

The Perspectives of Family Specialists on the Socio-Cultural Challenges of Family Therapy Interventions in Iran: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study aimed to explore the socio-cultural challenges of family therapy. This applied research utilized a qualitative phenomenological approach.

Methods: The study population consisted of specialists in various fields of couples and family therapy in Tehran province during the years 2022-2023, who met the inclusion criteria for the study. The inclusion criteria were psychologists or counselors with a Master's or Doctoral degree who had at least five years of experience in one of the family-related fields and were willing to collaborate in the research. A purposive, snowball sampling method was used, continuing until data saturation was reached, with a final selection of 15 specialists. Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection, and the data were analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis approach.

Findings: The findings revealed 24 initial concepts, 5 sub-themes, and 2 main themes as the socio-cultural challenges and factors that perpetuate these challenges. Ineffective application of existing family therapy theories in response to societal changes, social harms affecting family systems over time, and socio-cultural-economic damages were among the sub-themes of challenges. Differences in opinions regarding the strengthening of theory-building and the approach to localizing interventions without relying on existing theories were identified as factors that sustain these challenges.

Conclusion: This study offers a new perspective on the impact of societal context on the effective or ineffective implementation of interventions based on non-native theories, providing an alternative approach to examining the issues of cultural insularity in interventions, beyond considerations of religion and written documents in research.

Keywords: Family therapy, socio-cultural challenges, specialists, Iran.

1. Introduction

Every family encompasses a world of complexities, and its influence is such that many psychological issues of individuals can initially be traced back to this context. Therefore, addressing the dysfunctions within the family system, considering it as a therapeutic unit, has been a focus of family therapists and counselors (Spengler et al., 2024; Van Duine, 2024). The necessity of family therapy becomes evident when dealing with certain issues such as child-related problems, marital issues, and chronic family conflicts, each of which can lead to a significant change within the family (Arvin et al., 2024; Atapour & Darbani, 2024).

A review of the transformations in contemporary families indicates a weakening of family structures and an insufficient response from Iranian society to the challenges that have arisen. These transformations, at both macro and micro levels, have affected the resilience of Iranian families (Navabinejad et al., 2024). Experts from various fields argue that the Iranian family is undergoing a transition, a process accompanied by various harms to the family unit (Tahmasebian et al., 2017). Some of the most significant of these harms include communication problems, emotional breakdowns and separations, sexual issues, and child-rearing difficulties (Ahmadi, 2007; Moradi Abbas Abadi et al., 2021; Tahmasebian et al., 2017). Consequently, the need for any remedial or preventive measures aimed at restoring the family system to its path has become a priority. This is particularly relevant given that, according to Khodayari-Fard and Asayesh (2021), individuals seeking treatment often present behavioral dysfunctions within the family system, which affect the quality of family interactions, thus necessitating greater attention to systemic family therapies (Khodayari Fard & Asayesh, 2021).

One issue that should not be overlooked is that factors related to the stability or instability of the family are defined within the cultural context of society (Dehdashti & Ghobadi, 2020; Tahmasebian et al., 2017). On the other hand, the influence of a cultural environment that has nurtured scientific disciplines is undeniable (Zabihzadeh et al., 2012). Therefore, considering the non-native nature of family therapy interventions, the compatibility of their philosophical and theoretical foundations with the social issues facing Iranian families today is a matter of concern. While past studies in this field have examined the health status of Iranian families (Tahmasebian et al., 2017), analyzed certain challenges facing Iranian families (Yazdani

& Dosti, 2015), and addressed the impact of modernization on Iranian families (Zahedi et al., 2015), less attention has been paid to how these issues influence the implementation of family therapy interventions from the perspective of family specialists. This is significant given that one of the main challenges facing psychotherapy in Iran is the overuse of non-native theoretical approaches (Rezaei et al., 2021), while a considerable gap exists between clinical reality and the examples presented in textbooks (Rivett & Street, 2009).

