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Irrational Beliefs, Life Cycles of a Couple and Divorce

¹Salimi Seyed-Hosseini, ¹Karaminia Reza, ¹Mirzamani Seyed-Mahmoud,
¹Ramezani Asiye and ²Taghavi Mohammad Reza

¹Department of Psychology, Baqiyatallah University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran

²Department of Clinical Psychology, Shiraz University, Shiraz, Iran

Abstract: The present study assessed the relationships between irrational beliefs and the life cycles for couples that decided to divorce. One hundred and seventy eight people including 120 women and 58 males who were referred to the divorce court were requested to fill in The Irrational Beliefs Inventory. The results showed that the majority (37.1%) of the couples referred to Court were in the third part of the life cycle (raising children). Most divorced subjects had a life length between 1 to 5 years (44%). The highest mean scores of irrational beliefs (296.9) were found for the fifth part of the life cycle (retirement and death). Analysis showed couples in the fifth and third part of the life cycle had significantly higher irrational beliefs than the couples in the other parts of the life cycle. Irrational beliefs such as Anxious Over-concern, Frustrated Reaction and Helplessness for Change had the highest mean scores while, the Problem Avoiding, Emotional Irresponsibility and High Self-Expectation had the lowest mean scores.

Key words: Irrational beliefs, life cycles, divorce, couples

INTRODUCTION

Pines (1996) pointed out that for most western couples romantic relationships can a powerful influence on the belief of such that each person changes his or her attitudes towards the partner until the partner fits the images want to see them. Also, divorce can affect the life of every individual involved. Divorce is more common among those from lower socioeconomic status with psychological distress. It is found that psychological resources are associated with several factors including maturity, the model of marital stability offered by non-divorced parents (Carr, 2000). Records (1992) revealed that nearly one half of marriages in western countries are profiled to end in divorce (e.g., in Sweden 64, Belgium 56, United State 49, Canada 45, France, 43 and Germany 41%). The divorce rate per 1000 population per year (e.g., S 4.95, Russia, 3.36, United Kingdom 3.08, Denmark 2.81) and per 100 marriages (54.8 in United State, 52.9 in Belarus, 51.2 in Finland, 44.5 in Denmark, 44 in Belgium, 43.4 in Austria) showed that more countries especially in western are suffered from divorce (Nugman, 2002; Sardon, 2002; UN Demographic Yearbook 1999, 2001). Moreover, many children, as well as a wide range of individuals in the community, either directly or indirectly experience the consequences of divorce. Divorce has in the past been seen, as a deviation from normal family life but is beginning to be considered an ordinary event in the western societies (Thompson and Amato, 1999). To

prevent unnecessary divorces, recent studies suggest confirm that examining the psychological aspects of divorce is essential. A person with divorce experience is confronted with several personal and interpersonal conflicts. The challenge of disentangling identity, loss of fulfilling hope, loss of life style, loss of familiarity and possible loss of a social network are only some of the negative effects of divorce (Berk, 1998). In fact, to end a committed relationship requires complex and emotionally difficult decisions. For example, Cooper (2001) suggested that many areas such as anxiety, depression, substance abuse, role strain and social support should all considered in treatment of divorce for men.

Crooks and Baur (1999) reported that the divorce rate during the recent four decades has dramatically increased in the United States. With respect to the rate of divorces in Iran, the Iran Statistical Center reported that most divorces occurred between 1 to 4 years after marriage (33%) and between 5 to 9 years after marriage (27%). Only 4% of divorces happened in the first year after marriage. Again, it was found that the rate of divorce varied slightly from 10.7 (1977), 8.3 (1982), 10.4 (1987), 6.3 (1994), 7.2 (1995), 7.9 (1997), 8.35 (2000), 9.43 (2002) and 10.33% (2003) (Management and Planning Organization, 2001; National Organization for Civil Registration, 2004). The rate of divorce in capital of Iran was 15.2 (2000) and 17.93% (2003). (Management and Planning Organization, 2001; National Organization for Civil Registration, 2004).

