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Comparison of Family Awareness, Emotional Climate, and Emotional Divorce among Married Men and Women

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ABSTRACT

Background: This research was conducted with the aim of comparing family awareness, emotional climate, and emotional divorce among married men and women in Yazd.

Methods: The study was of an analytical type and was conducted cross-sectional, with the participation of 250 married men and women who had sought counseling services in Yazd due to family problems. The sampling method in this research was purposive. Data were collected using a demographic form, the Family Awareness Scale (FAS), the Emotional Climate Scale for Couples (ECSC), and the Emotional Divorce Scale (EDS). The data were analyzed using SPSS-21 software.

Results: Pearson correlation coefficients showed a significant negative relationship between family awareness and emotional climate ($r = -0.71$) and emotional divorce ($r = -0.70$), and a significant positive relationship between emotional climate and emotional divorce ($r = 0.86$, $p < 0.01$). Independent t-test showed that women had lower family awareness than men. Furthermore, women scored higher on emotional climate and emotional divorce compared to men, and these results were statistically significant ($p < 0.01$).

Conclusion: The results indicate that women have lower family awareness than men, which, in addition to creating a tension-inducing emotional climate, increases the likelihood of emotional divorce. Therefore, it is recommended for couple's therapists to develop practical programs to enhance family awareness skills as an effective step in reducing emotional divorce and increasing emotional climate between spouses.

Keywords: Family therapy, Awareness, Emotional regulation, Divorce

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Introduction

Families are considered the smallest social unit and, in fact, the most important unit in terms of supportive and educational effectiveness (Fishman, 2022; Reiter, 2023). An individual learns social norms and values within the family environment, and these teachings guide them in making specific behavioral choices. Establishing healthy relationships and proper functioning within the family is crucial for the well-being of family members and even society as a whole (Fishman, 2022; Kahrazee & Rigi Kooteh, 2016). What occurs within the family and how it functions can be a key factor in strengthening emotions and adaptability, as well as reducing current and future threats related to unfavorable events and conditions (Kahrazee & Rigi Kooteh, 2016). Of course, the important and constructive role of women in creating moral and emotional bonds among family members cannot be overlooked (Greif et al., 2023). This significant role, by creating a calm and secure environment free from discomfort and inappropriate emotional climates, will be accessible to all family members (Rahnama, 2020).

Emotional climate is shaped by factors that are quite similar, including family member relationships, attitudes and perspectives toward each other, emotions and affections, participation levels in family activities, the presence of cooperation or competition within the family, and the quality of communication among family members (Amanelahi et al., 2023). In a healthy emotional climate, as children grow, they adopt the way of expressing emotions and form intimate relationships among family members, reacting to it from themselves (Alonso-Tapia & Nieto, 2019; Bodovski & Youn, 2010). In fact, if spouses have warm, intimate, and conflict-free relationships with each other, they create a balanced and peaceful life for their children, and naturally, children will enjoy it. Conversely, if the emotional space between spouses is cold, hostile, and lacks respect, the level of conflict between spouses will be higher, and the family environment for children will be filled with tension and anxiety (Neckel & Hasenfratz, 2021; Nejad et al., 2022). Therefore, the emotional climate can be defined as "multiple emotions generated through the social interaction of group members in a specific environment" (Vandekerkhof et al., 2022). An essential element in the emotional climate is how emotions and affections are expressed between spouses (Huerta et al., 2023; Wiebe & Johnson, 2016). Individuals can effectively manage and respond to emotional experiences, referred to as emotion regulation. In emotion regulation, they can modify the expression of their emotions (Todorov et al., 2023; Vandekerkhof et al., 2022).

In this regard, one significant factor in the emotional climate is the presence of emotional divorce between spouses (Sabzevari et al., 2023). Unfortunately, in modern families, emotional divorce is one of the common issues that have occupied the attention of many therapists and couples' counselors (Nasershariati, 2022). This is because emotional separation and divorce often come with various economic, social, and psychological consequences for individuals (Dewilde & Stier, 2014). Emotional divorce refers to spouses separating from each other emotionally due to feelings of anger and emotional disappointment with their partner (Rasheed et al., 2021). In this type of divorce, the emotional connection, affection, support, attention, intimacy, and love between spouses decrease, potentially leading to a non-emotional marital life between them. This means that spouses live together without love and affection, and their relationship is primarily a legal contract (Gottman, 2008; Lebow & Snyder, 2022).

