

ORIGINAL RESEARCH**Predicting emotional divorce based on metacognitive beliefs and psychological flexibility**Younes Parvaz¹, Maryam Bakhtiari^{2*}, Abbas Masjedi Arani³, Maryam Asle Zaker⁴

1. *Ph.D. Student of Clinical Psychology, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran*
2. *Associate Professor, Department of Clinical Psychology, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran*
3. *Assistant Professor Department of Clinical Psychology, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran*
4. *Assistant Professor Department of Clinical Psychology, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran*

*Corresponding Author:

Address: Department of Clinical Psychology, Faculty of Medicine, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran.

Email: maryam_bakhtiyari@sbmu.ac.ir

Date Received: May, 2019

Date Accepted: June, 2019

Online Publication: July 15, 2019

Abstract

Introduction: This study aimed to predict emotional divorce based on metacognitive beliefs and psychological flexibility.

Materials and Methods: The type of study was cross-sectional. The target population was the total married individuals in Tehran. Using cluster random sampling 467 married people (282 women, 185 man) were chosen to complete the Gottman emotional divorce scale, Meta Cognition Questionnaire (MCQ-30), acceptance and commitment inventory and demographic information sheet.

Results: findings showed that metacognitive beliefs and psychological flexibility had a significant relationship ($p < 0.01$) with emotional divorce. These variables accounted for 24% of variance in emotional divorce. Negative metacognitions had a positive significant relationship with emotional divorce. In other words, by incremental level of negative metacognitions the rate of emotional divorce will increase. Also, positive metacognitions and psychological flexibility had a negative significant relationship with emotional divorce. Results showed that by increasing in level of psychological flexibility and applying Positive metacognitions instead of negative metacognitions the rate of emotional divorce will diminish.

Conclusion: The current study support empirical evidence that a significant relationship does exist between aforementioned constructs. Given the implications of this research, by modifying of metacognitive beliefs and increasing psychological flexibility, the marital relationship can be improved. Thereby diminishing emotional divorce in couples.

Keywords: Emotional divorce, Metacognitive beliefs, Psychological flexibility

Introduction

Family, in terms of history is the most basic and in terms of expansion is the most cosmopolitan social institution (1). Also family is the first structure of civilization and communities and the main pillar of the society. The family should be taken into consideration as much as possible and try to prevent family conflicts. Stability and strength of a family depends on a stable marriage (2). It means that any instability and problems in marital satisfaction or lack of a successful marriage not only disrupt couple's mental relaxation; it also puts durability of the family at risk. Marriage is the basis of family formation and that is in the opposite point of divorce (3). Instability in spouses relationship has an adverse effect on both couples and children (4). Parental divorce and distress has a long-term detrimental impact on physical and psychological health. It has been related to poor health among adolescents and children (5). Divorce is one of serious social problems, affecting both parents and children each year (6). Divorce can have substantial effect on the life of every individual in the family; it has huge impact on socio-financial status of the families (7). Research has shown that divorce can have both negative and long term effects for children (8). Divorce is never a prepared procedure, it is a consequence of both partner suffering from imminent, painful five stages of emotional transitions with an average of three years duration to reach legal divorce. In each divorce, there is an "initiator", where spouse wants divorce, while "non-initiator" spouse wouldn't want divorce (9). The marital problems are related to misperception and irrational beliefs of one partner in the couple. It is very important to keep in mind that marriage breakup is not the fault of one party, and it needs long term, couple relationship, breaking up process (10). Before legal divorce usually emotional divorce occurs, but majority of couple's relationship begins and persists in an emotional divorce (9).

Bohannan (1970) posited that divorce is an individual and social phenomenon that involves six stations of overlapping experiences that center on the emotional divorce, legal divorce, economic divorce, co-parental divorce, community divorce, and psychic divorce (11). Emotional divorce is a type of divorce that couple live together but no

emotion would exchange between them (12). Emotional divorce has not only one certain reason, it may be as consequence of different causes (13). This phenomenon has been investigated from various perspectives such as psycho-social, economic and demographical (14). Here some of previous studies on emotional divorce have been cited.

In a study by Zahra Khorshidi and colleagues the main predictors of emotional divorce were attempt to legal divorce, living with spouses' family of origin and intervention of family their members (15). Akbar Talebpour and colleagues in a research showed that there is a significant relationship between subjective infidelity, agreeableness, openness, age of spouses and emotional divorce (16). Patterns of divorce based on demographic variables were explored by Amit Kaplan and Anat Herbert, results indicated that lower socioeconomic status was a risk factor of divorce while similar higher education in both couple was a protective factor (17). Mihaela Robila and Ambika Krishnakumar in a study examined the effect of economic pressure on marital conflict, findings showed that economic pressure associated with marital dissatisfaction and conflict (18).

