

Women who initiate divorce embrace autonomy

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Abstract

Objective: This study investigates the coping mechanisms and resilience of women who initiate divorce, with a focus on their development of autonomy post-divorce.

Background: Life after divorce is viewed as a transition period with new opportunities. This is particularly pertinent in Israel, a familistic, traditional society where family and marriage are centrally controlled by religious institutions.

Method: A qualitative methodology involved semi-structured in-depth interviews with 38 Israeli-Jewish mothers (ages 25–70) who initiated divorce. Data analysis included identifying central motifs, creating a category tree, and using the Narrlizer software to organize data.

Results: Women described their challenging roles re-independence and control within their families, with their narratives highlighting their shift towards becoming family leaders and perceiving themselves as experiencing greater autonomy.

Conclusion: Women who initiate divorce act against societal norms, breaking through marital barriers to gain autonomy and control over their lives. This aligns with authentic behavior, emphasizing their strength and the reclamation of personal agency.

Implications: Our research provides a nuanced perspective on women initiating divorce, recognizing their liberation from patriarchal norms and gains despite diverse struggles. It underscores opportunities for reshaping women's societal roles and self-identity, presenting divorce initiation as an act of autonomy and resistance to gender oppression, and enriching discussions on women's experiences.

KEYWORDS

divorce, family dynamics, family processes, gender, relationship dissolution, resilience

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INTRODUCTION

Most research on divorce sees it as a crisis event, negatively effecting the life of the individual and family, particularly women and children (e.g., Herbst-Debby et al., 2021; Hogendoorn et al., 2020; Ongaro et al., 2009). Research has pointed to the overload of roles that divorced women need to assume and the emotional intensity they experience themselves and with their children (Coltrane & Adams, 2003; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Raley & Sweeney, 2020).

Researchers have also begun to perceive divorce as a dynamic opportunity for individual development (De Graaf & Kalmijn, 2006; Finch, 2007; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009; Yan et al., 2023). Few studies, however, have taken as their point of departure the fact that most divorces (60%–80%) are at the wife's initiative (Cohen, 2019; Sayer et al., 2011). This initiative to exit marriage can be embedded in the woman's process of coping with her new situation, reflecting her resilience.

At the same time, the woman initiating divorce has to deal with relatives and the community, who may or may not legitimize her move to dissolve the union (Herbst-Debby, 2022; Ritterhouse, 2020). Thus, divorce can be perceived as a way for women to seek freedom in defining themselves and their place in the world (Demo et al., 2005), expanding the perspective on divorce in general and on divorce initiated by women in particular, where such women can be seen as initiators of change, the leaders of a significant movement (Plunkett, 2001).

However, the literature does not discuss the meaning these women give to the new life they design post-divorce. It is of value to focus on the duality embedded in this powerful experience of release and independence, as objective conditions after union dissolution lead to complex challenges. Thus, we embrace the viewpoint that divorce and life following it should be treated as a transition in the woman's life, in which new opportunities emerge, particularly if she initiates the breakup (Crowley, 2019; Krantzler, 2014; Thomas & Ryan, 2008). Based on a preliminary study of women who initiated divorce and of their lives post-divorce (Almog, 2022), we focus on the unique experiences of such women and the life they redesign once they are no longer married. While prior research, such as Almog (2022), explores women's initiative in divorce and their broad experiences, this study uniquely adopts a feminist-sociological perspective, focusing specifically on autonomy in post-divorce life. Using Mackenzie's (2019) feminist notion of relational autonomy, we address a gap in the literature by analyzing how women redefine autonomy and challenge gendered constraints after divorce, contrasting with the primarily psychological approaches of earlier studies. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to examine the renewed meaning that women who initiated divorce attribute to their lives, particularly in relation to autonomy and freedom, and how they restructure and redefine the way they live. Specifically, we ask: How do such women label the change in their lives with new meanings and experiences?

Feminist autonomy theories suggest that internalized oppression and societal constraints, shaped by social dynamics and historical contexts, impact an individual's self-determination. We adopt Mackenzie's (2019) feminist notion of relational autonomy as our theoretical anchor, in the sense that any proposition concerning women's autonomy must acknowledge the profound influence of family and social relationships on their lives (see also Khader, 2009). The use of this conceptual framework allows us to trace, analyze, and identify nuances in women's experiences and the meanings they add to their feelings of renewed autonomy under restrictive gendered conditions. It enables us to examine gender equality, as well as women's autonomy and social agency, in the context of divorce under patriarchal conditions.

To address our research question, we applied a qualitative methodology of semi-structured in-depth interviews of 38 Israeli-Jewish mothers who initiated divorce, examining testimonies of their life experiences post-separation and emphasizing their active agency in challenging the social order. We focused on their changed perceptions of themselves, their desires, needs, and notions of independence, despite the challenges they faced post-divorce.

We observed the women's initiative as marking their changing desires and needs, as resisting oppression and inequality, and as a means of expanding their independence within existing structures. We analyzed the experience of autonomy as a central expression of how these women give new meaning to their lives after the end of their marriage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Divorce in Israel

The study of women who initiate divorce is of particular interest in Israel, a familistic, traditional society (Gal, 2010; Stier et al., 2001), in which family and marriage are central, controlled by religious institutions (Bogoch & Halperin-Kaddri, 2006; Triger, 2014). This is related to the unique circumstances perpetuated in the Israeli ethos: the Holocaust and the consequent necessity of a home for the Jewish people. In addition, various power groups preserve the perception of the country as under continuous threat of an enemy in the form of the demographic problem of Arab-Palestinian residents (Berkovitch, 1997; Yuval-Davis, 1996).

Thus, public policy treats divorce as a threat to the family's integrity and the existential continuity of the Jewish state. This reinforces the importance of the current study in such a socio-cultural context. Despite a decline in marriage in Israel (ICBS, 2023; Raz-Yurovich, 2012), the institution remains entrenched. Notwithstanding the country's heterogeneous character, by the age of 45–59 about 90% of Israelis have been married and become parents (ICBS, 2023; Raz-Yurovich, 2012). Moreover, the birth rate is the highest in all OECD countries (three children per woman, as compared to the OECD average of 1.58), while the rate of divorce is relatively low (OECD, 2022, 2023).