The MMPI-2 profiles of unhappy couples indicated that they are more likely to show depression and worry. The husbands seemed to worry, be anxious, blame themselves easily and be punitive with their wives. In particular, they feel inadequate and withdraw, while the wives appear to be somewhat open to problem solving and suffer from symptoms of depression, hysteria with indications of physical concerns, anxiety and self-doubt (Greene, 1991; Nurse, 1999). Comparing married mothers with those couples with divorce crisis indicated that the married mothers enjoyed a higher sense of well-being than divorced mothers. The divorced mothers suffered from more depression, anxiety, stress and poor social adjustment (Waite, 1995; Demo and Acock, 1996; Cohen and Dekel, 2000).

With respect to McGoldrick and Carter (1988) the life cycle of a couple includes 1) marriage, 2) birth, 3) raising children, 4) launching young adults, 5) retirement and 6) death. The length of marriage and the birth of children are the main criteria to identify the life cycles. Several studies showed that men were more satisfied with their lives during first five years after marriage, while women reported their satisfaction increased when they had children. In general, most of the couples showed their highest satisfaction level during the first part of the life cycle (Sadegifard, 1995).

Many studies supported this idea that marital adjustment is associated with mental and physical health and family functioning (Waring and Patten, 1984; Chowanec and Binik, 1989; Deal, 1996). It appears that having marital problems are related to misperception of the other partner in the couple and irrational beliefs rather than external stimuli in the environment. The consequences of their illogical thoughts result in a wide range of negative emotions and behaviors such as aggression, guilt, anxiety, avoidance behavior and loss of control over their emotions and behaviors (Fardari and Amin-Yazdi, 1995). Ellis (1985) suggested that the foundation of marital and family conflicts is influenced by either one or both partners' irrational beliefs. In this situation, partners are predisposed to neglect the positive attitudes and behaviors of the other partner while they highlight the negative ones (Fardari and Amin-Yazdi, 1995). Based on Ellis' theory (1987), misperceptions and irrational beliefs caused irrational consequences. In fact, these beliefs are not upheld by reality and are based on suspicious and guessing. Irrational beliefs are unnecessary and inflexible thoughts. In addition, they seem to express demanding attitude, neediness, misery and a damning attitude (Ellis, 1985, 1987; Tagipor, 1999). Sadegifard (1995) indicated that Problem Avoiding and Anxious Over-concern were the most and least irrational beliefs, respectively. It seems that partners tend to reinforce the negative behaviors of their spouses.

Results derived from Iranian research showed that more females with primary educational levels filed for divorce while more males who filed for divorce had high school educational levels. With respect to age range, divorced women were between 25 and 36 years old while men were between 30 and 34. Most of these couples had one child and they had divorced between 5 to 10 years after marriage. The most common causes for divorce were maladjustment (37%), parent or significant others intervened (11%), addiction (8.5%), psychological conflicts (8.4%), unemployment (7.4%) and woman divorced her husband because he remarried (3.7%) (Sadegifard, 1995; Behzisti Organization, 2000).

In a summary of studies by Kaslow and Robison (1996) that focused on characteristics of healthy couples and families the basic dimensions of a strong healthy family were to adapt to change ability, fiddle to family, encouraging family members, expression of appreciation, religious and spiritual orientation, social connectedness, clear roles, shared times, clear boundaries between the couple and others, cooperation and successful negotiating. On the other hand, several studies showed that components such as different attitudes towards child rearing and sexuality, perfectionism, different values, high expectations and irrational beliefs in couples and families may result in marital discord and divorce (Fardari and Amin-Yazdi, 1995).

