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# REASONS FOR DIVORCE AMONG MUSLIM ARABS IN ISRAEL

An exploratory study

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**ABSTRACT:** This is an exploratory, cross-cultural study<sup>1</sup> examining the reasons for divorce in a sample of 312 Muslim Arabs in Israel. Findings showed a combination of modern and traditional reasons, which reflect the transition that Arab society in Israel is undergoing. On the modern side, over two-thirds of both the men and women endorsed 'did not get along' and communications problems, common reasons in the West today. On the traditional side, large proportions of respondents cited physical violence and interference by relatives – reasons which are more common in traditional societies, where divorce is stigmatized and otherwise very difficult. In addition, a sizeable proportion of the men cited problems of conception.

**Key words:** reasons for divorce; causes of divorce; Muslims; Arabs; citizens of Israel; society in transition

The literature indicates that reasons for divorce vary not only with the particulars of the individuals and marriages involved, but also with the time, place and population.

In the United States in the last quarter of the twentieth century, the most frequently cited reasons for divorce were emotional or expressive: unmet emotional needs, communication problems, incompatibility and lifestyle differences (Davis and Aron 1988; Cleek and Pearson 1985; Kitson and Sussman 1982; Granvold *et al.* 1979; Gigy and Kelly 1992). In the 1990s, career and role issues were added (Gigy and Kelly 1992; Dolan and Hoffman 1998). Concrete, tangible reasons, including physical and emotional abuse, alcoholism and drug abuse, were also named in these studies, especially by women complaining of these behaviours in their ex-husbands, but they constituted a second tier of reasons, cited by fewer

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respondents than the emotional ones (Kitson and Sussman 1982; Gigy and Kelly 1992).

Comparable patterns were evident in Burns' (1984, 1992) studies of an Australian sample, in Bohle's (1994) investigation of reasons for divorce in Germany and in Kaffman *et al.*'s (1989) study of divorce on an Israeli kibbutz. The primacy of emotional and expressive reasons represents a view of divorce as a means of improving quality of life and enhancing personal fulfilment. It is typical in modern, tolerant and relatively affluent societies, where divorce is a socially acceptable way of resolving marital problems and its financial and social consequences are relatively manageable (Kitson and Sussman 1982).

Where divorce is more difficult, concrete reasons prevail. Physical abuse, drinking and financial problems played a greater role in divorce in mid-century America, when divorce was less accepted and women's earning capacity lower (Kitson and Sussman 1982). In both the US and Australia, tangible reasons continue to be more prominent than emotional or expressive reasons among persons in the lower socio-economic strata but not those in the middle and upper strata (Levinger 1966; Burns 1984; Cleek and Pearson 1985; Lawson and Thompson 1996).

Concrete reasons are also primary in developing countries and traditional societies. Alcoholism and adultery were the main causes cited for divorce in Poland (Lobodzinska 1983) and the former Soviet Union (Moskoff 1983), where the considerable hardships of daily life are greatly exacerbated for the single parent. Husband's cruelty and lack of financial support were prevalent reasons among samples of both Hindi (Pothen 1989) and Muslim (Merchant, 1992) women in India, where divorced women encounter considerable social stigma. Similarly, El-Ramin (1993) found that physical violence, economic problems and severe personal problems were major reasons for divorce in Syria.

A third set of reasons – problems with relatives – plays a prominent role in divorces in traditional societies, where inter-generational households are common and where the traditional authority of the elders is being challenged by an increasingly modern, independent and better-educated younger generation. Pothen (1989) study of Hindi divorced persons found that over half the men and over 80 per cent of the women gave interference of in-laws as a reason for their divorce. Three studies of divorce in traditional Muslim societies – India (Merchant 1992), Uzbekistan (Tashtemirov 1981) and Taolzhikistan (Islamov 1987) – all found problems with in-laws to be a major contributor to divorce. In the United States, where problems with relatives is one of the least frequent reasons for divorce (Kitson and Sussman 1982), Parra *et al.* (1995) found that women of Mexican birth or parentage were more likely to name this reason than White women born in America of American parents.

Information on the reasons for divorce in Western Europe is more difficult to attain, since the literature focuses not on individual motives but on demographic trends and changes in family structure in the wake of legal, social, economic and ideological changes (Daalder 2001; Golini and Silvestrini 1997; McKenry and Price 1995; Castles and Flood 1991; Kury *et al.*, 1997; Lester 1996). There are grounds for believing, however, that the pattern is similar. With the adaptation of no-fault divorce procedures in the 1970s in most Western European countries, divorce became more acceptable and rates rose sharply. According to Dumon (1997), 'irreconcilable disruption of the marital bond' became the main overriding reason for divorce, although violence, unemployment and infidelity may still figure in with this emotional-expressive cause (Gargberg-Morner 2001, personal communication, in consultation with Ulla Bjornberg).

