

Post-Divorce Experience within Arab Context: Gender Differences

Muna Abdullah Al-Bahrani

Abstract—The impact of divorce experience on divorcees (N = 508) was examined within Arab context using stress measurement consisting of three domains: Cognitive, behavioral, and emotional. Results of a one-way analysis of variance indicated a statistically significant effect of gender within emotional domain. A strong correlation between emotional and cognitive symptoms subscales was found among divorcees. Negative moderate correlation between behavioral and cognitive as well as emotional and behavioral association were shown among men divorcees.

Index Terms—Arab, divorce, gender, symptoms.

I. INTRODUCTION

Divorce is a complicated and emotionally painful experience and the negative psychological impact on divorcees has been consistently reported. It is a devastating experience and can foster depressive mood because it is not only a loss of a partner, but also the loss of a way of life [1]-[4]. Researchers documented psychological reactions to divorce ranging from uncertainty, anger, grief and depression to anxiety and the feeling that one's life is getting out of control [5]-[7]. According to [8], divorce is often followed by continuing and escalating conflict with the ex-spouse, entailing numerous negative events. The reaction to the negative events includes components of psychological distress such as behavioral, motivational, affective, cognitive, and somatic symptoms of depression and anxiety [9]. A meta-analysis study of [10] revealed also a significant increase in risk for early death among divorced adults in comparison to their married counterparts.

In addition, divorce may not only lead to experience temporary or permanent decrements in well-being, but also may be associated with feelings of relief or liberation and may benefit some individuals [6], [7], [11], [12]. This suggests that divorce, like other forms of trauma, may present the individual with an opportunity to find meaning and facilitate subsequent adjustment [13]. As effective adaptation, theory proposes that people react emotionally to unexplained events and attempt to understand them; and, if they succeed, adapt to the events and have weaker affective reactions [12]. Some individuals perceive divorce as a tragedy and a personal failing, while other view the divorce – though stressful – as an opportunity for a new beginning and for personal growth [14]. However, results from studies on gender differences of psychological health following divorce

are far from conclusive [7], [15]. Therefore, research on the contingencies that determine whether divorce has positive, neutral, or negative long-term consequences for adults is a high priority [14], [6] and little is known about the effect on divorcees' lives in nonwestern cultures [1], [16].

Researchers reported that women who had custody of children were more likely to experience task overload, while men who had higher income than women would suffer lower levels of distress [6], [7]. This suggests that unemployment and associated financial problems could impair the ability to cope with stress [4]. Both women and men divorcees reported that they felt anger the most and then sadness [1]. For men, divorce led to a decline in regular contacts with the children and to a weakening of the father-child bond [17]. Further, men reported the mourning process later than women did and they mourned the loss of home and children more than the loss of wives and tended to express mourning through actions rather than in words or obvious emotional manifestations of grief [6]. For example, men showed greater levels of optimism than women did. Women were more realistic in their estimations about a happy marriage. Optimistic men remained unrealistically optimistic, but pessimistic men updated their self-estimation and did not show any self-negativity [18]. Men responded to stress by defaulting to less resource demanding and more automatic processing strategies. As representing the feelings and intentions of others were resource demanding, they displayed a fall back towards more self-related processes, when having to judge emotions. When men exposed to acute stress, they showed diminished self-other distinction on perceptual-motor, the affective, and the cognitive domains [19].

Researchers documented that women experienced more stress than men did prior to the decision to divorce. Psychological distress preceded divorce among women and therefore experienced less stress and better adjustment in general, than men did after divorce [7], [20]. They generated significantly more positive consequences of their divorce than did men [13]. In this sense, several possible explanations have been pointed that women more accustomed to relationships and relational difficulties than were men. Women were likely to notice marital problems cause stress and to feel relief when such problems end. Second, women were more likely to rely on social support systems and this might help to cushion their emotional stress after divorce. However, marriage had a stronger positive relationship to emotional reliance for men than it did for women [20], [21]. Men perceived learning to live without their partners as overwhelming while women enjoyed time alone. The vast majority of women, unlike men, developed a new philosophy toward life, and felt at peace with the world. In addition, men were more likely to report that getting a divorce was a

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mistake and responded to distress behaviorally while distress affected women psychologically [22]. Having gone through the upheaval of the divorce and separation from their families, men expressed a lot of stress in their lives with a need to relax more, gain a better understanding of themselves, and get more in tune with their feelings [23].

