

Method

This chapter provides an overview of the epistemological stance of the study, procedure for participant selection, information about the pilot study, details about the study tools, the process by which the data was collected, and the method used for analyzing and interpreting the data to derive the results. The chapter further discusses the ethical issues of the study and the aspects of methodological rigor, that is, issues of validity and reliability. It ends with a review of the strengths and limitations of the method.

The Research Design

A qualitative research design with an interpretive stance was adopted.

The constructivist or the interpretivist believes that to understand this world of meaning one must interpret it. The inquirer must elucidate the process of meaning construction and clarify what and how meanings are embodied in the language and actions of social actors. To prepare an interpretation is itself to construct a reading of these meanings; it is to offer the inquirer's construction of the constructions of the actors one studies (Schwandt, 1994).

Since the objectives of the study were to either identify, explore or understand the overall experiences of divorce and separation, an interpretive epistemology, supported by interview as a method for data collection, and a qualitative approach which was descriptive in nature was considered most appropriate for the study. It was assumed that adopting the interpretive stance would be beneficial in generating the type of knowledge which could satisfy the study objectives to a reasonable extent.

The Selection of the Participants

Location of the study. The location of the study was Vadodara, Vadodara a cosmopolitan city that is is geographically located in the center of Gujarat state. Limiting the study to only one city will help to maintain uniformity in the study. Vadodara was also a convenient city for the study, because the researcher belonged to Vadodara.

Research population. It is difficult to ascertain even an approximate population of divorced and separated women living in Vadodara. There are many cases which are ongoing and many divorces also take place through an out of court settlement. It is quite likely that there are many more women living separately from their husbands but their marital status appears as married in the government records (A. Patel, Advocate, personal communication, June 2015).

Though the aim of the study was not to generalize the results, it is assumed that most divorced or separated women living in Vadodara will have similar experiences. Hence, the results can be generalized to the divorced or separated women living in Vadodara belonging to Hindu religion from the middle and upper socio-economic classes.

Participant selection technique. The participant selection technique was purposive in nature and participants were identified through the snowball sampling technique.

Participant size. A total of 30 women were interviewed out of which 18 were divorced and 12 were separated (see Figure 2).

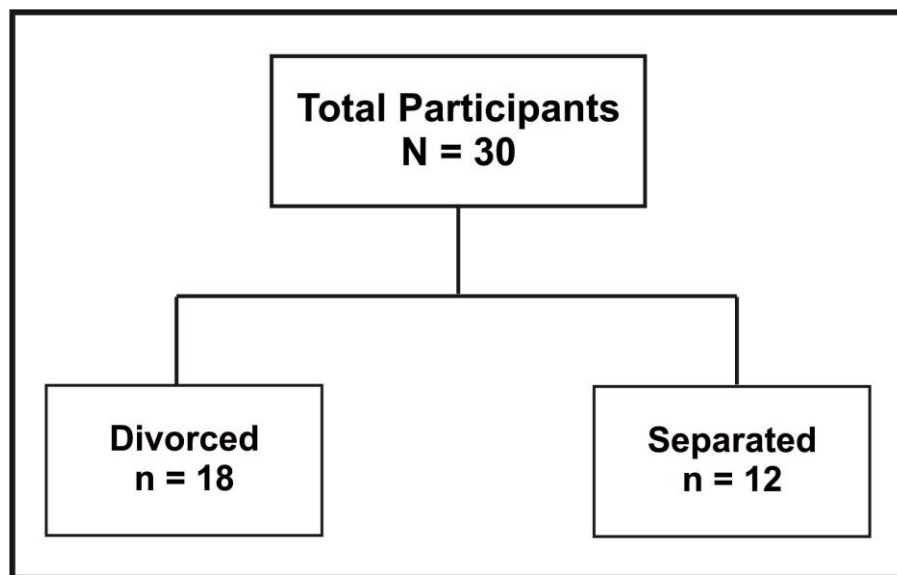


Figure 2. Participant size

Criteria for participant selection. The following criteria were considered for selecting the participants of the study.

- **Women, who were divorced or separated.** Given the social stigma attached to divorce in India there was a lot of ambiguity found with the actual marital status of women and its portrayal in the society. Women did not disclose their marital status to many people but only to very close friends and relatives. Also, taking a legal divorce is lengthy and a difficult process in India which involves many people and a combination of various factors. Hence, the actual legal divorce may occur much later from the date of initiation of the process. Therefore both divorced and separated women were included as participants of the study.

- ***Women who were recently divorced or separated (within one year), since two to five years, and since five to ten years or more.*** One objective of the research was to study how women adjust and cope with the divorce and separation in their life over time. Therefore, the participants comprised women who were divorced or separated within a range of time frames.
- ***Women, who belonged to the Hindu religion.*** Religion has powerful implications on marriage and divorce, hence it was advisable to do a detailed study within the boundaries of one religion.
- ***Women, above the age of 18 years.*** Since 18 years is a legal age of marriage for women in India, the study assumed that women who have experienced divorce or separation will be above 18 years of age.
- ***Women from middle or upper socio-economic classes.*** Studies have shown that socio-economic status has a definite influence on the nuances of divorce and marital separation. Therefore, to maintain homogeneity women from middle and upper socio-economic classes were included in the sample.

The Pilot Study

The pilot study was conducted with 15 participants to explore the planned research design and to understand the general attitudes of people about divorce and separation. Details of the participants are organized in table 3.