To be sure, the emotional and concrete reasons are not totally distinct. Concrete problems are bound to lead to emotional dissatisfaction, while emotional dissatisfaction may augment the adversity experienced because of the tangible problem. Nonetheless, a rough distinction is observed in the literature.

The close association between the reasons for divorce and the economic, social and cultural situation in which the divorce takes place means that, for proper understanding, every distinct group must be studied on its own. This paper presents an exploratory study of the reasons for divorce among Muslim Arab citizens of Israel.

### **Divorce among Muslim Arabs in Israel**

In recent years divorce has become increasingly frequent among Arabs in all parts of the Middle East (Mercy 1991), Israel included (Central Bureau of Statistics 1998). Official Israeli figures show that, while in 1972 3.4 marriages per every 1,000 Arabs aged 15 to 49 ended in divorce, in 1995 the figure for the same age group was 7 – more than double. Although these figures are lower than the Jewish rate in Israel (5.6 out of 1,000 in 1972 and 11 out of 1,000 in 1995), the rate of increase over this period was much the same in the two populations: around 100 per cent (Central Bureau of Statistics 1998).

Muslim Arabs in Israel have their own religion, culture and society, and interact in multiple and complex ways with Israeli Jews. It is virtually impossible to extrapolate their reasons for divorce from those of any other group, whether the modern, middle class, Westernized populations who have received the bulk of research attention or the traditional populations who have recently come under scholarly scrutiny. Nonetheless, there has

been almost no study of their divorce experience or of their reasons for divorce.

The authors are aware of only two studies to date: Al-Krenawi and Graham's (1998) quantitative survey of some 150 divorced Arab women in Israel, which does not explore their reasons for divorce, and a qualitative exploratory study carried out by the present authors on nine Muslim Arab divorcees in Jaffa, Tel Aviv (Cohen and Savaya, 1997). The main reasons that these women gave for their divorces were serious concrete problems – their husband's drug or alcohol addiction, mental illness, and/or severe physical abuse and their in-law's interference. However, because the sample was a tiny, unrepresentative group of women in a single locale, who turned out to be practically uniform in their low educational and economic status, their reasons may not be characteristic of other Muslim Arab divorcees in Israel.

The present study is a quantitative study conducted on a large, heterogeneous sample of divorced men and women throughout Israel (excluding the West Bank and Gaza Strip) that uses a culturally sensitive questionnaire especially designed for the research population.

### **The cultural and societal context**

Arab society in Israel is a society in transition from traditionalism to modernity (Chabash 1977; Al-Haj 1987, 1989; Weil 1989; Haj-Yahia 1995). In the last three or so decades, it has been moving from a closed, conservative, mainly agricultural society characterized by a patriarchal, patrilineal family structure to a more urbanized, more liberal society, which has been exposed to and affected by Western patterns of life through education, the media and contact with Israel's Jews in work and other channels (Smootha 1989).

The transition has placed great stress on the Arab family, while providing opportunities for the individuals in it. For a complex of political, social and economic reasons, the extended family has been whittled down in size and the status and the authority of its elders undermined (Al-Haj 1987; Smootha 1989), so that it can no longer provide the cohesion and financial support for its members that it had in the past. In consequence, the nuclear family has been left to fend largely for itself economically and emotionally, and to deal on its own with the intense stresses that the changing situation has placed on it.

Both husband and wife have experienced major changes in role. Arab men have seen their traditional role as head of the family undermined: by their low status in the larger Jewish society, by their difficulty in fulfilling their traditional role of supporting their families economically in a

situation where a disproportionate number of them work for low wages as unskilled labourers and by the erosion of their tradition-mandated authority over their wives and children (Healu 1991; Harpaz 1986). Arab women have become increasingly educated and, to help carry the economic burden, have started to work outside the home (Al-Haj 1987, 1989). Although their status in the family hierarchy is still low and they are generally still expected to behave as the submissive Arab wife, deferential to their husbands, parents-in-law and parents (Al-Haj 1987; Avitzur 1987; Shokeid 1993; Haj-Yahia 1995, 1997), their education and work outside the home have given them resources they had not previously possessed and a new degree of exposure to Israeli society.

The role changes, along with the disparity in the status of each of the spouses in and outside the home, place great pressure on married couple and create incentives to divorce. For many couples, the pressures and incentives are probably compounded by the external stressors of poverty, severe housing shortages and drug abuse (Harpaz 1986; Barnea *et al.* 1990; Healu 1991). Moreover, intuitively, it would seem that the impact of Western values would foster a mental climate that makes divorce more of an option than in the past, especially for women, who have greater resources than previously.

