

Explaining the Formation Process and Examining the Causes and Consequences of Unhealthy Relationships in Iranian Families and Providing Guidelines for Their Reduction: A Constructivist Grounded Theory Study

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E d i t o r	R e v i e w e r s
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1. Round 1

1.1. Reviewer 1

Reviewer:

In the Data Collection section, the sentence “The interview guide was developed on the basis of the theoretical foundations and relevant research literature” raises a potential tension with grounded theory methodology. Extensive reliance on predetermined theoretical concepts can impose sensitizing categories on the data and constrain emergence. The authors should clarify how prior literature was used without forcing participants’ narratives into pre-existing frameworks. It would be helpful to provide several initial interview questions and examples of follow-up questions that were added or modified as analysis progressed, thereby demonstrating the iterative and emergent nature of data collection.

The manuscript states that “one pilot interview was conducted with one eligible participant” but does not explain why the pilot interview was excluded from final analysis despite apparently satisfying the inclusion criteria. The authors should indicate

whether substantial modifications were made to the interview guide after the pilot, whether the pilot interview was methodologically different from subsequent interviews, and whether excluding it was decided prospectively. In grounded theory research, pilot data can often contribute analytically if collected under comparable conditions, so the rationale for exclusion should be explicitly documented.

Table 2 also requires a clearer distinction between descriptive codes, interpretive categories, and causal claims. For example, “Unhealthy sexual patterns” includes sexual dissatisfaction, pornography use, premature ejaculation, infidelity, low frequency of intercourse, and lack of sexual knowledge. These phenomena have different psychological meanings and may function as antecedents, manifestations, consequences, or correlates of relational distress. The authors should explain how these codes were conceptually unified and whether participants themselves described them as belonging to a common process. Otherwise, the category risks becoming an overly broad aggregation rather than an analytically coherent grounded theory construct.

Response: Revised and uploaded the manuscript.

1.2. Reviewer 2

Reviewer:

In the procedure paragraph, the sentence “Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was audio-recorded in a safe setting” requires additional information about the interview context. The manuscript should specify where interviews occurred, whether they were conducted face-to-face or remotely, who was present during the interviews, whether repeated interviews occurred, and whether the interviewer had any prior relationship with participants. These details are important because disclosures concerning violence, sexuality, infidelity, addiction, and family conflict are highly sensitive and may be strongly affected by privacy and interviewer–participant dynamics.

The description of coding is internally inconsistent. The Methods section states that analysis occurred through “open, focused, and theoretical coding,” whereas the Findings section later reports “open, axial/relational, focused, and theoretical levels,” and Table 2 is explicitly labeled “Axial Coding.” Since the manuscript correctly notes that Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory does not employ Strauss and Corbin’s formal axial coding procedure, the authors should resolve this inconsistency. If “axial coding” is retained merely as an informal relational organization of codes, this should be renamed consistently throughout the manuscript—for example, “relational category organization”—to avoid conceptual confusion about the analytic tradition being followed.

The sentence “At the open coding level, 105 conceptual codes were extracted” needs greater methodological transparency. The authors should explain whether these 105 codes represent unique initial codes after consolidation, whether in vivo codes were used, how duplicate or overlapping codes were managed, and how coding decisions evolved through constant comparison. In constructivist grounded theory, the analytic value lies not in the number of codes itself but in how codes are compared, refined, elevated into categories, and integrated theoretically. The manuscript currently emphasizes numerical code counts more strongly than the analytic reasoning connecting the stages.

Table 2 contains several categories that require conceptual refinement. For example, the axial code “Spouse’s personality and behavioral problems” combines “selfishness,” “narcissism,” “lack of responsibility,” “psychological immaturity,” “authoritarianism,” and “mood instability.” These are heterogeneous constructs, and terms such as “narcissism” may imply a clinical personality diagnosis that cannot be established from a former spouse’s qualitative report. The authors should avoid pathologizing labels unless diagnostic assessment was performed and instead use phenomenologically grounded wording such as “perceived self-centeredness,” “controlling behavior,” or “emotional instability.” Similar caution is warranted for the category “substance-use disorders,” unless formal diagnoses were established.

Response: Revised and uploaded the manuscript.

2. Revised

Editor's decision after revisions: Accepted.
Editor in Chief's decision: Accepted.