In this regard, a review of the literature indicates that existing theories provide a general and abstract view of family therapy dynamics with respect to cultural context. For example, the influence of cultural beliefs and practices has led family therapists to explore issues within outdated cultural narratives and harmful family beliefs (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2017). In a similar vein, Armstrong and Monroe (2018), in a study in Australia aimed at implementing narrative therapy alongside Islamic epistemology, concluded that some post-structuralist therapeutic techniques could be used alongside past Qur'anic guidelines to address contemporary issues for Muslims. However, implementing family therapy using this approach without theoretical modifications to fit Iranian society may lead to difficulties (Azadi & Bastan Najafi, 2017). According to studies, expectations of therapy, therapy endurance, value systems, and family and social interactions all impact people's inclination to seek psychotherapy services and the outcomes of such treatments (Khazaei et al., 2014; Rashtbari & Saed, 2018; Safarzade et al., 2020). Therefore, maintaining a culturally sensitive perspective in therapeutic interventions has always been a key focus. In this regard, many studies have focused on the role of culture in interventions. For example, Cheraghi (2017) presented an Iranian family therapy model regarding how to intervene with the nuclear family (Cheraghi et al., 2017). Jan Bozorgi (2016), focusing on implementing family therapy in line with Islamic culture, proposed a model based on systemic thinking to influence marital satisfaction and family functioning (Jan Bozorgi, 2016). Other studies have generally aimed to overcome cultural-religious challenges and have adopted a localization approach for interventions based on written texts. Shaykhi Fard et al. (2021) conducted a qualitative content analysis to explore the similarities between structural approaches and Islamic approaches (Sheykhi Fard et al., 2021). In the study by Azizi, Ahmadi, and Salari Far (2019), Islamic family therapy principles were presented through a descriptive-analytical method based on Qur'anic verses and Hadiths (Azizi et al., 2019). Farsani,

Safi, and Bahmani (2019) used content analysis of written texts to propose techniques for enhancing communication and enriching marital relationships in family therapy, rooted in Islamic culture (Farsani et al., 2019). Additionally, Ainechi and Jan Bozorgi (2017) applied qualitative content analysis to illustrate the fundamental differences between the intellectual line of Allameh Tabatabaei and postmodern family therapists, formulating general principles of family therapy (Ainechi & Jan Bozorgi, 2017). Khodayari Fard and Abedini (2012) introduced a spiritual-religious approach to family therapy and explained how religion and spirituality affect family functioning based on concepts found in stress theory, social role, and support networks (Khodayari Fard & Abedini, 2012).

Most previous studies have focused on the cultural-religious aspect and used document analysis approaches, and there has been less exploration of how social factors intersect with family therapy interventions. This is because earlier studies have not clarified, from the perspectives and experiences of therapists and counselors in this field, which topics are considered socio-cultural challenges within family therapy theories and interventions. This is important, as the lack of applied and priority research in the field of family therapy in Iran has been identified as a significant issue (Asnafi & Omati, 2016), which may stem from a lack of deep understanding of the challenges faced by family therapy practitioners and researchers. Therefore, obtaining an overall perspective on the views of family specialists regarding the challenges of interventions, alongside enhancing understanding of this discipline, provides the foundation for identifying and conducting priority research. Thus, due to the need for a deeper exploration and overcoming the lack of indigenous knowledge, a qualitative study is proposed. Since, according to some experts (Dehghani & Abbasi, 2007), drawing on the opinions of specialists, and recognizing that experience is the best way to understand social realities (Delavar, 2010), it seems that to address the issues in family therapy sessions more effectively, it is essential to identify and interpret the viewpoints of specialists who have direct experience with these types of challenges. Therefore, this study was conducted to answer the following questions:

1. According to the experience and perspectives of specialists in various family domains, what socio-cultural challenges are perceived in family therapy interventions?
2. According to the experience and perspectives of specialists in various family domains, what factors

contribute to the persistence of socio-cultural challenges in family therapy interventions?

2. Methods

The methodology of this study, given the nature of the research questions, is qualitative and phenomenological in nature. To analyze the data, a thematic analysis approach was chosen because it allows for exploring and analyzing patterns within the data and organizing these patterns into more detailed elements embedded within the data. Furthermore, considering the aim of this study, an "inductive analysis" approach was adopted so that themes could be extracted based on the data, without relying on pre-established categories or theories. Additionally, the motivation to uncover hidden meanings within the collected content highlighted the need to employ the "latent thematic analysis" strategy. Based on this approach, the research team made additional interpretive efforts to extract implicit concepts not explicitly stated by the participants. A major part of this process was facilitated through taking field notes during the interviews and asking exploratory questions.