On the other hand, divorce is strongly stigmatized in Muslim Arab society. It is regarded as repugnant by Islam (personal communication by Kadi Ahmed Natur, President of the Muslim High Court of Appeals in Israel) and constitutes a major violation of key values of Arab culture. It overturns the hierarchical order of traditional Arab society, a collectivist society in which individuals are expected to subordinate their own wishes to the needs of their families, and women their wishes to those of their husbands. It constitutes a breach of the harmony and homeostasis valued by Arab culture (Haj-Yahia 1995), which views change as undesirable and regards family conflict as the outcome of sin or impiety (Dirmelkanian 1993; Haj-Yahia 1995). Divorced persons, especially but not only women, are often labelled bad parents and licentious, subjected to social opprobrium that can border on abuse and, in some cases, rejected by their families of origin (Cohen and Savaya 1997; Savaya and Cohen submitted). Divorced women are viewed both as 'broken glass' which can never be made whole again and as sexual temptresses who are fair game for testing sexual advances by the men in their communities (Cohen and Savaya 1997; Al-Krenawi and Graham 1998).

The assumption underlying this study is that this particular combination of incentives and disincentives will be reflected in the reasons for divorce in the population.

### **Religious and legal bases of divorce**

In Muslim law, divorce can be effected in any of three ways (Layish 1995; Savaya *et al.* 1999). The first is by the husband to declaring 'I divorce you' three times in the presence of two witnesses. The second is when husband and wife agree to the divorce, and the woman returns the dower his family had paid. The third is by either the husband or wife, or their representatives, suing for divorce in the Shari'a Court. Israeli law prohibits the first option, the man's expelling his wife. Divorce by either of the other two options is finalized only with the authorization of the Shari'a Court, a requirement that is supported by Israeli law. In Israel, a couple may sue for divorce in either a civil or religious court, but the divorce is valid only when it receives the stamp of approval of the religious court of the religion to which the couple belongs. With isolated exceptions, virtually all Muslim Arabs in Israel bring their divorce cases to their local Shari'a Court, where Muslim law applies.

Islamic divorce law is highly detailed, with many variations and conditions (Layish 1975). There is no complete consensus in the Muslim world regarding the acceptable grounds for divorce. Most schools of Islam grant the Kadi, the Islamic religious judge, the authority to authorize a divorce over the husband's objections if the Kadi is persuaded that remaining in the marriage will cause the woman personal harm. The situations that are generally deemed to fall into this category include the husband's absence, imprisonment, mental illness, inability to provide for the family financially and his endangering his wife physically. A man's violence and incurable contagious disease come under the last category. Because of the nature of the grounds, the burden of proof falls on the woman (Savaya *et al.* 1999). These grounds are subject to the interpretation of the Kadis, and depend on the school of Islam to which the Kadi belongs, as well as on his general outlook (Layish 1995). They are not identical to the 'reasons' that people divorce, though it can be assumed that when individuals present their case to the court they tailor the reasons to what they believe the court will find acceptable.

This study examines the reasons for which the subjects in the sample dismantled their marriage, not the reasons that they told the court or the grounds on which the court authorized their divorces.

### **Approach of the study**

Because of the dearth of information about divorce among Arabs in Israel and the still limited information available about divorce in other non-Western cultures, this study takes an inductive approach. Despite the



above-mentioned studies of divorce in traditional societies, most of our knowledge about divorce derives from studies of White middle-class populations in the US and other parts of the English-speaking world. As others who study non-Western populations (as well as those who study ethnic minorities in the US) have pointed out, these groups must be studied on their own terms, with an open mind, and with sensitivity to the nuances and specificity of their experiences and ways of being (Hughes *et al.* 1993; Hui and Triandis 1989; Sue 1991; Savaya and Cohen 1998).

A deductive approach would necessitate premature theorizing and formulation of hypotheses. Given the status of our knowledge, we believe that this would be presumptuous and would restrict our field of vision to familiar predetermined concepts. Thus, although we can venture that the divorce process of Arabs in Israel, including their reasons for divorce, may be influenced by the movement of their society from traditionalism to modernity, we do not feel on firm enough ground to generate theories or hypotheses about how.

This is an exploratory paper which seeks to provide hitherto unavailable information about a little studied population. It asks two related questions:

- 1 What are the reasons for divorce among Arab men and women living in Israel?
- 2 To whom do these men and women attribute responsibility for the problems that bring them to divorce?

The second question is an extension of the first and aims at delineating the reasons more precisely (e.g. was it the wife's or husband's verbal abuse, mental illness, etc., that led to the divorce?). The reasons of the men and women are examined separately because the literature indicates that they differ somewhat (Cleek and Pearson 1985; Davis and Aron 1988; Gigy and Kelly 1992). The focus of the investigation, however, is not on gender differences, but on the overall picture of the reasons for divorce in the population.

