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Exploring the Emotional Divorce Process in Couples: A Grounded Theory Study

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Abstract

Objective

This study aimed to develop a grounded theory of the emotional divorce process among couples in Ardabil, Iran, focusing on gendered power dynamics and sociocultural contexts.

Background

Emotional divorce signifies deterioration of emotional bonds, often preceding legal divorce. Qualitative studies exploring this process in non-Western, collectivist societies remain scarce.

Method

This constructivist grounded theory study (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) used 26 interviews with 22 participants experiencing emotional divorce. Purposive and theoretical sampling continued until saturation. Data were analyzed using MAXQDA 20 and constant comparative methods.

Results

The core category "emotional collapse" emerged as an active process of relational deterioration. The model includes contextual conditions (sociocultural differences, past experiences, financial problems, disloyalty, interference, emotional dependence), emotional transformation (reduced engagement, loss of empathy, cooling, detachment, loneliness), duality of efforts (constructive and destructive strategies), and outcomes (constructive voice vs. blackout fog). Emotional shifts were shaped by gendered power dynamics and cultural discourses. Behaviors labeled "destructive" often reflected adaptive responses to constrained positions.

Conclusion

This culturally grounded theory integrates micro-level interactions with macro-level structures. Interventions must address broader sociocultural and gendered contexts in non-Western settings.

Background

The family is widely regarded as the most fundamental social institution and is essential to societal health and stability. Societal well-being is closely associated with the strength and stability of families (Buehler, 2020; Lee et al., 2024). In contemporary society, divorce constitutes a significant social challenge, as it undermines family structures and, consequently, societal stability.

Emotional divorce, often the precursor to legal divorce, is characterized by a profound deterioration of emotional bonds, reduced intimacy, and increasing relational distance between partners (Al-Moselhy et al., 2023).

Research demonstrates that emotional divorce develops gradually, often as a result of persistent communication problems, emotional dissatisfaction, and ineffective conflict management (Rashid & Moradi, 2017). Several psychological and social theories offer frameworks for understanding this process. Dependency theory conceptualizes couple relationships as social exchanges, indicating that when perceived costs exceed benefits, dissatisfaction and emotional divorce are more likely to occur (Rumble, 2022). Need-expectancy theory posits that unmet expectations within a relationship can lead to emotional distance between partners (Perlman & Miller, 2024). Attachment theory emphasizes the role of childhood attachment patterns, noting that individuals with insecure attachments are at increased risk for emotional divorce (Keller, 2021). Additionally, unresolved marital conflicts are recognized as significant contributors to the emergence of emotional divorce (Ebrahimi, 2020).

However, these theoretical frameworks have predominantly been developed in Western, individualistic contexts and often fall short in capturing the dynamics of emotional divorce in non-Western, collectivist societies. In particular, they frequently overlook how gender operates within specific cultural, religious, and patriarchal systems to shape emotional possibilities and constraints in marriage. Family therapy and family studies scholarship has increasingly emphasized the need to understand couple dynamics as embedded within larger systems of meaning, power, and social regulation (McGoldrick & Hardy, 2019; Walsh, 2015). The present study draws explicitly on feminist family therapy perspectives that foreground gendered power in intimate relationships, as well as sociocultural theories that locate marital processes within particular historical and community contexts (Knudson-Martin, 2013).

Although these frameworks offer valuable insights, each carries limitations for understanding emotional divorce in non-Western contexts. Attachment theory emphasizes individual internal working models but undertheorizes how cultural norms about marriage and gender shape attachment behaviors (Keller, 2021). Dependency theory's cost-benefit calculus assumes rational choice and does not capture how social obligations (e.g., preserving family honor) constrain exit options (Rumble, 2022). Need-expectancy theory presumes partners have equal power to articulate and pursue their needs—a presumption that often fails in patriarchal contexts (Perlman & Miller, 2024). Moreover, these theories were developed in Western individualistic societies and may not travel well to collectivist settings where marriage is a public institution, not merely a private relationship. Given these limitations, an inductive, grounded theory approach is warranted. Grounded theory allows the researcher to remain open to participants' emic perspectives while building theory that is empirically anchored in the specific cultural, gendered, and structural realities of Iranian family life (Charmaz, 2014).

