

IN THE SAME HOUSE BUT ALONE: EMOTIONAL DIVORCE IN MODERN COUPLES FROM PSYCHOLOGY AND SOCIAL WORK PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

This literature review examines the phenomenon of emotional divorce in modern couples from the perspectives of psychology and social work. Emotional divorce, a condition in which couples remain legally bound but have lost emotional attachment, intimacy, and spiritual connection, is increasingly encountered in the context of modern life characterized by work pressures, individualization, and changes in family structure. This study integrates various major theories, including attachment theory (Bowlby; Hazan & Shaver), couple communication theory (Gottman), self-differentiation theory (Bowen), and the family systems approach in social work practice. The results of the study indicate that emotional divorce is multidimensional and influenced by individual, relational, social, and structural factors. Its impact is felt not only by couples but also by children and the wider social order. Effective interventions require a holistic approach that includes evidence-based therapy, context-sensitive social work practices, and policies that support family health. This study is expected to contribute to the development of a conceptual and practical framework for professionals in the fields of psychology, counseling, and social work in addressing couple relationship issues in the modern era.

Keywords: Attachment Theory, Couple Communication, Emotional Divorce, Family Psychology, Relational Intervention, Social Work

Abstrak

Tinjauan literatur ini mengkaji fenomena perceraian emosional (emotional divorce) pada pasangan modern dari perspektif psikologi dan pekerjaan sosial. Perceraian emosional merupakan kondisi ketika pasangan masih terikat secara hukum dalam pernikahan, tetapi telah kehilangan keterikatan emosional, keintiman, dan kedekatan spiritual. Fenomena ini semakin banyak ditemukan dalam kehidupan modern yang ditandai oleh tekanan pekerjaan, meningkatnya individualisasi, serta perubahan struktur dan dinamika keluarga. Kajian ini mengintegrasikan berbagai teori utama, termasuk Teori Kelekatan (Attachment Theory) dari Bowlby serta Hazan dan Shaver, Teori Komunikasi Pasangan dari Gottman, Teori Diferensiasi Diri (Self-Differentiation Theory) dari Bowen, serta pendekatan Sistem Keluarga (Family Systems Approach) dalam praktik pekerjaan sosial. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa perceraian emosional merupakan fenomena multidimensional yang dipengaruhi oleh faktor individu, relasional, sosial, dan struktural. Dampaknya tidak hanya dirasakan oleh pasangan, tetapi juga oleh anak-anak serta tatanan sosial yang lebih luas. Intervensi yang efektif

memerlukan pendekatan holistik yang mencakup terapi berbasis bukti (evidence-based therapy), praktik pekerjaan sosial yang sensitif terhadap konteks, serta kebijakan yang mendukung kesehatan dan keberfungsian keluarga. Kajian ini diharapkan dapat memberikan kontribusi bagi pengembangan kerangka konseptual dan praktis bagi para profesional di bidang psikologi, konseling, dan pekerjaan sosial dalam menangani permasalahan hubungan pasangan di era modern.

Kata Kunci: *Intervensi Relasional, Komunikasi Pasangan, Pekerjaan Sosial, Perceraian Emosional, Psikologi Keluarga, Teori Kelekatan.*

Introduction

Marriage, as the most fundamental social institution, has undergone profound transformations in the 21st century. Amidst the acceleration of modernization, globalization, and shifting cultural values, many couples remain formally married but have grown emotionally distant from each other. This phenomenon is known as emotional divorce, a situation in which couples live under the same roof but lead emotionally separate, lonely, and disconnected lives (Bohannon & Bernard, 1970; Kaslow, 2001). On the surface, they appear to be a functional couple: sharing a home, raising children together, and even attending social events. But behind this facade lies a deep emotional emptiness, a lack of psychological intimacy, and a lack of meaningful communication.

The prevalence of emotional divorce is increasing along with the transformation of contemporary lifestyles. Various studies in the United States, Europe, and Asia show that although formal divorce rates fluctuate, the proportion of couples reporting relational dissatisfaction, marital loneliness, and a lack of emotional connection continues to rise (Cherlin, 2013; Kraus et al., 2024; San & Juhari, 2021). In Indonesia, this phenomenon is beginning to attract attention from academics and practitioners, along with the increasing number of cases of marital counseling that end not in divorce but in prolonged emotional deadlock (Fatihanna et al., 2025; Ilyasha et al., 2025).