Emotion regulation and maladaptive schema were used as predictors of emotional divorce in an investigation by Ebrahim Akbari and colleagues, they found that altruism, shame, undeveloped self, obedience and defect schemas were a stronger predictor of emotional divorce. Emotional inhibition and emotional suppression also had a significant relationship with emotional divorce (19). Mojgan Shiri and Afsaneh Ghanbari examined association between emotional divorce and character strengths, results suggest that loyalty and love predicted 33% of variance in emotional divorce and 58% of marital conflict variance (20). Hamidreza Samadi and his colleagues studied the relationship between emotional divorce and metacognitive beliefs, founding's showed that there was a significant relationship between emotional divorce and metacognitive beliefs (21).

Metacognitive beliefs and psychological flexibility (commitment and acceptance), both are constructs that have been shown associated with marital satisfaction and emotional divorce in previous research (22, 23). Metacognition beliefs include our reflection and knowledge

on control of situations, appraisal and monitoring. Problematic and Negative Metacognition beliefs are linked with variety of psychological problems and disorders (24). Wells divided metacognitive beliefs into two categories: namely positive and negative beliefs. Positive beliefs lead to solving the problems and negative beliefs may entrap ones in a cycle of worry. Wells has identified five categories of metacognition beliefs that included: 1-positive belief about worry. 2-negative belief about uncontrollability of danger and thought. 3-beliefs about superstition and responsibility. 4-cognitive self-consciousness and 5-cognitive competence (25). Cognitive flexibility and experiential avoidance are both associated with social and psychological problems and well-being (26). Psychological flexibility has an important role in marital satisfaction and marital conflict. One of determinant factors in couples relationship is experiential avoidance in addition to cognition flexibility (27). In current research, the relationship between these constructs and emotional divorce was explored. The question in present research is: does metacognitive beliefs and experiential avoidance/psychological flexibility as main parts of acceptance and commitment theory can predict emotional divorce?

Materials and Methods

A cross-sectional research design was used to gather the necessary data. The data utilized in this study was collected in May of 2019. The population of the study were married individuals in city of Tehran. By using free statistic calculator software, 467 individuals (282 women, 185 men) were determined as sample size. By cluster sampling among 22 districts of Tehran 4 districts (in north, south, west and east) randomly were chosen.

Inclusion criteria were: the couples who lived under the same roof, minimum marriage period of 2 years, and lack of mental disorders according to the participants' responses to this study. Moreover, death of a spouse, legal divorced, were the exclusion criteria. SPSS software (version 22.0) was used for data analysis and calculating descriptive statistics, in order to determine the predictive variables of emotional divorce, multiple regression was used.

Measures:

Participants in the study were required to complete three questionnaires: Gottman emotional divorce scale, metacognitive questionnaire, and action and commitment questionnaire.

Gottman emotional divorce scale:

In this study, "Gottman emotional divorce" is used to assess the scale of emotional divorce variable. Gottman (2008) has regulated this questionnaire in the form of 24 items of two options of Yes (1) or No. The cut-of-point for the scale is 8. If the scores of participants be equal or more than 8 it is a sign of emotional divorce. The alpha cronbach reported for this scale was 0.83 in a study by Mommy and Askari. Its reliability and validity seems to be satisfactory.

Action and acceptance questionnaire:

Bond and his colleagues designed the questionnaire. The constructs this questionnaire assesses include acceptance, variously, experiential avoidance and psychological flexibility. Participants respond on 7-point Likert scale. Lower score take into account as more tendency and ability to action in the presence of negative thoughts and feelings. Psychometric properties of the questionnaire are satisfactory. Alpha coefficient was approximately 0.84 to 0.88. Test-retest reliability after 3 and 12 month was 0.81 and 0.79 respectively. Abbasi and his colleagues reported good internal consistency (0.71) in an Iranian sample.

Metacognitions Questionnaire 30:

The MCQ-30 is a self-report measure assesses individual differences in metacognitive beliefs, judgments and monitoring tendencies. It consists of five replicable sub-scales assessed by 30-items in total. The five sub-scales measure the following dimensions of metacognition: (1) positive beliefs about worry; (2) negative beliefs about worry concerning uncontrollability and danger; (3) cognitive confidence; (4) needing to control thoughts; and (5) cognitive self-awareness. Each item is related on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicate higher levels of unhelpful metacognitions. The MCQ-30 has good psychometric properties (Spada, Mohiyeddini & wells, 2008).

Results

The demographic characteristics of the sample population are shown in Table 1.1. The participants ranged in age from 20 to 69, ($M=45.10$, $SD=10.105$). Majority of the participants were women (61 %) and 39% were men. Based on education level they were divided into diploma or lower (31%), bachelor (39%), master (23%), Ph.D. (7%).

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Variables	n	(%)
Gender		
Male	185	39
Female	282	61
Age		
20-29	135	29
30-39	132	28
40-49	144	31
50-59	53	11
60-69	3	1
Education		
Diploma/lower	143	31
Bachelor	185	39
Master	108	23
Ph.D.	31	7

The aim of this study was to determine to what extent metacognitive beliefs and experiential avoidance/psychological flexibility can account for variance of emotional divorce. To doing so, multiple regression analysis is used. The results have been showed in the table below (1.2).

