

The Concept of Withdrawal of Divorce Petition Based on the Theory of Planned Behavior: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

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AIM: The present study sought to explore the experiences of participants in divorce process according to the theory of planned behaviour.

MATERIAL AND METHODS: This qualitative study was conducted using content analysis method. In this research, 27 participants involved in the divorce process were selected. The data were coded, and the qualitative content analysis was performed.

RESULTS: Based on four constructs of the theory of planned behaviour, the subcategories of instrumental attitude were "Divorce as the last solution" and "Divorce as damage for individuals and society". From the perceived behavioural control theme, two subcategories of behavioural control and self-efficacy were drawn; the first subtheme included "Others' meddling in the married life", "Social problems reducing behavioural control power" and "Personality characteristics affecting the behavioural control power"; and the second one included: "Education as a means for developing self-efficacy" and "barriers to self-efficacy". The injunctive norms theme included three subcategories of "Others help to reconcile", "Others meddling and lack of reconciliation", and "Families support to reconcile". The descriptive norms theme was "High divorce rate and misuse of satellite channels and social networks as factors making reconciliation difficult".

CONCLUSION: It seems that education and counselling, within a predefined framework, such as applied theories, can be useful.

Introduction

In recent decades, divorce has increased all over the world [1]. In Iran, like other developing countries, the divorce rate has significantly increased [2]. Although in some cases divorce and even its increasing rate cannot be considered as negative [3], in Iran, due to the importance of the family, any harm to this institution is seen as an unpleasant and investigable social issue [4]. Globally, divorce has been accompanied by many changes in economic social and cultural terms. For example today in the western societies we face the grey divorce phenomenon which refers to the increasing divorce rate for older couples in long-lasting marriages. Roughly 1 in 4 divorces in 2010 occurred to persons aged 50 and older [5].

Increasing divorce rate is considered as a social problem that has various consequences and puts mental health of the family members and therefore society at risk. There are several ways to reduce divorce rate such as counselling and Couple therapy before marriage, during marital life and before divorce [6]. The theory of planned behaviour is one of the patterns used to change behaviours such as addiction, nutritional behaviours, pregnancy prevention, and Internet and so on [7] [8] [9] [10] [11]. It seems that the theory of planned behaviour and its components are also suitable for changing the behaviour of couples (withdrawal of divorce petition) because the withdrawal of divorce can be considered as a behaviour affected by different behavioural models.

Attitude is the first determinant of behavioural intention and one of the components of the planned

behaviour theory. It refers to the degree to which a person has a favourable or unfavourable evaluation of the behaviour of interest and entails negative or positive beliefs about performing the behavior [12]. The individual's attitude toward divorce is one of the most influential factors in his decision making. Attitude can be divided into two categories: instrumental and Experiential. Instrumental attitude is determined by beliefs about outcomes of behaviour, and experiential attitude refers to a judgment about the pleasantness or unpleasantness of performing a certain behaviour [13] [14].

Another important and effective factor in the decision about divorce is subjective norms. Subjective norms or perceived norms reflect the social pressure that a person perceives about doing or not doing a certain behaviour. The norms are classified into two categories: Injunctive norm, the Descriptive norm. Injunctive norm refers to normative beliefs about what others think one should do and motivation to comply. Descriptive norm refers to perceptions about what others in one's social or personal networks are doing. Meant to capture situations where there is strong social identity [12].

The other important factor in performing or changing behaviour is evaluation (perception) of a person's own capability to accomplish a certain level of performance. The perceived behavioural control includes behavioural control and self-efficacy. When there is no limitation, individual may have complete control over the behaviour. But at the end of this continuum, there may be no control over the behaviour. Control over some behaviours requires resources, facilities and skills that people may not have. Control factors are either internal or external. Internal factors are personal such as skills, abilities, knowledge, feelings of stress, and external factors include environmental or occupational factors. The other construct of this theory is the behavioural intention. Intention refers to the motivational factors that influence a given behaviour where the stronger the intention to perform the behaviour, the more likely the behaviour will be performed [15].