Table 3. Profile of Participants of the Pilot Study

Marital Status	Divorced or Separated		Married		Single (never married)	
Sex	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Number	2	3	2	3	2	3

A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted with single (never married) and married participants whereas interviews were conducted with divorced and separated individuals. Participants were questioned about their views on marriage, divorce, remarriage, differences and similarities in societal experiences of divorced men and women, relationship of success and happiness with divorce, purpose of marriage in India, needs of a divorced person etc. The FGDs

were carried out in the seminar hall of the Women's Studies Research Center, Faculty of Family and Community Sciences. Interviews were carried out either at the homes of the participants or at the home of the researcher.

Learning from the pilot study. Conducting the pilot study was worthwhile and beneficial in many ways. It enabled the researcher to refine the overall research design. The feedback from the pilot study and its influence on the main study is described below.

- ***To consider only women as participants of the study.*** The pilot study found that the impact of negative experiences of divorce or separation was greater on women than on men. Experiences in the society were bitter and stigmatizing more so in the case of women with children. Men did not report any such major incidences of social ridicule, but experienced difficulties in household management especially if they lived alone. Single (never married) and married participants also felt that experiences of divorced or separated women are more difficult than for divorced or separated men.

Likewise, it was difficult to find divorced or separated men, as most potential participants contacted by the researcher who were once divorced were then married. This is a reflection of the social reality that it is easier for divorced men to get remarried compared to divorced women and it is even more difficult to get remarried for divorced women who have children. The review of literature also suggests similar findings in most studies.

As striking gender differences were observed in the experiences of divorced or separated men and women it was felt that an in-depth study to understand the experiences of both women and men is required.

- ***The interview method as the most appropriate method for gathering data.*** According to Charmaz (2006) intensive interviewing permits an in-depth exploration of a particular topic or experience and, thus, is a useful method for interpretive inquiry. Although, it was decided that data of the study will be collected through interviews the pilot study confirmed this decision. Of all the participants of the pilot study those who were single (never married) and married were willing to participate in the FGD, whereas all the divorced or separated participants refused to participate in the FGD but consented to an interview. The issue of divorce and separation being very private and stigmatizing especially in the Indian culture, it was anticipated that conducting an interview with

privacy would give enough scope to the respondents to discuss freely about their experiences.

- ***The study will serve a major need of the divorced or separated women, that is, to be heard non-judgmentally.*** As per Oliver (2008) research may not have a direct moral purpose and it may be more concerned with adding to the overall understanding of an issue. He adds that research is rather more than collecting and analyzing data, and it is an activity which involves the lives of others which makes it important for the researcher to reflect upon the impact of research on its participants. It was possible that asking the participants about their experiences of divorce or separation would cause them further emotional distress. Interestingly, all the participants of the pilot study told the researcher that they had never shared in so much detail with anybody about their deepest feelings related to their divorce as they were sharing it with the researcher. All of them expressed that although the interview reminded them of the past, it made them feel emotionally lighter. More of such similar experiences were reported by the participants of the main study, which is discussed in the following chapters. Thus, it was felt that in one way the study would serve a major need to be heard and the interview would be cathartic in nature for the participants.
- ***It would be helpful to understand the factors associated with adjustment and coping with respect to time after divorce or separation.*** It was observed that participants (especially women) who were divorced or separated a long time ago were better adjusted in their lives compared to those who were recently divorced or separated. Therefore identifying the factors that aid in post-divorce or separation adjustment would be useful. This observation helped to formulate the second objective of the study, that is, to identify factors, patterns and dynamics associated with adjustment strategies and coping with respect to time after divorce or separation.

Study Tool

Unstructured interviewing provides a greater breadth than the other types of interviewing, given its qualitative nature. Unstructured interviewing is used in an attempt to understand the complex behavior of members of society without imposing any prior categorization that may limit the field of inquiry (Malinowski, 1989, cited in Fontana & Frey, 1994).

Guba and Lincoln (1994) state that the variable and personal nature of social constructions suggests that individual constructions can be elicited and refined only through interaction between and among investigator and respondents. Further, Denzin and Lincoln (1994) suggest that it must be understood that each paradigm and perspective of research has a distinct history with the methods of data collection. The epistemological stance of the study is interpretive and therefore using interview as a method of data collection was the most suitable.

The pilot study also confirmed that the interview method would be an appropriate method for this study in comparison to any other method.

Considering the above a self-formulated 'In-depth Interview Guideline' was used to collect the data. The interview guideline was translated in Gujarati and Hindi by the researcher. The major domains of the tool included: marriage and its process, the process of divorce, pathways of coping with divorce, needs of divorced and separated women, network of relationships and its impact and self-perception regarding success and happiness post-divorce. Refer Appendix A, B and C for the 'In-depth Interview Guideline' in English, Gujarati and Hindi.

Before conducting the interview all the participants were provided a background information form to fill their basic details. Refer Appendix D for the 'Background Information Form'.

A digital recorder was used to record the interviews in order to have an accurate account of the conversations during the interview.

Apart from the interviews the researcher maintained a diary of field notes which included information like observations, feeling and reflections before, during, and after the interviews.

Procedure of Data Collection

Gaining access. Almost 120 divorced and separated women were approached as potential participants of the study. These potential participants were approached through friends, relatives and acquaintances who acted as mediators between the researcher and the potential participants. Many of the potential participants were also friends or acquaintances of the women who had participated in the study.

Most of the potential participants who were contacted refused to participate in the study. Below is a list of reasons given by the potential participants for not participating in the study which

reflects how serious, petrifying and personal the issue of marital separation in the Indian culture is.