Civil law in Israel places marriage and divorce in the hands of the religious courts (Bogoch & Halperin-Kaddri, 2006). Men have an advantage in divorce in the religious courts (Halperin-Kaddari et al., 2023). Gas difficulties in religious law make the bargaining power of men and women in these proceedings unequal (Bogoch & Halperin-Kaddri, 2006).

Yet, changes typical of industrialized societies since the mid-1900s are also salient in Israel, including delay of the age of marriage, prolonged fertility, an increase in women's employment and higher education, and a rise in divorce (OECD, 2022). In this context, Israeli women move dynamically in the space between the normative dictates of the familistic order and their need to challenge it (what Rom & Benjamin (2011) call "ambivalent belonging"), in light of the power relations between familism and feminism (Lavee, 2017).

The consequences and challenges of divorce

Research has tended to present divorce as a static event with severe negative consequences for the individual, family, and society, requiring ongoing adaptation to lifelong difficulties (Amato, 2010; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Studies point to a wide range of arenas in which women face challenges post-divorce, referring to economic (Bröckel & Andreß, 2015; Hogendoorn et al., 2020), social (Coltrane & Adams, 2003; Lampraki et al., 2019), emotional (Venta & Walker, 2021), and health issues (Symoens et al., 2014). With changes in the traditional distribution of roles and resources, divorced women become the family head, responsible for breadwinning in addition to their previous roles. Limited time resources often hinder divorced mothers' ability to cope with economic challenges post-divorce. Research shows a strong link between mothers' distress from separation and their children's increased needs (DeAnda et al., 2020). Moreover, divorced mothers have to navigate work–life strain, which can be facilitated by flexibility in their motherhood ideology and work context (Van Gasse & Mortelmans, 2020). They also need to invest

significant effort in communication patterns with their children to ensure their well-being (Afifi & Mazur, 2021). Studies in Israel suggest that, given the country's highly conservative family structure and high marriage rates (Gal, 2010; Stier et al., 2001), mothers in particular may face heightened delegitimization post-divorce (Ajzenstadt, 2009; Herbst, 2013). In such instances, recovering from divorce becomes especially challenging.

However, another research perspective sees divorce as a dynamic process with opportunities for renewal in mid-life alongside these difficulties, which can reveal the individual's varying needs and desires (Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). Similarly, some scholars (Diamond et al., 2018; Krantzler, 2014; Thomas & Ryan, 2008) argue that divorce offers gains, like a change in lifestyle tied less to social expectations and norms and serving as fertile ground for new activities and roles. Accordingly, divorce can be seen as a mechanism offering an opportunity for change, renewed self-definition, and more initiative taken by women (as they did in divorcing)—an action of agency that includes a facet of resistance, and is aimed at a more autonomous life for women within the existing patriarchal order (Risman, 2009; Sandström & Garðarsdóttir, 2018). Indeed, Lewin and Stier (2017) found that the majority of divorced Israeli women they studied had a limited perception of their economic hardships post-divorce, which the authors attributed to the women's strong desire to exit the marriage.

Divorce from a gender perspective

Through a gender lens, post-divorce experiences reveal distinct challenges faced by women and men (Dahl et al., 2015; Symoens et al., 2014). Research on divorced women in general (Härkönen, 2014), and those who initiated dissolution in particular (Almog, 2022; Hershkowitz, 2019), indicates gender differences in coping, self-worth, resilience, and the overall divorce experience.

Studies suggest a difference in how women and men experience marriage (Hartmann, 2020; Yan et al., 2023) and divorce (Theunis et al., 2018). The gendered aspects of heterosexual marriage, such as role division, resource access, emotional investment in the relationship, parenting, and decision-making, mark this as a distinctly gendered institution (Lowndes, 2020; Sayer et al., 2011). Stoljar (2013) and Westlund (2018) argue that, within patriarchal social systems, women internalize gender oppression as part of a social process of self-deprecation and respecting the will of others over their own. Code (2006) explains this process, in which women unconsciously train themselves to be limited, as a way to reduce cognitive dissonance between what is considered desirable and other life options. Others (Mackenzie, 2019; Walzer, 2008) argue that the marital institution, socially maintained as central in the life of the individual and society, produces gender stratification and inferiority in the lives of women; thus, divorce is an important exit for women unwilling to obey the gender order within this framework.

Although men have considerably more access to power, and the wife is more likely to be negatively affected by union dissolution, women have been initiating about two thirds of all divorces since the 1940s (Allison et al., 2004; Cohen, 2019; Parker et al., 2022; Sayer et al., 2011). Structural reasons, such as education, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, have not explained this phenomenon (Lucier-Greer & Adler-Baeder, 2016). Rather, studies suggest it is the lack of power many women experience in heterosexual marriages that motivates them to leave this framework (England & Kilbourne, 2019; Vatuk, 2020; Werbner & Werbner, 2018). Such lack of power keeps them from voicing missing parts of themselves and the intensity of the difficulty they experience. Divorce may then become a way of escaping unfair living conditions (Hobson, 1990; Strizzi et al., 2022).

Two studies in Israel (Almog, 2022; Hershkowitz, 2019), that examined the life experiences of women who initiated divorce, found they challenged the gender division, raising new expectations of both genders, which may ultimately contribute to societal change. These women's

expanded roles and reshaped lives post-divorce were reflected in new daily performances and a strong experience of control and independence, a “redoing of gender,” allowing for examination and redesign of the female category.

Autonomy from a social and gender perspective

From a moral perspective, autonomy has been defined as self-sovereignty and acting in keeping with one’s own motivations, ideas and values (Stoljar, 2013). Feminist thinkers have challenged this definition, arguing that it promotes “masculine” ideas of self-management and ignores emotional aspects of interpersonal relationships essential to people’s lives, particularly women. Encapsulated in the term “relational autonomy” (Friedman, 2003; Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000), it is assumed that any theory of women’s autonomy should recognize that family and social relationships are significantly embedded in their lives (Khader, 2009; Mackenzie, 2019).