## **Method**

### **Interviewees**

The interviewees consisted of 312 Muslim Arabs, 147 women and 165 men, who had divorced in Israel between the mid-1980s through 1997. To locate a large, representative sample, the researchers enlisted the director of the Shari'a courts to send a letter to the Kadis of six of the seven regional Shari'a courts in Israel, asking them to provide the names,



addresses and phone numbers of all the couples who had divorced in their jurisdiction in 1993 and 1994. The Be'er Sheva Shari'a Court in the Negev region was excluded because the Muslim residents of this area are primarily Bedouin, whose lifestyle and traditions are sufficiently different from those of mainstream Muslims to make them a distinct group. Five of the six courts that were queried sent back lists that contained only names; addresses and phone numbers were not recorded in their files. Efforts to locate the people on those lists yielded little success, especially in the cities. Only one court sent all the information.

The interviewees were thus obtained in two ways. Those divorced in the Jaffa Shari'a Court were obtained from the list provided by the court secretary, and consisted of all those divorced in that court in 1993 and 1994. The other interviewees were obtained by snowballing, begun by the Arab interviewers hired for the research. These interviewers lived in proximity to the population and were able to locate divorced persons who were willing to participate in the study and/or to provide names of other divorced persons. The subjects gathered by this method came from the catchment areas of all six of the targeted Shari'a courts.

The interviewees ranged in age from 20 to 76 ( $M = 33.3$ ,  $SD = 8.6$ ). Most had not completed high school (57.8 per cent); only 10 per cent had a college degree. They had been married an average of 7.6 years ( $SD = 7.5$ ) and divorced for an average of 3.8 years ( $SD = 4.3$ ) at the time of the interview. Average age at marriage was 21.8 years ( $SD = 4.5$ ) and at divorce 29.4 ( $SD = 7.8$ ). Just over half (52.6 per cent) reported that their marriages had been arranged by their family; the remainder (47.4 per cent) reported that they chose their own spouses. Almost half (45 per cent) had no children. About half (50.6 per cent) lived in a mixed Arab-Jewish city; the remainder lived in all Arab communities: in an Arab village, an Arab city or East Jerusalem.

## Measures

Reasons for divorce were ascertained on a questionnaire listing nineteen possible reasons, based on the literature on divorce (Levinger 1996; Granvold *et al.* 1979; Kitson and Sussman 1982; Burns 1984; Cleek and Pearson 1985, 1991; Davis and Aron 1988; Pozetti *et al.* 1992) and on the authors' preliminary qualitative study of divorce among nine Arab women living in Jaffa, Tel Aviv (Cohen and Savaya 1997; Savaya and Cohen 1998). The latter study had been carried out, in part, to help us construct a questionnaire that is more culturally sensitive than the standard questionnaires used in the West. In response to each reason, respondents were asked to indicate whether it was a cause for their divorce and, if so,

whether they viewed themselves or their spouse as responsible for the problem.

To facilitate discussion, the study presents the reasons in pragmatic clusters, which reflect both the differentiation of reasons reported in the literature review above and our own view of how the reasons fit together logically.

The questionnaire was part of a battery designed for a comprehensive study exploring the divorce process, and the reasons for, coping with and adjustment to divorce among Muslim Arabs in Israel. Initially written in Hebrew, it was translated into Arabic by a professional translator. The first draft was presented to a group of six bi-lingual (Arabic and Hebrew) senior Arab social workers, who together compared the Arabic with the Hebrew in each item. Whenever there was disagreement, the Arabic was reworded on the basis of consensus. The preliminary version of the questionnaire was administered in a pilot study to thirty divorced Arabs and, based on comments from the interviewers, some items were further revised to ensure complete comprehensibility.

### Procedure

The interviews were conducted in Arabic in the homes of the participants after assuring them of confidentiality and obtaining their informed written consent to participate in the study. Each interviewee was questioned without anyone else present. The interviews took between an hour-and-a-half and two-and-a-half hours.

Because of the sensitivity of the subject, the interviewers were carefully selected and trained. All were Arab, either students in the behavioural sciences or certified social workers. Males interviewed men; females interviewed women. The training was a day-long workshop consisting of both frontal instruction and role-playing. In addition, two Arab MA social work students provided follow-up and guidance, telephoning or meeting with the interviewers to check on their progress, and troubleshooting when the interviewers contacted them with questions or problems.

### Results

Respondents reported an average of 5.2 reasons for their divorce ( $SD = 3.6$ ), with a mean of 5.5 reasons ( $SD = 4.0$ ) reported by women and 4.9 reasons ( $SD = 3.1$ ) by men.