- My divorce is not very stressful so you will not learn anything from my interview.
- If I have taken a divorce then I must have surely thought wisely about it. What is the use of justifying it?
- Many people have taken my interview. You can take someone else's interview.
- I mind giving an interview. I cannot go over everything again.
- It will be very traumatic for me.
- I am going to get remarried.
- Why should I tell you my story when I feel that I am not even answerable to my parents?
- I do not mind but right now I am very busy. I will call you back. Many said this but never called the researcher back. When the researcher called them they did not receive the call and neither responded to any of her text messages.
- I am extremely busy. I cannot let go of my TV serials for the interview. I can give you only 15 minutes. You may ask whatever you want to in 15 minutes.
- You can ask me on the phone. I don't have time.
- I am not well; I will get back to you.
- I am out of town; I will get back to you.
- At present I have guests at my place and I will get back to you.
- What is the guarantee that you are not my husband's friend? I do not trust anybody.
- I will have to ask my lawyer if I can participate in the study. Women who said this never got back to the researcher. They possibly feared that the researcher has been sent by their husband or in-laws and something will go against them in the ongoing divorce case.

- Few respondents who agreed and also fixed the time and date never shared their residential address. When the researcher called at the time of the interview they did not pick up the call neither responded to the messages nor called back.

Few participants showed readiness to participate but their parents, children and friends did not want them to give the interview, and hence they had to refuse.

Of those who agreed to participate, some took time to agree, some readily agreed whereas some, although not having any issues with participating, were too busy which led to the postponement of the scheduled interview many times. Few participants in spite of being very busy, scheduled time for the interview as they strongly felt that it is their responsibility to share about their experiences so that other women in similar circumstances could be helped.

Participants expressed their concern over privacy and confidentiality and were curious to know about the reason for tape recording the interviews as well as how the results of the study will be used and who will have access to it. How these issues were dealt is discussed in the section on ethical considerations.

The researcher's self-presentation to the participants was vital. It was observed initially that when the researcher presented herself simply as a PhD student she was sometimes misinterpreted as an amateur student who would not understand women's issues. The participants would choose not to share their life story with a student. It therefore became important to tell the participants that the researcher has prior experience and knowhow about women's issues and that this kind of research will aid in improving the condition of divorced or separated women in the society. By sharing their experiences they were helping other women similar to them in some way.

For those potential participants who were contacted through a mediator it was important to brief the mediator about the study. Those respondents who were contacted directly by the researcher were briefed about the study over the phone, face to face or sometimes through text messages. The following was conveyed to the potential respondents.

1. I am Swati Joshi.
2. I have got your reference from XYZ.

3. I was working with the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda as a researcher and a Program Officer at the Women's Studies Research Center. My main work was to conduct research and programs on women's issues.
4. At present I am a PhD student from the department of Human Development and Family Studies, Faculty of Family and Community Sciences, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda.
5. My study is about the experiences of divorced and separated women and that is the reason why I have contacted you.
6. The results of the study will be useful to other divorced or separated women and couples undergoing a turbulent marriage.
7. All information of the interview will be kept confidential and your name will not be used anywhere. The data will be used only for the purpose of publication of the research.
8. The interview will be tape recorded as it is not possible to capture all the responses in writing. The recording will be transcribed and deleted after the completion of the study.
9. Would you give me your time so that I can take your interview, know your views and understand your experiences for my research?
10. We can meet at your home if there is a place where both of us can talk in privacy or at my home. I can pick you up from wherever you say and drop you back after the interview.

Place of the interviews. From the experience of the pilot study and from conversations with the potential participants it was discovered that a private space where the interview could be conducted was of utmost importance. Most participants expressed their concern about a private space where the interview would be conducted. Some women asked if they could be interviewed in gardens and restaurants or at the residence of the researcher. Since, a recorder had to be used, it was not possible to conduct the interview in the garden or in a restaurant/coffee shop as too much noise in such public places would affect the quality of the recording and there would be no privacy during the interview.

Living arrangement of the participants was an important determinant for the place of the interview. Out of 30, 15 interviews were conducted at the residence of the researcher in a private room. Most of these participants were living with their families and were either uncomfortable in

their homes or they did not have a private space where the interview could be conducted. Some participants were picked up from their homes and dropped back by the researcher in her vehicle and some came on their own. Out of 15, 14 women came alone whereas one of them came with her 2 year old son. The child was kept busy with toys, coloring book, crayons and biscuits while the interview was ongoing. Out of 30, 14 interviews were conducted at the homes of the participants in private rooms. Some of these women lived alone and some with children or family. In such arrangements sometimes parents or children sat with the participant for a while before the interview began or peeped in the room once or twice during the interview. This was more to express care and concern towards the respondent or to offer water, tea, coffee or refreshments to the participant and the researcher. One participant out of 30 called the researcher to her office and the interview was carried out in the conference room with permission from a senior official. Overall, it was ensured that the participant is offered a quiet, safe, separate and a private space so as to open up and talk freely.

Time and duration of the interviews. The process of data collection was carried out from May, 2013 to December, 2014. Most interviews were carried out on Saturdays, Sundays, public holidays, or in late evenings. A convenient time and day of the participants was decided and the researcher adjusted her schedules accordingly. The duration of each interview was approximately between 1.5 to 4.5 hours.

Language of the interviews. The interviews were conducted in one of the three languages; Gujarati, English and Hindi. Most interviews were a mix of two languages, that is, English and Gujarati or English and Hindi. Some interviews were carried out in only Gujarati and Hindi. The language of the interview was chosen by the participants and the researcher adjusted accordingly.

