

A Qualitative Study on Negative Experiences of Divorced Families and the Social Perception of Divorce

Handan Apak-Can Çalıcı

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Handan Apak

handanapak1@gmail.com

0000-0002-5670-9292

İstanbul Üniversitesi- Cerrahpaşa/ Adli Tıp ve Adli Bilimler Enstitüsü

Can Çalıcı

can.calici@istanbul.edu.tr

0000-0001-9145-681X

İSTANBUL ÜNİVERSİTESİ-CERRAHPAŞA, ADLI TIP VE ADLI BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ



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Abstract

The process of divorce has numerous individual and societal consequences for parents and, if they have, their children. This process and its aftermath present emotional, cognitive, and social challenges for parents and children who struggle with adjustment and uncertainty. Although divorce has become more common in contemporary society and appears to be more socially accepted, divorced individuals still face social pressure, prejudice, and stigmatization, with the consequences of divorce for men and women being shaped by prevailing gender roles. The aim of this study is to understand the adverse experiences of divorced parents and their children, as well as the influence of societal perceptions on this process. In this context, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 13 divorced mothers and 13 divorced fathers, all of whom have children. Participants were asked questions regarding their individual challenges during and after the divorce, the attitudes of those around them, the ways in which they were perceived in social life, and their children's circumstances throughout this process. The data obtained were analyzed using the thematic analysis method with the support of MaxQDA software. The analysis revealed themes indicating that gender roles shape societal attitudes

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towards divorced men and women, that both genders are subjected to various prejudices and stigmatization, that the social support can mitigate the negative consequences of divorce, that the impact of divorce on children is determined by parental attitudes and the ways in which motherhood and fatherhood roles are fulfilled, and that divorce can sometimes be inevitable and necessary.

Keywords: Divorce, Divorced Parents, Children of Divorced Parents, Social Perceptions of Divorce, Gender Roles, Stigmatization

Boşanmış Ailelerin Yaşadıkları Olumsuz Deneyimler ve Boşanmaya Dair Toplumsal Algı Üzerine Nitel Bir Çalışma

Özet

Boşanma süreci ebeveynler ve varsa çocukları için bireysel ve toplumsal birçok sonuç doğurmaktadır. Bu süreç ebeveynler için duygusal, zihinsel ve sosyal anlamda zorlayıcı olmakta, çocuklar ise uyum süreci ve belirsizlikle baş etmeye çalışmaktadır. Günümüzde boşanmalar yaygınlaşmış ve daha doğal karşılanıyor gibi görünse de hala boşanmış bireyler toplumsal baskısı, önyargısı ve damgalama ile karşı karşıya kalmakta, boşanmanın kadın ve erkek için sonuçları toplumsal cinsiyet rolleri ile şekillenmektedir. Bu çalışmanın amacı boşanmış ebeveynlerin ve çocukların yaşadıkları olumsuz deneyimleri ve toplumsal algının bu süreçteki etkisini anlayabilmektir. Bu bağlamda boşanmış ve çocuğu olan 13 kadın ve 13 erkek ile yarı yapılandırılmış derinlemesine görüşmeler yapılmış, katılımcılara boşanma süreçleri ve sonrasında ilişkin bireysel zorlanmaları, çevrenin yaklaşımları, sosyal hayatı onlara yönelik bakış açısının nasıl olduğu ve çocukların bu süreçte durumuna ilişkin çeşitli sorular yöneltilmiştir. Elde edilen bulgular, Maxqda programı kullanılarak, tematik analiz yöntemi ile değerlendirilmiştir. Yapılan analiz sonucunda; toplumsal cinsiyet rollerinin boşanmış kadın ve erkeğe olan bakış açısını şekillendirdiğine, her iki cinsiyet için de çeşitli önyargı ve damgalanmalara maruz kalındığına, bu süreçte sahip olunan sosyal destegin boşanmanın olumsuz sonuçlarını hafiflettiğine, çocukların boşanmadan nasıl etkilendiğini ebeveyn tutumu ve annelik babalık rollerini nasıl yürüttüklerinin

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belirlediğine ve boşanmanın bazen kaçınılmaz ve gerekli olduğuna ilişkin çeşitli temalar öne çıkmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Boşanma, Boşanmış Ebeveyn, Boşanmış Ebeveyn Çocukları, Boşanmaya Dair Toplumsal Algı, Cinsiyet Rolleri Damgalanma

1. Introduction

The Turkish Language Association defines the family as the smallest unit of society, encompassing relationships between husband, wife, children, and siblings who are bound together by marriage and kinship (Turkish Language Association [TDK], 2024). Society is composed of subsystems that function harmoniously, and the family, as the smallest of these units, assumes the role of preserving, transmitting, and reproducing social values (Turğut, 2017). Moreover, the family fulfills biological, psychological, sociological, and economic functions by meeting the physical and emotional needs of its members without any expectation (Sayın, 1994). The establishment of a family within the legal framework begins with marriage, which refers to the union of a man and a woman through a marriage contract. This contract constitutes the first step toward forming a family by granting certain rights to both parties and providing mutual legitimate benefits (Bilmen, 1968, akt. Pekdemir, 2015). Marriage is regarded as one of the most dynamic spheres in which the roles of men and women are maintained, altered, and transformed and the network of family relationships established through the institutions of marriage and family seen as a factor that reproduces gender roles and stands as an obstacle to the realization of gender equality since it sustains internalized gender discrimination and lead to an institutionalized social sphere where individuals rarely question their internalized gender identities (Delphy, 1998; Goffman, 2002; Kauffman, 2000).

