh handedness inventory to investigate the effect of emotions on people's behaviors. The results showed that the ability to generate appropriate responses in social situations is strongly influenced by emotion. According to researchers, human responses to situations are not always based on rationality, but also emotions play an important role (23).

In some studies, the role of emotions in decision-making was examined. For example, a study was done in 2011 in which a hundred and sixty participants were confronted with a set of scenarios that described various emotional

outcomes of actions and needed to decide what they would do if they were in the protagonist's shoes. Researchers found that emotions are formed due to a series of cognitive activities. Therefore, cognitive activities must be regulated (24,25). A qualitative study was also conducted in 2015 in which data were collected through in-depth interviews, including a total of forty-five people. That study aimed to compare the reactions of married men and women of different generations to marital conflicts. The results showed that women of younger generations show more emotional behaviors about conflicts. The researchers believed that managing emotions makes coping with life's challenges (26). As a result, developing emotional intelligence skills can assist women in efficiently managing conflicts. Participants explained some of their responses to the situation with perceived self-efficacy. A quasi-experimental study was conducted in 2021 to evaluate the effectiveness of self-efficacy training in promoting mental health and reducing rumination in divorced women. Forty women in two experimental and control groups completed the ruminative response scale and the general health questionnaire in the pre-test and post-test phases. The results showed that self-efficacy is one of the most important factors regulating human behavior (27). In many cases, the studied women found that they were inefficient in examining and managing conflicts. However, they attributed some of their responses to marital conflict to enhance their efficiency due to life challenges. These women still need to improve their efficiency in dealing with marital conflicts. In this regard, the results of some studies also demonstrate that people with high self-efficacy employ more adaptable conflict resolution strategies.

These people overcome barriers and have control over their problems. Self-efficacy training helps people believe in their abilities and experience positive emotions. This type of training also increases people's responsibility and ability to deal with stress (27). In light of the preceding, self-efficacy training for women can lead to an acceptable response to marital conflicts.

Conclusion

According to the findings of this study, marital conflicts triggered a series of mental activities in the participants. These mental activities aimed to clarify the conflict and involved the interaction between values, emotions, and perceptions that affected the participants' responses to the conflicts. The main limitation of the present study is the generalization of findings due to the explanatory nature of qualitative research, the low number of participants, and context-based data. Nevertheless, the findings emphasized the significance of developing systemic thinking, flexible attributional style, and rational thinking to deal with marital conflicts. It also highlighted the need for developing emotional intelligence and perceived self-efficacy.

Acknowledgments

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