Procedure for Data Analysis and Interpretation

The data was analyzed using the basic thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in rich detail. However, it often goes further than this and interprets various aspects of the research topic (Boyatzis, 1998, cited in Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Guest, MacQueen, and Namey (2012) thematic analysis as in grounded theory and development of cultural models, requires more involvement and interpretation from the researcher. Thematic analysis moves beyond counting explicit words or phrases and focuses on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data set, that is, themes. The thematic analysis approach is the most useful in capturing the complexities of meaning within a textual data

set and its greatest strength is its pragmatic focus on using whatever tools might be appropriate to get the analytic job done in a transparent, efficient and ethical manner. As stated by Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis should be seen as a foundational method for qualitative analysis, which through its theoretical freedom provides a flexible and useful research tool which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data. Given the advantage of the flexibility of thematic analysis a combination of inductive and deductive approach was used for the data analysis (example, Fereday & Muir-Cochrane's, 2006 study on exploring the phenomenon of performance feedback within nursing).

Braun and Clarke (2006) discuss that themes or patterns within data can be identified in one of the two primary ways in thematic analysis: in an inductive or 'bottom up' way or in a theoretical or deductive or 'top down' way. An inductive approach means the themes identified are strongly linked to the data themselves (Patton, 1990, cited in Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this approach, if data have been collected specifically for the research (e.g., via interview or focus group) the themes identified may bear little relationship to the specific question that were asked to the participants. They would also not be driven by the researcher's theoretical interest in the area or topic. Inductive analysis is therefore a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher's analytic preconceptions. In this sense, this form of thematic analysis is data driven and bears some similarity to grounded theory. In contrast, a 'theoretical' thematic analysis would tend to be driven by the researcher's theoretical or analytic interest in the area, and is thus more explicitly analyst-driven. This form of thematic analysis tends to provide a less rich description of the data overall, and a more detailed analysis of some aspect of data.

Considering the above the data was coded for emerging themes in relation to specific research questions and themes were allowed to emerge from the data as well. A detailed procedure of the data analysis is explained in five stages below.

1. **Familiarization and management of data.** Becoming familiar with the data began during the process of data collection itself. Apart from recording the interviews the researcher's observations were carefully noted in the researcher's diary which was helpful in later stages of analysis. The recorded interviews were translated in English, transcribed and proof read. Specific terms, idioms, proverbs and certain sentences in the local languages were retained in the transcript to maintain the essence of the language and conversation. Thereafter, each interview was given a code and a number to mark the identity of the

participant. A final interview transcript file was prepared in a pdf version which included the participant identification number, background information, interview proceedings, and researcher's observations and reflections. The first stage of analysis although the most time consuming, served as a bedrock for the rest of the analysis.

2. **Generating codes.** The next stage of analysis involved generating codes from the data. Codes are tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study. Codes are usually attached to 'chunks' of varying size-words, phrases, sentences, or whole paragraphs, connected or unconnected to a specific setting (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Coding of the data was done manually. The first level or open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was carried out by selecting ten interviews, which fairly represented most of the study participants. These interviews were systematically read and reread to identify aspects that may form the basis of repeated patterns across all segments of data. Codes were allowed to emerge from the overall data as well as in connection to the specific research questions. Relevant parts of the data were given codes using words or phrases with the help of a pencil. First level coding of these ten interviews served as a reference coding frame for the other 20 interviews.

The second level of coding, that is relational coding (Gibson, 2006), was carried out to relate the first level codes to each other in terms of causes, properties, aspects, associations, results, contrasts etc. At the end of coding all 30 interviews some new codes emerged, some were merged and some were omitted. An exemplar of open and relational coding is described in the Table 4.

An example of open coding. Table 4 describes some excerpts from different participants in different contexts. These are not specific types of codes, but they are 'first impression' words/phrases derived from an open ended process. These were either retained or refined on re-reading the text.

Table 4. An Example of Open Coding

Sr. No	Data	Code
1.	I started realizing that I was not comfortable in that family. I started realizing my mistake. I started questioning my decision to marry him.	Regretting the marriage
2.	Who does not need a man in her life? But when I know that he is not going to be of any help then why should I break my head in expecting something out of him?	Calculating advantages
3.	I don't think about it. No thoughts. I have removed all that. I have tolerated a lot. Now I don't want to think anything. If you sit with all those thoughts of the past then how can you do your work?	Saturated
4.	I think that the fault was not only his. I realized, it was my fault also. I was alert but I did not take any action when the problems started. I could have saved the marriage. I could have ignored his behavior.	Guilt
5.	I think it (divorce) has been very good because I have grown as a person.	Reconciled /Impact on self

An example of relational coding. Codes were related with each other in various ways as described in Table 5.

For example one code could **cause** or **result** into another code. In the below excerpts Code A causes Code B, C, D and E

Table 5. An Example of Relational Coding

No	Data	Code
1.	It (marriage) is something which is forced upon a girl.	Marriage is a social norm ^A
2.	Because of parental pressure one has to marry.	Marriage is a social norm ^A
3.	I was bounded by so many limitations after marriage. I was free before marriage. I could sit anywhere at any time. After marriage I had to cover my head. I could not sit in the same room where my in-laws were sitting. I had to wear a <i>saree</i> . I could not talk to my husband in the presence of my in-laws. I was under complete restriction.	No freedom ^B
4.	Then...there are times that if there is an occasion or event, then before marriage we may not attend it but after marriage we don't have any choice but to attend. We have to attend all the social functions.	Compulsion ^C
5.	Getting up early in the morning and doing lots of work. I had no choice but to work because a daughter in-law has to work only. My whole life changed	Gender Roles ^D
6.	Before marriage I could go anywhere at any time. I just had to inform my parents about it. I had complete freedom which was not the case when I got married. It was complete opposite. Even if I had to go out for a little while I had to take their permission	Immobility ^E

Codes which appeared similar were combined/merged into one and given one name. In the Table 5 the code 'No freedom'^B, the code 'Compulsion'^C, the code 'Gender Roles'^D and the code 'Immobility'^E can be combined to form one code 'Restrictions after marriage'^F and while relating it with the code Marriage is a social norm ^A we can say that A causes F. In other words, marriage results into restrictions.