Emotional divorce is recognized as one of the most significant family issues that lead to family breakdown and have long-term personal and social effects. This phenomenon is still considered an understudied issue in scientific research and is referred to as the informal stage of formal divorce (Arbabzadeh et al., 2023). The prevalence rate of 40.9% indicates a high prevalence of emotional divorce among Iranian couples (Habibalahzadeh et al., 2020). Islamic and colleagues also reported that half of Iranian couples are dissatisfied with their

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marital relationships, and approximately 10% of couples experience emotional divorce (Eslami et al., 2020).

Considering the aforementioned, investigating and understanding the influential factors on family awareness, the emotional climate, and the phenomenon of emotional divorce in a specific region can provide new insights that can be effective in formulating policies and social programs to increase family awareness and prevent emotional divorce. Additionally, gathering information in the field of family awareness can assist individuals and psychology and family relationship specialists in providing the best solutions and counseling for healthier and more stable families. Therefore, the aim of this study was to compare the level of family awareness, emotional climate, and emotional divorce among married men and women in Yazd city.

Methods

This study was analytical and cross-sectional, conducted from March 10, 2023, to September 6, 2023. The statistical population in this research included all married men and women who referred to family counseling centers in Yazd in 2023. For sampling, the researcher invited all couples to participate in the research before starting their counseling sessions at three private counseling centers (such as Parnian, Zehne Mana and Mehre-Shefa). Since the sampling method in this study was purposive, applicants who expressed their consent to participate in the research were subjected to an initial interview. The inclusion criteria for this research included: 1) being married with a minimum of one year of cohabitation, 2) being native and residing in Yazd city, 3) being aged between 18 and 50, 4) having at least a high school education, 5) experiencing more than one month of family disputes and problems, and 6) completing the questionnaires before the family counseling sessions. The exclusion criteria included: 1) inability to fill out the questionnaires due to physical conditions and 2) non-consensual participation in the research.

For this research, the data collection tools included a demographic information form along with two other questionnaires.

A- Demographic Information Form: This form included demographic information such as age, education level, economic status (Income, financial situation), marital status, occupation, duration of marital life, and more.

B- Family Awareness Scale (FAS): The Family Awareness Scale was developed by Olson and Gorall in 1985 to assess family cohesion. This scale consists of 14 items designed to evaluate family cohesion based on the circumplex model of family functioning. The first part of the scale, consisting of two questions, requires the respondent to specify which statement best describes their family in each question. The second part of the scale, comprising 12 questions, asks the respondent to rate on a 9-point Likert scale to what extent each statement applies to their family. The higher the scores, the greater the family cohesion. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for this questionnaire is reported as 0.78 (Green et al., 1985).

C- Emotional Divorce Questionnaire (EDQ): This questionnaire was designed by Mohammadi et al. in 2015 to measure emotional divorce among couples in Iran. It consists of 36 items and 9 subscales, with each subscale containing 4 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (Never = 0 to Always = 4). The total score range for the questionnaire is 0 to 36, with higher scores indicating higher levels of emotional divorce. Therefore, a total score above 18 (on average) for the entire questionnaire and above 2 (on average) for each variable indicates higher than average emotional divorce in life. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for the entire research is 0.95, and for the subscales, it ranges from 0.83 to 0.85 (Mohammadi et al., 2017).

D- Emotional Climate Scale for Couples (ECSC): Originally developed by Navardgahfard (1994) as the "Family Emotional Atmosphere Questionnaire (FEAQ)," this questionnaire consisted of 35 questions designed to assess the status of relationships among Iranian family

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members. In this study, we used a modified 21-item version of the ECSC by Sabzevari et al. in 2023. This version has two subscales: "lack of affection" and "coercion with limitation." Respondents rate each item on a 5-point scale (Never = 1 to Very Much=5). The total score range for the questionnaire is 21 to 105, with higher scores indicating a more negative emotional climate between spouses. This questionnaire has been confirmed for its face validity and has demonstrated good structural validity through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis. The test-retest reliability for the entire scale is 0.83, and for the two subscales, it is 0.82 and 0.81, respectively (Sabzevari et al., 2023).

SPSS-21 software was used for data analysis. In the descriptive section, mean, standard deviation, and percentage were reported, and in the inferential section, while considering the parametric assumptions of the data and at a significance level of 0.05, the chi-square test and t-test for independent groups were employed.

To conduct this research, ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Shahid Sadoughi University of Medical Sciences, Yazd (IR.SSU.SPH.REC.1402.029). Officials at counseling centers were informed about the research objectives, and participants were requested to complete the questionnaires. Participants were also assured that their information would remain confidential.