Cultural and social factors play a critical role in shaping emotional divorce. In Middle Eastern societies, including Iran, couples may remain legally married to preserve family reputation and honor even while experiencing profound emotional separation (Al-Shahrani & Hammad, 2023; Joseph, 2018). In such contexts, emotional divorce is not merely individual relationship deterioration but a complex negotiation between personal emotional needs and powerful social expectations regarding family honor, gender-appropriate

behavior, and the public performance of marital unity. This phenomenon is shaped by intersecting systems of patriarchy, collectivism, and religious obligation that construct marriage as both a private bond and a public social institution. Despite growing divorce rates in Iran (Nakhaee et al., 2020), qualitative, process-oriented studies of emotional divorce within specific cultural contexts remain scarce.

The Iranian Context: Marriage, Divorce, and Gender

Iran has experienced significant demographic and social changes in recent decades. While marriage rates have declined, divorce rates have steadily increased, particularly in urban areas (Nakhaee et al., 2020). The 2011 family law reforms made divorce more accessible to women, yet social stigma remains substantial, especially in traditional provinces like Ardabil. Iranian marriage operates within a complex legal and cultural framework: civil law grants men easier divorce access while requiring women to demonstrate specific grounds (e.g., husband's addiction, abuse, or abandonment). This legal asymmetry reinforces patriarchal power dynamics within marriage.

Culturally, marriage in Iran serves functions beyond emotional fulfillment, including family alliance, economic security, and religious obligation (Moghadam, 2004). Extended family involvement is normative and often expected, particularly from the husband's family. Gender roles remain relatively traditional: men are expected to be providers and authority figures, while women are expected to be homemakers, primary caregivers, and guardians of family honor (Joseph, 2018). However, rising female education and labor force participation have created tensions between traditional expectations and emerging egalitarian ideals—a 'cultural lag' that generates marital conflict. Ardabil, as a mid-sized city in northwestern Iran with strong tribal and traditional heritage, offers a context where these tensions may be particularly salient. Understanding emotional divorce in Iran requires attending to this specific configuration of legal, religious, economic, and gendered forces.

While existing quantitative studies have identified correlates of emotional divorce (Ebrahimi, 2020; Rashid & Moradi, 2017), and Western qualitative work has examined marital deterioration (Jamison et al., 2014), significant gaps remain. First, most research operationalizes emotional divorce as a static outcome rather than a dynamic process. Second, existing theories (attachment, interdependence) assume Western individualistic norms and do not account for how collectivist values, extended family systems, and patriarchal structures shape emotional separation. Third, no study has systematically theorized the process of emotional divorce in contemporary Iran, where legal divorce rates are rising but couples face unique cultural pressures to maintain public marital unity. This study addresses these gaps by developing a culturally grounded, process-oriented theory of emotional divorce from the perspectives of Iranian couples themselves.

Addressing these gaps requires a methodology capable of capturing both individual experiences and structural forces. Grounded theory is particularly well-suited to address this gap because it facilitates the development of theory that remains grounded in participants' lived experiences while simultaneously attending to broader structural contexts (Charmaz, 2014). Therefore, the present study employs a grounded theory approach to identify and explain the process through which emotional divorce emerges and develops

among couples in Ardabil, Iran, with particular attention to how gender, culture, and power relations shape this process.

Methods

Study design and setting

This qualitative study employed a constructivist grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) to explore and theorize the process of emotional divorce as it occurs in natural social settings. The methodology was selected because it allows for the inductive development of theory that is firmly grounded in participants' lived experiences while attending to broader sociocultural and structural contexts. The study adhered to the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) (O'Brien et al., 2014).

Study participants

Participants were selected from couples residing in Ardabil, Iran, using purposive sampling combined with snowball sampling. Inclusion criteria included self-reported or informant-confirmed experience of emotional divorce and the ability and willingness to articulate their experiences. To maximize theoretical variation, participants with diverse demographic backgrounds (age, education, marital status, and occupation) were recruited. No prior relationship existed between the researcher and participants.