Further, one code was split into two or more codes. In the excerpt in Table 6 the code ascribed to the data is further split into two codes.

Table 6. An Example of Code Splitting

Sr. No	Data	Code
1	Sometimes I feel...I wish that my husband would be with me right now. I also have dreams and aspirations. I also want to live with my husband because I have two children. I need someone to support me in my life. Because I also have feelings. I feel lonely. I wish there is a male member in my family who is my husband. Someone who takes my responsibility. I have would have his support to rear my children. I can walk along with him.	Missing husband's support ^A
	Sometimes I feel...I wish that my husband would be with me right now. I also have dreams and aspirations. I need someone to support me in my life. I feel lonely. I wish there is a male member in my family who is my husband. Someone who takes my responsibility.	Feeling Lonely ^{A-1}
	I also want to live with my husband because I have two children! I have would have his support to rear my children. I can walk along with him.	Missing husband's support for child rearing ^{A-2}

Based on the emerging codes a super code book was prepared. Super codes were generated and defined in brief and each super code was assigned a different color.

While the researcher engaged in the cyclical process of coding and recoding the data, memoing (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was done in terms of careful noting down of emerging thoughts and ideas, questions and reminders in a separate book. According to Charmaz (2006) writing successive memos throughout the research process keeps you involved in the analysis and helps you to increase the level of abstraction of your ideas. Certain codes stand out and take the form as theoretical categories as you write successive memos.

3. **Identification of themes.** A theme is an outcome of coding, categorization, and analytic reflection (Saldana, 2009). The list of super codes which was prepared after coding and collating the data across all the interviews served as a groundwork for this stage. A theme

is an abstract entity that brings meaning and identity to a recurrent experience and its variant manifestations. As such, a theme captures and unifies the nature or basis of the experience into a meaningful whole (DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000).

As suggested by Ryan and Bernard (2003) themes were identified from the codes by looking for:

- Repetitions within the data
- Indigenous typologies or categories. In other words in-vivo coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998)
- Metaphors and Analogies
- Transitions
- Similarities and differences
- Linguistic connectors, that is, words and phrases which often indicate causal relations.

On the whole this stage involved identification of the emerging, main overarching themes in connection with the research questions, theoretical framework of the study, as well as those emerging from data. All the data sources, that is, coded interview transcript, observations, and memos were used to extract the themes and interpret the data.

- 4 **Reviewing and refining the themes.** This advanced stage of analysis looked for coherent patterns within the themes and also for clear and identifiable differences between the themes. Careful analysis was done to find out if there was enough data within a theme to support it or to call it a theme. If not then the some themes were merged into each other whereas some were broken down into separate themes and some were discarded. This stage also involved preparing thematic/cognitive maps. A cognitive map displays the person's representation of concepts about a particular domain, showing the relationship among them. Descriptive text is associated with it (Miles and Huberman, 1994). An exemplar of an initial thematic map showing four emerging themes related to meanings of marriage is displayed in Figure 3.