Divorce can be also considered marital burn out in which the couples demonstrate their physical, emotional and mental exhaustion. In fact, they prone to present their feelings of helplessness and hopelessness their negative view of themselves and their negative attitudes towards life, work and people. In addition, divorcing couples often express a loss of morale, feelings of isolation, reduced productivity and decreased capacity to cope. Furthermore, these individuals are more likely to shift their positive view and get stuck in negative attitudes and in feeling unappreciated. In particular, in the modern world, couples are more inclined to have greater freedom which in turn can cause couples to have more demands and expectations for each other (Maslach, 1982; Pines, 1996; Corey and Corey, 1998).

The main aim of the study was to answer the question whether or not there were significant differences between times of the life cycle and types of irrational beliefs in divorced people. In particular, the study attempted to verify whether or not there were a significant relationship between the types of irrational belief and parts of the life cycle.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

From the total population of couples who asked for divorce from the Family Court in Rasht (a province in north of Iran) during the first six months in 2001, 178 of

couples, including 120 women and 58 men, participated in the study. With respect to the life cycle definition, 27, 28, 66, 31 and 26 individuals were selected as being in the first to fifth life cycles, respectively. In this study, those asked to participate in the research were the first person in a couple to file for divorce. In addition, those couples who have files to divorce due to their partners' addiction, mental illness, severe physical illness, diseases difficult to cure or were illiterate were excluded from the study. After an explanation of the aims of the research and the ethical issues, subjects were offered confidentiality to fill in the Jones Irrational Beliefs Questionnaire (1969) as well as a demographic Form. The Jones questionnaire included 100 items and was repeatedly conducted in Iran and the statistical characteristics of the test confirmed the validity and reliability of the test for an Iranian population (Sadegifard, 1995; Tagipor, 1999). This scale contains ten types of irrational beliefs including: 1) Demand for Approval (DA), 2) High Self Expectation (HSE), 3) Blame Proneness (BP), 4) Frustration Reaction (FR), 5) Emotional Irresponsibility (EI), 6) Anxious Overconcern (AO), 7) Problem Avoiding (PA), 8) Dependency (D), 9) Helplessness for Change (HC) and 10) Perfectionism (P). Subjects were asked to show their feelings and choose between 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. For some items, the scores were reversed. The low scores demonstrate rational beliefs while the high scores show irrational beliefs.

RESULTS

The age range of the divorced couples was between 18 to 58 with a mean age of 37.7 (SD = 9.9). The mean age and standard deviation for five parts of the life cycles are shown in Table 1.

The results showed that most claims for divorce for women took place between ages 25 to 31 (15.7%), while for men the ages were between 32 to 38 (10.6%). In total, the majority and minority of people who had files to divorce were found from 25 to 31 years (37.1%) and 52 to 58 years (14.6%), respectively. With respect to the participants' educational levels, the most claims for divorce were found for those who had finished high school or lower educational levels (48.3%; 18.5 for women and 5.05% for men) and the least claims were found for those who had an educational level above a high school (17.4%).

Table 1 showed the mean and SD of the total scores of irrational beliefs. Based on these results, the most and least mean total scores on irrational beliefs were found for the couples who were on in the fifth part of the life cycle (M = 296.9, SD = 23.15) and the third part of the life cycle (M = 283.2, SD = 19.9), respectively. ANOVA analysis

indicated non significant differences on irrational beliefs between the parts of the life cycle while analysis by t-test indicated significant differences on irrational beliefs between part of the life cycle follows; 1) there were significant differences between the third part of the life cycle and the first part ($p < 0.05$), second part ($p < 0.05$) and fifth part ($p < 0.001$). Furthermore, significant differences were found between the fourth part of the life cycle and the fifth one ($p < 0.05$). Overall, couples in the fifth part and third part of the life cycle had significantly higher irrational beliefs mean scores than the couples in other parts of the life cycle.