Of the 24 individuals contacted, 22 agreed to participate. Following the initial interviews, theoretical sampling was used to guide subsequent data collection based on emerging concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). For example, when the theme of "traditional marriage" emerged, additional interviews with couples in non-traditional arrangements were conducted. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was reached, as determined by the research team through ongoing analysis and discussion. Demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Participant	Age*	Gender	Marital Status	Education Level	Job	Duration of life together	Divorce period	Number of children
1	40–45	Female	Divorce	Bachelor's degree	Tailor	15	6	1
2	35–40	Female	Divorce	Master's degree	Company manager	15	2	1
3	40–45	Female	Married	PhD	Professor	12	-	1
4	45–50	Female	Married	Bachelor's degree	Teacher	22	-	2
5	55–60	Female	Married	Bachelor's degree	Retired	30	-	2
6	45–50	Female	Married	Master's degree	Company manager	20	-	1
7	40–45	Female	Divorce	Bachelor's degree	Tailor	5	5	1
8	35–40	Male	Divorce	Bachelor's degree	free job	2	2	-
9	40–45	Female	Divorce	Bachelor's degree	University Employee	7	7	-
10	40–45	Male	Married	Master's degree	Company manager	5	-	2
11	35–40	Female	Married	Master's degree	Teacher	7	-	1
12	40–45	Male	Married	Bachelor's degree	Nurse	20	-	2
13	40–45	Female	Married	Diploma	Housewife	20	-	2
14	50–55	Male	Married	Illiterate	Housewife	35	-	4
15	55–60	Male	Married	Bachelor's degree	Military	35	-	4
16	55–60	Female	Married	Illiterate	Housewife	35	-	4
17	55–60	Male	Married	Elementary	free job	35	-	4

* Age was provided in ranges to ensure anonymity.

Participant	Age*	Gender	Marital Status	Education Level	Job	Duration of life together	Divorce period	Number of children
18	50–55	Female	Married	PhD	Professor	25	-	2
19	55–60	Male	Married	PhD	Doctor	25	-	2
20	50–55	Female	Married	PhD	Doctor	25	-	2
21	35–40	Male	Married	Bachelor's degree	Nurse	9	-	1
22	35–40	Female	Married	Master's degree	Nurse	9	-	1

* Age was provided in ranges to ensure anonymity.

Data collection

A female researcher with a PhD and faculty position conducted all interviews after obtaining informed consent. Interviews began with broad, open-ended questions (e.g., “Please tell me about your personal experiences with emotional divorce” and “What factors contributed to this process?”) and proceeded with probing questions (“Can you tell me more about that?” “Why?” “How?”) to deepen understanding. Twenty-two primary interviews were conducted face-to-face in quiet, participant-chosen locations; four supplemental interviews were conducted via WhatsApp video call at participants’ request to clarify or expand on emerging themes. Field notes were recorded before and after each interview. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes (average = 50 minutes). All interviews were audio-recorded with permission.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed Corbin and Strauss's (2015) grounded theory procedures, using an iterative, team-based approach. The analysis proceeded through three main phases.

Phase 1: Open coding. After each interview, the first author transcribed the recording verbatim (producing approximately 300 pages of Persian text). Two research team members independently read each transcript and performed line-by-line open coding, identifying discrete concepts and actions. For example, phrases such as "I stopped telling him how I felt" were coded as "reduced emotional disclosure." The team then met to compare codes, resolve discrepancies through discussion, and group related codes into preliminary categories. Memos were written throughout to document emerging ideas and analytical decisions.

Phase 2: Axial coding. Using constant comparative analysis, the team examined relationships among categories. For each candidate category (e.g., "interference from in-laws"), we asked: Under what conditions does this phenomenon occur? What actions or interactions result from it? What are the consequences? This

phase involved extensive diagramming and team discussions to identify causal conditions, contextual factors, strategies, and outcomes. MAXQDA 20 software facilitated coding retrieval and management.

Phase 3: Selective coding and theory development. The team identified "emotional collapse" as the core category that appeared most frequently, connected to all other categories, and explained the greatest variation in the data. We then systematically related other categories (contextual conditions, emotional transformation, strategies, outcomes) to this core category, refining the model through successive rounds of data collection and analysis. Theoretical sampling was used to fill gaps; for instance, after identifying "traditional marriage" as a relevant theme, we recruited participants in non-traditional arrangements to explore contrasting cases.

Ensuring analytic quality. Multiple strategies ensured rigor: (a) investigator triangulation (two analysts independently coded, with regular team reconciliation); (b) peer debriefing (weekly meetings with a qualitative methods expert not involved in coding); (c) member checking (five participants reviewed their transcript summaries and confirmed interpretations); (d) audit trail (all memos, diagrams, and coding decisions were retained); and (e) theoretical saturation (sampling continued until three consecutive interviews yielded no new properties of the core category).

