

BAR ILAN UNIVERSITY

“The Dream and its Interpretation”

Divorce at a Young Age in the Religious Zionist Community in Israel

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master’s Degree in the
School of Education at Bar Ilan University

Abstract

This work deals with marriage and divorce of young Religious Zionists, a community with idealistic collective characteristics (Gross, 2013). This is due to the increase in divorce rates among this group in recent years, which has not received attention in the literature. The work aims to assess the reasons which lead young Religious Zionists to divorce after a few years of marriage. In light of this, the research question evaluates the unique impacts of religion, the Religious-Zionism community and the State Religious educational system on Religious Zionist young adults who decided to divorce at a young age.

Divorce is formally defined in the literature as “the legal discontinuation of marriage” and as a way to solve unbearable familial disputes. Divorce is described as a crisis resulting from loss of a partner, loss of a lifestyle and loss of parts of self-identity that were built up in the framework of the relationship with the partner (Livni, 2000).

The literature describes various factors underlying marital breakdown, including demographic and socioeconomic (Lehrer, 2008; Glenn, Uecker, & Love, 2010), gender (Amato, 2010; Greenstein & Davis, 2006), religious (Greenstein & Davis, 2006), and interpersonal (Amato, 2010; Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007) aspects. The reasons for divorce include conflictive relations (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Kelly, Fincham, & Beach, 2003), individual differences (Birditt, Brown, Orbuch, & McIlvane, 2010; Caughlin, Huston, & Houts, 2000; Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001), the nature of the relationship and sex life (Dzara, 2010). These factors have also impacts one another (Amato, 2014; Sweeper, 2013).

Methods

In order to assess the phenomenon of marriage and divorce among young Religious Zionists, we conducted eleven interviews with participants who graduated the State Religious educational system and divorced before the age of 29. In order to understand

the interpretation of the participants who experienced this phenomenon, we used a qualitative research method, which reflects broad, inter-related assumptions regarding the studied reality (Shkedi, 2003). This method assigns significance to the way participants interpret experiences (Tzabar Ben-Yehoshua, 1995). Documenting the participants' interpretations, enables to uncover internal processes, which are typically unexposed to an external observer. In this study, we touched the deepest layers of consciousness to identify the factors leading religious young adults to get married, the difficulties they experience in their marriage and the unique factors to this population which influenced their decision to divorce.

The analysis of the data collected in this study was performed in a Content Analysis method by Gross (1995). The phrases (words) served as analysis units, and topics and patterns that repeated themselves were sought out with the aim of identifying categories and links between categories (Gross, 1995, 2002). The data analysis was conducted in several stages; At first, words and meanings were identified out of the phrases from the interviews. Then, we assessed links between meanings in the text, with the aim of forming preliminary and temporary categories (Kacem & Krumer-Nevo, 2010). In the second stage, we performed a mapping analysis, in which the relations between categories and between categories and subcategories were evaluated, while identifying and merging connecting groups to form a hierarchy of categories (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Finally, we identified a super-category – which impacts and feeds into the other categories. The super-category is presented in the theoretical model, which connects between the literature and known theories relevant to this study.

Results

The participants indicated three societal factors that significantly influenced and molded their marriage and divorce experiences: religion, including religious authorities, the Religious Zionism community and the State Religious educational system.

Religion was singled out as a factor influencing and molding the entire marriage and divorce process, starting from the decision to get married, including the marital lifestyle, the decision to get divorced, as well as post-divorce difficulties. In addition, the participants tended to ascribe most of the reasons for complexity of the process they experienced to external elements, such as religious authorities that mediate the halachik (Jewish law) aspects of married life without relating to personal emotional levels or degree of maturity. They experienced themselves as a part of an obedient collective led by religious authorities, such as rabbis in their schools and communities. Moreover, when the participants contemplated about serious decisions in their lives, they consulted with these halachik authorities and received collective and homogenous responses. They also consulted with rabbis during their married life with questions such as pushing off having children, decisions relating to military service, problems with their partner and other questions in Halacha. In addition, the requirement to fulfill religious, halachik commandments relating to intercourse, led to tension and quarrels between partners, particularly on the days when physical contact and intimacy were prohibited. The participants describe intensive and difficult quarrels during this period, since communication and reconciliation through physical contact were not allowed.

The norms of the **Religious Zionism community**, as apparent from this study, encouraged and promoted young adults to marry as soon as possible. These young adults felt that early marriage is a social obligation which drove them to marry without making any further considerations. Some even complained about the fact that they didn't even have sufficient time to get to know their partner-to-be properly. In addition, in their opinion, the social message generated an illusion that marriage will solve all problems and will bring them to the ultimate happiness. When the dream was broken, due to immaturity and other difficulties they failed to identify in time, they saw themselves as failures. Furthermore, when they started having marital problems, they felt a strong sense of social disappointment following the "aura" and sense of euphoria that had accompanied the marriage.