In the past few years, joint efforts were undertaken to increase reconciliation between couples and withdrawal of divorce, by the Judicature and the State Welfare Organization. Divorce applicants were introduced to the Family Counseling Center by the judicature. After different education and counselling programs, if they refuse to reconcile, they will be referred to the Judicature to pursue legal separation procedures. This research attempted to examine the concept of divorce and its withdrawal, by carrying out qualitative work and interviewing people, who are involved in the issue of divorce in the Family Counseling Center in Yazd, based on the four constructs of the theory of planned behaviour within the framework of personal experiences. Yazd is a central and a relatively industrial city of Iran, and regarding climate, is located in a warm and dry region

of the country. The population of the city is 1 040 286, of whom 87.4% live in urban areas, and 12.6% live in rural areas. Men comprise 51.3% of the city's population, and female population is 48.7%. The language spoken in the city is Persian, and the religion of its residents is Islam. In Yazd, the life expectancy rate is 75.7 years, the unemployment rate is 11.2%, and the average family size is 3.54 persons. In recent years, there have been many cultural changes in the city due to migrant workers and students, including an increase in divorce rates for various reasons.

The present study sought to explore the experiences of participants in divorce process according to the theory of planned behaviour.

Methods

This qualitative study was conducted by directed content analysis. Data were collected by in-depth interviews to evaluate participants' experiences about the concept of withdrawal of divorce. Participants included various groups such as divorce applicants, their families, social workers and counsellors of the Family Counseling Center and Family Court Judges. One of the authors was the interviewer, and the interviews were conducted from May 1 to September 1, 2016, at the Family Counseling Center. The only condition for the participation of the subjects was their satisfaction with interviewing and collaborating with the researchers. The condition for leaving the study was also the lack of consent of the participants to continue the interview. Table 1 revealed demographic characteristics of participants.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of participants

Participants	N (%)	Gender N (%)		Age N (%)		Occupation N (%)		Education N (%)		
		Female	Male	31≤	= 30	Unempl oyed	Empl oyed	Master and higher	Diploma to bachelor	Primary
Couples	10(37)	4(40)	6(60)	7 (70)	3(30)	2(20)	8(80)	3(30)	1(10)	6(60)
Parents	7(25.9)	6(85.7)	1(14.3)	7(100)	0	6(85.7)	1(14.3)	0	0	7(100)
Counselors and social workers	7(25.9)	5(71.4)	2(28.6)	7(100)	0	0	7(100)	5(71.4)	2(28.6)	0
Family Court Judges	3(11.1)	1(33.3)	2(66.7)	3(100)	0	0	3(100)	2(66.7)	1(33.3)	0
Total	27	16	11	24	3	8	19	10	4	13

To get a full understanding of the concepts of divorce and withdrawal of divorce, we tried to conduct in-depth interviews with different people in each group. The interview was initially conducted with a social worker and two divorce applicants to obtain an appropriate framework for the interviews. In this research the key questions based on the four constructs of TPB included. Table 2 revealed the key questions based on the four constructs of TPB.

Table 2: Interview questions TPB constructs

Constructs of TPB questions	
Attitude	What is your experience of divorce? Please describe your experience of reconciliation or withdrawal of divorce.
	How will your life be after withdrawal of divorce?
Subjective norms	As you experienced, what roles do family members have in the withdrawal of divorce? Based on your experience, who do play roles in the withdrawal of divorce?
	Who in your personal life was involved in creating or escalating your married life problems?
Perceived behavioural control	What are barriers to the withdrawal of divorce petition, according to your personal experience? What does your experience show you about conditions leading to the withdrawal of divorce petition?
	Based on your experience, are all the conditions for [couples] living together in one's control? How can you give up your intention to divorce?
Intention	Do you have any experience with someone who wants to continue his/her married life despite filing a petition for divorce?

The questions were completely flexible so that if a question was needed to be asked for participants' better understanding, they were asked. It was important because Participants' level of education ranged from the academic education of counsellors and social workers to primary school education of couples and their families. Therefore, the researcher should make the question simpler, if necessary, or raise follow-up questions like: Can you explain more about this? Exactly how?