Data trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was addressed using criteria outlined by Corbin and Strauss (2015) for grounded theory (methodological coherence, quality, and applicability) as well as Guba and Lincoln's (Lincoln, 1985) criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and authenticity. Strategies included prolonged engagement with data, theoretical sampling, constant comparison, member checking where appropriate, peer debriefing, maintenance of an audit trail (memos, diagrams, and decision logs), and thick description of the research context and participant characteristics. Diverse participant backgrounds were intentionally sought to enhance transferability to similar sociocultural settings. The detailed analytic steps described above (open, axial, and selective coding; constant comparison; team-based analysis) operationalized these trustworthiness criteria systematically.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval

was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Ardabil University of Medical Sciences (IR.ARUMS.REC.1403.029). All participants received a full explanation of the study purpose, provided voluntary informed consent, and were assured of their right to withdraw at any time. They chose the time and location of interviews. Audio recordings were deleted after transcription and analysis, and participants were assigned numbers (e.g., P1) to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

Findings

The analysis of the 22 interviews revealed a theoretical model of emotional divorce centered on the core category of "emotional collapse". This concept captures an active process of relational deterioration — not

merely the absence of positive emotions — embedded within specific sociocultural and gendered power contexts. The model, depicted in Fig. 1 and summarized in Table 2, consists of four main components: contextual conditions, emotional transformation, duality of efforts (strategies), and reflections of choice (outcomes).

Table 2
The process of emotional divorce in couples

Paradigm components	Categories	Subcategories
Contextual conditions	Shadows of emotional breakdown	Socio-cultural differences Past experiences Personal problems Financial problems Disloyalty Shadows of Interference Emotional dependence
Emotional transformation	Emotional collapse	Reduced emotional engagement Loss of empathy Cooling of relationships Emotional detachment Feelings of loneliness
Strategies	Duality of efforts	Constructive strategies Destructive strategies
Outcome	Reflections of choice	Constructive voice Blackout fog

Emotional Transformation

Participants described a gradual progression of emotional shifts beginning with reduced emotional engagement (difficulties expressing feelings, increased misunderstandings, and declining intimate conversations). This led to individuals feeling unheard and encountering disagreements on significant matters. As one participant stated: *"We can no longer talk about our feelings" (P3)*. In the Iranian cultural context, where gendered expectations often constrain direct emotional expression (Joseph, 2018; Moghadam, 2004), this erosion carried particular weight.

The process continued with loss of empathy, which impeded partners' ability to understand each other's emotional needs and resulted in a colder relationship with diminished support. Ultimately, these dynamics culminated in emotional detachment, characterized by loneliness, alienation, and increased relational distance. These emotional transformations were not isolated but fundamentally shaped by the contextual conditions described below.

Contextual Conditions: Shadows of Emotional Breakdown

Participants identified multiple contextual factors — grouped as "shadows of emotional breakdown" — that contributed to emotional collapse. These included socio-cultural differences, past experiences, personal problems, financial difficulties, disloyalty, interference from others, and emotional dependence.

Socio-cultural differences

Evolving gender expectations created significant tension. In Ardabil and similar traditional Iranian communities, women navigated between conventional roles (obedient, home-centered, emotionally nurturing) and emerging ideals of companionate marriage promising greater equality. Men negotiated between patriarchal authority and newer expectations of emotional partnership. This "cultural lag" (Inglehart & Baker, 2000) generated confusion and conflict. Social pressures to perform appropriate gendered roles added emotional labor, particularly for women responsible for family reputation and harmony (Russell Hochschild, 2012). One participant explained: "I had always to keep the house tidy because my husband's family expected it, even though I was tired" (P4).

Past experiences

Negative family-of-origin dynamics and prior relationships fostered fears of recurrence, unrealistic expectations, and hypervigilance. In the Iranian extended-family context, these experiences carried heightened salience. One woman described constant monitoring due to past violence (P4), while a man admitted excessive surveillance of his wife stemming from family patterns (P7). Such behaviors reflected both attachment insecurities and culturally available masculine strategies for managing anxiety.

Personal problems

Individual issues such as depression, anxiety, stinginess, or voyeuristic behaviors reduced intimacy. These "personal problems" were culturally constructed and often intertwined with gendered expectations. For instance, stinginess in husbands was interpreted as emotional abandonment because male provision symbolizes care in Iranian culture. One participant (P6) described distancing herself from her husband's voyeuristic behavior, revealing complex power dynamics when she held the employer role.