This discourse proposes an understanding of the conditions required for women’s “autonomous choice,” recognizing the importance of relationships and the care of others as part of the fabric of women’s lives, and considering existing gender oppression and the level of autonomy possible for women under varying conditions (Bjornberg & Kollind, 2018; Pepin, 2019; Yan et al., 2023). Israeli women experience perpetual tension between traditional gender expectations, rooted in social norms, and the pursuit of individualist ideals prioritizing personal freedom and the quest for private happiness over conformity to communal conventions. These norms encompass various aspects of life, such as marriage, parenthood, and the establishment of a family (Hershkowitz, 2019). Meyers (2002, 2005) proposes that women’s autonomy falls within a continuum, as an agent’s capacity for critical reflection may operate at different levels of sophistication over time, depending on such factors as level of socialization and education (see also Friedman, 2003). Careful listening to their stories allows us to glimpse the meanings that the initiators attribute to their divorce and the initiative they took. Bruner (2004) argues that individuals construct narratives that express their identity, providing insight into their values and the significance they assign to their lives or actions, thus, the researcher’s task is to uncover the thread of meaning that the narrator weaves into their story.

Through a feminist lens, the concept of autonomy combines components of status and capacity (Westlund, 2018), where the former refers to people’s entitlement to be the authority in their own lives, while the latter indicates that we hold power for self-determination and self-governance as “owners” of our decisions and preferences (Johnston, 2017). Thus, the woman’s autonomy is threatened when she is subject to social oppression and deprivation (Oshana, 2005). Ongoing social oppression both shapes and weakens the individual woman’s identity and self-concept. Similarly, oppression has the power to both establish the woman’s representation as a social agent and harm her ability to practice autonomy. Westlund (2018) refers to autonomy in women’s lives as a stage in which they feel strong enough to criticize the accepted point of view, if only as internal criticism. Furthermore, autonomy concepts that consider idealized social conditions as a prerequisite for autonomy lead to the problematic conclusion that oppressed agents are suitable subjects for paternalism. This study offers a feminist-sociological perspective on autonomy in post-divorce life, focusing on how women who initiated divorce redefine autonomy and challenge gendered constraints, using Mackenzie’s (2019) concept of relational autonomy. Accordingly, we ask: How do such women label the change in their lives with new meanings and experiences?

METHODOLOGY

We used a feminist lens to examine how women’s initiative to divorce adds meaning to their lives related to the autonomy they experience post-divorce, combining narrative and

phenomenological approaches. These methodologies encourage deep listening to how women shape their stories (Crompton & Lyonette, 2005). They promote dialogue and discourse under conditions in which the women's stories can be present, respecting their life experience, yet allowing them to create a new reality or expand the existing one (Bruner, 1987). Specifically, the first author conducted semi-structured indepth individual interviews. This method is particularly suitable when the focus of interest is uncovering common processes for a group of people who share a human-social experience in a certain sociocultural context (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For example, interviewees were asked: Can you share the story of your divorce? When we mention "initiation of divorce," what thoughts come to mind? How would you define your current family, and what is the reason for your definition?

A recent study indicated that women's decisions to divorce and their life thereafter led them to a process of critical reflection (Almog, 2022). Assuming that reflection is enhanced around identity structures (Giddens, 1991), and as we are interested in the women's individual process in the context of social forces, the heart of our research is participants' internal discussion with themselves, and perhaps also with those around them.

We present our findings as a descriptive-theoretical report, combining interviewee narratives with theoretical explanations, so as to offer both informative and conceptually rich insights. This translation of phenomena into academic language deepens our understanding of interviewees' stories, emphasizing the unique experiences of women amidst prevailing divorce and marriage norms. Given the limited attention the current topic has received, we situate our findings within dynamic empirical-theoretical contexts in an effort to amplify underrepresented voices. Following Josselson's (2004) call for connecting cultural and social realities to form strong theoretical foundations, our approach enables meaningful aggregation of insights.

Study population

To recruit participants, we published notices in several university departments, at WIZO (a women's organization) centers, and on an online divorce forum (via the forum administrators), specifically requesting mothers who had initiated divorce. We also contacted a group of single parents with whom the first author was acquainted. Additional participants were recruited via the "snowball approach" (Josselson, 1995). The snowball sampling method is suitable for identifying participants with shared specific experiences, as it facilitates trust-building and encourages participation through personal connections, making it an effective approach for studying nuanced phenomena, such as divorce initiation (Josselson, 1995). Although the sample does not represent a large, diverse population, the high percentage of individuals with bachelor's degrees in Israel makes this homogeneous group suitable for examining the phenomenon of divorce initiative. It is important to note that women who take the initiative can be found across all population groups. All 38 women did not go through a separation phase but transitioned directly from marriage to the divorce process.

We selected 43 women with diverse backgrounds in terms of age, residence, education and socioeconomic status, ensuring a broad representation. Our inclusion criteria were secular, heterosexual Israeli Jewish mothers, aged 25–70, who recognized themselves as divorce initiators and were at least 2 years post-divorce (to attain a distance from events). The search for divorced women revealed their prevalence in various communities, exceeding our expectations. Our experience affirmed these women's eagerness and need to share their stories.

Out of 43 initial applicants, five withdrew for such reasons as geographical distance and reluctance to be recorded. All 38 women in the final sample reside in Israel, except for one who relocated to her home country. With few exceptions, they underwent divorce in Israel. Thirty live in central Israel, while the rest lived in Be'er Sheva, Jerusalem, or north of Haifa. Of these women, most held a college degree (15 with a bachelor's degree and 13 with a master's degree

or doctorate). Ten had completed high school and certificate studies. The interviews were conducted over a continuous 14-month period during 2018 and 2019.

At the time of the interview, 12 women were in a relationship in separate homes (living apart together; hereafter LAT); 17 were without a partner (hereafter single); 6 were cohabiting; and 3 had remarried. All had experienced a period of being unattached, managing an independent household. Many talked of long periods without a partner, as well as attempts to establish a relationship in one house, which often did not go well. Table S1, Supporting Information presents the women's demographic characteristics. This study focused on Israeli, Jewish, secular, heterosexual women who initiated the divorce process, for whom divorce represented a significant milestone and led to a reflexive life transition. Women from other religious or sexual identity groups were excluded to maintain sample homogeneity, given the varying meanings attributed to divorce across groups and the lack of prior research on divorce initiative in this context. Most participants lived in Israel and experienced the divorce process there, except for one who relocated abroad and two whose divorces occurred elsewhere. Key sample characteristics included age, years since divorce, number of children, employment status, current marital status, years of marriage before divorce, religious affiliation, and education level. Details regarding the participants can be found in Table S1.