The interviews were recorded except two interviews with the Family Court Judges who did not allow the recording. As a result, the researcher wrote down the essential points of the interview so that after the interviews, other points were also added before forgetting. Except these two, all interviews took place at the Family Counseling Center. Interviews lasted 40 to 65 minutes. Interviews were conducted in each group to reach data saturation so that in the last three interviews no new code was obtained. Interviews were conducted with 27 participants in several groups.

The recorded interview was immediately typed in full, and then the data was encoded. Then the qualitative content analysis based on Graneheim and Lundman 5-step method was used which includes: gaining overall insight by reading interviews for several times, dividing the text into semantic units, abstraction of semantic units and tagging them by codes, dividing codes into subthemes by comparing their similarities and differences, setting themes as indicators of hidden content and main themes including attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and intention of participants. To analyse data MAXQDA 10 was operated.

To check the trustworthiness of data, Lincoln and Guba's method was used [16] [17]. The diversity of the participants in both the general characteristics and the various roles they had in the process of divorce, e.g. couples, their parents, judges and counsellors, increased the credibility of the data. While the interviews were reviewed and encoded and data were analysed, two supervisors assisted and controlled the process, therefore encoding and classification were compared by the researchers

(Dependability). In the case of discrepancies, consensus over final themes was reached through discussion between the researchers and an external observer. To reach the confirmability of data, interviews were repeatedly studied and also colleagues comments on them. By a full and exact description of methodology, participants' interviews and data analysis, possibility of using our methodology in similar cases (transferability) was reached.

Results

Using the theory of planned behaviour, the present study provides appropriate information which makes the behavioural change, i.e. withdrawal of divorce more possible. Four constructs of the theory of planned behaviour include attitudes, perceived behavioural control, subjective norms and intentions, each based on the encoding of interviews consisted of categories and subtheme. Reviewing 27 interviews, the total number of primary codes was 853. After omitting duplicate codes, 396 codes remained, among which 57 as the main codes were by the four constructs of the theory of planned behaviour. Other codes were also categorised into 40 categories, out of the constructs, which can be used in future studies. The attitudes consisted of two categories of instrumental and empirical attitude, each of which had two subcategories. Within the theme of perceived behavioural control, two categories of behavioural control and self-efficacy were obtained, having 3 and 2 subcategories, respectively (To be published) [18]. The theme of subjective norms had two categories of injunctive and descriptive norms, having 1 and 3 subcategories, respectively. Intention also had two categories of definitive intention, with one subtheme or non-definitive intention, with three subcategories. Review of all construct along with related categories, subcategories and codes are as follows:

A: Instrumental attitude (the degree to which a behaviour is thought to be enjoyable)

- Divorce as a solution to insoluble problems

In some cases, those who refer to the counselling centre believed that to continue marital life would damage their children's upbringing. One of the men referring to the Center said: "I don't like that my children grow like their mother and to behave like her. Even if divorce harms my life, it is good for my children". (Referral No. 3)

B: Experiential attitude (a judgment about the pleasantness or unpleasantness of performing a certain behaviour)

- An annoying concept

"No one loves to lose what he owns. Man is

accustomed to and get interested in what belongs to him and will suffer while losing it (Judge No. 2)

Fear of being alone was seen among participants' attitudes toward divorce, one of them said: divorce is not a good event. For me, it means loneliness. It is as if you wonder. (Referral No. 4)

- Divorce; not very bad and the easiest solution

Counsellors believed that in some cases, people thought that filing divorce petition is the easiest way to solve their marital problems and they often regret when emotions subside. "a man was a pigeon racer who accused his wife of escaping a pigeon. They argued. In the morning they refer to the Family Court, after living together for 19 years, and fill the divorce petition. After taking legal measures and getting a divorce, they reconciled. They had have chosen the easiest way" (Counselor No. 5). Table 3 revealed the description of codes and categories of the main theme of attitude.