Emotional divorce is not simply a personal issue limited to two individuals in a romantic relationship. It is a phenomenon with social, psychological, and even political dimensions. Children who grow up in families with parents experiencing emotional divorce often exhibit significant developmental challenges (Amato, 2010; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). The broader community also feels the impact through weakened social networks, increased mental health problems, and strains on social service systems (Hawkins et al., 2012).

This literature review aims to map and synthesize existing knowledge on the phenomenon of emotional divorce from two primary, complementary perspectives: psychology and social work. The psychological perspective provides in-depth analysis of the intrapsychic and interpersonal dynamics underlying emotional divorce, while the social work perspective offers a more contextual and systemic framework of socio-structural factors and a holistic intervention approach.

By integrating these two perspectives, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive and applicable understanding for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers.

This literature review was systematically compiled using the narrative review method, collecting and synthesizing sources from academic databases such as PsycINFO, PubMed, Social Work Abstracts, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, with keywords including: emotional divorce, marital estrangement, emotional disconnection in marriage, attachment and marital quality, and social work family intervention. The sources used included peer-reviewed journal articles, textbooks, research reports, and dissertations published between 1970 and 2024.

Literature Review

Definition And Conceptualization Of Emotional Divorce

Origin of the Concept and Definition

The term emotional divorce was first formally introduced by sociologist Paul Bohannon in his work, "The Six Stations of Divorce" (1970). Bohannon defined emotional divorce as one of six stages in the divorce process, the initial stage where partners begin to lose affection and emotional involvement with each other, even though the relationship has not yet legally ended. In Bohannon's conceptualization, emotional divorce can occur long before a formal divorce and can even occur without ever resulting in a legal divorce.

However, in subsequent literary developments, the concept of emotional divorce has undergone a significant expansion of meaning. Kaslow (2001) views emotional divorce as a separate relational condition that does not necessarily lead to divorce. In this view, emotional divorce is a situation in which a couple maintains their marital status, whether for reasons of children, financial, religious, cultural, or social pressure, but has emotionally withdrawn from the relationship. They live side by side but not together; physically present but psychologically absent.

A more operational definition was put forward by Gottman & Silver (2015), who, in a two-decade longitudinal study of hundreds of couples, identified certain patterns that signal emotional erosion in marriage. Gottman called this condition emotional disengagement, characterized by four destructive communication patterns he called "The Four Horsemen": criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. When these four patterns become entrenched in a couple's dynamics, emotional separation becomes almost inevitable.

In more context broad, emotional divorce is related close with the concepts of marital alienation (Luo et al., 2010), emotional withdrawal (Gottman, 2014), couple burnout (Malakh-Pines, 1996), and lonely marriage (Cacioppo, 2010) all describe various manifestations of the same underlying problem: the loss of emotional closeness, warmth, and meaningful connection in a marriage.

Dimensions of Emotional Divorce

Academics have identified several key dimensions of emotional divorce. First, the affective dimension, which encompasses the reduction or loss of feelings of love, affection, warmth, and attraction toward one's partner (Fisher, 2004;

Sternberg, 1986). In Sternberg's triangular theory of love, he describes a healthy marriage as requiring three components: intimacy, passion, and commitment. Emotional divorce can be seen as a condition in which these intimacy and passion components have eroded, leaving only habitual or forced commitment.

Second, the cognitive dimension, which encompasses how partners perceive each other. In emotional divorce, partners tend to develop negative or even negative narratives about their partners, selectively viewing their strengths and ignoring their positive aspects (Gottman & Levenson, 2002). This phenomenon is related to the concept of negative sentiment override, where deeply rooted negative perceptions lead to even essentially neutral interactions being interpreted negatively.

Third, the behavioral dimension, which encompasses a decline in the quantity and quality of meaningful interactions between partners. This includes a reduction in open communication, intimate physical contact, enjoyable shared activities, and in-depth self-disclosure (Laurenceau et al., 1998). Fourth, the existential dimension, which relates to feelings of loneliness, loss of meaning in the relationship, and questions about one's identity outside the relationship (Cacioppo, 2010; Weiss, 1977).