With respect to the length of the marriages, most divorced subjects had a life length of marriage between 1 to 5 years (N = 79, 44%) and the least divorced subjects had a length of marriage between 12 to 25 years (N = 10, 5.6%). With regard to the life cycle, it appeared that the most and least claims for divorce were occurred in the third cycle (27.5 women and 9.5% men) and the fifth cycle (9 women and 5.6% men), respectively. In order to test for significant differences between irrational beliefs in each part of the life cycle, analysis by ANOVA was conducted and the results are presented in Table 2. In order to find out whether or not there were significant differences between the parts of the life cycle, further analyses were conducted by the Scheffe test and the results are as follows:

- On the Demand for Approval subscale, there were significant differences between the fourth part of the life cycle (M = 25.38, SD = 4.49) with the fifth part of the life cycle (M = 29.76, SD = 3.37).
- On the Blame Proneness subscale, there were significant differences between the first part (M = 34.92, SD = 5.74) with the third part of the life cycle (M = 31.03, SD = 4.50).
- On the other subscales, analyses failed to show significant differences between the parts of the life cycles.

The findings (Table 3) showed that the most irrational beliefs were found in the subscales Anxious Overconcern (M = 33.06, SD = 4.80), Blame Proneness (M = 32.76, SD = 5.78) and Helplessness For Changing (M = 32.14, SD = 4.34), while the least irrational beliefs were found for subscales High Self-expectation (M = 24.72, SD = 4.16), Emotional Irresponsibility (M = 25.38, SD = 3.91) and Problem Avoiding (M = 25.94, SD = 4.80).

Table 3 shows the mean and SD for the irrational beliefs for each part of the life cycle. Based on these results, the highest mean scores on irrational beliefs for divorced subjects were Blame Proneness, Anxious

Table 1: Mean and SD of age and irrational beliefs scores for the parts of life cycle

Parts of the life cycle	N	Age			Irrational beliefs scores	
		M	SD	Age range	M	SD
(1) Marriage	27	25.28	6.28	18-35	294.4	22.35
(2) Birth	28	26.61	4.82	19-37	293.7	25.90
(3) Raising children	66	28.10	5.19	40-18	283.2	19.92
(4) Launching young adult	31	39.61	4.51	49-31	286.8	19.02
(5) retirement/death	26	49.35	4.96	42-58	296.92	23.15

Table 2: ANOVA analysis between the life cycles and the irrational beliefs

Irrational beliefs	F	df	p-value
Demand for approval	2.97	4,172	<0.01
High self expectation	0.68	4,172	0.60
Blame Proneness	4.71	4,172	<0.001
Frustration reaction	0.92	4,172	0.44
Emotional irresponsibility	1.46	4,172	0.21
Anxious overconcern	1.12	4,172	0.34
Problem avoiding	1.16	4,172	0.16
Dependency	0.65	4,172	0.62
Hopelessness for changing	1.03	4,172	0.39
Perfectionism	1.76	4,172	0.13

Table 3: The order of mean scores of irrational beliefs for the parts of the life cycle in divorced couples

Order	First part of the life cycle			Second part of the life cycle			Third part of the life cycle			Fourth part of the life cycle			Fifth part of the life cycle		
	Irr. B	M	SD	Irr. B	M	SD	Irr. B	M	SD	Irr. B	M	SD	Irr. B	M	SD
1	BP	34.9	5.7	AO	33.2	6.1	AO	32.4	5.3	BP	33.3	3.1	AO	34.7	5.2
2	AO	32.9	5.5	HC	32	4.5	HC	31.9	4.9	AO	32.9	4.3	BP	33.3	4.3
3	HC	32	4.9	BP	31.4	4.4	BP	31.3	4.5	HC	32	4.4	HC	33.3	3.9
4	HSE	31.8	5.4	HSE	30.6	4.8	HSE	30.3	5	D	30.1	4.5	HSE	31.9	5.6
5	D	30.1	4.6	D	30.4	5.1	D	29.2	5.4	HSE	30	5.5	DA	29.8	3.7
6	FR	28.1	6.5	FR	28.6	4.5	DA	27.4	5.1	P	27.5	4.5	D	28.7	4.8
7	DA	27.5	5.1	DA	28.5	5.1	FR	26.9	6.8	FR	26.4	4.3	FR	27.3	6.3
8	PA	26.7	5.9	EI	27.4	6.6	P	26	5	PA	25.6	3.8	P	27.1	3.5
9	EI	25.6	6.8	P	25.7	3.6	PA	24.6	4.8	DA	25.4	4.5	PA	27.1	4.9
10	P	24.7	4.5	PA	25.6	5.3	EI	24.2	5.4	EI	24.7	6.3	EI	25.6	6.2