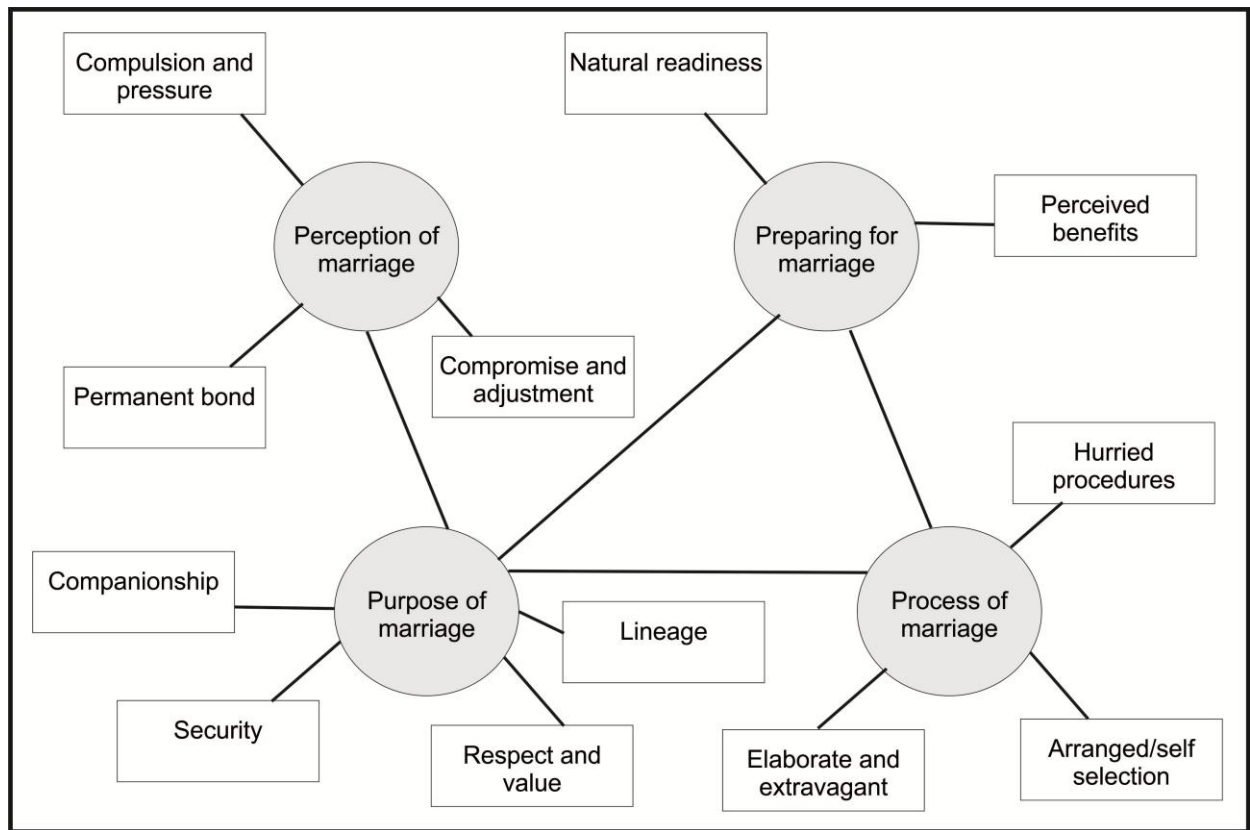


Figure 3. Initial thematic map

This stage ended with the finalization of themes in their abstract forms and writing the overall story that the themes convey, in connection to the research area and research questions.

- 5 **Defining and naming the themes.** The last stage of data analysis began with further refinement of themes, identifying sub-themes within the final themes and writing a detailed story of each theme and analyzing how it fits into the overall story of the research area. At the end of this stage it was possible to clearly define the themes of the study and name them such that it would give the reader a sense of what that theme is all about. The figure 4 displays the main theme and its subthemes. A careful comparison of figures 3 and 4 shows how the final theme of ‘conceptualizations of marriage’ in figure 4 is more refined and abstract in comparison to the emerging themes in figure 3.

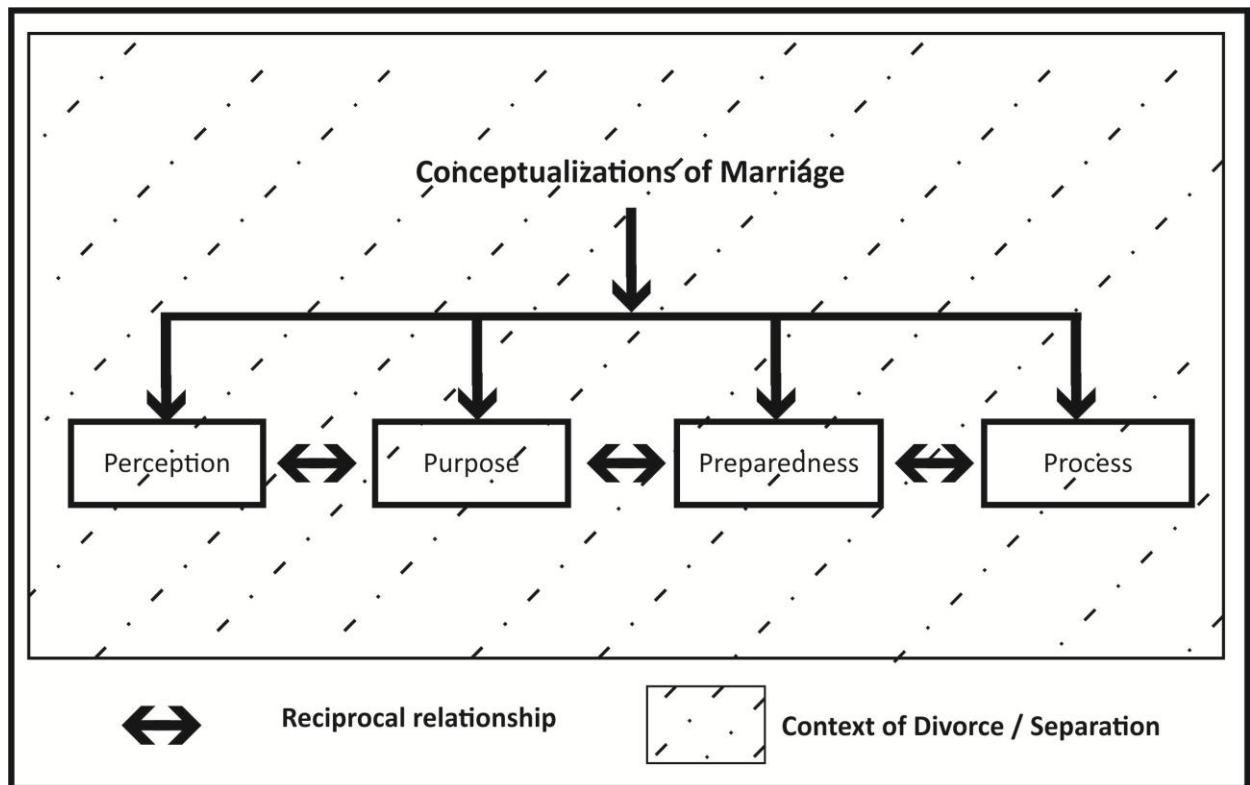


Figure 4. Final thematic map

Ethical Considerations

This section discusses the aspects which were considered to treat the research participants with care, sensitivity and respect. Though there are many ethical issues in social science research which cannot be completely resolved, utmost care was taken to protect the rights of the participants to the maximum extent possible.