Emotional Divorce In A Psychological Perspective

Attachment Theory: The Roots of Disconnection

Attachment theory, developed by Bowlby (1969, 1980, 1991) and later extended to the context of adult romantic relationships, Hazan & Shaver (1987) provides one of the most powerful theoretical frameworks for understanding the phenomenon of emotional divorce. Bowlby argued that humans have a fundamental biological need to form secure emotional bonds with those closest to them, whom he called attachment figures. These bonds serve as a secure base, a foundation of psychological security that allows individuals to explore the world and cope with life's stresses.

Hazan & Shaver (1987) expands on this concept by showing that attachment patterns formed in childhood, whether secure, anxious, or avoidant, carry over into adult romantic relationships. Individuals with an insecure attachment style are more likely to have difficulty establishing and maintaining emotional closeness with their partners. Avoidant attachment style, for example, is characterized by discomfort with emotional closeness and a tendency to suppress attachment needs, conditions that are highly conducive to emotional divorce (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2010).

Johnson (2012), through Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), develops a therapeutic framework based on special attachment theory for couples. Johnson argues that couple conflict is essentially an expression of unmet attachment needs and fears of abandonment or disrespect. In emotional divorce, couples have entered what Johnson calls 'freeze and flee,' a state in which both have given up trying to connect emotionally and instead choose withdrawal as a self-protective mechanism.

Recent research in the neurobiology of attachment adds a new dimension to this understanding, Cacioppo (2010) showing that marital loneliness, a hallmark of emotional divorce, has significant physiological impacts, including increased cortisol levels, sleep disturbances, and a weakened immune system. This confirms

that emotional divorce is not simply a "*matter of the heart*" but a phenomenon that impacts an individual's overall physical health.

Communication Theory and Relational Dynamics

Communication theory's contribution to understanding emotional divorce is significant. Gottman (2014, 2015). His longitudinal study, known as The Love Lab, found that the quality of a couple's communication is the strongest predictor of marital satisfaction and longevity. Gottman developed the concept of the 5:1 magic ratio, which states that a healthy relationship requires at least five positive interactions for every one negative one. When this ratio is consistently disturbed, the emotional balance in the relationship is disrupted and the process of emotional divorce can begin.

In addition, Gottman identified a distance and isolation cascade pattern, a series of behaviors that gradually create emotional distance between partners: starting with flooding (excessive emotional response), then seeing marital problems as getting worse, each developing a negative narrative about the partner, and finally living parallel lives without meaningful emotional involvement (Gottman & Levenson, 2002).

Watzlawick et al., 2014, through pragmatic communication theory, emphasizes that communication encompasses not only verbal messages but also relational messages that define how partners position themselves toward each other. In the context of emotional divorce, couples often become trapped in dysfunctional and repetitive communication patterns, known as escalatory sequences or rut-like patterns, which continually reinforce the emotional distance between them.

The concept of self-disclosure, developed by Jourard (1971) and later by Altman & Taylor (1973) and Click or tap here to enter text.incorporated into Social Penetration Theory, is also relevant in this context. Relational intimacy is built through sharing increasingly deep and personal information. In emotional divorce, this process reverses or regresses, as partners stop sharing the deepest aspects of themselves, and communication is reduced to merely exchanging logistical information about daily life.

Self-Identity, Differentiation, and Triangulation

Bowen (1993), within the framework of Family Systems Theory, provides a different yet complementary perspective on understanding emotional divorce. Bowen introduces the key concept of differentiation of self, an individual's ability to maintain an autonomous self-identity while remaining emotionally close to others. Individuals with low levels of differentiation of self tend to experience emotional fusion with their partners, or conversely, engage in emotional disconnection to avoid the anxiety of such closeness.

Bowen also developed the concept of triangulation, a pattern in which tension within a couple is relieved by involving a third party, which could be a child, another family member, a job, a hobby, or even a screen. Triangulation is one of the most common mechanisms contributing to emotional divorce: instead of confronting relational tensions directly, couples distribute their emotional energy

across multiple external sources, which in turn further reduces emotional investment in the relationship itself (Bowen, 2022).

Erikson (1963) and his theory of adult identity development also provide important context. In middle adulthood, many individuals experience what Erikson called the generativity versus stagnation crisis, the need to feel productive and meaningful in life. When a partner is no longer a source of support and encouragement for this growth, but instead is perceived as an obstacle or source of stagnation, emotional divorce can become an unconscious way to search for new meaning and identity outside the relationship (Levinson, 1978).