Financial problems

Economic pressures, intensified by inflation and unemployment in Iran, created chronic stress and feelings of inadequacy, especially for men whose provider role is central to masculine identity (Salehi-Isfahani, 2017). One participant stated: "Every time I thought about spending, I felt I could not properly provide for the family's needs" (P8).

Disloyalty

Infidelity (emotional or sexual) destroyed trust and produced profound distress. In the Iranian context, it carried gendered weight: women experienced "double jeopardy" of betrayal plus pressure to preserve family honor (Joseph, 2018). One woman described feelings of worthlessness (P3), while a man expressed entitlement and shock at his wife's infidelity (P6).

Shadows of Interference

Family interference undermined couple autonomy while reflecting legitimate claims in collectivist culture (Aghajanian & Thompson, 2013). One participant recounted her in-laws' possessive attitudes: "They tell me

that we will not let you own him" (P1). Another traced the shift from love to technological disengagement due to external pressures (P6).

Emotional Dependence

Excessive reliance on family of origin, especially mothers for men, created tension and role confusion in patriarchal systems (Moghadam, 2004). Participants highlighted the asymmetry: male dependence was culturally expected, but female dependence was often criticized.

Duality of Efforts: Constructive and Destructive Strategies

Couples responded to contextual conditions through a range of strategies, categorized as "duality of efforts." However, this binary requires critical qualification. What appears "destructive" from an outsider's perspective often represented adaptive responses to constrained positions within gendered power hierarchies (Goldner, 1985; Hare-Mustin, 1978; Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 2009).

Constructive strategies included modifying behaviors after counseling, expressing affection, attending to the partner's emotional needs (often via female support networks), creating positive home atmospheres, shared activities, and seeking professional help. Notably, women frequently described these efforts as their primary responsibility, reflecting gendered emotional labor (Erickson, 2005).

Destructive strategies encompassed blaming, social isolation, emotional withdrawal, concealment of feelings, excessive virtual engagement, turning to prayer books, and denial/anger. While this intensified distance, they were often intelligible as survival or resistance strategies in contexts where direct vulnerability was risky or culturally restricted. For example, isolation provided safety for some women, and prayer offered a sanctioned coping resource in a religious society. Blame sometimes served as the only available language for expressing hurt, especially for men.

Reflections of Choice: Constructive Voice versus Blackout Fog

Strategies led to two broad outcomes shaped by personal effort, relational history, and structural constraints.

Constructive voice involved improved communication, trust, and emotional closeness when both partners engaged (e.g., after counseling; P5). Access to such repair was not equal and depended on socioeconomic resources.

Blackout fog described negative outcomes including increased distance, diminished self-confidence, loneliness, depression, and, in some cases, decisions to end the relationship. The metaphor of "fog" captured the disorientation produced by accumulated cultural, gendered, and relational pressures. One participant noted persistent frustration when her efforts were not reciprocated (P2). Such outcomes affected not only the couple but the entire family.

Overall, **"emotional collapse"** emerged as the integrative process linking contextual shadows, emotional transformation, strategic responses, and their consequences. The model highlights how micro-level

interactions are deeply embedded in macro-level gendered and sociocultural structures.

Discussion

This study developed a grounded theory of emotional divorce among couples in Ardabil, Iran, identifying "emotional collapse" as the core category—an active process of relational deterioration embedded in specific sociocultural and gendered power contexts. The findings highlight how contextual conditions, emotional transformation, strategic responses, and their consequences interact to produce emotional separation. These results align with prior research conceptualizing emotional divorce as a dynamic, multi-stage process shaped by structural and individual factors (Allen & Hawkins, 2017; Gharaibeh et al., 2023; Jamison et al., 2014). However, this study extends the existing literature by situating these processes within a non-Western, collectivist Iranian context and by explicitly foregrounding the role of gendered power dynamics at every stage of the process.

Theoretical Contribution

The primary theoretical contribution of this study lies in its integration of micro-level interactional processes with macro-level structural analysis. Drawing on feminist family therapy perspectives (Knudson-Martin, 2013; McGoldrick & Hardy, 2019) and sociocultural theories of marriage (Joseph, 2018), we propose that emotional divorce in this context represents not merely relationship deterioration but a complex negotiation between individual emotional needs and powerful cultural mandates regarding gender roles, family honor, and the public performance of marital unity. "Emotional collapse" is therefore both psychological and social: an individual experience of relational loss that is profoundly shaped by collective expectations, patriarchal structures, and the cultural lag between traditional and emerging companionate ideals of marriage.