Table 3: Description of codes and categories of Attitude related to the concept of withdrawal of divorce petition

Main Theme	Theme	Subtheme	Extracted codes
Attitude	Instrumental Attitude	Divorce as the last solution	1) to continue stressful life or a forced compulsory disrupt healthy upbringing children 2) divorce a solution to prevent physical harm in unsuccessful lives 3) divorce as the last solution to marital problems 4) a divorce means a wrong choice that needs to be erased and no more
		Divorce as damage for individuals and society	1) divorce is stressful 2) divorce is an obstacle to progress. 3) divorce as a harmful social phenomenon
	Empirical attitude	Divorce as an annoying concept	1) to accept divorce is annoying 2) divorce is not a beautiful word 3) negative judgment of society toward divorced people 4) divorce means loneliness and confusion. 5) unacceptability of the concept of divorce
		Divorce, to escape the painful situation	1) divorce as freedom 2) divorce is not so bad

Perceived behavioural control (includes two categories of behavioural control and self-efficacy)

A: Behavioral control power

The initial codes showed that the relevant codes could be classified into several subcategories including meddling of others, social problems affecting behavioural control and personality characteristics which were put under behavioural control. The obtained codes under subcategories of education as a means for developing self-efficacy and barriers to self-efficacy constitute the categories of self-efficacy. All codes mentioned above, categories and subcategories form the theme of perceived behavioural control. (This construct is independently written in an article in print.)

- Meddling of others

Occasionally conflicts occur between couples' families and make them more difficult to reconcile. One of the counsellors said: "Families are involved. They want to synthesise and do something but engage themselves and make things worse." (Counselor No. 3)

- Social problems

In many cases, social problems initiate or intensify the couples' conflicts. Chronic and incurable addiction and betrayal are the most important factors arising conflicts. The importance of addiction was repeatedly stated by divorce applicants, their families, counsellors and judges. Mother of a divorcee said:" we wait for 5 years. We prayed and sacrificed a sheep. We encouraged him .he quitted three times. But again get addicted besides his father. Our efforts had no result."(Mother of Referral No. 2)

B: Self-efficiency

- Education

A Social worker believed that counselling is very useful for couples: "they come to the Center, learn solutions, their minds open, they recognise problems; therefore, they will learn those things which were not taught in the family, such as skills of marital affairs and marital relationship. Consequently, their problems are solved" (social worker No. 3). Table 4 revealed the description of codes and categories of the main theme of Perceived behavioural control.

Table 4: Description of codes and categories of perceived behavioural control related to the concept of withdrawal of divorce petition

Main Theme	Theme	Subtheme	Extracted codes
Perceived behavioural control	Others' meddling in the married life		1) impossibility of reconciliation due to conflicts between parents and the couples 2) inability to reconcile due to the conflicts between families 3) inability to reconcile due to having one child and families meddling 4) ability to reconcile without families meddling 5) difficulty of reconciliation without couples families help for solving married life problems
		Social problems reducing behavioural control power	1) difficulty of reconciliation due to easy access to adultery in the society 2) difficulty of reconciliation due to woman's assurance about the dowry 3) inability to reconcile due to imprisonment of the spouse
	Personality characteristics affecting the behavioural control power	1) inability to reconcile due to his/her distrust and suspicion 2) difficulty of reconciliation due to lack of independent decision-making by the spouse 3) difficulty of reconciliation due to lack of responsibility 4) difficulty of reconciliation due to the violence of spouse 5) inability to reconcile due to sexual reluctance and coldness 6) inability to reconcile since the spouse is on trial or imprisoned 7) ability to reconcile in the case of spouse's moral consistency	
Self-efficacy	Education as a means for developing self-efficacy,		1) ability to reconcile by receiving appropriate counselling and education at the centre 2) ability to reconcile by receiving appropriate counselling and education at organisations like NGOs, drug rehab centres, etc. 3) ability to reconcile because of an opportunity to think during the divorce process
	Barriers to self-efficacy (the ability to reconcile)		1) reconciliation is impossible due to the failure of the previous one 2) inability to compromise due to low tolerance in a new generation 3) difficulty of reconciliation due to forced marriages

Subjective norms

A: Injunctive norms as preventive norms refer to normative beliefs about what others think one should do and motivation to comply. A man referring to the Center said: "at first we live peacefully, but little by little her mother interfered. My mother-in-law was good to me. But she began to interfere. She wishes I divorce my wife. She said I would pay her living expenses. My wife wants to divorce under her influence. (Referral No. 6)

B: Descriptive norms: Includes perceptions of the individual's behaviour about what some people in the community are doing. One of the counsellors said: "Divorce is no longer a bad thing, it is very effective. When a man faces some behaviours within the society, he becomes one step closer to doing it. E.g. the destructive effect of watching pornographic videos is to bring someone closer to doing the same. (Counselor No. 3). Table 5 revealed the description of codes and categories of the main theme of Subjective norms.