Procedure

The 38 interviews were conducted over a period of 14 months, capturing the full spectrum of participants (Josselson, 1995). The women were asked to choose locations, and when unspecified, neutral venues like quiet coffee shops, were suggested. Interviews varied in length from under 60–150 min, averaging around 90 min. Thus, locations and interview durations were flexible.

Participants were told they would be part of a study of mothers who initiated divorce with the aim of understanding women's lives, especially when in transition. All signed an informed consent form and were aware of the recording and transcription of sessions. Interviews began with casual conversation and an expression of gratitude for the woman's contribution to knowledge and for expanding the researcher's social consciousness. This approach, marked by empathy, aimed to soften the power dynamics (Shkedi, 2012). Anonymity measures were used to address privacy concerns, including assigning codes and limiting access to recordings. All interviews were taped verbatim and transcribed by the first author.

Data analysis

This study utilized two complementary approaches to analyze the interviews: thematic content analysis and holistic narrative analysis. Thematic analysis identified central themes and sub-themes, highlighting shared experiences and individual differences among participants. This approach allowed for the categories to be identified directly from the data, providing insights into collective processes while maintaining sensitivity to the unique meanings attributed by each participant (Flick, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Saturation was achieved when recurring themes were observed, and no new insights identified (Morse, 1995).

At the same time, holistic narrative analysis traced the dominant narratives chosen by participants, focusing on how they constructed and revised their identities within their sociocultural context. This method emphasized the participants' reflexive engagement with their experiences and the broader societal discourses influencing their stories (Benhabib, 2020).

To ensure depth and rigor, the analysis integrated deductive categories derived from the research questions alongside inductive themes identifying throughout the data (Patton, 2002).

Coding discrepancies were resolved through collaborative discussions among researchers, and the process was supported by the Narralyzer software, which facilitated organization while maintaining the contextual richness of the interviews. This dual analytical framework provided a robust lens with which to explore the dynamic interplay between individual narratives and broader sociocultural structures in the context of divorce.

Following initial analysis by the first author, the researchers collaborated on further data analysis, resolving any differences as they arose. The first step was to locate central motifs common to the interviews and draw conclusions regarding differences in the meanings of each theme for each participant (Shkedi, 2012). Using a process of deliberate selection (Huberman & Miles, 1994), we reduced the categories and created a “category tree” (Shkedi, 2012), that is, a schematic representation that reflects the relationships and hierarchy between categories.

Next, we used the Narralyzer software, which codes the data yielded by the category tree and organizes it into topics of interest. The coding and analysis process involved several stages. After the raw data was segmented into meaningful units through thorough reading, each unit was labeled to reflect its subject matter, using participants’ own words when possible. Primary and interim central categories were established, aligned with the study focus—the story of divorce, taking the initiative, changes in roles/feelings, and social attitudes to the initiative. The initial analysis employed open, intuitive coding, where data pieces were dissected and compared to uncover similarities and differences (Charmaz, 2014). Thematic analysis was also conducted to identify common themes among participants and variations in their interpretations. Themes were crucial in presenting participants’ collective responses within their social context. Each theme served as a category contributing to the overall understanding of the findings (Flick, 1998).

After gleaning the themes, we returned to the interviews to identify the contexts in which things were said and the changing importance each interviewee gave to a category. At this point, we sorted the data into deductive categories (from information external to findings) and inductive categories (identified throughout the interview content) (Patton, 2002). Lastly, we conducted a holistic analysis based on the narrative approach. Taking the full text as the unit of analysis, we sought expressions of identity, development and change created within the social context (Tuval-Mashiach & Spector-Mersel, 2010). This allowed us to address the broad context in which women initiated divorce and lived their lives the day after. Thematic analysis uncovered common themes, while holistic analysis delved into the nuances of individual stories.

Ethical considerations

In keeping with feminist-narrative research, the study emphasized an ongoing negotiation between researcher and participants (Howe & Moses, 1999), guided by principles of respect, protection, fairness and mutual benefit. Throughout the process, we acknowledged our role and significant influence as researchers (Edwards, 1993; Tuval-Mashiach & Spector-Mersel, 2010), as well as the potential bias of our cultural, political, social, and ideological standpoint (Patton, 2002). Feminist research in particular faces challenges, as it inherently carries a social agenda and interpretive approach through the lens of gender. While this approach does not guarantee impartiality, it prompts a conscious recognition of our biases throughout the research process and our potential impact on outcomes. As committed feminist researchers (Harding, 2007), we remained vigilant against reproducing hegemonic concepts about hierarchy and marginalization, recognizing the risk posed by our closeness to the research population. Throughout the interviews, the first author constantly reflected on the role of interviewer, made efforts to establish rapport with interviewees and foster democratic and empathetic connections, and was conscious of the social disparities that persisted despite these attempts, acknowledging existing hierarchies.

Moreover, employing a criticism-focused methodology (Doshnik & Zabar Ben Yehoshua, 2001; Kemmis, 2013), we listened to participants' discourse while applying external criteria, recognizing additional layers of meaning influenced by societal forces. We also practiced reflexivity, a feminist methodology (Pillow & Mayo, 2011) offering a unique epistemological understanding of knowledge collection, reporting, and application. This methodology demands continuous self-awareness throughout the process, from posing questions to analyzing findings, ensuring a nuanced and sensitive approach throughout the research journey.

Negotiating the delicate balance between participant interests and research demands, we opted not to share interpretation methods with interviewees. This critical approach prompted reflection on the freedom afforded to us as researchers. Following Gadamer (1986), our interpretive analysis was dynamic, aimed at refining meaning. Drawing on Gadamer's (1986) insights, we acknowledged the absence of original or fixed meaning in the phenomenon studied. Interpretive analysis became essential for understanding, recognizing that each interpretation sharpens and changes meaning during the process (Josselson, 2004). In order to navigate unwritten contracts with participants and blur hierarchical boundaries, we took into consideration story ownership and researcher roles (Josselson, 2007). This study obtained approval from the Ethics Committee at the academic institution where the research was conducted.