When individual needs and expectations are not fulfilled within marriage, interactions, sharing, and social relations between spouses may deteriorate beyond the limits of tolerance. In such circumstances, divorce entails the termination of the legal, emotional, and sexual union between the spouses and it is defined as the dissolution of a consensually established marriage through the consent of one or

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both spouses, or through the fulfillment of legal conditions and a court decision, thus ending the marital union within a legal framework (Şanlı Yalın, 2017).

Although divorce may appear to be a relatively modern phenomenon and exists in various forms across all cultural contexts, it is not universally accepted in every society or times (Öz, 2019). Preserving family unity, which forms the fundamental building block of society, and ensuring its continuity through marriage is of great importance. Societies aim to maintain and protect their current order and therefore strive to keep the institutions that support this order alive (Öz, 2019).

1.1. Experiences After Divorce

Following divorce, families with children are reorganized into two new subsystems as custodial parent and the non-custodial parent (Carter & McGoldrick, 1988). Although men and women relinquish their roles as spouses after divorce, their parental roles continue. Divorce is not only a single event but also a developmental transition that initiates a broader process of psychological and relational transformation, requiring families to renegotiate roles, identities, and patterns of connection over time (Gladding, 2019).

The problems and stressors experienced during divorce period can be classified into three main categories as practical concerns, interpersonal and social problems, and family-related stress (Cabılar & Yılmaz., 2022; Ferah, 2019). However, divorce can also have some positive outcomes. Individuals who leave a stressful and harmful relationship can lead healthier lives, provide their children with a more peaceful environment to grow up, regain their self-confidence, strengthen their independence, and gain more opportunities for personal development (Mohi, 2014).

1.2. The Status of Women in Society and the Consequences of Divorce for Women

Within the framework of Turkish cultural norms, women belong to the domestic and private sphere continues and women are still expected to prioritize the roles of being a wife and mother, while remaining materially, morally, and culturally dependent on men (İlbars, 2007). Women are often seen as solely responsible for divorce, blamed for failing to maintain the marriage or contributing to perceived moral decay in society, so women often find it difficult to decide on divorce and may postpone this decision (Sarpkaya, 2013). In marriages involving children, concerns such as the child's future, the potential impact of divorce on children, custody arrangements,

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and the fulfillment of children's needs act as delaying factors in women's decision-making process regarding divorce (Bozkurt, 2021).

Divorced women are often perceived by society as "willing to engage in illegitimate relationships," and this forces them to live within the moral boundaries defined by prevailing notions of honor. This social pressure increases family control and scrutiny over divorced women and, in some cases, results in forms of violence that threaten human life such as suicide, rape, and murder (Can & Aksu, 2016).

Following divorce, women tend to adopt various strategies to regulate their behavior and avoid social criticism. These include acting with restraint, avoiding mixed-gender environments, refraining from attending social events that involve couples, maintaining limited intimacy with married friends, primarily interacting with single or divorced individuals, dressing modestly, and ensuring they do not return home late (Uğur, 2014; Sarpkaya, 2013).

1.3. The Status of Men in Society and the Consequences of Divorce for Men

The male gender role is shaped through a series of social milestones, which serve to consolidate masculine identity, such as circumcision, military service, employment, and marriage (Selek, 2012; Barutçu, 2013; Aktaş, 2018; Bozok, 2019; Yavuz, 2014). Divorce dismantles the family structure that serves as the institutional foundation legitimizing men's social power and they lose their privileged position within the family, so it represents a form of crisis for men (Connell, 1988).

Since custody of children is typically granted to mothers after divorce, fathers commonly experience longing for their children and a weakening of emotional bonds with them which is considered one of the most profound emotional difficulties faced by fathers during this period (Tatlılıoğlu & Demirel, 2016; Emery, 2013).

Society also perceives divorced men as culpable and subjecting them to prejudices like those faced by women (Aktaş, 2018). While women are generally viewed as victims during and after the divorce process and thus receive social support, men are frequently deprived of such support. As a result, they may isolate themselves and develop feelings of anger, irritability, inadequacy, and frustration (Catlett & McKenry, 2004).

Within the social environments in which they are raised, men are taught that certain emotions and behaviors are signs of weakness or vulnerability. Consequently, during

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the divorce process, men often fear being perceived as weak if they openly express their emotions (Karakaya, 2018).

1.4. The Consequences of Divorce for Children

Divorce removes men and women from the status of marriage and places them in a new social category as “divorced,” while children acquire the status of “children of divorced families” (Özdemir et al., 2006). During divorce, parents often expend most of their emotional energy on conflicts with each other, which can lead to the neglect or rejection of their children and to the weakening of the emotional bond between parent and child. This situation may have adverse effects on children’s emotional, social, and cognitive development (Yavuzer, 1994; Uzun, 2013).