Our first step was to identify the respondents' reasons for divorce. Table 1 presents the percentages of women and men who endorsed each reason. As can be seen, most of the reasons were cited by similar

**TABLE 1. Percentages of women and men endorsing each reason for divorce**

	<i>Women</i>		<i>Men</i>		<i>T</i>		$\chi^2$
	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	
<i>Incompatibility</i>							
Communication problems	70	94	76	117	73	211	n.s
Didn't get along	65	88	70	107	68	195	n.s
Verbal abuse	58	78	38	57	47	135	12.25***
<i>Lack of commitment</i>							
Infidelity	23	31	17	26	18	57	n.s
Lack of commitment to the family	48	62	41	63	44	125	n.s
Lack of commitment to the couple	46	60	42	67	44	127	n.s
<i>Lifestyle differences</i>							
Traditional lifestyle	23	18	21	14	44	16	n.s
Modern lifestyle	6	8	11	16	9	24	n.s
<i>Sexual and reproductive problems</i>							
Difficulties in conception	16	20	27	41	22	61	5.00*
Sexual problems	17	23	19	30	18	53	n.s
<i>Interference by extended family</i>							
The family interfered in couple's life	50	66	42	65	46	131	n.s
The family forced the couple to divorce	15	19	18	28	16	47	n.s
Physical abuse by the family	16	21	8	13	12	34	4.1*
<i>Abuse</i>							
Physical abuse	47	64	20	31	33	95	24.7***
Sexual abuse	18	23	9	14	13	37	4.78*
<i>Severe concrete problems</i>							
Addiction	29	39	20	31	24	70	n.s
Incarceration	11	14	8	13	10	27	n.s
Unwillingness to work	28	37	19	29	23	66	n.s
Mental illness	20	26	17	29	13	55	n.s

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ 

proportions of men and women, with no significant gender differences. 'Didn't get along' and communications problems were named by around two-thirds of the women and over 70 per cent of the men. Lack of commitment to the marriage or to the family was cited by over 40 per cent of the men and over 45 per cent of the women. Similarly, around 40 per cent of the men and 50 per cent of the women gave interference by the extended family in their daily lives as a reason for their divorce. Lifestyle differences were reported less often, but also with similar gender frequencies, though the men tended to name the desire for a traditional lifestyle and the women the desire for a modern lifestyle.

Significant gender differences emerged, however, in the endorsement

of five problems. Physical abuse, verbal abuse, sexual abuse and physical abuse by the extended family were all endorsed by significantly more women than men. Women were around twice as inclined as men to report sexual abuse, physical abuse by their spouse and physical abuse by the extended family, and about one-and-a-half times more inclined to report verbal abuse. Difficulty in conception, on the other hand, was endorsed significantly more by men than women: 27 per cent versus 16 per cent.

The table also suggests that the order of reasons of the men and women differed somewhat. For both, the most frequently endorsed reason was incompatibility. 76 per cent of the men and 70 per cent of the women endorsed communication problems; 70 per cent of the men and 65 per cent of the women endorsed 'didn't get along'. Following incompatibility, however, men were most inclined to cite lack of commitment to the marriage (42 per cent) and to the family (41 per cent) and interference by the extended family in the couple's daily life (42 per cent), while women were most inclined to cite verbal abuse (58 per cent), followed by interference by the extended family (50 per cent) and physical abuse (47 per cent).

Table 2 presents the men's and women's attributions of responsibility for the problems that they endorsed. Significant differences were found in the attributions of most of the problems. Over three-quarters of the women who endorsed incompatibility blamed their husbands, while the men who endorsed the problems in this category were divided in their attributions: about half placed the responsibility on themselves, the other half on their wives. Much the same patterns emerged in the attributions for lack of commitment, lifestyle differences and interference by the extended family, only the percentages of women who blamed their husbands or their husbands' relatives for these problems were even higher. A somewhat different pattern emerged in the attributions for verbal and physical abuse. Here, the men and women tended to agree more that the husband was responsible for the problem. Virtually all the women who endorsed abuse blamed their husbands, and very high proportions of the men who endorsed these problems blamed themselves, though significant gender differences remained.

No significant gender differences were found in the attributions of five problems: modern lifestyle, difficulties in conception, addiction, incarceration and sexual abuse. The patterns of agreement, however, differed from problem to problem. Of those who endorsed modern lifestyle, 63 per cent of both the men and women blamed themselves, the other third or so their spouse. Half of those who endorsed reproductive problems blamed themselves, while half blamed their spouse. And almost all the persons who endorsed addiction, incarceration and/or sexual abuse attributed these problems to the ex-husband.