Psychological Impact on Individuals

Research shows that emotional divorce has a substantial psychological impact on both parties. Weiss (1977) describes the phenomenon of "*the loneliness of the married*," a paradoxical loneliness experienced by individuals who are socially classified as "married" yet emotionally experience profound loneliness. This type of loneliness is more psychologically damaging than the loneliness experienced by unmarried individuals, as it is accompanied by feelings of failure, betrayal, and loss of hope (Cacioppo, 2010).

Research by Kiecolt-Glaser et al. (1993) shows that poor marital quality is significantly correlated with an increased risk of depression, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and even physical disorders such as hypertension and weakened immunity. This is consistent with meta-analyses. Proulx et al. (2007) found marital dissatisfaction to be a strong predictor of depressive symptoms, especially in women. In contexts where emotional divorce persists unacknowledged or unaddressed, these psychological impacts tend to be cumulative and chronic.

Furthermore, recent research highlights the link between emotional divorce and relational burnout. Malakh-Pines (1996). Couple burnout defined as a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion resulting from long-term involvement in an emotionally unsatisfying relationship. Relational burnout differs from open conflict; it is characterized by feelings of flatness, apathy, and a loss of energy to invest in the relationship, which are essentially signs of a deep-seated emotional divorce.

Emotional Divorce In A Social Work Perspective

Family Systems Framework in Social Work

Social work views the family as a complex social system in which each member influences the others in interdependent patterns (Nichols, 2010). The family systems approach in social work, which is largely rooted in the contributions of Bowen, Minuchin, and Satir, emphasizes the importance of understanding relational dysfunction, including emotional divorce, not as an individual pathology but as a product of larger system dynamics.

Minuchin (2006), through Structural Family Therapy, provides a highly relevant concept: the marital subsystem is the primary foundation that determines the health of the entire family system. When the marital subsystem experiences dysfunction, as occurs in emotional divorce, the impact will manifest itself throughout the family system: children may exhibit problematic behaviors,

intergenerational boundaries become blurred, and the overall health of the family system is compromised.

Satir (1989), in his humanistic approach, emphasizes the importance of self-worth and communication in family life. Satir argues that relational dysfunction, including emotional divorce, is often rooted in low individual self-esteem and communication patterns that deny genuine emotional needs. In social work practice, Satir's perspective encourages an approach that focuses on strengthening and empowering individuals and couples, rather than simply improving behavior.

Ecological and Contextual Perspectives

Social work, unlike clinical psychology, which tends to focus on individuals and couples, inherently emphasizes the importance of the socio-structural context in understanding relational issues. Bronfenbrenner (1981), in his ecological systems theory, describes that individuals develop and function in the context of various layers of systems: microsystems (family, friends), mesosystems (interactions between microsystems), exosystems (work environment, policies), and macrosystems (cultural norms, ideologies).

Within this framework, emotional divorce cannot be understood solely from the internal dynamics of the couple, but must also be viewed in the context of exosystemic pressures, such as excessive work demands, economic instability, and minimal social support, as well as macrosystemic ones, such as rigid gender norms, individualistic values that develop in modern society, and unrealistic representations of marriage in the media (Cherlin, 2013; Hawkins et al., 2012).

The perspective of gender inequality is also highly relevant in analysing the social work of emotional divorce. Research consistently shows that the emotional burden in marriage, including emotional labor, kin-keeping, and caregiving, tends to be disproportionately borne by women (Duncombe & Marsden, 1993; Hochschild & Machung, 1989). This imbalance creates chronic emotional exhaustion in women, which in turn contributes to the development of emotional divorce. In fact, in many cases, women experience and identify emotional divorce earlier in their marriages than men (Heaton & Albrecht, 1991).

The Role of Social Work in Handling Emotional Divorce

Social work practitioners have a unique and complementary role to psychologists in the emotional management of divorce. Unlike therapists, who typically work in clinical settings, social workers operate in a variety of contexts, including hospitals, schools, social service agencies, and communities, allowing them to reach couples and families who may never seek formal psychological help (Zastrow, 2014).

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2021) emphasizes the importance of a strengths-based approach in social work practice with families. Rather than focusing solely on pathology or deficiencies, a strengths-based approach encourages practitioners to identify and activate the resources, resilience, and capacities of couples and families to address relational challenges. In the context of emotional divorce, this means helping couples rediscover why they chose each other and what remains meaningful in their relationship.