When communication with the non-residential parent becomes restricted, the child may feel abandoned, experience intense anger, and, in some cases, direct this anger inward (Türkgüzel, 2019). To prevent such emotional reactions, it is essential that both parents adopt a consistent approach to divorce and clearly explain to the child that separation pertains to their spousal relationship rather than their parental one (Kapinus, 2004). Children often copy their divorced parent’s reactions, so the psychological difficulties experienced by parents during this process may also negatively influence their children (Ekş, 1990).

When children of divorced families do not receive adequate support, they may exhibit delayed socialization, anger, and defiance of rules, as well as experience problems such as depression, anxiety, insecurity, difficulties adapting to school, weakened self-perception, and low self-esteem (Meriç, 2007). During this period, parents may struggle to meet their children’s emotional needs, fail to provide reassurance, and be unable to respond clearly and effectively to their children’s questions about what to expect after the divorce (Taylor & Andrews, 2009).

In cases where the family environment is characterized by continuous conflict, divorce may have positive effects on children by alleviating stress (Shulman et al., 2001). In other words, the persistent discord and tension within the household may come to an end with divorce, and depending on the quality of the marriage, divorce may sometimes have beneficial effects on children (Shulman et al., 2001).

1.5. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are as follows:

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- To gain an in-depth understanding of the process of negative experiences caused by divorce within the framework of social norms and expectations, and to examine the effects of this process on divorced parents and their children.
- To explore, from sociological, psychological, cultural, and social perspectives, the nature of the adverse experiences encountered by parents and children after divorce, as well as the role of societal perception in shaping these experiences.
- To provide an insight into the experiences of individuals who are directly affected by divorced parents and their children from their own perspectives.

2. Method

This research is an example of a qualitative study based on fieldwork, and that the in-depth and semi- structured interview method was used as the data collection technique. In-depth interviews allow participants to explain the subject in their own words, thereby providing richer and more detailed data (Holloway & Biley, 2011). The semi-structured interview technique ensures that the interviewer adheres to a specific guide, while also allowing the participant to respond freely and in detail (Busetto et al., 2020).

2.1. Data Collection Tool

The interview questions were developed through a multi-stage process guided by the literature review consisting of qualitative studies about divorce process. Initially, a broad question pool was created based on semi-structured interview questions used in three previous qualitative studies on divorce and post-divorce experiences in Turkey (Bayraktar, 2022; Gökçe, 2020; Soygan, 2019). In the next stage, questions that were not directly relevant to the aims of the present study were excluded (e.g., questions focusing primarily on the marriage process). The remaining questions were revised, shortened, and rephrased to align with the specific focus of this research. In addition, new questions addressing societal perceptions of divorce and parents' perceptions of their children's experiences during the divorce process were added. Then, the preliminary interview questions were evaluated through two pilot interviews to assess clarity, redundancy, and potential gaps. Based on this

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evaluation, the interview guide was finalized as a semi-structured form with 10 open-ended questions regarding:

- How society views divorced individuals,
- What kind of expressions are used for divorced individuals,
- The difficulties participants faced after divorce,
- How participants' social relationships changed after divorce and whether they were exposed to social pressure,
- How divorce affected their children,
- What kinds of changes occurred in their own and their children's lives after the divorce.

2.2. Sample of Research

In this study, the sample was reached through "purposive sampling." Purposive sampling is the process of deliberately selecting participants who are most suitable for the aim of the research (Campbell et al., 2020). Accordingly, divorced male and female parents with at least one child and living in Istanbul constituted the sample of the study. Each participant was interviewed until the saturation point was reached. Considering the qualitative research method, it was presumed appropriate to interview 15 divorced women and 15 divorced men. However, out of the 30 individuals contacted, one withdrew from participation, two did not attend the scheduled interviews, and one discontinued the interview midway. Consequently, interviews were conducted with a total of 26 participants. Before participating, the participants were given informed consent, and the face-to-face interviews were recorded with their permission.

2.3. Data Analysis

The audio recordings obtained from the in-depth interviews were transcribed immediately after the interviews. Staying true to the interview transcripts, the data were analyzed using the thematic analysis method.

The thematic analysis process consists of six stages: In the familiarization stage, researchers become acquainted with the data by repeatedly reading or listening to them. In the coding stage, meaningful segments in the data are coded, and these codes define important features within the dataset. In the theme development stage, codes are grouped, and similar ones are brought together to form themes. In the reviewing themes stage, the created themes are reviewed to check whether they are

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compatible with the entirety of the data. In the defining and naming themes stage, the meanings of the themes are defined, and appropriate names are assigned to each theme. Finally, in the report writing stage, the analysis process and findings are reported in detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3. Findings

Within the scope of the interviews, the data were categorized under seven main themes (Table 1).