Model Summary for metacognitive beliefs, psychological flexibility and emotional divorce (table 1.2)

Predictive variables	β	T	P		
Psychological Flexibility	0.16	-2.12	.003		
Uncontrollability and danger	0.2	1.23	.001		
Cognitive Confidence	0.19	2.43	.001		
Cognitive self-consciousness	0.13	-3.11	.001		
Positive beliefs	0.18	-1.33	.002		
Need to control thoughts	0.83	3.14	.001		
Dependent variable	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	DF	F-ratio
Emotional divorce	0.49	0.24	0.23	0.10	14.32

As has been shown in table 1.2, both metacognitive beliefs and experiential avoidance/cognitive flexibility have a significant relationship with emotional divorce. Experiential avoidance/cognitive

flexibility had a negative relationship with emotional divorce (-2.12 , $p > 0.03$). With increasing in psychological flexibility (experiential avoidance/cognitive flexibility) the probability of emotional divorce will decrease. Negative metacognitive beliefs: Negative belief about worry (Uncontrollability and danger), cognitive confidence, and needing to control thoughts had a significant positive relationship with emotional divorce (1.23 $p > 0.03$, 2.43 $p > 0.01$, 3.14 $p > 0.01$ respectively). With increasing level of these variables the probability of emotional divorce can go up. Also, as have been indicated in above table, positive metacognitive beliefs have a significant negative relationship with emotional divorce. Cognitive self-consciousness and positive beliefs about worry had a negative association with emotional divorce (-3.11 $p > 0.01$, -1.22 $p > 0.01$ respectively). Findings from regression analysis showed that metacognitive beliefs and psychological flexibility experiential avoidance/cognitive flexibility totally can account for (0.24) of variance in emotional divorce.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to predict emotional divorce based on metacognitive beliefs and psychological flexibility (experiential avoidance/cognitive flexibility). With regard to these results, metacognitive beliefs and psychological flexibility have a significant relationship with emotional divorce. Negative metacognitive beliefs include strategies that are not solution-oriented and cannot help to solving problems (28). Lack of good problem-solving strategies can lead to marital conflict and marital dissatisfaction, in fact, negative metacognitive beliefs not only cannot help to couples discordant relationship among couples but also deteriorating it. Through influencing on coping strategies negative metacognitive beliefs give rise to continuance of marital conflict and emotional divorce (29). On the other hand, positive metacognitive beliefs have a negative relationship with emotional divorce and marital dissatisfaction. With increasing level of positive beliefs about worry and cognitive

self-consciousness the probability of emotional divorce would diminish. Couples who use these strategies may better be able to manage tumultuous couple's relationship. They take a problem-solving approach toward their marital conflicts. Experiential avoidance is a state of negative reinforcement to shunning unpleasant thoughts and experiences (30). They only lead to short-term comfort but in long term the problems will persist. Our study indicated that couples who had high experiential avoidance consequently having more rate of emotional divorce. Cognitive flexibility is another component of ACT theory that is connected with family health and marital satisfaction. Cognitive flexibility means needing to living at the moment and separating oneself from thoughts and intrapsychic experiences (31). Our findings was similar to that of Moradzadeh and Pirkhaefi, found that psychological flexibility are associated with marital satisfaction(31).in our study results showed that lower psychological flexibility linked to higher rate of emotional divorce. In a study, Narimani and colleagues found that metacognitive beliefs can predict emotional divorce, results of this research was alike our findings(32). Negative metacognitions are not effective approach to deal with marital issues and they may soar up the tension between couples.

Conclusion

Findings of current research indicated that metacognitive beliefs and psychological flexibility (experiential avoidance/cognitive

flexibility) have a predictive relationship with emotional divorce. Low psychological flexibility and negative metacognitions entrap couples in a cycle of problematic relationship. They cannot resolve their problems maturely. Thus, continuance and worsening of their marital conflicting. By promoting psychological flexibility and replacing positive metacognitions instead of negative metacognitions couples can improve quality of marital life and have a satisfying relationship. Demographic variables such as age, sex, and socioeconomic status are affecting variables, in this study the effect of this factors did not investigate or control. A case control design would be better one to control confounding variables. Participant's lack of authenticity in response to questionnaires may be another limitation of this study. In emotional divorce both social and psychological variable play a role, one of our suggestions for future researchers in this field is that they concurrently assess the effect of them. Thereby we can obtain a holistic view about affecting factors of emotional divorce.

Conflict of interest

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgments

We would also like to show our gratitude to the subjects who participated in this study. Also, we would like to thank Dr. Meysam Olfati for assistance with methodology, and Dr. Reza Karimi for comments that greatly improved the manuscript.

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