A communal coping model of catastrophizing predicted that women would catastrophize more than men do suggesting that women were more likely than men to be emotionally expressive and relationally oriented in their efforts to cope with life stresses including pain [24]. Likewise, women scored significantly higher than men did in emotional and avoidance domains, while they scored lower than men did in rational and detachment domains, although the magnitude of differences was moderate to small [25]. Women were more likely to ruminate on sad and anxious emotions whereas men were more prone to distract attention away from these emotional states [26]. Men and women differed in how they labeled their feelings. A majority of women would feel more emotional than stressed in troubling situations, whereas a majority of men would feel more stressed than emotional [15]. For instance, women tended to suppress their anger more than men did, while men expressed their anger directly more than women. This difference in anger expression was mediated by negative social appraisals [2]. As men learn to conceal their feelings and consequently underreporting symptoms, women learn to more freely, express their emotions, and show relatively higher endorsement of symptoms by women [27]-[29].

Within Arab context, the family is the social institution that society develops to be an enduring unit that can survive through problems. In this regard, marriage is a well-defined turning point that bestows prestige, recognition, and societal approval on both partners, particularly the spouses. Women's status is mainly defined by their roles as mothers and wives [30]. When the family fails to survive or continue functioning, divorce becomes the solution to end the disannulment relationship [31]. Related empirical studies reported negative impacts on the family as well as children, mostly divorced women within Arab societies. Divorced women for example expressed the strongest sense of loneliness and reported more somatization, obsessive-compulsion, depression, anxiety, lower self-esteem and more family problems, and lower satisfaction with life [32]. However, according to [31] divorce in the Arab societies to some extent was not considered a social stigma and a source of social exclusion but a viable option to free bad matrimonial relationships. Wives who had economic resources might act as a facilitating factor in case of matrimonial failure and could maintain their lives after divorce. In a qualitative study addressed different aspects of struggling marriages and post-divorce life, many women expressed that they felt empowered after going through the divorce and independently caring for themselves and their children emotionally and financially. Many participants experienced a sense of renewed hope for the future, both for themselves as individuals and for possible future relationships [33].

The expression of stress found to be different between women and men in the area of behavioral symptoms and no gender differences reported in the symptoms within emotional and cognitive domains [34]. Additional results

found that individuals rationalized their problems with the belief that things will become easier with time. They did not give attention to feelings and consequently suppression of emotion contributes, in part, to the delay of help-seeking behavior within Omani society [35]. Coping findings research indicated that women tended to rely more on maladaptive coping that involved blaming one self, keeping to themselves, escaping, and feeling anxiety [36]. In this regard, women usually internalized distress, while men externalized it. Men attempted to escape pain by working excessively, seeking extramarital affairs, going into isolation, withdrawing from loved ones, lashing out, and becoming irritable or violent [37]. Significant differences found between women and men divorcees with regard to the psychosomatic and emotional disorders. Women were more likely to experience such disorders [38]. These differences attributed to social values that encouraged men to talk about problems caused by their wives, while women were taught to keep quiet about problems caused by their husbands [39]. In general, self-disclosure, client affect, and self-exploration are often difficult, mainly if they are perceived as risking damage to family honor [32].

Oman is one of Arab countries where the marital stability declined about 17.4% in the face of dropping off the marriage cases and raising the rate of divorce cases [40]. Qualitative indicators revealed various reasons for divorce among Omani divorcees: Violence between spouses, family interference, arranged and or forced marriage, adjustment problems, economic hardship such joint accommodation with family and husband unemployment [41]. The results of this study will enrich the limited empirical studies on divorcee's expression of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive symptoms after divorce. Therefore, the present study focuses on exploring whether divorcee's women and men differ in expressing cognitive, behavioral, and emotional symptoms. In addition, the strength of association among symptoms domains due to gender is also investigated.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The participants were drawn from public records of Social Development and Justice Ministries. The sample represented various distant locations in Oman (nine Governorates). The sample of this study consisted of 508 (125 men, 393 women) divorcees. The average age of the sample is 37.12 (SD = 10.17) and about half of the sample finished at least high school. Collecting data of this study took about four months.