Table 1

Featured Main Themes and Sub-Themes

Ana Tema	Alt Tema
Society's Perception of Divorced Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Social Development and Cultural Differences• Gender Differences• Blame• Stigmatization
Social Pressure Experienced by Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Prejudices and Stigmatization• Family Pressure• Norms and Expectations• Reactions of the Social Environment
Social Effects of Divorce	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Exclusion• Self- Isolation
The Effects of Divorce on Children	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Parenting Style<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Cooperative and Supportive Co-Parenting◦ Conflict and Lack of Support• Emotional and Psychological Effects<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Custody and Visitation Arrangements◦ Emotional Bonds and Relationship Dynamics
Coping Mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Childcare Support• Individual Resilience• Social Support
Life Change and Adaptation	
Participants' Personal Perspectives on Divorce	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Empathy Toward Divorced Individuals• The Inevitability and Necessity of Divorce

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3.1. Society's Perception of Divorced Individuals

The theme regarding society's perception of divorced individuals reflects the participants' views on how divorce is generally perceived within society.

a) Social Development and Cultural Differences

"Western provinces are a bit more open and relaxed about this (divorce). But eastern provinces are more repressive. In the western provinces, a divorced woman appears calmer, stronger. But in the east, she is generally seen as an incomplete woman. To put it more bluntly, she is seen as an open door." (Female Participant, 4)

"Divorce have now become much more normalized but Turkish society has only recently started getting used to it. In the past, when you got divorced, families were ashamed of what people around them would think. Now people live in big cities and have learned to say, 'My child is precious.' and 'Let them divorce and be free.' Back then, you had to endure it. You left in a wedding dress; you could only return in a coffin." (Female Participant, 3)

These narratives suggest that the social meaning of divorce is not fixed but is actively reconstructed through time and place.

b) Gender Differences

"They call a divorced woman 'promiscuous.' They see her as an immoral woman, usually. Even when they do know what happened, they blame the woman... They say she could have tried harder, held it together, fixed it." (Male Participant, 6)

"The duty of keeping a family together is entirely placed on the woman. The man can be bad, no problem. If you couldn't build or sustain your home, it's always your fault as the woman. A man can cheat, do anything, go out, live whatever he wants. But you are the one who must keep a happy home for your children. So, for society, the woman who fails to do that is the bad one." (Female Participant, 1)

The participants' statements indicate that divorce is perceived as a moral issue within society, particularly for women. In this context, women are expected to remain in the marriage under all circumstances in order to protect moral values.

c) Blame

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“Whether it’s a woman or a man, it doesn’t matter. There always must be someone to blame.” (Male Participant, 5)

“When you get divorced, there must be some issue. Especially if the decision was made suddenly, they think there must be a problem related to honor. Like the woman did something, and the man couldn’t protect his honor...” (Male Participant, 4)

After divorce, gender differences emerge in the nature of the blame, what individuals are held responsible for, but in every case, society seeks a party to bear the responsibility for the divorce.

d) Stigmatization

“When marriage is seen as an institution, people view those who cannot manage it as incompetent and incapable. It’s assumed that they had to go through this because of their financial or emotional inadequacy.” (Male Participant, 4)

“They look at you like, ‘You’re widowed, so anything goes.’ They see you as easy prey. That’s how they approach you emotionally, and in every other way, too—in life in general. They treat you like an easy woman.” (Female Participant, 6)

Stigma related to divorce appears to operate independently of gender, yet it is articulated through gendered expectations and moral evaluations that differ for men and women.

3.2. Social Pressure Experienced by Parents

The theme regarding the social pressure experienced by parents encompasses the negative experiences and forms of pressure that participants were directly subjected to.

a) Prejudice and Stigmatization

“They said I couldn’t take care of my home, couldn’t provide for my family, that I broke up my household.” (Male Participant, 8)

“There were people asking who came to my house, where I was going, or what time I would return... In the neighborhood where I lived, everyone kept track of how many people came to see me, how many left, and how long they stayed.” (Female Participant, 6)

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These statements clearly demonstrate, through the participants' lived experiences, how prejudice and stigmatization surrounding divorce are shaped by gendered norms and expectations.

b) Family Pressure

"I had such a wonderful family who said, 'If you've made this decision, we respect it.' I was lucky in that sense... They said, 'This is your life and whatever decision you make, we will never interfere, we're behind you.'" (Female Participant, 9)

"My mother threatened me, saying I wasn't allowed to get divorced. She said if I did, she would send my children to an orphanage. She only allowed it after I promised her, I would never get married again." (Male Participant, 9)

The reactions that participants received from their families were shaped not by their gender but by family structures. Contrary to expectations, the female participant was supported, whereas the male participant encountered attempts to prevent the divorce.

c) Norms and Expectations

"Even my mother blamed me... She said, 'It was going fine, more or less.' But I said, 'It is not good enough.' It's supposed to be good. I'm unhappy. Just because there's no beating, no swearing, no addiction, it doesn't mean it's okay, right?'" (Female Participant, 5)

"We had relatives, and when I said I couldn't take it anymore, that I was going to get divorced, they said, 'You'll stay until the knife cuts through the bone.'" (Female Participant, 3)

Families and close social circles expected participants to preserve the marital union at all costs. In the study, these expectations were concentrated among female participants, indicating that the responsibility for maintaining the marriage was predominantly attributed to women.

d) Reactions of the Social Environment

"People are generally curious and pity you. They keep asking questions, but I don't want to talk about my private life anymore." (Male Participant, 1)

"Our neighbors, people from our street, the old man who went on pilgrimage, his sons, the local grocer... They all came to talk. 'Don't do it, son, you have kids, think about them.'" (Male Participant, 9)

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The expressions of curiosity, pity, and attempts at discouragement described by the participants demonstrate that divorce is not perceived as a socially normalized phenomenon.