A narrative therapy approach integrated with practical social work offers a very useful framework for emotional divorce management. Narrative therapy invites couples to examine and deconstruct the dominant narrative about their relationship, which is often problem-saturated, and helps them develop alternative narratives that (White & Epston, 1990) are more nuanced, agentic, and hopeful. separate identity partner from problem relational that they face ('the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem'), narrative therapy opens room for meaningful transformation.

Factors Causing Emotional Divorce in Modern Couples *Social, Cultural, and Economic Change*

Modernity has brought about fundamental changes in how people view marriage and intimate relationships. Gidd Giddens (1993), in his work, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, argues that modern marriage has shifted from an obligatory social institution to what he calls a '*pure relationship*,' a relationship that is sustained only as long as it continues to provide satisfaction and fulfillment for both parties. This shift, while on the one hand offering greater autonomy and equality, on the other hand creates tremendous pressure on couples to constantly renew and justify their relationship.

Cherlin (2013) notes the phenomenon of the "*deinstitutionalization of marriage*" in Western societies, a weakening of social norms that traditionally govern marital behavior and limit divorce. In this context, people marry with much higher emotional expectations than previous generations, but without the adequate relational skills to meet those expectations. This gap between expectations and reality creates fertile ground for disappointment and emotional divorce.

From a political economic perspective, Hochschild (1997) in *The Time Bind* analyzes how the demands of the modern workplace, long hours, high mobility, and the fluidity of the boundaries between work and personal life, erode the time and energy available for intimate relationships. Ironically, her research finds that for many, the workplace has become a more reliable source of emotional satisfaction than home, resulting in more and more people unconsciously 'investing' their emotional selves in work and reducing emotional involvement in marriage.

Technology, Social Media, and Digital Distractions

The development of digital technology and social media has created a new dimension in the emotional dynamics of divorce. Research McDaniel & Coyne (2016) has found that excessive smartphone use by one or both partners is significantly correlated with marital dissatisfaction and relational conflict, a phenomenon they call "*technoference*" Social media creates abundant opportunities for connection with the outside world, but at the same time, it can divert attention and emotional energy from partners.

More than just a distraction, digital technology provides an easily accessible '*emotional escape*' from relational discomfort. When conflict or tension arises in a relationship, the ease of retreating into the digital world, through social media, streaming, gaming, or even pornography, exacerbates the stonewalling pattern that Gottman has identified as one of the strongest predictors of marital discord. Callais

(2020) In *Reclaiming Conversation*, he argues that digital culture has eroded the human capacity for deep, empathetic conversation, which is at the heart of relational intimacy.

Additionally, social media creates what researchers call a '*comparison trap*,' a tendency to compare one's own relationship to the idealized representations of others' relationships on social media. Research by Vogel et al. (2014) shows that constant exposure to representations of perfect, happy relationships on social media can decrease an individual's satisfaction with their own relationship, even when it is actually quite satisfying.

Job Stress, Role Imbalance, and Fatigue

Work-related stress is one of the most consistently cited causes of emotional divorce in the literature. Research by Repetti (1989) shows that work stress tends to spill over into the family domain through spillover mechanisms, resulting in behavioral and emotional withdrawal from family interactions. Spouses who return home emotionally exhausted, known as *"ego depletion,"* have limited psychological resources to empathically and responsively engage with their partners.

Unequal gender roles within the household are also a significant factor. Although gender norms have changed significantly, research shows that women in heterosexual couples still bear a greater share of housework and childcare, even when both partners work full-time (Bianchi et al., 2000; Hochschild & Machung, 1989). This inequity creates accumulated anger and exhaustion that can manifest as emotional withdrawal and ultimately contribute to emotional divorce.

Untreated mental health conditions, such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and substance use disorders, are also significant risk factors. Research by Beach et al. (1990) shows a strong, bidirectional relationship between depression and marital quality: depression worsens marital quality, and poor marital quality exacerbates depression. In this context, emotional divorce can be both a symptom and a cause of mental health problems.

Differences in Values, Developmental Stages, and Asymmetrical Growth

Asymmetrical personal change and growth between partners is one of the often-overlooked causes of emotional divorce (Walsh, 2003). It notes that individuals continue to develop and change throughout the life cycle, through various experiences, education, journeys, and life crises. When this growth occurs asymmetrically between two partners, they can emerge as very different individuals from when they first met, with increasingly divergent values, interests, and life goals.