TABLE 2. Attributions of reason for divorce (by percentage and number)

	Women's attribution						Men's attribution						$\chi^2$
	To men			To women			To men			To women			
	N	%	n	%	n	N	%	n	%	n	%	n	
<i>Incompatibility</i>													
Communication problems	94	79	74	21	20	117	55	64	45	53	38.8***		
Didn't get along	88	74	65	61	23	107	56	52	51	48	9.5**		
Verbal abuse	78	97	76	3	2	57	72	41	28	16	18.5***		
<i>Lack of commitment</i>													
Infidelity	31	93.5	29	6.5	2	26	54	14	46	12	12.03***		
Lack of commitment to the family	62	100	62	0	0	63	52	33	48	30	38.9***		
Lack of commitment to the couple	88	74	65	26	33	107	52	56	48	51	9.5**		
<i>Lifestyle differences</i>													
Traditional lifestyle	23	96	22	4	1	21	48	10	52	11	12.8***		
Modern lifestyle	8	63	5	37	3	16	63	10	37	6	n.s		
<i>Sexual and reproductive problems</i>													
Difficulties in conception	20	60	12	40	8	41	54	22	46	19	n.s		
Sexual problems	23	87	19	17	4	30	43	13	57	17	8.4**		
<i>Interference by extended family</i>													
The family interfered in couple's life	66	96	63	4	3	65	60	39	40	26	23.9***		
The family forced the couple to divorce	19	100	0	0	0	28	54	15	46	13	12.2***		
Physical abuse by the family	21	100	21	0	0	13	54	7	46	2	11.8**		

	Women's attribution				Men's attribution				$\chi^2$
	To men		To women		To men		To women		
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	
<i>Abuse</i>									
Physical abuse	100	64	0	0	90	28	10	3	6.4*
Sexual abuse	96	22	4	1	77	11	21	5	n.s
<i>Severe concrete problems</i>									
Addiction	100	0	0	0	94	29	6	2	n.s
Incarceration	100	14	0	0	92	12	8	1	n.s
Unwillingness to work	100	37	0	0	90	26	10	3	4.0*
Mental illness	85	22	15	4	52	15	43	13	6.7**

\* p <.05; \*\* p <.01; \*\*\*p <.001

Since communication problems and the failure to get along, which are viewed by the literature as modern reasons for divorce, were the most frequently endorsed reasons by both the men and women in our sample, we decided to probe these reasons in greater depth. More specifically, we wanted to know the extent to which those who endorsed these reasons also endorsed the more traditional reasons for divorce. Since these two modern reasons were highly correlated ( $r = 0.62$ ;  $p < .001$ ), we combined them into a single category, labelled 'personal incompatibility', that we coded as 0 (neither reason stated) or 1 (one or both reasons cited). We then examined the bivariate distribution of this variable with each of the other reasons for divorce examined in this study, to see which of the other reasons were reported significantly more or less by the 'personal incompatibility' sub-group than by the other divorcees.

Before carrying out this analysis, we examined the socio-demographic features of this sub-group and compared them with those of the sample as a whole. The analyses showed that the socio-demographics of the sub-group were virtually identical to those of the larger group.

Table 3 presents the bivariate distribution of 'personal incompatibility' with the other reasons for divorce endorsed by the sub-group. The percentages of respondents in the sub-group that reported communication problems or did not get along who endorsed each of the other reasons is remarkably similar to the percentages of those in the sample as a whole. Both the men and the women in this sub-group endorsed most of the other reasons with the same or only a slightly higher frequency than the respondents in the sample as a whole. Only three reasons for divorce depart from this similarity: verbal abuse, lack of commitment to the family and lack of commitment to the couple. These reasons were all endorsed by considerably more men and women in the sub-group than in the sample as a whole.

## Discussion

The pattern of reasons for divorce found in this study can be understood as reflecting the transition of Muslim Arab society in Israel from tradition to modernity. The most direct indication of the role of the transition is the fact that about one-sixth of the sample implicated modern-traditional lifestyle differences in the dissolution of their marriage. Indirect indications are provided by the overall pattern of reasons.

In important respects, the reasons for divorce in our sample resemble those most commonly reported in the West today. By far the most frequently endorsed reasons were expressive and emotional: across gender, more than two-thirds of the interviewees cited communication



**TABLE 3. Percentage of persons reporting both incompatibility and each of the other reasons for divorce**

	<i>Communication problems/ didn't get along</i>	
	<i>W</i>	<i>M</i>
<i>Incompatibility</i>		
Verbal abuse	67	42
<i>Lack of commitment</i>		
Infidelity	22	18
Lack of commitment to the family	58	47
Lack of commitment to the couple	55	48
<i>Lifestyle differences</i>		
Traditional lifestyle	22	14
Modern lifestyle	8	10
<i>Interference by extended family</i>		
The family interfered in couple's life	55	46
The family forced the couple to divorce	16	17
<i>Abuse</i>		
Sexual abuse	21	10
Physical abuse by spouse	52	22
<i>Severe concrete problem</i>		
Sexual abuse	21	10
Addiction	28	18
Incarceration	12	9
Physical abuse by family	18	9
Unwillingness to work	30	24
Mental illness	21	20
<i>Sexual and reproductive problems</i>		
Difficulties in conception	15	23
Sexual problems	20	22

problems and 'didn't get along'; around half named verbal abuse; and another 40 per cent or so cited either their own or their spouse's lack of commitment to the marriage or family. Though such things as incompatibility, lack of affection and infidelity were cited in some of the studies of divorce in developing countries and traditional societies noted in the introduction, in none of these studies were the percentages so high (Pothen 1989; Merchant 1992; Moskoff 1983).