B. Measure

Symptoms of stress resulted from divorce experience were measured by a questionnaire comprised of three sub-domains [34]. These sub-domains are cognitive, behavioral, and emotional. In particular, cognitive domain reflects items such as "I think negatively about my future" "I have trouble concentrating" and "unwanted thoughts about divorce experience keep come to my mind." Behavioral domain consists of items such as avoidance of activities and distance from others. The emotional domain refers to items focus on feelings of anger, anxiety, and loneliness.

The three subscales had a good to acceptable level of reliability. The cognitive subscale (7 items) had a Cronbach's alpha .65; the behavioral subscale (9 items) had an alpha .65; and the emotional subscale (13 items) had an alpha .83. Alpha coefficients were dissimilar across gender as Table I shows. Men's responses were more consistent than women's responses.

TABLE I: CRONBACH ALPHAS FOR MEN AND WOMEN AND BOTH

	Cognitive	Behavioral	Emotional
Man	.75	.74	.90
Woman	.67	.62	.86
All	.65	.65	.83
Number of items	7	9	13

C. Data Analysis

Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to test the effect of gender on the symptoms of post-divorce

TABLE II: TESTS OF BETWEEN – SUBJECTS EFFECTS (N=508)

Source	Dependent Variable	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Gender	Cognitive	16.25	1	16.25	.81	.368	.002
	Behavioral	32.56	1	32.56	1.50	.222	.003
	Emotional	8235.63	1	8235.63	102.98	.000	.185
Error	Cognitive	9072.57	454	19.98			
	Behavioral	9879.57	454	21.76			
	Emotional	36306.65	454	79.97			

TABLE III: CORRELATIONS, MEAN, AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS (N=508)

Subscale	Women						Men					
	1	2	3	Mean	SD	1	2	3	Mean	SD		
Cognitive	1.00			11.90	4.42	1.00			12.52	4.50		
Behavioral	.437**	1.00		11.28	4.25	-.424**	1.00		10.53	5.63		
Emotional	.659**	.464**	1.00	17.61	8.98	.740**	-.442**	1.00	27.82	8.82		

** P < 0.01 (2-tailed)

* P < 0.05 (2-tailed)

B. The Correlation of Subscales among Men and Women

Table III shows the subscale of cognitive correlated with emotional symptoms and that yielded a positives strong correlation of .740 among men divorcees. This means that the more respondents report emotional, the more cognitive symptoms are expressed. Further, there is a negative moderate correlation of .424 between behavioral and cognitive symptoms as well as a correlation of .442 between emotional and behavioral symptoms among men.

Table III also reveals a strong correlation of .659 between emotional and cognitive symptoms, and a moderate positive correlation of .437 between cognitive and behavioral as well as correlation of .464 between behavioral and emotional symptoms among women.

Experience. Further, the association among the three sub-domains of symptoms was investigated using Pearson correlation.

III. RESULTS

A. Symptoms of Post-Divorce Experience and Gender

The effect of gender on three types of symptoms expression was analyzed. Table II shows the significance levels for subscales of cognitive, behavioral, and emotional are, respectively: .368, .222 and .000. Emotional subscale has a statistically significant effect on gender (p=.000), the effect size is (Eta=.185). All effect sizes were weak, despite the significant difference between men and women on one subscale.

divorcees' symptoms according to gender. Subscales of cognitive and behavioral symptoms do not have effect on gender with the exceptional of emotion, which explains about 18% of variance due to gender. Earlier studies compared life stress among men and women have recognized the difference in expression although the reported results are inconsistent [25], [38], [42]. For example, research conducted within Omani culture reported that repression of emotion was common among respondents [35] and the major variance in the expression of stress tended to be within behavioral actions rather than in emotional words [34]. Other researcher found that men externalize stress while women were more likely internalize emotional reaction to distress [6], [28], [29], [43], [44], and this may contribute to relatively higher endorsement of symptoms by women [2], [27].