Differences in religious or spiritual orientation, career ambitions, desires about the number and parenting style of children, and visions of an ideal lifestyle can create deep value tensions that are difficult to resolve without an active commitment to dialogue and negotiation. When couples lack the capacity or willingness to manage these differences constructively, emotional withdrawal becomes a *de facto* mechanism for avoiding conflicts that feel insurmountable (Gottman & Silver, 2015).

Emotional Impact of Divorce

Impact on Individuals and Couples

The psychological impact of emotional divorce on individuals is significant and encompasses many dimensions. Cacioppo (2010). In *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*, he extensively documents how loneliness in close relationships, as experienced in emotional divorce, is one of the most painful and destructive forms of loneliness, as it is accompanied by a sense of betrayal of trust and loss of hope.

Clinically, emotional divorce is associated with an increased risk of major depressive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and burnout (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1993). Individuals experiencing emotional divorce often develop what is called 'learned relational helplessness,' the belief that no matter what they do, their relationship will not improve, which further reinforces the cycle of hopelessness and withdrawal (Seligman, 1975).

It is also not uncommon for individuals in emotional divorce to develop maladaptive coping strategies such as increased alcohol or substance use, hypersexuality or sexual aversion, eating disorders, or excessive reliance on work, activities, or friendships outside the marriage. In the context of physical health, a Robles et al. (2014) comprehensive meta-analysis found that poor marital quality is correlated with an increased risk of mortality, particularly from cardiovascular disease.

Impact on Children and Family Dynamics

Children who grow up in families where parents experience emotional divorce face real developmental risks. Amato (2010), in a three-decade longitudinal review of the impact of marital quality on children, found that children in families with high marital conflict or chronic emotional disconnection showed outcomes comparable to those of children whose parents divorced, or even worse on some indicators, because they experienced chronic stress without clarity.

Impacts on children include behavioral problems (*externalizing problems*), internalizing symptoms such as depression and anxiety, academic achievement problems, and difficulties forming intimate relationships in adulthood (Hetherington & Kelly, 2003; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). Children in families with emotional divorce often become objects of triangulation, used unconsciously by parents as a channel of communication, alliance, or emotional compensation, which places them in a highly developmentally inappropriate position.

From an intergenerational perspective, patterns of emotional divorce can be transmitted between generations through observational learning and the internalization of internal working models of intimate relationships (Amato & Booth, 2009; Bowlby, 1980). Children who grow up in families with emotional divorce tend to develop mental representations of intimate relationships characterized by withdrawal, attachment insecurity, and expectations of disappointment, which they then carry into their own romantic relationships.

Social and Structural Impacts

At a broader societal level, the prevalence of emotional divorce has significant implications. Putnam (2000), in *Bowling Alone*, documents the erosion of social capital in contemporary society, manifested in the decline of social trust, community engagement, and social support networks. *Emotional divorce* contributes to and is exacerbated by this broader trend. Yet emotionally well-functioning families are the fundamental unit of a society's social capital.

From a public health perspective, the burden of emotional divorce on the mental health care system is significant, including the direct costs of counseling and therapy, as well as the indirect costs of lost productivity, work absence, and the impact on the next generation (Hawkins et al., 2012). This underscores the importance of preventive approaches and relational health promotion at the public policy level, not just clinical interventions after the damage has occurred.

Intervention Approaches and Recovery Strategies

Evidence-Based Couples Therapy

A number of therapeutic approaches have proven effective in addressing the various emotional manifestations of divorce. Emotionally Focused Therapy for Couples (EFT-C) was developed by Johnson (2012) is one of the approaches with an empirical basis the most powerful. EFT-C works with method identify and change pattern interaction negative that has been rooted, helping partner access and express emotions the basis hidden behind behavior defensive, and create experience new and deeper attachments safe. Meta- analysis Johnson et al. (1999) show that 70-73% of couples who undergo EFT are successful recover from distress relational, with proven effects endure in long-term follow-up long.

The Gottman Method Couple Therapy (Gottman & Gottman, 2015) is another approach rooted in research A longitudinal empirical study. This therapy focuses on building a foundation of trust and commitment, strengthening friendship and intimacy, managing conflict constructively, and creating shared meaning. Specific techniques developed by Gottman, such as Love Maps, Turning Toward, and Dream Within Conflict, provide concrete tools for couples to overcome emotional distance and rebuild meaningful connections.