3.3. Social Effects of Divorce

a) Exclusion

“Because they didn’t want me to get divorced, they completely excluded both me and my family... Since it was a consanguineous marriage, whenever they gathered, we were never included. They said, ‘You supported her, that’s why she got divorced. If you hadn’t opened that door, what would she have done? Don’t look after her, exclude her.’” (Female Participant, 1)

“When I was married, no one interfered with me, I had my friends, but now, after the divorce, they’ve stopped greeting me. Probably their husbands don’t want them to.” (Female Participant, 10)

These narratives indicate that the boundaries of both the individual and the family are redrawn after divorce, through exclusion which functions as a collective mechanism of control.

b) Self-Isolation

“My friends used to go places together as families. After I got divorced, they kept inviting me, but I couldn’t go because I would have felt uncomfortable. Everyone was going with their spouse, and I was alone.” (Male Participant, 5)

“During that period, I could only meet comfortably with one person. My children and I felt at ease only there. Other than that, we didn’t go anywhere and kept our distance from everyone.” (Male Participant, 4)

These statements suggest that divorce also triggers an internal process of isolation, during which individuals intentionally limit their social interactions as a means of self-protection.

3.4. Effects of Divorce on Children

a) Parenting Style

Cooperative and Supportive Co-Parenting

“We told our children, ‘We are separated and will never get back together, but we are still parents to you.’ Their father would come in the evenings, and we would all have dinner together. Our children grew up in this environment.” (Female Participant, 9)

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“We didn’t take out the pain of our divorce on our child. Everything, every decision, every expense, was done together.” (Male Participant, 13)

These narratives demonstrate that, following divorce, parenting can be restructured and a predictable and secure family environment can be maintained for the child.

Conflict and Lack of Support

“Sometimes he would take the child, sometimes he wouldn’t. I had a very hard time taking care of her. I was constantly looking for daycare or a nanny.” (Female Participant, 3)

“The child is with her mother. I wish I could support my child more. Since her mother refuses to communicate with me, I can’t be in contact with my child.” (Male Participant, 12)

When parental cooperation weakens, different outcomes emerge for custodial and non-custodial parents: the custodial parent bears an unequal caregiving burden, while the non-custodial parent’s relationship with the child weakens.

b) Emotional and Psychological Effects

“I think my child became more mature. But then I wonder, is this really maturity, or is it because he had to stay silent after being hurt?” (Male Participant, 5)

“My children don’t share much with me, and since I’m not sure how this process has affected them. My son doesn’t tell me things. He talks to his sister instead, and even that shows how much he’s been hurt- just the fact that he feels the need to talk to someone. My daughter still can’t get over what happened.” (Female Participant, 5)

It suggests that behaviors interpreted as “maturity” in children during divorce may reflect suppressed emotions rather than healthy adaptation. Emotional distress may therefore appear indirectly through silence or emotional distancing, while parents may remain unaware of their children’s inner emotional experiences.

c) Parent–Child Relationship

Custody and Visitation Arrangements

“He’s 11 years old now, and I didn’t see him for nine years. During those nine years, I only heard his voice, but he didn’t even know who he was talking to... He’s only known who his father is for the past year.” (Male Participant, 7)

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"I drop my child off myself and pick him up myself (to his father). He has unlimited rights to see his father and grandfather. I would never restrict that... I try very hard not to sever his bond with the other side of the family." (Female Participant, 2)

Participants' statements reflect two contrasting experiences: on one hand, years of disconnection and lack of contact with the child, on the other hand, flexible and cooperative arrangements that allow ongoing communication. This demonstrates that the nature of custody and visitation arrangements plays a decisive role in either weakening or strengthening the parent-child relationship.

Emotional Bonds and Relationship Dynamics

"My son told me, 'The concept of motherhood means nothing to me... Normally, when a child falls on the street and scrapes his knee, he cries out 'Mom.' Mine cried out 'Aunt (Father's sister).''" (Male Participant, 9)

"They see their father. He comes to school and sees them during 10-minute breaks. If he feels like it, he takes them once every two or three months, and they spend a day together. But they've never stayed overnight with him." (Female Participant, 6)

These statements reveal that after divorce, children tend to form stronger emotional bonds with the primary caregiver, while their relationship with the other parent remains limited and superficial.

3.5. Coping Mechanisms

a) Childcare Support

"My mother was a great help with my daughter's care and with all kinds of household chores. She spends a lot of time with my daughter." (Male Participant, 1)

"Since I was living with my parents, my mother was already taking care of my child most of the time. She was my greatest support during this process." (Female Participant, 4)

These excerpts demonstrate that family support, particularly in childcare, was a critical coping mechanism during the divorce process. This support alleviated the stress caused by the process and allowed parents to fulfill their responsibilities in a more balanced manner.

b) Individual Resilience

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“Everyone asked questions, but I didn’t allow them to comment. I cut it short. Since I was already aggressive and tense at that time, no one insisted.” (Male Participant, 6)

“I already have a strong and assertive personality, an authoritative nature, so no one judged or criticized me about it.” (Female Participant, 12)

These narratives indicate that individuals’ ways of coping with social judgment and interference during the divorce process are shaped by their personal attitudes and perceived capacity for self-assertion. Individuals who are able to set boundaries and display an authoritative or self-confident attitude can limit social control and criticism at an early stage, thereby effectively preventing stigmatization.

c) Social Support

“Having people who will listen to you during such a period is very important. You want to talk, to express what’s inside... You need someone who will listen, and I had that.” (Male Participant, 10)

“I received a lot of support from my family on this matter. Thanks to their support, I was able to make this decision. Without it, I couldn’t have divorced. It’s hard to make such a decision, you must consider so many factors, both financial and emotional.” (Female Participant, 6)

According to participants’ statements social support emerged as a key resource that reduced feelings of loneliness and strengthened individuals’ coping capacities throughout the process.