Irr. B = Irrational belief

Overconcern and Helpless for Changing. In addition, the lowest mean scores were found for Problem Avoiding, Emotional Irresponsibility, Perfectionism and Demand For Approval. With respect to sex, t-test analyses showed that the group of women (n = 120, M = 33.5, SD = 5.35) had significantly higher scores on Anxious Overconcern than the group of men (n = 58, M = 31.6, SD = 4.91) [$t_{176} = 2.28, (p = 0.05)$].

DISCUSSION

Results of the present study showed that women compared to men were more likely to file for divorce. In addition, more divorces occurred in the third part of the life cycle. This is consistent with the results of Pines' (1996) which suggested that due to romantic relationships, most couples have marital satisfaction in the first part of the life cycle. However, in the third part of

the life cycle, raising children, the responsibilities of the wife increased and the husband's expectations toward his wife increased. If the wife does not receive positive feedback from her husband, the possibility of resentment due to high stress and tension for the wife increases (Berk, 1998). In particular, in the first five years after marriage, it is more likely that the husband would have more marital satisfaction than the wife (Sadegifard, 1995).

In a similar vein, more divorces occurred for subjects in the age range of 25 to 31 years old. It is more likely that the couple's interaction patterns are affected when the first child is born. Based on this assumption, it is likely there would be more conflict and tensions at that point. One possible explanation for these findings can be that if either or both partners have developmental problems from their childhood or if they were not ready to behave in an either father or mother role (due to lack of having appropriate model or fail to achieve a mature cognition in

marriage), raising their child with force them to deal with those or act them out in conflict in the marriage. These results are similar to the results of previous studies. Results of the study are also congruous with the previous studies in that divorces occurred for the couples with low levels education (Sadegifard, 1995).

Results related to irrational beliefs indicated that the most irrational beliefs were found for the first part of the life cycle, while the least were found for the third part of the life cycle. It is interesting to note that more divorces happened in the third part of the life cycle, raising children. In may be that couple's pay more attention to the negative feelings of his/her partner (Maslach, 1982; Corey and Corey, 1998). Based on Ellis (1985, 1987), the couples' dissatisfaction is created by psychopathology, severe conflicts and partner's irrational beliefs about the marriage. Based on the findings, the first and fifth part of the life cycle showed the highest number of irrational beliefs, while more divorces were found for the third part of the life cycle. One possible explanation for these results is that the interaction and mutual patterns in the first and fifth parts of the life cycle are more important for the couples. Nevertheless, in the first part of the life cycle, the couples may feel more fidelity and loyalty to each other (Sadegifard, 1995) and if that is time, they may ignore their partner's negative points, although the level of their irrational beliefs is high. In addition, marital satisfaction and having happier social or private experiences may lessen their attention to their personal difficulties. For the fifth part of the life cycle, it is likely that all family members have established a new life and the parents have enough time again to review their problems as a couple as well as their mistakes. In this atmosphere, the level of conflict could increase and the previous problems arise again for the couple. Nevertheless, the risk of divorce is at the lowest rate due to compassion toward their children's lives, their age and the high adjustment level that they may have attained during the previous years. In contrast, in the third part of the life cycle, the partners may still be proud of their abilities including establishing a new and good life. With these expectations, they are more likely to file for divorce (Fadardi and Amin-Yazdi, 1995).

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