Results

Out of the total questionnaires collected from the participants over a period of 6 months, six questionnaires were incomplete and were excluded from the study. Data from 250 completed questionnaires were analyzed. The mean and standard deviation of the participants' age were 38.27±11.85, with 57% being. The highest educational level among participants was above high school or bachelor's degree, accounting for 52%. The most common occupation among participants was self-employment (56%), and the majority of participants had an average economic status (37%). The chi-square test results for data homogeneity indicated no significant differences between the two groups regarding demographic variables (education level and economic status) ($p > 0.05$). Therefore, it can be concluded that the two groups of men and women were homogeneous in terms of demographic characteristics, Table 1.

Table 1. Examination of demographic characteristics of study participants

Variables	Category	N	%	Chi-square	Sig.
Gender	Male	143	57.2	-	-
	Female	107	42.8		
Education level	Under Diploma	16	6.4	2.092	> 0.554
	Diploma	69	27.6		
	Licentiate	130	52		
	Master and over	35	14		
Job	House wife	64	25.6	91.81	< 0.001
	Worker	20	8		
	Self-employment	141	56.4		
	Pensioner	25	10		
Economic level	Week	76	30.4	4.06	> 0.236
	Moderate	94	37.6		
	Good	80	32		

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To examine the relationships between research variables, the Pearson correlation coefficient was used. The results indicated a significant negative relationship between family awareness and emotional climate (r = -0.71) as well as emotional divorce (r = -0.70). On the other hand, a significant positive relationship was found between emotional climate and emotional divorce (r = 0.86, p < 0.01), Table 2.

Table 2. Mean (M), Standard deviation (SD) and Correlation matrix of research variables (N= 250)

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Family awareness	77.18	16.99	-		
2. Emotional climate	29.36	28.42	-0.71	-	
3. Emotional divorce	37.53	17.52	-0.70	0.86	-

Furthermore, to investigate the level of family awareness, emotional climate, and emotional divorce among married men and women, an independent samples t-test was utilized. The results, considering the lower mean scores of family awareness in individuals, indicate that women had less family awareness compared to men, and this difference was statistically significant (p < 0.05). On the other hand, women had higher scores in emotional climate and emotional divorce compared to men, and these results were also statistically significant (p < 0.05), Table 3.

Table 3. Comparison of main research variables in married men and women

Variables	Male (N = 143) M ± SD	Female (N = 107) M ± SD	t	Sig.
Family awareness	80.12 ± 10.60	73.26 ± 22.37	3.215	< 0.001
Emotional climate	24.08 ± 18.30	36.43 ± 36.89	-3.181	< 0.001
Emotional divorce	34.40 ± 8.82	41.72 ± 24.21	-2.98	< 0.001

Discussion

The present research aimed to compare the levels of family awareness, emotional climate, and emotional divorce among married men and women. Initially, the results indicated a significant negative relationship between family awareness and emotional climate and emotional divorce. This implies that individuals with higher levels of family awareness tend to have better emotional climates and lower emotional divorce. On the other hand, a significant positive relationship was found between the emotional climate and emotional divorce. This suggests that couples with a better emotional climate are less likely to experience emotional divorce.

Khan-Mohammadi et al. (2018) reported in their study that there is a negative relationship between basic psychological needs and marital expectations with emotional divorce. Furthermore, a positive relationship was observed between family functioning and emotional divorce. This study also demonstrated that basic psychological needs and family functioning were significantly correlated. Koppejan-Luitze et al. (2020) showed that parents in complex divorces reported stronger negative emotions towards their former spouses, which may lead to emotional detachment and self-regulation breakdown. Rahnama (2020) reported in their research that awareness of the spouse and married life can reduce spousal abuse and family violence. Families experiencing emotional divorce have more severe problems, making it difficult for them to resolve their conflicts and issues. In these families, the emotional relationships among family members are dysfunctional and disrupted, and they perform poorly in their roles and behaviors (Salehi-Amiri et al., 2014). The results of Arbabzadeh et al. (2023) indicate that there are 29

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different factors acting as triggers for emotional divorce in Iran, categorized into four dimensions: skills, personal life, social and psychological behaviors, and structured backgrounds. According to experts, the social and psychological dimension is the most important among these dimensions and plays a more significant role in emotional divorce. Furthermore, triggers related to poor communication skills in the skills dimension, infidelity, and extramarital relationships in the behavioral and personality dimension, inadequacy, and marital compatibility in the social and psychological dimension and the individual's economic situation in the background dimension are considered important factors.