The research topic and the researcher. According to Gregory (2005) choosing a research topic demands a certain moral scrutiny. It is certainly no part of the research enterprise to cause harm unnecessarily or to damage the interests of the researched. He further adds that there is little reason to doubt that a crucial way to understand certain issues is to talk to those who have experienced it or who are experiencing it and therefore careful attention needs to be paid whether the researcher is the right person to undertake such research.

The divorced and separated women were particularly a vulnerable group and they may be further distressed in all kinds of unpredictable ways by talking about their experience even if they have consented to such discussions. Thus, there was a chance of further emotional harm to the participants. In such cases having special skills, maturity and experience by the researcher would minimize the risk of such harm.

The researcher had a prior experience of collecting data, analyzing and writing a report on 'Perceptions of Women Suffering from Mental Illness.' She also had an experience of doing the literature review, designing the questionnaire, translating the questionnaire and designing the pilot study for the study on 'Living Conditions of Widows in Gujarat'. Having eight years of work experience in Women's Health Training Research and Advocacy Cell (WOHTRAC) and Women's Studies Research Center (WSRC) provided an additional advantage to the researcher to be able to pursue research in the area of women's issues. She has also pursued short courses like Guidance and Counseling, Gendered Research in Health and Interdisciplinary Course in Women's Studies. She has written chapters on Marriage and Separation, Divorce and Future Options in a Masters course on Family Counseling and Psychotherapy offered by Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi. Further, the researcher had access to Non-Government Organizations and individuals who provide services like counseling and legal help which could be recommended to the participants if required.

Thus, the researcher was equipped with sensitivities, experience, specialized professional skills and maturity to engage in this topic of research which helped in alleviating and managing the possible emotional harm and distress caused during the interview.

Fully informed consent. Full, voluntary and informed consent was sought from all the 30 participants. They were briefed about the study and its purpose, identity of the researcher, and their right not to participate or to withdraw in-between. Answers to any further questions or clarifications related to the research, interview, data or the researcher were provided to the participants. Apart from verbal briefing about the study, a consent form was given to all the participants to ensure that everyone was given the same information. Refer Appendix E for the 'Consent Form'. Most participants signed the consent form whereas some gave their verbal consent only and refused to sign the form. Permission for recording the interview was sought from the participants at the time of first conversation and thereafter moments before the interview. All except one participant agreed that the interview be tape recorded. Important points were noted during that particular interview and the transcript was written down by the researcher within two days of the interview. All women who participated in the study did it willingly and there was no force, pressure or threat of any kind used to convince them to participate.

Assuring and maintaining anonymity, confidentiality and privacy. Anonymity and confidentiality are the inherent rights of all participants. The right whether to remain anonymous

or to be identified lies with the participant. It becomes all the more important in research projects dealing with stigmatized, sensitive or personal issues and information (CEHAT, 2000).

Assuring complete anonymity to the participants was of utmost importance. Participants gave consent for the interview and were positive and forthcoming only after anonymity was guaranteed and trust was built between the researcher and the participant. The participants who were approached through a mediator had to be specifically assured of confidentiality of the information which they would share during the interview. Sometimes the mediating person would inquire about the interview and the details shared by the participant in direct and indirect ways. Therefore, in such situations the issue of confidentiality had to be explained to the mediator as well and the rights of the participants were protected. All the participants were reassured that the research results will be used only for the purpose of publication and their names or identity in any form will not be revealed anywhere in the publication.

Working out a private space for carrying out the interview was an equally important ethical consideration as well as to enable the participants to talk freely and openly about their feelings and experiences. Care has been taken to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity by being extremely careful in handling and preserving the data after the interview.

Interview ethics. Before the interview started the participants were briefed about the study once again. Most women voiced their feelings and experiences comfortably in the interview. Many women cried during the interview. Few cried uncontrollably and had to be counseled and comforted during the interview by the researcher. In such situations the participants were asked if they wished to discontinue with the interview, but none of them opted out. A glass of water, tissues, some light refreshments and comforting and consoling words helped in such situations. Some of them were happy and proud to share about their experiences. Care was taken that the interviews began and ended with light and empowering questions. The participants were given small gifts (a laughing Buddha and a key chain) after the interview ended, as a token of gratitude for their time and participation in the study. Participants were not told about these gifts before the interview.

Assuming that the interview would last longer the participants were asked to take a good breakfast or lunch before the interview. Tea/Coffee and some light refreshments were served to the participants since some interviews lasted for more than three hours.

Out of 30 participants only one objected to tape recording her interview. Most participants were okay with their interviews being recorded and spoke freely whereas a few women chose not to have their comments recorded on certain issues like their plans with the ongoing case, how much alimony are they planning to ask, sexual demands made by their ex-husbands after the divorce etc. However when the recording was discontinued these women easily discussed these details and their feelings and sometimes also used abusive words for their ex-husbands and in-laws. All participants were assured that the recording will be deleted on the completion of the study. A few participants inquired about people who will have access to the recording. One participant asked for a copy of the recording in the form of a CD but later, on second thoughts took back her request. One participant called the researcher to check if the recording is deleted and if not then when will it be deleted. Satisfactory answers were given to all the participants regarding the above issues.

Relationship with the participants. Participants should be seen as indispensable and worthy partners in research. Researchers should recognize and ensure that respect, protection and promotion of the rights of participants are made intrinsic to every stage and level of research undertaken by them (CEHAT, 2000).