The participants in this study were specialists in various fields of couple and family therapy from Tehran province in 2022-2023, who met the inclusion criteria for the study. The inclusion criteria were psychologists or counselors with a Master's or Doctorate degree and at least five years of experience in one of the family-related fields, as well as a willingness to participate in the research. Therefore, 15 specialists were selected using purposeful sampling.

For data collection, semi-structured interviews, a common method in qualitative designs, were used. First, an interview guide was developed based on the research objectives. Then, specialists in the field of family therapy who met the criteria and had expressed their willingness to participate in the study were interviewed by appointment. Following a snowball sampling method, participants were asked to recommend colleagues who also met the study's inclusion criteria. Prior to each interview, participants were provided with explanations about the objectives and potential applications of the research findings, as well as reassurances regarding confidentiality and anonymity. The interviews were recorded in full with the permission of each participant. The duration of the interviews ranged from 40 to 90 minutes.

Since this finding is part of a larger study aimed at identifying challenges in family therapy, this article addresses only the findings related to two questions

regarding socio-cultural challenges. For the operationalization of interview analysis, Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase reflective thematic analysis approach was used (Braun & Clarke, 2019). According to this approach, in this study, after conducting the interviews and transcribing them, the text was read multiple times. Important findings from each interview were identified, and an effort was made to align with the participants in order to understand their perspectives. Key statements related to the phenomenon under study were extracted, specific meanings were assigned to these statements (formulation), common concepts were categorized, the original content was revisited, ideas were compared and combined, a final description of the phenomenon was developed, and ultimately, the description was returned to the participants for validation of the results. In this way, 24 initial concepts were formulated, which were then reduced to 5 sub-themes in the categorization phase, and eventually, 2 main themes emerged in the final description of the phenomenon.

To manage and increase the accuracy of the analysis, the data analysis was conducted using MAXQDA version 20 software. After transcribing the interviews into the software, they were read and reviewed to gain a preliminary understanding of the data. Open coding was then conducted, and the codes were compared based on their similarities and differences, gradually leading to the formation of themes. It is worth noting that in the section for reviewing the

robustness of the results, participant review, one of the key techniques for trustworthiness, was used (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, the technique of external auditing was employed. In this process, the extracted codes and themes were continuously reviewed by an expert in qualitative research, and the feedback from three specialists in this field who were not involved in the study was also sought. Throughout the study, the research team held regular meetings to review the findings and ensure the accuracy of the coding process.

3. Findings and Results

The data for this study were collected through fifteen semi-structured interviews with specialists in family therapy (9 women and 6 men). These individuals were selected considering maximum diversity (including diversity in work focus within family-related fields, theoretical approaches, gender, etc.), as well as meeting the inclusion criteria. Following data analysis based on Braun and Clarke's method (2019), in response to the first research question, one theme was identified as the socio-cultural challenges in family therapy interventions, and in response to the second question, one theme was identified as the factors that sustain these challenges. Table 1 presents the initial concepts, sub-themes, and main themes.

Table 1

Initial Concepts, Sub-Themes, and Main Themes Extracted from the Interviews

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Initial Concept
Socio-cultural Challenges in Family Therapy Interventions	Ineffective Application of Existing Family Therapy Theories in Response to Changes	Inadequate response of Western and outdated theories in academic texts
		Lack of new interventions
		Intersection of Islamic and religious contextual factors
	Social Damages Affecting the Family System Over Time	Limitations in applying certain interventions
		Extensive social changes in the family structure
	Socio-cultural and Economic Damages	Changes in the meaning of family
		Changes in the needs and concerns of family members compared to the past
		Family changes remain unexplored and unscientifically studied
		Elimination of family rituals
		Role changes and expectations
		Incorrect social stereotypes
		Financial problems
		Economic instability
		Lack of financial support systems for counseling
		Absence of a systemic perspective
Factors Sustaining Socio-cultural Challenges	Differences in Opinions Regarding Theory Development	Neglect of the research domain

Localization of Interventions without Theoretical Basis

Inefficient needs assessment
Lack of adaptation to clients' needs
Lack of effective theorists
Use of techniques without cultural consideration
Superficial perspectives
Lack of operational applicability
Limitations of culturally bound interventions
Ignoring Iranian family culture

3.1. Socio-Cultural Challenges in Family Therapy

The sub-themes of this main theme included the ineffective application of existing family therapy theories in response to changes, social damages affecting the family system over time, and socio-cultural and economic damages. The following sections describe the sub-themes and include some participant quotes.