Table 5: Description of codes and categories of subjective norms related to the concept of withdrawal of divorce petition

Main Theme	Theme	Subtheme	Extracted codes
Subjective norms	Descriptive norms	High divorce rate and misuse of satellite channels and social networks as factors making reconciliation difficult	1) high divorce rate and less negative view of it 2) difficulty of reconciliation due to misuse of satellite channels and social networks
		Others help to reconcile	1) religious comments encouraging marital life and solving problems 2) counsellors and social workers encourage to reconcile
	Injunctive norms	Others meddling and lack of reconciliation	1) girl/boyfriends or concubines as supporters of divorce 2) parents help to divorce 3) mother as the main supporter of her daughter's divorce 4) couples families encourage to divorce
		Families support to reconcile	1) couples families encourage to reconcile 2) couples families support to divorce

Intention

Some of the divorce applicants fill the petition as the last solution: a woman said: "I tolerated for 18 years because I wanted to continue my marital life. He gets me to his concubines' house, I tolerated. I tolerated many things". (Referral No. 5).

In some cases, they decided to divorce: "she granted her dowry, I don't think there is a possibility for reconciliation. This situation lasted for 4 years. Her parents say she is young, tolerate her, but it was not useful. If was, we should have seen it during these 4 years (Referral No.1)

In some cases wives don't want to get divorced, they only try to punish their husbands, but this is not a solution. One of the counsellors said: "They said by going to the court, their husbands will be punished, but it resulted in something different. Men usually don't accept to continue living with those

who take them to court. Referring to the court and ask for dowry make reconciliation more difficult. (Counselor No. 4). Table 6 revealed the description of codes and categories of the main theme of intention.

Table 6: Description of codes and categories of Intentions related to the concept of withdrawal of divorce petition

Main Theme	Theme	Subtheme	Extracted codes
Intention	Non-definitive intention	Withdrawal due to emotional decision	1) decide to the withdrawal of divorce while hurry to file for divorce 2) intention to reconcile when emotions subside
		Decide to continue marital life by tolerating a difficult situation	1) tendency to reconcile and to file divorce petition to frighten the spouse 2) tolerate marital problems in order to reconcile
	Definitive intention	Withdrawal of divorce after referring to the centre	1) tendency to reconcile in spite of families disagreement 2) intend to reconcile despite filling agreed divorce petition 1) intend to reconcile despite chronic addiction of the spouse 2) intend to divorce due to the unchanged ability of abnormal personality 3) unwillingness to continue marital life due to betrayal 4) lack of intention to continue marital life after leaving the spouse for years

Discussion

Considering the importance of family preservation and the efforts of various institutions and organisations to reduce divorce rate especially in cases of preventable or contested divorce, the present study is planned to examine this social problem in depth and qualitatively through interviews, using the theory of planned behaviour and its constructs. The results of this study showed that most people had a negative attitude toward the concept of divorce and considered it an annoying and bad event, even if it is accepted as the last resort. It is noteworthy that, compare to the past, many changes had taken place in people's attitudes toward divorce, it is accepted despite being annoying. It was not seen before in Yazd [19]. Nowadays, due to the changes in technology and its effects on the lives and cultures of the people, especially the youth, divorce is more readily accepted and there is no longer a negative attitude toward it. The change in the attitude toward divorce is confirmed in other studies. According to another studies, this change in attitudes and the less negative views about divorce, especially in metropolises or among educated people, was clear [19] [21] [22]. Considering the experiences of counselors and social workers and even the couples, it seems possible to correct or complete these attitudes by using appropriate education and counselling [23] [24].