The role of emotional and expressive reasons is further confirmed by the findings of the cross-tabs. The finding that the only three reasons for divorce that were substantially more frequent in the sub-sample who

reported poor communication, 'didn't get along', than in the sample as a whole were emotional (verbal abuse, lack of commitment to the family and lack of commitment to the couple) suggests that emotional and expressive reasons were major factors in the dissolution of the marriages of a certain portion of respondents.

At the same time, the study findings also reveal the salience of severe concrete problems and family interference – the main reasons for divorce reported in traditional societies and in other situations where divorce is difficult or unacceptable. Severe concrete problems were cited with particular frequency by the women. Almost 30 per cent of them gave endorsed their ex-husband's addiction and/or unwillingness to work; around a fifth named his mental illness; and about another tenth named his being in prison. Especially striking is the place of physical violence in the women's reports. Almost half named physical abuse by their husband as a reason for their divorce; almost a fifth named sexual abuse.

Family interference took two forms. One was general interference in the couples' lives, named by over 40 per cent of the men and almost half the women. This reflects the traditional involvement of the extended Arab family in the life of the nuclear couple (Haj-Yahia 1995). Often the involvement is positive, expressed in instrumental assistance and emotional support. It can also be the source of friction, however. For many of the divorced persons in this study, the friction may have been exacerbated by living in the home of their parents or in-laws, due in part to the severe housing shortage in Arab communities in Israel.

The other form taken by family interference was more active and sinister. Around 16 per cent of the women and 8 per cent of the men named physical abuse by the extended family as a reason for their divorce. Moreover, almost 15 per cent of the women and almost 18 per cent of the men reported that their in-laws directly compelled the divorce. Both these reasons reflect the persistence of the traditional hierarchical pattern of authority in Muslim Arab culture in Israel; but they point in different directions. The first reflects the unwillingness of the women who endorsed this reason to subordinate themselves to their in-laws. According to Arab informants, such abuse would have been tolerated more in previous generations (Cohen and Savaya 1997). The second reflects continued acceptance of the hierarchy. For those who divorced at the command of their parents, tradition mandating obedience to their parents was apparently a more compelling value than loyalty to their partners.

The salience of severe concrete reasons and family interference is much the same or somewhat higher in the sub-group of respondents who endorsed 'didn't get along', communications problems, as in the sample as a whole. This means that the majority of those who cited reasons of

incompatibility for their divorce were not moved only or even mainly by emotional or expressive causes. The findings thus suggest that for most of the sample, especially among the women, the emotional and expressive reasons probably accompanied the concrete ones, while the latter probably created the major impetus for ending the marriage.

The main concrete problems implicated in the divorce were different for men and women. For the women, the most frequently reported concrete problem was physical abuse. This finding provides empirical support for the conclusion to our qualitative study of nine Muslim Arab women divorcees in Jaffa (Cohen and Savaya 1997), that, for Arab women, divorce is not a luxury or way to self-fulfilment, but the only solution to extreme misery.

For the men, the most frequently reported concrete reason was conception problems – endorsed by over a quarter of the male respondents. This finding is best understood in connection with the finding that 45 per cent of the sample in this study were childless. This is an extremely high proportion, unmatched in the samples of other studies on divorce. Even though the current sample was not a representative one, the high percentage is probably not entirely accidental. It would seem to reflect both the greater readiness of childless couples to end an unhappy marriage and the real salience of childlessness as a reason for divorce among Muslim Arabs in Israel.

In addition to reasons, the study examined attributions. The patterns of attribution were somewhat different among the men and women. The women were far more inclined to attribute the problems in the marriage to their spouses than to themselves. A substantial majority attributed the dyadic problems of poor communication and ‘didn’t get along’ to their ex-husbands, and almost all those who cited severe concrete problems, lack of commitment to the marriage and family, interference by the extended family and/or the desire for a traditional lifestyle placed the onus for these problems on their ex-husbands or in-laws. The men, in contrast, were less inclined to blame their ex-wives. Almost all the men who acknowledged severe concrete problems as causes for their divorce placed the blame for most of those problems on themselves. Around three-quarters of the men who reported verbal abuse blamed themselves. Around half who endorsed communication problems or not getting along, lack of commitment, interference by the extended family, lifestyle differences and/or sexual and conception problems placed the onus on themselves or their own extended families. In other words, most of the men’s attributions of responsibility support the women’s. Further study is required to determine the extent to which the attributions reflect the reality of the situations, self-serving bias on the part of the women or acceptance of responsibility on the part of the men.