FINDINGS

The narratives of the 38 mothers who initiated divorce exemplified how they "do autonomy." These women not only chose to end the marriage, but also experienced autonomy (as conceptualized by Budgeon, 2015; Friedman, 2003; Mackenzie, 2019; Meyers, 2005; Oshana, 2005) in their new life arena. The main themes identified throughout their narratives reflected changes created in the women's life space post-divorce: the power of reflection, redetermination of the self, and gaining self-governance.

The findings suggested a shared process among the initiators, beginning with prolonged frustration and a growing gap between their expectations of marriage and its reality. This gap fostered a critical internal voice, leading to thoughts of change, initially within the marriage and later towards leaving it altogether. As this process unfolded, the women transitioned from accepting their reality to actively planning a different future, preparing both emotionally and practically for separation. After the divorce, they described a sense of empowerment, fueled by their self-determined decision and pre-divorce preparations. This journey involved redefining their identity, taking on new roles, and achieving greater autonomy. The three themes identified in this study reflected these stages, highlighting the progression from reflection to self-determination and ultimately to self-governance.

The power of reflection

As all interviewees initiated the divorce, all underwent a process of critically observing their marital relationship, their situation within it, and (later on) the changes occurring in their lives following union dissolution. The nature of the reflective process was salient in Liat's words:

We think we choose. Only after 10 years of marriage did I begin to understand that maybe [marriage] wasn't a real choice at all, I suddenly realized that I was working like an automaton that made me feel like I was choosing. Suddenly I allowed myself to ask why I even got married, what it gave me, and what it took from me. ... Suddenly at the age of 35 I allowed myself to really, really ask what I want. The main thing was the word "I." Then I started to give less power to what is said

outside and more to what I wanted, which is not easy. Because you don't have such a voice at first (57 years old, 3 children, LAT, post-secondary, 22 years of marriage, 10 years since divorce).

The reflective perspective that Liat described allows movement from the outside to the inside, while affording her a critical look at what is appropriate in her life and what is not. The process allowed women—taught that understanding others is a virtue and even an important value in their feminine identity—to turn their gaze inward (Hershkowitz, 2019). This inward gaze embodied the possibility of designing new thoughts about the future. According to Benson (2011), only by following a reflective process can women find the power and ability to authentically correct their preferences in the face of society's demands.

Reflecting on her journey to arrive at the decision to divorce, Orna related:

After the birth, the distance started.... I expected us to experience it together and support each other. We were both disappointed in each other. It all started to add up. My esteem for him has decreased. We moved apart. We tried to take care of the problems, I tried to silence my feelings, I tried to invest more because maybe I'm wrong, and then [there was] also a period of a kind of self-paralysis. The more I thought about it, the more something broke in the wall that reminded me not to end the relationship. Or that going through a divorce is more than I can handle. In this way, in a kind of paralysis, I received an understanding that I was fed up, and suddenly I knew I had to vent and tell him, and then I also started planning the breakup (48 years old, 2 children, cohabitation, post-secondary, 18 years of marriage, 8 years since divorce).

Orna described a process of distancing from her ex-partner while approaching her authentic self, drawing attention to her inner debate and her transition from an experience of togetherness to separation. While at the start of the reflective process she adopted a strategy of avoiding the issue, she subsequently recognized her inner strength to confront social expectations and take the daring step of questioning her marriage and choosing divorce. As doubts crept in, she underwent a phase of observation and significant internal dialogue, at the end of which she dared to end the marriage. This internal dialogue allowed her to better understand, in retrospect, the price she was paying within the relationship.

Orna's description of her process is in keeping with Friedman's (1997) argument that when an agent acts upon her desires, she undergoes disillusionment accompanied by self-reflection that reveals her inner desires, separating them from the social expectations with which they had been intertwined. Friedman claimed that this requires women to discern and expand how they perceive reality and the possibilities inherent in it. Furthermore, for women to feel deeply autonomous, they need to reach a state where they dare to criticize and challenge accepted gender norms (Friedman, 2003). This transition was salient in Rony's narrative:

You should have met me once [beforehand]. I was the most pleasing type there is. Just don't want to come into conflict with the world. Just to prove that I'm married and I'm in a perfect relationship. I couldn't get a divorce from this space, nor did I think it was something I wanted, but it sure is a word that scared me. In a relatively slow process, I began to ask myself if I'm satisfied. Mainly because I thought it was important to fix what wasn't working from the inside. And with parenting, a lot of things didn't work, we grew in different directions. Or I grew up and he stayed behind.

As I gained strength within my motherhood I began to allow myself to disagree with things. Things he said and thought he knew better than me, things his family said, and even things my mother told me. I began to disagree, to oppose, to get angry, to put question marks where they spoke with exclamation marks. I allowed myself to disagree. I allowed myself more and more to argue, to state a different opinion, about education, about a place to live, about work, about money and expenses.

Gradually I realized I was no less and maybe even more successful.... I stopped accepting what was sold to me. That's how I got stronger and became not 'nice like that'. As far as he was concerned, I went crazy and became a feminist because I had an opinion about things. The more my eyes opened wide, the more I felt everything was distorted. I was also angry with my mother, what she taught me. The moment has come when it will become clear to me that I have nothing more to do in this relationship, that I'm suffocating in it, and that it's too small for me. That I can breathe and be without him and feel free. I longed to be free and out of the shackles of marriage. By the way, there's no way I will remarry. Never. Marriage isn't good for women (37 years old, 2 children, single, master's, 3.5 years of marriage, 8 years since divorce).

Rony's words reinforce the claim that a strengthened reflective look—one that allowed women to challenge social norms they take for granted in a patriarchal society, enabled them to move from their position as submissive collaborators with social expectations and norms, and find the strength to rescue themselves from gender oppression, if only partially (Stoljar, 2013; Westlund, 2003).