The present study revealed that subjective norms of divorce applicants are affected by different factors. The frequency and increasing rate of divorce lessen the negative views about it. As some

counsellors believed divorce became one of the options some choose as the first and easiest solution for their problems. It might be said that programs of Satellite TVs and misuse of online social networks in traditional societies like Yazd made divorce easier. In the other side, it is noteworthy that increase in the divorce rate in a traditional society shows changes in the attitudes of females and decrease of pressures to conform to wrong traditions [25] [26] [27] [28]. However, the increasing rate of divorce might be seen as harmful and severe. Subjective norms are determined by the perceived social pressure from significant others for an individual to behave in a certain manner and their motivation to comply with those people's views. Therefore parents' role become greater here. This is seen more among women because of their greater dependency to their parents. Other studies also revealed the effects of families' interference on couples' decision making. Family Intervention Divorce Girl's Dependency Family Intervention Divorce Girl's Dependency [29] [30]. According to data drawn from our interviews, the effects of parents are mainly negative. Most of the counselors believed that it is difficult to involve parents in the process of solving couples' problems. Sometimes due to their low literacy, age, and ignoring others' advice, it seems impossible to change parents decisions. Therefore, counselors focus on strengthening the independence of decision making by couples because dependent decision making may result in worsening the problems. Some studies showed the positive effects of education in decision making [31] [32], in steps to establish and stabilize the family, the importance of independent thinking is necessary [32].

Perceived behavioural control is one of the important variables effects on the ability of individuals to control their decision to divorce, as a behaviour. In this study, it included categories of social problems, others meddling, personality characteristics, and sexual problems of couples. The effects of these factors were also confirmed in other studies [33] [34]. Although social, economic and cultural problems are very influential on solidity and stability of the families, both directly and indirectly; people are not able to solve these problems and at most they, especially by learning problem-solving and decision-making at the primary school, can only reduce the negative effects of these problems on their family structure. Anyway, about those couples referring to the Family Counseling Center, education and counseling may improve their self-efficacy [35], since some characteristics or lack of knowledge reduce the couples' self-efficacy and self-esteem on solving problems and controlling the situation [36] (results of this section is independently studied in an article in print) [18].

According to the interviews, most of the couples, referred to the Center, fully intended to end their married life. However, a few of the divorce

applicants only hoped to punish their spouses and force them to behave better. As the counsellors reported, bringing the spouse to the court will worsen the situation and lead to retaliatory actions by the other side.

Due to the sensitivity and difficulty of addressing the issue, it was difficult to obtain permission from the Judicature and the State Welfare Organization to conduct the research and interview the people involved in the divorce process. In many cases, couples and their parents reject our request for being interviewed. Moreover, the authors could not find similar studies in which the theory of planned behaviour was used to explain divorce. The family members' meddling in the process of divorce and their role in solving couples' problems are probably one aspect of Iranian culture reflected in the laws since in the studies on family conflicts in other countries, this is seen only before or after the divorce process.

In conclusion, the findings revealed that individuals' attitudes towards divorce were considered annoying and inevitable. This view was shaped under the influence of the family, particularly parents, and general social atmosphere. However, most of the codes drawn belonged to the perceived behavioural control which was affected by different personal and social problems. Participants felt that they had lost control over their lives; in other words, their self-efficacy had decreased.

According to the findings, it can be argued that a qualitative study on divorce is the best choice for researchers to investigate this issue. Conducting a qualitative study, using a finely determined protocol, designing proper questions based on the constructs of the theory, and also enrolling various groups involved in divorce process were the strengths of the present study. It seems that findings of this study can provide a suitable context to conduct similar studies, particularly by encouraging the researchers to use mixed and interdisciplinary, e.g., sociology and health education, methods and researchers.

Ethical Approval

Participants' satisfaction and observance of their rights were confirmed at the ethical committee of Shahid Sadoughi University of Medical Sciences in Yazd with the code of ethics IR.SSU.SPH.REC.1395.43. Participants were informed of the research and were told that they had the right to withdraw at any time during the interview process or the study and that their names and interviews would be fully trusted.

Authors' contributions

This was a part of PhD thesis of the first investigator (NA). (MAMS, SARA) supervised the development of work. (AV, SSMM and SAAR) Were the study advisors. All authors read and approved the final version.

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