• Ineffective Application of Existing Family Therapy Theories in Response to Changes

This sub-theme includes the inadequate response of Western and outdated theories in academic texts, lack of new interventions, the intersection of Islamic and religious contextual factors, and limitations in applying certain interventions. Participants expressed that older theories often fail to address new problems. Furthermore, due to the dominant role of Islam and religion in Iranian society, many Western techniques are not applicable. Below are some quotes from participants:

"These things are in the books. For example, every book on couples therapy suggests treatments for unmarried partners or for homosexuals, but the issue is, it doesn't work for Iranian culture. I'm talking about a boy and girl whose families are from rural areas, and they don't know that they are living together, or for people who are homosexual, and if the country finds out, they could be killed. Here, we need family therapy and engaging the family, but these limitations make it unworkable" (Specialist 2).

"All these theories are from a long time ago, and aside from the fact that they are not suitable for our culture, they are outdated. For example, in the case of divorced families, we are witnessing huge changes compared to the past" (Specialist 11).

"What the couples were concerned about, I couldn't provide an answer for them. The approach got stuck, and it didn't address the problems of the couple" (Specialist 6).

• Social Damages Affecting the Family System Over Time

This sub-theme included concepts such as extensive social changes in the family structure, changes in the

meaning of family, the evolving needs and concerns of family members compared to the past, the unexamined and unstudied nature of family changes, the elimination of family rituals, role changes, expectations, and incorrect social stereotypes. Below are some quotes from participants:

"It's even stranger with families that have parallel or extramarital relationships, which unfortunately in our religious culture, some damages in the family are not recognized by us therapists because they are not accepted in our culture. Now, suppose we have to intervene for them" (Specialist 4).

"Family dynamics have changed now. We can't implement these interventions anymore. We can't stick to the theory that the whole family needs to be present for therapy" (Specialist 8).

"Now they've fallen off the other side of the spectrum. Many people are now focused on their own satisfaction and happiness. That's why they come to therapy more. But our parents are still holding onto the old ways and think that's the right approach. This is where, when their child, who in the past few decades, says, 'Let's go to a counselor,' they don't see any need to come. They don't even think it's a problem. That's why I think there's not much hope for changing the parents of previous generations; we have to focus on those members who have recognized the need" (Specialist 9).

"There are some problems specific to Iranian culture that no one thinks are even problems. So how can a therapist treat a problem they don't even recognize? These women who are no longer looking for compatibility in the traditional sense but are seeking satisfaction—what do we do with them? The change in the role that women and children play in the family has created waves that Western psychology can't handle" (Specialist 10).

"I see this a lot in couples; it's very common now that the wife is strong, earning well, and knows what she wants, but the husband's confidence keeps shrinking and shrinking. I can't stop the wife from progressing. Now imagine I want to help the husband, and suddenly, I hit a wall of cultural narcissism. These are our cultural blind spots" (Specialist 5).

"In the past, we had oil heaters, and the family would gather around it to stay warm, they'd eat together, even do homework together by the heater. In Minuchin's family therapy theory, we talk about the dining table, which has the quality of bringing the family together. I compare that old oil heater to the dining table that used to create unity, but today, because of the many roles both parents play, the father is working two jobs, the mother too. The children are preoccupied with their own activities. They don't even eat breakfast, lunch, or dinner together anymore. Unfortunately, this sense of unity and being together has really diminished" (Specialist 15).

• Socio-Cultural and Economic Damages

The third sub-theme, socio-cultural and economic damages, consisted of initial concepts such as financial problems, economic instability, the lack of a financial support system for counseling, and the absence of a systemic perspective. Below are some quotes from participants:

"This all goes back to the instability we have in our society. We come from a culture where half of the couples' issues stem from unemployment, financial problems, and the instability of the situation, as well as migration-related stress. These issues aren't addressed in couples therapy, and that's why I always say, 'Sorry, I agree with you, but I don't know what to say' (with a tone of frustration)" (Specialist 2).