The **State Religious educational system** was an additional factor that drove the participants to get married at a young age. They argued that this education stream delivers clear messages that young adults should get married as early as possible. In addition, the participants claimed that the State Religious educational system does not provide adequate, appropriate and holistic preparation for married life. The preparation was technical and halachik and dealt with commandments and the laws of Family Purity. An additional difficulty identified in this study was the claim that single-gender schooling ends up meaning that the first interpersonal communication between girls and boys is for marriage purposes. Young adults are unused to relations with the opposite sex, which leads to feelings and emotions that they tend to mistakenly interpret as love, which later in marriage turn out to be an erroneous feeling.

Discussion

The literature and study findings indicated that the main reasons for early marriage are rooted in religious, social and educational aspects.

This study demonstrated that **religion** is a main and significant factor leading young Religious Zionists to marry at a relatively young age. These findings reflect the generations-long halachik atmosphere characteristic of the Jewish society with regards to early marriage, dating back as far as the literature of the Sages (Schremer, 1998). Barth (2012) claims that rabbis have a significant impact on youngsters, and that these authorities prefer compromise and conflict resolving. The data analysis revealed that the religious legal authorities, represented by rabbinic community leaders, generated in them a deep dependence on external ruling authorities. They felt that the critical decisions in their lives were not made autonomously. The authorities presenting religion promoted marriage at a young age.

Regarding social aspects, the data analysis identified collective religious factors in the **Religious Zionism** community, which expect participants to act in accordance with

norms and for the benefit of the collective. Thinking patterns in such societies focus on connection, integration and assimilation (Barth, 2012; Cohen & Hill, 2007). Namely, the individuals within the community are guided to choose a lifestyle meeting societal norms, without considering their own personal wellbeing. The study demonstrated that in the Religious Zionism community, the collective norm is marriage at a young age.

When considering the educational aspect, the **State Religious educational system** encourages youngsters, via indoctrination and exploitation of halachik justifications and statements, to get married at a young age. This study demonstrated that the religious public schooling acts in accordance with ideological education patterns. Ideological educational patterns generate fixation, claiming that there is only one way to realize the goals that are being taught, with no room to challenge these messages (Gross, 2006, 2011; Lamm, 1991). In other words, it preaches a single truth and demands that pupils act accordingly. The literature survey and the current findings demonstrated that the State Religious educational system aims to endow religious content and identity molding. This stream of education repeatedly delivers a message calling for marriage as early as possible in order to realize their mission in life.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The primary conclusion is that there are three factors that significantly impact the marriage and divorce experience: religion, including religious authorities, a collective community and indoctrination. These factors lead to early marriage, late impact marital relations, and finally divorce at a young age.

The current study has significant ramifications and contributions both on a theoretical and practical level. On the theoretical level, this study constitutes an important addition to the existing literature on divorce at a young age in the Religious Zionism community. This is the first study to interview both genders in this unique population of young Religious Zionist divorcees. This study also assessed the impact and role of religion, the

Religious Zionism community and the State Religious educational system, which were all found to have a significant molding effect at every decision-making crosswalk mentioned above. They were found to be factors that accelerated the decision to marry at a young age, exacerbated marital problems, delayed divorce and finally, made the decision to divorce at a young age more difficult.

On a practical level, the study exposed, for the first time, the unique opinions of young Religious Zionist divorcees. The knowledge gained may assist the State Religious educational system in formulating programs preparing students for married life as well as the messages that should be relayed. In addition, it raised claims of the young Religious Zionists demanding that the rabbinic authorities provide appropriate support to divorced families and develop a support system for divorcees.

Educational recommendations arising from this study include a call to develop long-term educational programs that will significantly contribute to preparation for married life. These programs should be delivered by trained professionals, such as a school guidance counselor. The main objective of development of such educational programs is to provide teens with both a theoretical and practical base. The theoretical aspect should prepare for married life, while emphasizing the position of the individual in the relationship, as well as emotional preparation. On a practical level, these programs should provide practical tools to students, to enable them to assess whether their relationship with their partner is appropriate and suitable for them. This should include legitimization of a prolonged period to enable them to become acquainted with one another before getting married. In addition, the programs should relate to what married life is all about, not merely by halachik perspective, as is generally done today. In addition, discussions on difficulties in marital relations should be held, while building coping tools, which will prevent teens from expecting marriage to solve all their problems. Furthermore, appropriate financial preparation is another critical point that should be discussed, particularly when dealing with marriage at a young age, based on criticism raised in this study regarding the lack of financial guidance and preparation.