This reflective stance of women who initiated divorce is in keeping with Dworkin's (1988) argument that autonomy is achieved when the agent finds in herself the ability to undergo an internal process through which she observes the motivations, beliefs and values that drive her life. Highlighting the importance of reflection, Meyers (2005) claimed that autonomy is not related to structural features rooted in a certain mental structure, but rather can be achieved when the woman-agent critically observes the sociocultural order and internalized concepts, to the point where she begins to question them. Christman (2009) reinforced this assumption, arguing that agents of autonomy are required to have a reflective and authentic point of view in order to pave alternative ways of life.

Seeking self-governance

The women's reflective stance seemed to be an important part of the process not only of preparing to initiate divorce, but also of repositioning themselves in the life space afterwards. In contrast to the institutionalized arenas of marriage and the heteronormative family, which enable the continued weakening of women (MacKinnon, 2005), divorce provides the women with a sense of control in decision-making, choice and life design, reinforcing their resources (Chafetz & Hagan, 1996; Miller et al., 2011).

Providing a glimpse of the flattening of personal freedoms within the framework of marriage, Rona pointed to an ongoing process of deep internal change in her intimate relationships following her divorce, and how these expressed her redefinition of herself.

I reached a point where I felt like I couldn't rock the boat too much when I was married; it felt risky. I was constantly self-critical for not conforming to what I felt was the 'correct' behavior expected of a married woman. Eventually, the

frustrations built up, and I reached a moment where I realized I didn't want to continue if this was how it was going to be. Making that decision sparked a newfound sense of strength within me. It's hard to articulate, but it was like a dormant part of myself suddenly awakened—a part brimming with power. [...] How would I describe the change? Significant change. When I was with [her husband], I felt that part of the work assigned to me as a married woman was to offer myself and my body and agree to sex many times even when it didn't suit me. Today, the fact that we [she and her new partner] don't live together gives me a free and real space to decide when I'm the one who wants sex. Of course, there is a compromise even today, but there is no comparison. I have a clear voice today with him (33 years old, 1 child, LAT, master's, 4 years of marriage, 5 years since divorce).

Rona's changing experience, whereby she now prioritizes herself, underlined her previous lack of autonomy when adapting herself to internalized gender norms. This challenged Westlund's (2018) claim that women's adaptive preferences may be considered autonomous and authentic even when committed to the norms that subjugate them. Rona described how, in the more independent life she leads today where she is in charge of her physical space, she can listen deeply to her own desires and make more authentic decisions. Many of the interviewees claimed that women cannot position themselves this way within the framework of marriage, which placed the man first and them second.

Naomi described the self-reduction she experienced in marriage, which she initially perceived as liberation, and her later understanding of what liberation truly means:

It's so confusing that I got delusional myself. I thought I was free to decide things [while I was married] because no one shackles me with a burqa at home. But I often felt I could make only a sort of decision and there was something stronger than me. I don't know if it's [her ex-husband] or being married, or the society and climate around you. But after the divorce I began to feel liberation I'd never known. Suddenly no one before me or behind me or above me has more power than me. On the contrary, it's my decision from a small to a big one. [There's] much more power in my hands now (39 years old, 2 children, LAT, master's, 5 years of marriage, 6 years since divorce).

Naomi described the deceptive life experience of many married women, who experience the ability to choose and decide, yet feel that something is limiting them.

Despite the emotional turmoil and the difficulty associated with deciding to initiate divorce, the women told of how they experienced growing discomfort with their relationships and swiftly moved towards a decision. Effi reported how she discovered her own standpoint, describing her journey from feeling weakened to becoming stronger:

For 12 years, I tried to prioritize the relationship and family, sacrificing parts of myself along the way. I felt like even the strength I once had as a single woman was slipping away. Despite all effort and sacrifices, there was no recognition or appreciation for what I gave and did. The accumulation of anger, frustration and loneliness reached a breaking point, and I realized that allowing another day to pass like this was only weakening me. I managed to overcome the barriers of self-doubt and fear of being alone, recognizing I deserve to feel empowered and not constantly belittled. I had had enough (55 years old, 2 children, single, master's, 16 years of marriage, 12 years since divorce).

Effi's experience highlighted the crucial stage of doubting the status quo, where resilience begins to emerge. This phase marked an important step towards the decision to divorce, as fears begin to dissipate and motivation grows (see Hershkowitz, 2019).

Gaining self-governance

This final theme referred to the process through which interviewees started to perceive themselves as making progress in self-governance. Mackenzie (2019) suggested seeing self-governance as maintaining a deep connection with the idea of "freedom," and seeing autonomy as a state in which external social conditions, such as freedom and opportunities, allow a person to practice their self-definition. For instance, Netta's words reflected a newfound freedom of choice after divorce:

One day I'm free to decide what I want, how I want, as much as I want. You understand how powerful that is. I'm in my own home. [It's] rented, small, but mine, and only I decide every moment about everything and anything. [I'm] able to do everything (37 years old, 1 children, single, bachelor's, 8 years of marriage, 4 years since divorce).

Netta described change that charged her with a high sense of ability. She referred to the post-divorce experience of discovering power and control in her life, encountering fewer restraints and objections, more options and resources, and the ability to make her own decisions.

Ayala also related a new experience of power, of how the intensification of her control over decision-making magnified her sense of self-governance:

Ayala: Suddenly I'm head of the family, something no woman is used to thinking of herself as. I've never seen such an example, and then I make all the decisions alone, the small and the big ones, completely alone, I take responsibility.

Interviewer: So how do you feel and what's happening to your self-concept?

Ayala: Wow, it's very hard to explain to someone who hasn't experienced it. I will say that from the position of deputy director, suddenly becoming the sole CEO of this entire enterprise is a lot of power and a lot of fear, but a completely new experience of real control over my life. You have to understand that ostensibly my everyday life remains with the same routines, but I changed everything I knew, I kicked the conventions that told me how to do and what to feel and how to be, and suddenly I can even reshape how I do things and how I feel about this power. Imagine someone who has been singing all his life and suddenly one day he becomes a world-class superstar and has to deal with all the power that the new situation brings to his life. Both are amazing and not easy (56 years old, 2 children, LAT, bachelor's, 7 years of marriage, 17 years since divorce).