## Limitations and implications of the study and recommendations for further research

This study suffers from several limitations. One is that it does not use a representative sample. Such a sample was impossible to obtain because of the unavailability of Shari'a court records with phone numbers and addresses in all but one of the jurisdictions. Moreover, some of the divorced persons contacted through the court listings and our snowballing procedure were unwilling to participate in the study, probably because of the highly personal and sensitive nature of the subject. There was thus a certain amount of self-selection in the composition of the final sample. The ways in which the self-selection may have biased the sample and the impact of this bias on the statistical analyses are impossible to know.

Another limitation derives from the way that the questions about reasons were posed. The divorced people were asked whether or not each potential cause that was indicated was a reason for their own divorce. They were not asked to rate or rank the relative importance of the reasons. This means that the major claim of this paper, that, while a certain proportion of the sample divorced mainly for emotional or expressive reasons, most divorced largely for concrete reasons and after acute suffering, is based on an interpretation of the findings and remains to be proven more directly. This shortcoming derives from the fact that since this is a pioneering study, very little was known and the issue of relative importance seemed secondary at the time.

A related problem has to do with the ambiguity inherent in the language. As in English, the word 'reason' in Hebrew and Arabic can denote either a cause or a motive. It is not always clear whether the respondents meant that an item was a factor implicated in their divorce or one of their motives for divorcing. This ambiguity, which is not uncommon in studies of divorce, makes it difficult fully to interpret the findings and to compare the answers of the men and the women.

A different type of limitation has to do with our pooling the reasons of people divorced over a twelve-year period, of people divorced after marriages of different lengths and of people divorced in different life stages. The study participants were thus pooled in order to obtain a general picture, since none exists to date. The pooling made it impossible to discern possible changes in the reasons for divorce over the years, however, and may thus have somewhat obscured the impact of the rapid modernization that has been occurring in Arab society in Israel. Further study is recommended to refine the findings.

Nonetheless, this is an important study that expands our knowledge of a little studied subject. To the knowledge of the authors, it is the first study that empirically examines the reasons for divorce among Muslim

Arabs citizens and residents of Israel. The sample is large, heterogeneous and consists of a fairly equal number of men and women obtained from both court and personal sources. Such a diverse sample is rare even in studies of divorce in the West. Moreover, the study questionnaire was a culturally sensitive instrument specifically designed to tap both reasons for divorce presented in the literature and reasons particular to this study population.

The study has important theoretical and practical implications. On the theoretical level, the study answers the need, emphasized by Kitson and Morgan (1990), for cross-cultural research of divorce in societies that are in transition from conservative patrilineal cultures to more modern liberal ones. In addition, the finding that the respondents gave both traditional and more modern reasons for their divorces may serve in the conceptualization of what it means for a society to move from traditionalism to modernity.

The major practical implications of the study stem from the finding that family violence was implicated in the divorces of a large proportion of the respondents. According to Haj-Yahia (1997), wife abuse is a manifestation of traditional patriarchal values, including the rigid masculine sex role stereotypes, traditional attitudes towards women and non-egalitarian expectations of marriage that are pervasive in Arab traditional society. Yet traditional Arab society also places great value on the wholeness of the family and considers divorce highly undesirable (Haj-Yahia 1995). Our findings, which show the harm that wife beating does to the family, may encourage Arab religious and community leaders in Israel to stand up against and take measures to discourage wife abuse.

The same finding may also be incorporated into the policies and practices of the social services in Arab communities in Israel. It is well known that both the woman who is beaten and her children, who are often beaten as well, suffer long-term psychological consequences, from depression and low self-esteem through heightened aggression and cognitive and functional problems (Edleson 1999; Abel 2000). Our findings imply that divorced Arab women and their children are a population at risk for the detrimental psychological consequences of family violence. The Shari'a courts, where virtually all Arab divorces in Israel are adjudicated, and the social services in Arab communities may wish to join to identify and offer assistance to divorced women and their children who suffered from family violence.

For future research we recommend examining the weight or relative importance of the various reasons for divorce, distinguishing better between causal factors and motives, and exploring the attributions of responsibility in greater depth. We also recommend exploring in greater depth issues that could not be dealt with in this paper, including how the

reasons combined; the association between reasons and socio-demographic features (especially age and economic status), initiation of the divorce, length of marriage, and other factors; and the congruence of the reasons given by the men and women in previously married couples. Finally, we recommend extending the inquiry to related issues, such as the motives of the extended families for forcing a divorce and the patterns of their interference.

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