Imago Relationship Therapy, developed by Hendrix & Hunt (1988) offers a unique perspective by linking partner choice and relational conflict to childhood experiences and internal images ('imago') of ideal caregivers. This approach helps couples understand why they are attracted to each other and why emerging conflicts often represent hidden opportunities for healing older developmental wounds.

Social Work-Based Interventions

Social work practices several approaches have proven effective in addressing emotional divorce. Family Preservation Services (FPS), an intensive service model designed to sustain families in crisis, offers comprehensive support that includes not only counseling but also practical assistance, case management, and linkages to community resources (Nelson & Landsman, 1992). This approach is particularly relevant for couples and families facing emotional divorce in the context of poverty, social isolation, or multiple crises.

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT), developed by De Shazer (1985) and widely adapted in social work practice with families, offers a shorter, competency-focused alternative to long-term therapy. SFBT helps couples identify 'exceptions,' moments when problems don't occur or feel less severe, and build solutions from existing strengths and resources, rather than from an in-depth analysis of the problem's causes.

In the context of community social work, psychoeducational programs for couples, such as PREP (Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program) developed by Markman et al. (1998) and the Couple Communication program, have been shown to be effective in improving communication skills, conflict management, and marital satisfaction, as well as in preventing the escalation of relational dissatisfaction into emotional divorce (Carroll & Doherty, 2003).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This literature review has comprehensively and multidimensionally examined the phenomenon of emotional divorce in modern couples from the perspectives of psychology and social work. Several key points can be concluded from this study. First, *emotional divorce* is a real, complex, and increasingly relevant phenomenon in the context of modern life, characterized by high work pressure, changing social norms, technological advances, and increasing individualism. This condition does not simply involve the "failure" of the individual or couple, but is the product of a complex interaction between individual psychological factors, relational dynamics, and larger socio-structural forces.

Second, a psychological perspective, with contributions from *attachment theory*, communication theory, family systems theory, and social neurobiology, provides a deeper understanding of the intrapsychic and interpersonal mechanisms that underlie and sustain *emotional divorce*. Meanwhile, a social work perspective adds an essential contextual and systemic layer, reminding us that relational issues cannot be fully understood without considering the social, economic, and cultural contexts in which couples live.

Third, the *emotional impact of divorce* extends far beyond the two individuals in the relationship; it affects children's development and broader social networks, and cumulatively contributes to the weakening of a community's social capital and the burden on health and social service systems. Fourth, a variety of intervention approaches have been proven effective, including evidence-based couples therapies such as EFT and the Gottman Method, as well as social work approaches such as *SFBT*, *Family Preservation Services*, and psychoeducational programs.

Fifth and finally, effective emotional divorce management requires a holistic and collaborative approach, involving psychologists, social workers, counselors, physicians, policymakers, and the community. No single discipline or approach is sufficient to address the complexity of this issue. Interdisciplinary studies such as those attempted in this paper are an important step and should be

further developed to enrich understanding and improve the effectiveness of responses to one of the most significant challenges in modern family life.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Most of the literature reviewed comes from a Western context, and its relevance to the Indonesian and Southeast Asian contexts requires further examination, taking into account cultural differences, collectivist values, the role of religion, and prevailing gender norms. Empirical research on emotional divorce with Indonesian samples is still very limited, and this represents an important gap that needs to be addressed by future research.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Based on this literature review, several recommendations can be put forward for policy development and practice in the field of family health. First, there is a need to integrate relational education into the formal education system, from secondary school to university, encompassing empathetic communication skills, conflict management, emotional intelligence, and relational literacy. Research Carroll & Doherty (2003) shows that preventive interventions are significantly more cost-effective than remedial therapy.

Second, policies that support a better work-life balance are needed, including flexible leave policies, work arrangements that are responsive to family needs, and affordable childcare support, as structural steps to reduce the stress that contributes to emotional divorce (Hawkins et al., 2012). Third, destigmatization and increased accessibility of mental health and marriage counseling services are needed, including through digital platforms and community-based services that can reach previously overlooked populations.

Fourth, *the social work profession* needs to be more active in advocating for social welfare policies that take into account the impact of poverty, discrimination, and structural inequality on family health. Emotional divorce does not occur in a vacuum; it is a phenomenon connected to broader social and economic conditions, and effective interventions must address these structural factors, not just interpersonal dynamics.

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