Ayala suggested that her decision to divorce, its realization, and her reshaping of the living space post-divorce required her to break the balance of power in the marital relationship. In her opposition to the state of affairs in marriage and her demand for change, Ayala formed social agreements, broke boundaries, and claimed power without which she would not be able to initiate these moves. Her decision to initiate the marital breakup, as well as the subsequent need to head the family for the first time in her life, expressed a deep commitment to values she sought

to promote. She released herself from the shackles of convention, while connecting authentically to herself and her changing desires. This is expressed through various daily actions, reflecting the development of autonomy in her life, even if it is limited.

Dorit's story illustrated how divorce allowed her to overcome the boundaries inflicted by marriage on her self-governance and level of autonomy:

Since childhood, I've dreamed of being a bus driver or a railroad engineer. I don't know why, but I know my husband didn't agree. It felt unfeminine to him or something. And I gave up. Six months after the divorce, I sent my CV to several transport companies, renewed my license, and started working as a bus driver. It may sound small to you, but for me it was a lot, like I was reborn. I do what I want and what is right for me, and I don't give up on myself. I drive the bus of my life (50 years old, 3 children, cohabitation, post-secondary, 16 years of marriage, 3 years since divorce).

The situation that Dorit related demonstrated how patterns of power embedded in society prevent women from being positioned as having equal social value, therefore also denying them freedom to live with autonomous self-determination and make decisions appropriate to their will and needs.

Orit described how, as head of the family, she had learned about the power and control inherent in making decisions and taking exclusive responsibility:

First of all, everything is mine, what I have and what I don't have, for the first time in my life I stand at the head. That's why I decide everything inside my house and my little family. I am both the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance and Foreign Affairs and Welfare, ... etc. When everything is up to you, you start to discover a lot of abilities, deciding on your own is a lot of power. Deciding not only which sofa to buy but what is right for me, with whom, and how much, is a powerful experience of power, and also full of responsibility (39 years old, 3 children, single, bachelor's, 10 years of marriage, 3 years since divorce).

Orit described the normative lives of women, allowing the reproduction and perpetuation of self-blindness to the oppression in which they live. As head of the family, she had learned the burden of full responsibility, and the power and control inherent in that responsibility.

Galit, who was on the brink of a second marriage, reflected on the changes in her approach to relationships, influenced by her dissatisfaction with her previous marriage. Asked what is different about her current relationship, she responded:

After dissolving my first marriage, I began to assert myself more from the start of this relationship, demanding a fairer division of responsibilities. Unlike before, where I just wanted things to be okay, now I believe I deserve more. For instance, we share childcare duties evenly, each with set days of responsibility. We also divide household chores, with him cooking and me handling laundry, among other tasks. This arrangement makes me feel less isolated and happier overall, which positively impacts our relationship (48 years old, 3 children, cohabitation, bachelor's, 3 years of marriage, 15 years since divorce).

Galit compared her past marriage to her current one, highlighting the importance of equal roles in enhancing her satisfaction. She credited her divorce with empowering her to negotiate fairly in her current relationship. This echoed findings by Frisco and Williams (2003), that less-defined domestic roles and active spousal involvement correlate with increased satisfaction and

lower divorce rates. Galit reflected on how crossing the boundary of divorce changed her self-perception and empowered her to negotiate from a stronger position:

Once you've made the decision to end a marriage, you no longer feel constrained; you dare to set boundaries and stand up for yourself. It allows you to approach relationships from a different perspective (48 years old, 3 children, cohabitation, bachelor's, 15 years of marriage, 3 years since divorce).

Galit's words beautifully summarized the findings: crossing the boundaries of the heteronormative family structure is woven into a broader growth of relational autonomy, self-determination, self-governance, and resistance to oppression. Autonomy encompassed both local autonomy for decision-making in specific situations, and programmatic autonomy for major life choices, such as initiating a divorce (Meyers, 2002, 2005). A woman initiating divorce illustrated both a broader narrative of planned autonomy re-challenging social norms, and a smaller narrative of exercising local autonomy through actions. In this sense, autonomy served as both an ideal and a means of resisting oppression, enabling individuals to identify their interests and oppose domination (Budgeon, 2015; Khader, 2020).

DISCUSSION

This study focused on a group of 38 women, all Israeli-Jewish mothers who had initiated divorce, with the aim of revealing the diverse new meanings they attach to the change they had created in their lives. It was conducted in a traditional society in which family and marriage are central (Gal, 2010; Stier et al., 2001). This study examined how meaning is shaped through the connections the interviewees create between different aspects of their lives as they perceive them. We aimed to understand how each initiator told her story, particularly focusing on the points she chose to highlight—separate spaces for refining her experience and deriving meaning that justifies her actions in the face of society's ambivalence towards divorce. Throughout the interviews, the women repeatedly described a similar experience, albeit using a variety of terms (number of occurrences in parentheses): free (25), independent/independence (27), liberty (18), liberation (12), myself (21), choice (32), strength (24), and breathing (15). These words resonated powerfully during the discussions, reflecting the intense experience felt by the initiators. The profound sense of freedom was evident in their accounts, despite the daily challenges they faced. For many of the initiators, this sense of liberty and independence seemed to overshadow the difficulties and hardships they encountered. The intensity of this experience can be better understood through the literature on marriage (Stets & Burke, 2005; Sun & Zhao, 2016), which suggests that many women report experiencing a shrinking of the "self," hindrance to self-development, and a relinquishment of personal freedom within marriage.

Our findings suggest that many of these women saw the possibility of breaking the marriage contract as a choice to withdraw from a relationship threatening their security and self-identity. Indeed, the concept of autonomy was strongly reflected in the stories of most study participants. The findings revealed a strong and surprising voice among the initiators, highlighting a process of empowerment. This involved experiencing a decline in living conditions alongside an improvement in quality of life, accompanied by growing criticism of their past lives, future planning, self-redefinition, repositioning, and gaining a new sense of self-governance. Our study thus fills a significant research gap regarding women's initiation of divorce from a socio-gender perspective. By presenting novel insights, our findings highlight their distinctiveness and offer a fresh perspective on a commonly explored topic.