In explaining the relationship between increased family awareness and the potential reduction in emotional climate and emotional divorce, it can be said that the emotional climate acts as a determinant factor in the decision to pursue emotional divorce. In some cases, conflicts and incompatibilities in the emotional climate may motivate an individual to seek divorce. Moreover, in certain situations, these conflicts may lead individuals to view divorce as a solution to escape or exit from an unhealthy emotional climate. Therefore, family awareness brings rational foresight regarding the role of a healthy and stable family in forming and maintaining emotional relationships. This awareness can lead family members to put in more effort to resolve issues and improve emotional relationships, consequently reducing the likelihood of emotional divorce. A better understanding of these relationships can assist individuals and family relationship counselors in promoting improved emotional relationships and facilitating the prevention of emotional divorce.

Furthermore, the results of this research indicate that women had lower levels of family awareness compared to men. On the other hand, the intensity of emotional climate and emotional divorce was significantly worse in women compared to men. These findings align with previous research. For example, Gong & Wang (2021) demonstrated that awareness of the philosophy of marriage has a significant impact on individuals' intentions to marry, especially among educated women and men. Acitelli (1992) showed that spouses discuss their relationships more, and marital satisfaction is positively related to the extent of discussing marital relationships. Ha (2008) indicated that primary family experiences directly affect marital satisfaction and psychological adjustment, with men's family experiences directly and women's family experiences indirectly influencing psychological adjustment.

Carstensen et al. (1995) demonstrated that in long-term marriages, elderly women and men behave less negatively and more amiably in coping with emotional tensions compared to middle-aged women and men. Additionally, wives often engage more in emotional negativity than necessary, while husbands rely more on defensiveness. Urooj & Anjum (2015) found that men perceive sexual infidelity more than women, while women have more emotional infidelity in mind. Men do not perceive any type of infidelity in response, whereas women perceive both types of infidelity. Hwang (2009) study showed that a positive relationship with a spouse strongly affects women's marital satisfaction, while destructive tensions significantly impact the strength of women's marriages. Salek Ebrahimi et al. (2022) investigated population-based predictors of emotional divorce and found that the rate of emotional divorce was higher in married women than in married men, and higher levels of education were associated with higher levels of emotional divorce.

In explaining this phenomenon, it should be noted that various factors such as upbringing, culture, and society can play a significant role in these differences. For instance, in some societies, women may be perceived as the primary caretakers of the family and children; consequently, they may pay less attention to other matters like family awareness. Alternatively, some women might face more significant challenges in dealing with emotional issues and divorce due to social

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pressures and gender roles imposed on them. Furthermore, issues related to gender differences can have a significant impact on the intensity of emotional climate and the likelihood of divorce. Therefore, gender differences in family awareness, emotional climate, and emotional divorce may be attributed to cultural, social, and gender-related factors. These findings can assist organizations and family counseling centers in managing and facilitating the improvement of family emotional relationships and issues.

Conclusion

In general, the research results showed that individuals with greater family awareness experience lower emotional divorce rates and emotional conflict. Additionally, when emotional conflict between spouses is more severe, the emotional divorce rate among them is higher. Other findings also indicated that women had lower family awareness compared to men. Furthermore, the intensity of emotional conflict and emotional divorce was worse and more severe among women compared to men. Therefore, it can be strongly argued that since women have lower family awareness and tend to make judgments and decisions more based on their emotions and feelings, the emotional divorce rate is higher among them. Hence, it is recommended that couples therapists and family counselors assist in reducing the growth of emotional divorce and increasing appropriate emotional intimacy by providing practical and therapeutic programs to educate family awareness skills among couples, especially for women. In this study, efforts were made to eliminate incomplete questionnaires and present bias-free results by obtaining a suitable sample. However, non-probability sampling and the sample size limitation in other cities in Iran were among the most important constraints of this research. Researchers in future studies are advised to consider the current advantages and limitations and explore various intervention strategies to increase family awareness among couples and help them deal with life events in a compatible and rational manner.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

To conduct this research, ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Shahid Sadoughi University of Medical Sciences, Yazd. Officials at counseling centers were informed about the research objectives, and participants were requested to complete the questionnaires. Participants were also assured that their information would remain confidential.

Code of Ethics

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Authors' Contribution

Conceptualization was conducted by, M. H. S; methodology by, A. A and S. A. K; Data was collected by, M. H. S and N. A; writing original draft and data analysis was conducted by, A. A; and Supervision by, M. H. S and S. A. K. All authors read and approved of the final manuscript and were responsible for any question related to the paper.

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