This study directly addresses three gaps identified in the literature. First, unlike previous quantitative studies that operationalized emotional divorce as a static outcome (Ebrahimi, 2020; Rashid & Moradi, 2017), our grounded theory captures emotional divorce as a dynamic, multi-stage process unfolding over time. Second, while Western theories (attachment, interdependence, need-expectancy) assume individualistic norms, our findings demonstrate how collectivist values, extended family systems, and patriarchal power relations fundamentally shape each stage of emotional collapse. Third, this is the first study to systematically theorize the process of emotional divorce from the perspectives of Iranian couples themselves, providing an emic, culturally grounded model that can inform context-specific interventions.

Contextual Conditions: Shadows of Emotional Breakdown

The category "shadows of emotional breakdown" is consistent with existing literature on factors weakening marital bonds (Gottman & Gottman, 2018). This study adds important cultural and gendered nuance to these factors within the Iranian context.

Socio-cultural differences generated tension through shifting gender expectations and the pressure to maintain "performative marriage" — publicly enacting unity despite private emotional distance. This performance disproportionately burdens women with emotional labor and responsibility for family reputation and harmony (Joseph, 2018) (Russell Hochschild, 2012). The study further illustrates how cultural

pressures delay legal divorce while intensifying internalized emotional separation, a dynamic less emphasized in Western research focused on individualism.

Past experiences operated through fears of repeating negative patterns and hypervigilance, interacting with cultural expectations of extended-family loyalty and gendered strategies for managing anxiety (e.g., male surveillance). While consistent with attachment theory (Feeney & Monin, 2016), this study highlights the heightened salience of family-of-origin influences in collectivist marriage systems.

Personal and financial problems were interpreted through cultural lenses: stinginess as emotional abandonment and financial stress as threat to masculine provider identity (Salehi-Isfahani, 2017). Disloyalty produced "double jeopardy" for women (betrayal plus pressure to preserve honor), while family interference reflected legitimate collectivist claims rather than simple intrusion (Aghajanian & Thompson, 2013). Emotional dependence, particularly men's ties to their mothers, underscored how patriarchy constrains men as well as women.

Emotional Transformation

The gradual progression from reduced emotional engagement to loss of empathy, relational cooling, detachment, and loneliness aligns with multi-stage models of emotional separation (Gharaibeh et al., 2023; Yamin et al., 2019). This study contributes a more culturally situated sequence, demonstrating how each stage is shaped by gendered expectations — women positioned as emotional caretakers and men as providers — within Iranian discourses of marriage.

Duality of Efforts: Constructive and Destructive Strategies

Participants employed a range of strategies categorized as "duality of efforts". However, this binary framing requires critical qualification. Constructive strategies (behavior change, expressing affection, counseling, and communication skills) frequently reflected women's disproportionate responsibility for emotional labor (Erickson, 2005; Hochschild & Machung, 1989). Destructive strategies (blame, isolation, virtual escape, and turning to prayer) exacerbated emotional distance but often served as adaptive responses or forms of resistance within constrained gendered power positions (Goldner, 1985; Hare-Mustin, 1978). This interpretation avoids pathologizing individual behavior and instead locates strategies within gendered and cultural realities.

Reflections of Choice: Constructive Voice versus Blackout Fog

Outcomes depended on the complex interplay of personal effort, relational history, and structural constraints. The "constructive voice" described renewed closeness and trust when both partners could engage, although access to resources such as counseling was unequally distributed. In contrast, the metaphor of "blackout fog" powerfully captured the disorientation, hopelessness, and loneliness that emerged when efforts failed or went unreciprocated, compounded by cultural pressures that discourage open discussion of marital distress. This metaphor is particularly apt in a context where marriage continues to function as a public social institution even as private emotional bonds erode.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. The qualitative design and focus on participants in Ardabil, Iran, limit generalizability, though thick description and theoretical sampling enhance transferability to similar sociocultural settings. The interviewer's positionality as a woman may have influenced disclosure patterns, particularly among male participants. Future studies could benefit from mixed-gender research teams. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of interviews precludes examination of how emotional divorce unfolds over time or mediates legal divorce. These limitations were addressed through rigorous trustworthiness strategies, including constant comparison, peer debriefing, and an audit trail.