"In this society, the social aspect is very important, and not much attention is given to it in interventions. This system, the family, and the child interact with society. We have to look at it from a systemic perspective. Now, we can't say that the rising dollar doesn't affect people's mental health. At the same time, often the solution is out of our hands" (Specialist 14).

"I just empathize. I can't even tell them that economic issues aren't important and that relationships are PI always say, 'Yeah, you're right—These things are really ruining your relationship'" (Specialist 7).

"They are very hard to work with. It's very difficult. Imagine how rare it is for everyone in the family to want to come to therapy. Why? Because the father says, 'I have to go earn money. Life is hard. I'm not like you guys, sitting around and talking like you do. You think this is my job? This is the mindset right now.' But depending on the area I've worked in, it varies" (Specialist 4).

3.2. Factors Sustaining Socio-Cultural Challenges

Since another issue under investigation was identifying the factors that sustain the socio-cultural challenges in this

field, analysis of the interviews suggested that the difference in opinions regarding the strengthening of theory development versus the localization of interventions without relying on theory development could contribute to the persistence of socio-cultural challenges in family therapy interventions. For example, most participants related the challenge of applying Western theories to the neglect of research in the area of needs assessment regarding the social changes and damages affecting the contemporary family system. The following sections describe the sub-themes and some quotes from participants.

• Difference in Opinions Regarding Theory Development

Neglect of the research field, ineffective needs assessment, lack of adaptation to clients, and the absence of effective theorists were some of the initial concepts in this theme. Participants noted that this difference in opinions has led to a disconnect from proper theory development. In fact, rather than being a strength, it has caused challenges to persist. Below are some quotes from participants:

"This research gap is felt, and we've misunderstood culture, thinking that everything we do in Iranian family therapy is necessarily cultural research, while that is not the case. We don't even consider culture as a variable" (Specialist 2).

"Right now, I can tell you that many theses are gathering dust because they were not needs-assessed properly, and they are not aligned with the current issues of families and society. The couple that comes to us is constantly talking about the challenges and problems that arise between their families, whether directly or indirectly affecting their relationship. Here, we need family therapy, meaning we need to bring in the in-laws—parents, mothers-in-law, fathers-in-law, brothers-in-law, and sisters-in-law—and work on their interactions. But in reality, this doesn't happen because of the culture we have; it hasn't become common" (Specialist 6).

"The problem is that we don't know whether these theories are suitable for our culture. Even the hundred studies that have been done, for example, on marital satisfaction in the fourth stage of the family life cycle, but the base you're applying to the fourth stage of the family life cycle is not for an Iranian family" (Specialist 11).

• Localization of Interventions without Relying on Theory Development

This sub-theme included concepts such as the use of techniques without considering culture, superficial perspectives, lack of operational applicability, limitations of

culturally-bound interventions, and neglecting the culture of Iranian families. In this regard, some participants did not find attempts at "localizing" theories particularly effective and suggested that theory development, focusing on the specific issues of Iranian society, would be a better approach. Below are some quotes from participants:

"The issue is theory. We don't have a theory that fits Iranian culture. Despite all the attempts in recent years to localize theories or to Islamize them, we haven't made much progress, and theory development rooted in Iran itself, which incorporates traditional and religious foundations, is nearly nonexistent" (Specialist 10).

"We don't have theory development, and there's no qualitative research to identify these issues. First, we need a needs assessment, then problem diagnosis. So what can we do next? After that, we need to evaluate the potential benefits and drawbacks and then design a package, and finally implement it. The problem is that we don't even have a diagnosis for family issues in our own society" (Specialist 8).

"They need to be fully adapted to Iran, taking into account issues like finances and power dynamics, things that are more prevalent in our culture. If these theories are aligned in such a way, they can become useful tools for family therapists" (Specialist 12).