Although divorce has harsh economic implications, particularly for women (Bröckel & Andreß, 2015; Hogendoorn et al., 2020), many women reported experiences of control and

power. As opposed to the institutionalized arenas of marriage and the heteronormative family that weakened them (in keeping with MacKinnon, 2005), these women who initiated divorce described a unique experience of increased agency, independent decision-making and access to resources and power, as well as a relative release from social dictates. This experience raised their levels of critical reflection, self-determination, and self-governance. Friedman (2003) and others (Parker et al., 2022; Pepin, 2019; Vatuk, 2020) point out that frameworks like marriage and the heteronormative family can harm the individual's ability to develop the critical point of view required for autonomy. Studies suggest that divorce has the power to charge divorced women with a renewed and broader self-concept (Burke, 2006; Strizzi et al., 2022).

In this context, dismantling the female category has the potential "to beat" gender inferiority (Crowley, 2019; Risman, 2004, 2009). These studies show that women who initiated divorce, along with adopting new roles, also seemed to carry out a new type of autonomy they had not experienced in marriage. In highly traditional societies such as Israel, gender norms strongly influence perceptions, emphasizing women's roles in motherhood (Berkovitch, 1997; Gal, 2010; Stier et al., 2001), and defining marriage as a marker of success. Women often feel compelled to prioritize traditional feminine roles over personal development. Yet, at different life stages, many women feel a desire to transcend these expectations, seeking greater autonomy to lead their families and shape their lives independently of male involvement.

Renewed reflection and self-redefinition

Westlund (2018) and Stoljar (2013) argue that adopting a reflective view enables women to move away from being submissive collaborators with social norms. The interviewees' accounts highlight how critical perspectives during marriage led them to challenge limiting social conditions, ultimately provoking them to initiate divorce. Post-divorce, they reflect inwardly, building resilience as they face personal and social challenges, fostering greater independence and control. Many describe increased responsibility and self-authority, recounting how initiating divorce required questioning past perceptions, learning self-advocacy, and standing behind their decisions. The act of divorce also prompts renewed self-definition. Marriage often conditions women to prioritize caregiving roles, overshadowing their individuality. Post-divorce, freed from clear societal expectations, women encounter unexpected possibilities, enabling them to redefine priorities and their self-concept (Baum et al., 2005). The reorganization of their roles and lives opens avenues for individuality and self-redefinition. Mackenzie (2019) links self-determination to freedom and autonomy, emphasizing the need for normative authority over decisions. Participants similarly describe autonomy in terms of self-sovereignty, where they view themselves as the primary authority in their lives (Mackenzie, 2008, 2019).

Women who initiate divorce as autonomous change agents

This study is based on a feminist perspective regarding autonomy in women's lives (Mackenzie, 2019; Oshana, 2005; Parker et al., 2022; Stoljar, 2013; Westlund, 2018), which suggests that wherever there is overt or covert oppression against women, they remain disadvantaged in terms of access to sources of power, political and personal freedoms, and rights. Mackenzie (2019) argues that built-in gender inequality, injustice towards women, and patterns of oppression are designed to reduce freedom of opportunity, impairing women's ability to manage and lead reflective, self-determined lives. Our focused look at women who initiated divorce exposes how they reposition themselves and shape their self-perception and their changing needs and desires. Thus, a complex picture emerges, whereby they continue to maintain

traditional gender roles and images, yet simultaneously refine these images and act in a less gender-differentiated manner.

Our findings underscore the empowerment of women and their enhanced perception of strength and autonomy post-divorce, which can infuse them with a sense of power and reinforce their resilience. It provides a fresh examination of young Israeli women who initially embraced the traditional sociocultural gender norms of marriage, motherhood and marital longevity, yet ultimately defied the boundaries set by societal expectations. In contrast to previous research (Amato, 2010; Coltrane & Adams, 2003) emphasizing the challenges faced by divorced mothers, our study sheds light on their resilience and newfound autonomy post-divorce.

The initiators described how, on the one hand, the burden of traditional female roles remained unchanged, yet at the same time, they encountered different living conditions and found themselves with a more fluid gender boundary. For example, they took exclusive responsibility for their financial situation, made independent household decisions, and navigated domains that were typically the husband's responsibility. The process of reflection began during the marriage, with an internal critical voice questioning the inequitable division of roles, the lack of recognition, and the absence of financial compensation for the woman's diverse contributions within the marital framework. This reflection continued into the divorce process, as the women bore a heavier burden than their male counterparts. However, they also gained a sense of empowerment absent in their marriages—the power to decide, manage, lead, and act autonomously.

In this sense, divorce is not simply a solution to a personal problem, but also a social issue, an opportunity for social change and transformation in women's lives. Our study offers a complex view of the reality in which women initiate divorce, providing understanding of an experience of liberation from patriarchal social conventions. These findings reinforce the view that although divorce demands diverse struggles of women, it also offers gains and opportunities for shaping and repositioning the woman in society and her self-identity (Crowley, 2019; Gregson & Ceynar, 2009). Thus, the initiative to divorce can be seen as an act of autonomy and resistance to gender oppression.

Study limitations, further research, and implications

The small size of the study sample and the use of the snowball technique demand caution in generalizing our findings to other populations. Notwithstanding the diversity and variation observed within our research population, expanding the study to include a larger number of women who initiate divorce would deepen our understanding of the issues. Thus, future research could explore divorce initiatives among ethnically and culturally diverse social groups of women. Moreover, a cross-country comparative study that examines the experiences of initiating divorce might reveal different perspectives on women, marriage, and family. Such research could offer a broader model to describe the transformations taking place in women's lives within these social contexts, and the dynamics of gender power relations.

A follow-up study could examine two groups of women—those who initiate divorce and those who do not—in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their distinct characteristics, the consequences they face, and the nature of their experiences after divorce.

In addition to the previously mentioned study limitations and recommendations for future research, we also suggest that policymakers develop family policies that address the needs of diverse family structures, including women who choose not to re-enter a partnership after separation. Such policies could uphold the right to freedom and personal autonomy, while reducing constraints stemming from restrictive social perceptions.

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