Conclusion

This study presents a culturally grounded theory of emotional divorce as "emotional collapse", demonstrating how micro-level emotional processes are inseparable from macro-level gendered and sociocultural structures in contemporary Iran. Marriage here functions simultaneously as a private bond and a public institution shaped by patriarchy, collectivism, and shifting companionate expectations. Behaviors labeled "destructive" often constitute adaptive responses to constrained circumstances, particularly for those with less relational power.

Effective prevention and intervention require moving beyond individual skills to address power dynamics and cultural discourses. Culturally attuned programs should attend to emotional labor distribution and resource access. Future research should explore the longitudinal links between emotional and legal divorce, develop context-specific tools for early identification, and examine how economic shifts, global media, and evolving gender norms are transforming marital emotional landscapes. Such efforts will enhance prevention, support crisis intervention, and improve couple and family well-being.

Declarations

Author Contribution

Mehraban Shahmari: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Supervision. Mehdi Ajri-Khameslou: Conceptualization, Validation, Investigation, Resources, Data curation, Writing – review & editing. Masoumeh Aghamohammadi: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing. Akram Ghobadi: Investigation, Data curation, Writing – review & editing. Saeid Nourani: Conceptualization, Data curation, Writing – review & editing.

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Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Figures

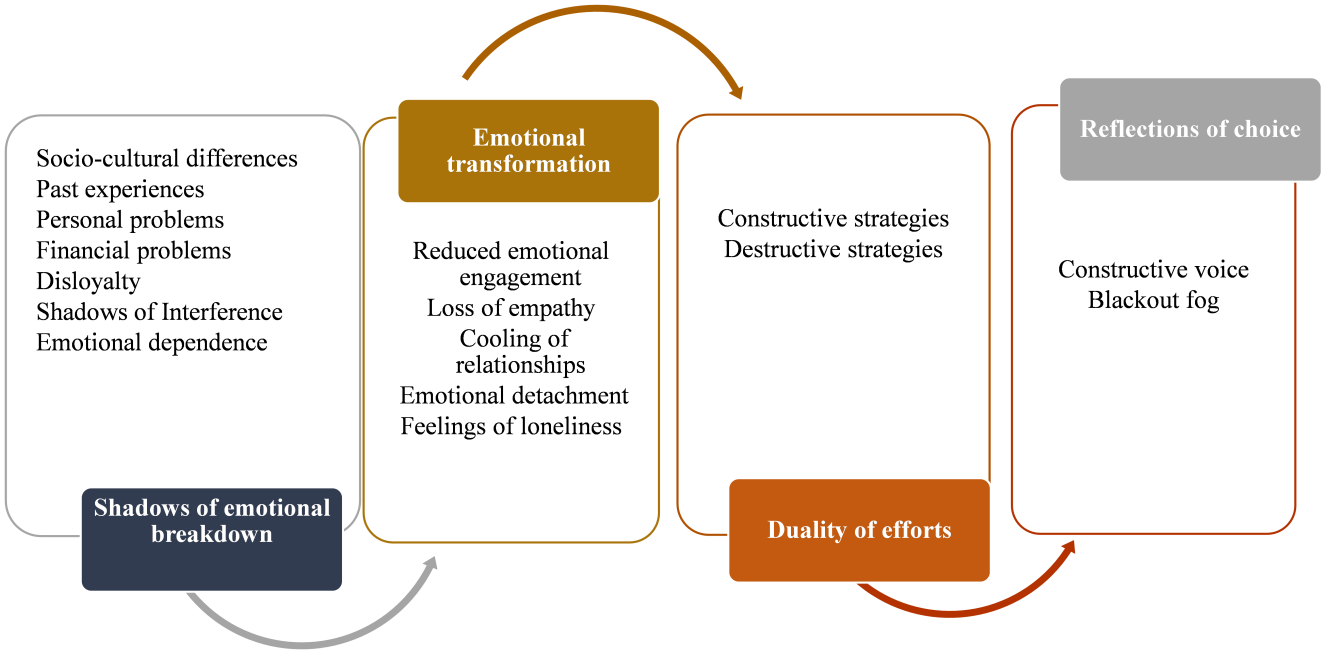


Figure 1

The process of emotional divorce in couples