3.6. Life Change and Adaptation

“Our routine has changed, our home has changed, our life has changed. Everything has changed. My daughter’s routine was turned upside down. She eventually got used to it, though, I think through talking and adjusting over time.” (Female Participant, 12)

“Getting divorced is a very difficult decision because you’re giving up a certain order. When you get married, you create your own system, you make it yours, everything belongs to you. The life you live belongs to you. When you give up that order, you return to your parents’ house and re-enter their system.” (Female Participant, 4)

These statements indicate that divorce represents not only the termination of a relationship but also the dissolution of an established way of life and a sense of

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belonging. For both individuals and children, divorce constitutes a profound transitional process that requires the reorganization of daily routines, roles, and spatial arrangements.

3.7. Participants' Personal Perspectives on Divorce

a) Empathy Toward Divorced Individuals

"My thoughts about divorce changed after going through it myself. I used to see it as a kind of failure. But now I say that every marriage is different, and each has its own troubles and difficulties." (Male Participant, 8)

"There's a saying: only someone who's fallen off a donkey understands another who's fallen off a donkey. If someone got divorced, it means they saved themselves from something worse. A divorced person, in my opinion, is someone who managed to pull themselves out of an unhappy life." (Male Participant, 9)

Following their own divorce experience, participants stopped perceiving divorce as a failure and began to recognize it as, at times, a necessary step toward a healthier life. Divorce, therefore, brings a transformation in individuals' personal perceptions, and contributes to the questioning of societal judgments.

b) The Inevitability and Necessity of Divorce

"Sometimes getting divorced can be the healthiest option. We were worried about how our children might be affected, but they never actually witnessed any tension at home. If we had lost respect for each other and forced ourselves to stay married, surrounded by fights and chaos, they might have been affected even worse." (Male Participant, 8)

"Trying to keep something going that clearly isn't working, just because you don't want your child to grow up without a father, feels a bit shameless to me. If we want to raise healthy children, we first need to take control of our own well-being. I believe that children who grow up with separated but loving parents are better off than those who grow up with unhappy ones." (Female Participant, 4)

Participants emphasized that divorce can sometimes be an unavoidable but healthy solution. Therefore, separation is seen as necessary both for the parents' mental well-being and for the child's overall development. This perspective reflects an

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understanding of divorce not as a failure, but as a conscious step toward achieving a healthier life and more balanced parenthood.

4. Discussion

The first interview question explored participants' views about society's perception of divorce and although all participants resided in Istanbul, they commonly described societal attitudes as varying across regions in Turkey, perceiving divorce as more socially acceptable in western provinces than in eastern regions. However, divorce has become a viable option for individuals compared to previous generations regardless of their social background. Findings from this study indicate that negative perceptions surrounding divorce have gradually declined, influenced by the growing prevalence of divorce, the prioritization of individual well-being over collective social norms, and the increasing normalization of divorce as a legitimate life choice.

Although all participants in the present study reside in Istanbul, some have familial origins in different regions of Turkey. Accordingly, while they may not experience social pressure within their close social circles in Istanbul, they report such pressure from family and extended relatives living either in Istanbul or in their hometowns. Conversely, it is noteworthy that participants who received familial support during the divorce process were either native to Istanbul or had families who had lived in Istanbul for a long time. Participants' accounts suggest that individuals continue to be influenced by the social norms of the communities into which they were born, regardless of where they currently reside. In this context, the study's findings on regional differences are shaped by participants' backgrounds and their perceptions of societal attitudes toward divorced individuals.

Studies conducted in the eastern provinces of Turkey and in neighborhoods characterized by traditional community life in Istanbul show that divorced women are perceived as immoral or dishonorable, subjected to verbal or physical harassment, and stigmatized as "difficult", "immoral" or "disobedient" for rejecting passive and compliant gender roles (Acar, 2022; Amato, 2010; Çiçekli & Parin, 2020; Hetherington, 2003; Kucur & Kelebek, 2021; Sarpkaya, 2013). In contrast, divorced men do not experience moral stigmatization, as women do, but are often viewed as men who abandoned their wives and children (Kaufman, 2000). Although

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they are not subjected to moral scrutiny, they may face social exclusion in environments where they are perceived as sexual threats. Moreover, because divorce is regarded as a sign of weakness, many men are deprived of social support (Yıldız & Yaman, 2023).

The findings of the current study are consistent with these previous results. Some female participants stated that they were stigmatized as “widows,” which is a label associated with immorality, blamed for failing to maintain their marriages, and limited their behaviors to avoid negative labeling by their social circles. Among male participants, some reported experiencing pressure from family members and relatives to sustain their marriages, while others acknowledged that women faced greater social scrutiny, whereas men were more often blamed for the dissolution of the marriage. Both male and female participants expressed feeling stigmatized as “incompetent,” “incompatible,” or “unsuccessful” due to their divorces. Although these stigmas may appear similar, they should be interpreted within the context of gender roles, as they reflect different forms of perceived failure assigned to women and men based on socially constructed family roles.