The effect size of gender in emotional subscale is low and that may attribute to social change contributing to decrease the difference of stress experience over time [25], [31]. Other possible explanation that time of mourning process is varied

IV. DISCUSSION

The study investigated the difference between

between men and women. For men, the mourning process start later than women do and they believe that negative events, such as divorce, are less likely to happen to them compared to women [45, 46, 18]. Likewise, men tend to attach general importance to have a partner than do women and they have a smaller support related and higher social loneliness than women [47, 20]. Women's greater involvement in positive relationships relative to men's is partly responsible for keeping women's emotion such as depression as low as they are [47].

In investigating the relationship among emotional, cognitive, and behavioral symptoms among women, it is shown that all subscales have positive and moderate correlation except a strong association between emotional and cognitive. As documented by previous research it would be just as likely that certain cognitive strategies lead to emotional problems such as depression and anxiety, as the other way around [48]. Similarly, divorcee clients tend to be less rational when emotional activated and counselor should response to the underlying emotion that divorce myths are communicated [11]. Reporting rumination, self-blame as a cognitive strategy was related to reporting more symptoms of anxiety [48]. As proposed by [49] that some cognitive emotion regulation strategies are more closely associated with emotional problems. For men, the finding showed the direction of association among subscales was moderate negative except the correlation between emotional and cognitive was strong and positive. It is likely that good mood and behavior is mediated by cognitive processes. In addition, one should consider the possibility that mood itself consists in, or is a product of cognitive changes [50]. This is similar to what was reported by [24] is that catastrophizing in general associated with high levels of situational anxiety, anger, and sadness. As a theory of rational emotive behavioral indicated cognition, emotion, and behavior are not viewed as separate psychological processes but rather as interdependent and interactive processes [51]. Irrational beliefs can be viewed a vulnerability factor that predisposes individuals to the development of emotional disturbance, that is, irrational beliefs act as a cognitive diathesis for emotional disturbance such as anxious attachment to the ex-spouse and low self-esteem in the context of divorce [52].

This study has some limitations that should be considered in future research. First, the generalization of study should be limited on divorcees' population with consideration of the variation within the group as well as the limited number of males' participants versus females. The study was based on self-report scale; therefore, the participants might not have reported their actual feelings because of the social desirability. Despite the limitations, mourning is the natural reaction to the loss of a meaningful relationship but the grieving process is constricted and denied and the language used surrounding loss often implies judgment and societal expectations [6], [45]. Counselors should help their clients to monitor and modify their own positive and negative thinking to achieve balance between positive and negative elements in their lives as indicated by [53]. Divorcees in general and particularly men need to work through the losses of their former relationship so that their grief and anger over that loss do not totally overwhelm whatever sadness they feel for the loss of their ex-wife [54]. Further, the act of sharing with

other men proved very empowering because it helped them understand their own experiences more and gave them a feeling that they were supported. Men also reported that listening to other men gave them more understanding and respect for relationships as well as a better understanding the effective strategies of handling their own problems [23]. Divorced women might benefit more from the Fisher post-divorce adjustment intervention particularly if their existing level of motivation to learn new coping strategies and skills is high. In this intervention, the intense emotions and pains are reduced through implementing some skills such validation and support as well as giving information [5].

V. CONCLUSION

This study only examined the effects of the divorce within cognitive, behavioral, and emotional functioning. Other stressful factors that underlie divorce symptoms such as parenting and economic stress is suggested to explore in future research. Additionally, the notion about the accumulation of problems after divorce needs to be considered in combination with concept of escape mechanism [6]. Additional research is needed regarding the adaptation to the post-divorce experience particularly its interaction with age, duration of divorce, children, the initiator of divorce, social support, and living arrangement. Furthermore, qualitative studies on the experience of divorce may provide rich insight concerning the differences of the psychological responses as function of gender and age within the social context.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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