Establishing rapport with the participants is a significant element for a good interview and special efforts were made by the researcher to build the same. Estimating the rough age of the participants the researcher dressed accordingly for the interview and tried to identify herself with the participant as much as possible. The tone of the researcher was friendly and respectful and a conscious attempt was made to engage in a real conversation. Wherever required the researcher revealed personal details and answered questions asked by the participants. This was helpful to a great extent to build an honest, nonhierarchical and a reliable relationship with the participants which in turn enhanced the quality of the interview.

The relationship with many of the participants did not end after the interview. Most of them were in touch with the researcher via text messages. Though most participants shared forward messages and casual multimedia messages with the researcher, some of them sent text messages to talk about their life, updates of ongoing divorce case, to check if the researcher is aware of any job suitable for them, requesting to work together in future, to ask if the person they may have recommended agreed for the interview, to inform the researcher about any events of interest etc.

Maintaining a long term relationship with the participant was very vital especially if the participant herself made an effort to do so. The researcher felt responsible to respond to calls or text messages even if they were casual forward messages. Presumably, doing so would make the participant feel important and heard. If the researcher failed to respond for whatsoever reasons then there would be chances that the participant might feel used and exploited and may not trust any other researcher in future. In many interviews the participants had expressed sharing some information which they had not shared with anybody before. In such cases the participant considered the researcher as a confidante who knew everything about her and understood her plight. Thus, maintaining trustworthy relationship with the participants was essential not only at the time of the interview but also beyond it.

Issues of Validity and Reliability

Rudestam (2007) contends that all research carries the responsibility of convincing oneself and one's audience that the findings are based on critical investigation and so does this study. Below is an account on how the researcher dealt with the issues of validity and reliability.

- **Trustworthiness/Internal validity.** The credibility of the research was established by spending sufficient time with the participant to check for distortions, exploring their experience in sufficient detail and checking multiple sources of data apart from interviews such as the researcher's diary, field notes, memos etc.
- **Transferability/External validity.** The aim of the study was not to generalize but to deepen the understanding of experiences of divorced and separated women. Thick and rich description of the participants within the context of the study were documented to permit adequate comparisons with other participants.
- **Dependability/Internal reliability.** The raw data was coded in such a way that another person could understand the themes and arrive at similar conclusions. Coding checks were made by selecting ten percent of the data randomly to determine inter-coder reliability with the help of two other researchers from the discipline of Women's Studies.
- **Conformability/External reliability.** To determine the reliability of the study the general methods of research and all other procedures are documented in detail. A meticulous record of the process of the research study is maintained for future interested researchers to recapture the steps and reach the same conclusions. The audit trail includes the coded

interview transcript, evidence of how the data was analyzed, memos that reflect the ongoing inner thoughts, hunches and reactions of the researcher. Personal values and biases and how they may have affected the study are discussed clearly in the next section.

Strengths and Limitations of the Method

The results of the study in the following chapter are conditioned as much by the limitations of the study method as by its strengths. This section throws light upon the same.

Since there are only a few studies carried out on this area the topic itself is a strength. Hence, the objectives, the overall research design, the study participants and the context of the study give it a distinctive character.

The combination of both inductive and deductive approaches used for the analysis and interpretation of data was yet another strength of the study method. As a result of this hybrid approach the themes which emerged were grounded in the data as well as based on the research questions. Such a combination of themes will create scope for future research and theory building in the much under-researched area of divorce and separation in India.

Controlling important variables like sex, religion, city, and socio-economic background with an adequate participant size was the third strength of the study method. This provided for rich and thick description of the data and thus creates scope for future comparative research in the same area.

Another advantage was the researcher being a complete stranger for the participants. This made the participants share their experiences in detail as there was no fear of being judged or advised. The sex of the researcher, her professional background and her single (never married) status was an added advantage for a 'woman-to-woman' talk. It is important to consider that this point could have also turned into a disadvantage because it is possible that significant events may be unnoticed by the researcher as they may appear as normal to her. This bias may also have influenced the analysis of the data. Although, the researcher tried to be as objective as possible the fact remains that no research is value free. It is likely that what to include and what not to include as relevant has been influenced by the subjectivity of the researcher and another researcher may have different influences on the data.

In order to understand the topic in depth it was of paramount importance that the researcher be completely involved with the life story of the participant and made a serious attempt to see the

situation from her vantage point. The life story of each participant was loaded with complex emotions and insecurities. This involvement made the interview process stressful, painful and overwhelming for the researcher at times. There were chances of being misled, emotionally carried away or wandering too far from the important information relevant to the research. This limitation was taken care of by ensuring adequate time gaps between the two interviews. Writing down the experiences, observations and feelings helped the researcher unwind, vent out her feelings and prepare herself for the next interview.

One important limitation of the method was difficulty in identifying the potential participants of the study and convincing them to participate in the study.

Given the sensitivity of the topic and exchange of painful emotions during the interview it was not ethically correct for the researcher to subject the participant to emotional pain all over again. As a result of this it was not possible after one interview, to fill in the gaps where the data was missing or more information was needed on certain aspects of the participant's life.

The voice recorder was an indispensable tool to gather accurate and detailed data. In one way it was a strength whereas in another way a limitation. Though all participants (except one) consented to recording the interviews a subtle discomfort (with the voice recorder) was observed in the participants. Had it been otherwise, even freer atmosphere during the interviews could have been created but at the cost of losing out on important and relevant data.