Studies conducted in western Turkey, including Istanbul, participants reported prioritizing economic concerns and their children’s future rather than social perceptions (Çiçek, 2021; Uğur, 2014; Aktaş Akoğlu & Küçükkaragöz, 2018; Aktaş, 2018; Aktaş & Uray, 2021; Sucu, 2007). Previous studies suggest that individuals, particularly women, with lower socioeconomic status and educational attainment are more likely to experience family pressure than men or individuals with higher social and educational backgrounds (Aktaş Akoğlu & Küçükkaragöz, 2018; Can & Aksu, 2016; Arıkan, 1996; Sarıkaya, 2013; Acar, 2022; Ünal, 2013). In the present study, among women, one shared characteristic of those who reported not experiencing pressure was that they were employed and had economic independence.

Also, some of the participants associated not perceiving social pressure with their assertive stance, disregard for societal opinion, or being perceived as “strong like a man.” This suggests that, in order to avoid stigmatization regarding their divorce decisions, women are expected to adopt attitudes socially associated with masculinity.

International research shows that the social acceptance of divorce differs between Eastern and Western societies (Birta et al., 2024; Thodukayil et al., 2025). In

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Western contexts such as Europe and the United States, divorce is largely framed within discourses of gender equality and, particularly for women, associated with autonomy and becoming the agent of one's own life (Meyer et al., 2022; Schmauk & Kridahl, 2025; Almog & Herbst-Debby, 2025; Hogendoorn & van den Berg, 2024). Nevertheless, studies emphasize that social exclusion and stigmatization in these societies may persist in subtle and indirect forms (Kaufman et al., 2025; Mentser & Sagiv, 2025). Findings from the present study indicate that in the Turkish context, negative social reactions to divorce continue to be mediated through notions of morality and honor, particularly for women. This suggests that divorce remains framed as a moral issue regulated through women's bodies and behaviors, whereas in Western societies patriarchal norms are more often reproduced symbolically and structurally within an seemingly egalitarian discourse.

Within the context of the social effects of divorce, *exclusion* and *self-isolation* emerged as salient themes. Participants in consanguineous marriages reported being ostracized by their extended families, while many others indicated that they voluntarily distanced themselves from social environments to avoid pitying or judgmental attitudes. Similar patterns have been documented in previous studies, which show that divorce often leads to the weakening family ties and social networks, as well as deliberate social withdrawal as a coping strategy to manage stigma and emotional discomfort (Amato, 2010; Kalmijn, 2013; Sbarra & Emery, 2005).

Individuals who possess adequate social support tend to experience smoother post-divorce adjustment, reorganizing their work and home lives more easily, experiencing fewer psychological difficulties, and reporting higher levels of well-being (Buehler & Legg, 1993; Kunz & Kunz, 1996; Potter, 2021; Wilder, 2016; Van Gasse & Mortelmans, 2020). Similarly, participants in this study emphasized that both emotional and childcare-related support from family members made other challenging aspects of the process more manageable.

This study aimed to examine not only the impact of divorce on parents and children but also how children perceive social pressure from peers and other social contexts. It is expected to shed light on children's experiences through parents' accounts. Previous research highlights that when parents experience high emotional distress or conflict, they often fail to recognize their children's struggles and make them

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emotionally vulnerable (Lansford, 2009; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004; Kelly & Emery, 2003). Children may become instruments of parental conflict which make neglect or emotional and physical abuse more possible (Joyce, 2016; Riga, 1994; Strohschein, 2005; Amato & Booth, 1996; Sun, 2001; Bilici, 2014).

The limited findings children's after- divorce process obtained from the present study about suggest that children may remain marginalized not only in high-conflict divorces but also in relatively cooperative processes characterized by parental collaboration. Many parents, regardless of custody status, reported being unaware of their children's emotional experiences and tended to interpret this lack of expression as minimal impact or successful adjustment. From Bowen's perspective, when parents focus on managing their own emotional burden, children's experiences may become invisible within the family system, positioning them as passive regulators of emotional tension even in the absence of overt conflict (Bowen, 1993). Accordingly, interpreting children's silence or emotional restraint as "adjustment" may represent a misreading that obscures their emotional load within the system.

Similarly, Minuchin emphasizes the risk of blurred parent-child boundaries in single-parent or restructured families, where parents' focus on functional responsibilities may marginalize children's emotional needs (Minuchin, 2018). In this study, parents' reports that children suppressed their emotions to avoid upsetting them suggest a role reversal. From Bowlby's perspective, children's emotional signals gain meaning only within a sensitive and attuned caregiving environment; when parents are overwhelmed by their own stress, children's silence may indicate unmet attachment needs rather than resilience (Bowlby, 2008). Accordingly, the findings indicate that children's emotional experiences during divorce are shaped not only by conflict levels but also by parents' awareness and availability.

In the present study, under the themes *post-divorce parenting styles* and *parent-child relationships* showed when parents act collaboratively and provide emotional and practical support to each other, their children tend to feel safer, facilitating smoother adaptation to the post-divorce environment. Supportive co-parenting enables children to maintain balanced, healthy relationships with both parents. Findings of this study revealed that custody was most often granted to the mother, and that legal decisions about visitation were frequently disregarded. These arrangements have a significant influence on the emotional bond and relational

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dynamics between parents and children. This suggests that post-divorce monitoring of child welfare is insufficient or inadequately conducted. While unrestricted visitation can positively affect emotional connections, in some cases, custody disputes turn into ongoing conflicts, resulting in one parent being unfairly denied visitation rights and, consequently, the child being deprived of contact with that parent.

Gladding's family life cycle approach conceptualizes divorce as a transition within the family system, and success depends on how new parenting roles are defined (Gladding, 2019). In this context, custody and visitation arrangements remaining largely formal suggest that post-divorce parenting responsibilities are not effectively restructured. According to Gladding, divorce does not terminate the parenting role; rather, it requires its active redefinition and continuation. Otherwise, parenting becomes contingent on individual effort and the continuity of the parent-child relationship which provide the sense of safety loses its feature (Gladding, 2019). In line with this approach, some participants with custody of their children noted that the other parents did not adhere court ruling and showed reluctance to maintain regular contact. Participants referred this situation as "divorcing from the child as well." Based on participants' experiences, maintaining a strong bond with the non-resident parent requires significant effort after divorce. Meeting children's material needs or spending occasional time together in public spaces was perceived as insufficient.

Some participants reported that they maintained their pre-divorce household environment to minimize the impact on children's routines. Maintaining routines and avoiding drastic lifestyle changes were found to reduce parental stress and help establish stability for children, thereby strengthening their sense of security (Hetherington, 2003; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Amato, 2010). On the other hand, some participants' efforts to maintain household organization and daily routines after divorce align with Gladding's view that preserving as much stability as possible in children's life rhythms is one of the most protective factors in the post-divorce period.

From a legal perspective, research shows that the concept of joint custody has become increasingly prominent in several European countries and the United States, particularly in recent years (Meyer et al., 2022; Schmauk & Kridahl, 2025; Kelly,

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2007; Nielsen, 2018). In contrast, joint custody is not practiced in Turkey; as reflected in the findings of this study, custody is typically granted to mothers, while fathers' caregiving responsibilities are largely left to individual initiative. This contrast indicates that in joint-custody contexts, primary caregiving is not assigned solely to mothers, fathers' roles are recognized at an equal level, and the continuity of the child-parent relationship with both parents is protected by legal frameworks. In Turkey, however, childcare both during and after marriage remains largely maternalized, with fathers' involvement often limited to a supportive role, resulting in more restricted and superficial relationships, particularly for the non-residential parent.

Findings from prior research confirm that effective communication, cooperation, and clear boundary-setting between parents enhance children's emotional health and behavioral adjustment (Zimmerman, 2019; Gamache, 2004; Garrison, 2008; Blackstone & Hill, 2020; Camara & Resnick, 1989). In contrast to cooperation, conflict between parents make them emotionally unavailable, leading children to perceive low social support, increase depression and anxiety, behavioral problems, feelings of worthlessness, fear of abandonment, aggression, declining academic performance, attachment difficulties in adulthood, and negative attitudes toward marriage and relationships (Cummings, 1994; Sturge-Apple et al., 2006; Cui & Fincham, 2010; Sarrazin & Cyr, 2007; Riggio, 2004; Vandewater & Lansford, 1998; Öngider, 2013; Erdim & Ergün, 2016).

Participants in this study discussed both the positive and negative transformations that occurred in their lives after divorce. Many stated that leaving an unhappy marriage acknowledging the difficulties encountered during the adaptation process. Overall, divorce is a complex, ongoing process shaped by societal, relational, structural, and emotional reconfigurations.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that divorce is a complex phenomenon shaped not only by individual choice but also by broader social and cultural dynamics. The findings indicate that gender roles and patriarchal norms are determinative at every stage of the divorce process. Women are more intensely subjected to stigmatization, blame, and social exclusion, while men experience the erosion of the leader role in family,

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isolation, and distancing from social support resources. Consequently, for both women and men, divorce is a transformative process required the reconstruction of identities and roles. The findings showed that social support and supportive co-parenting practices serve a critical protective function in facilitating the psychosocial adjustment of both parents and children.

The original contribution of this study lies in its comprehensive perspective that examines the experiences of divorced parents and their children within the context of societal perceptions and offering an in-depth analysis of the sociological and psychological dimensions of the process. Nevertheless, the study has several methodological limitations such as the sample is confined to a single city, the number of participants is relatively limited, and children's perspectives were not obtained directly and sufficiently. Future research should be designed to include participants from different regions and socioeconomic groups, to investigate children's subjective experiences through in-depth interviews, and to identify risk and protective factors via comparative studies.

5.1. Suggestions

Considering the findings;

- Development of holistic and multi-level intervention programs is essential to mitigate the adverse effects of divorce.
- Priority actions should include strengthening social support for divorced parents, facilitating access to psychological counseling and mental health services, and establishing economic support mechanisms.
- Implementing public awareness campaigns and developing social policies that reduce stigmatizing attitudes to facilitate the reintegration of divorced families into social life and support the healthy development of children.
- For children, it is necessary to;
 - Expand school-based psychological counseling and guidance services.
 - Implement custody and visitation arrangements fairly and equitably in accordance with the child's best interests.
 - Promote mediation and co-parenting education to reduce interparental conflict.

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