"Theory development is a long road, and it's not easy. But if we can even use the existing theories that have been tested and evaluated, therapists, with their skills, can adapt them to their clients and put them into practice" (Specialist 13).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the socio-cultural challenges of family therapy interventions based on the perspectives and experiences of therapists and counselors in this field. The findings from this qualitative research indicated that the primary socio-cultural challenges were related to the effects of social transformations and harms on the contemporary family system, the social damages affecting the family over time, and the cultural-economic damages. At the same time, the lack of consensus regarding theory development and the localization of interventions may perpetuate these challenges.

The first finding to be addressed is that the synthesis and analysis of the discussions revealed the inadequacy of Western classical theories in addressing the effects of social changes and harms on the contemporary family system. Participants identified this as one of the major issues related

to the applicability of outdated interventions. Therefore, this challenge underscores the urgent need for new educational resources aligned with the transformational context affecting the family. In this regard, to maintain stability in Iranian families, the necessity of using therapeutic approaches that focus on individual and interpersonal dynamics in the context of value transformations within society has been emphasized (Dehdashti & Ghobadi, 2020), alongside a strong focus on family therapy services (Mousavi, 2016). Particularly, due to the high importance of the family role in Iranian culture and the family-centered nature of Iranian society, family therapy can be considered an effective approach for addressing family issues (Khodayari Fard & Abedini, 2012; Khodayari Fard & Asayesh, 2021; Khodayarifard et al., 2007; Mousavi, 2016). In other words, it can be argued that theory development lies at the core of scientific processes and the relationship between academic institutions and the surrounding world, serving as a path through which social science scholars generate ideas and advance knowledge (Jaccard & Jacoby, 2010). However, sometimes theories encounter obstacles such as functional, structural, motivational, and cultural barriers, which reduce their effectiveness, particularly in the social sciences and humanities. Javaherdehi (2012) refers to eight key barriers to theory development and the ineffectiveness of theories in Iran: initial contextualization, subjectivism, dominant discourse, materialism, lack of insight, inability to connect reasoning with religious obedience, lack of intuitionism, and lack of tolerance (Javaherdehi, 2012). These barriers prevent the creation of new theories, and in the face of human transformations, old theories continue to be applied, even though they provide insufficient responses, and there is a lack of new interventions. The limitations in the application of old theories have also reduced their effectiveness. Family therapy, which is used worldwide through various educational programs based on specialized rules and diverse experiences, will certainly benefit from scientific contributions in this area (Asnafi & Omati, 2016).

Thus, Lynham (2000) has also examined the inefficacy of theory development in the humanities by defining the related concepts (Lynham, 2000). This inefficacy includes the lack of communication between specialists and researchers, neglect of the practical outputs of theories, limited scientific focus, insufficient responses, predominance of positivist tools, lack of clear tools, and viewing theory development as solely the responsibility of the researcher. These are also findings that emerged from the present study.

Additionally, widespread social changes related to family structure, alterations in the meaning of family, changing needs and concerns of family members compared to the past, the failure to examine the scientific changes in family dynamics, the elimination of family rituals, changing roles and expectations, and erroneous social stereotypes were identified as initial concepts of the social harms affecting the family system over time. Factors such as the emergence of new forms of families, changes in the structure of contemporary families, shifts in the needs and expectations of family members compared to the previous generation, changes in the semantic understanding of family cohesion, combined with the impact of economic problems and social harms within society, indicate that written theories in family therapy textbooks may not always effectively address these challenges (Dehdashti & Ghobadi, 2020). However, these changes are not limited to developed countries. The institution of the family in many developing countries has also faced significant transformations due to the spread of modernization. As a result of gradual changes brought by modernity in society, primary groups such as the family institution, along with secondary groups, have lost their social power and influence. Iran, like other developing countries, has taken steps toward modernization over the past few decades and, under this process, has experienced significant changes in many areas and social institutions (Sadeghi Fasaee & Erfanmanesh, 2013). Therefore, given these transformations, it is natural that family therapy theories will also be affected, as psychotherapy, in its interaction with the individual, society, culture, aesthetic concerns, religion, governance, freedom, and ethics, has evolved into a scientific-social-cultural phenomenon (Moradi Abbas Abadi et al., 2021).

According to the findings of Azarbayjani (2016), the number of visits to family therapy centers in Iran has increased (Azarbaijani, 2016). From the perspective of psychotherapists, factors such as increased awareness, media influence, changes in the social status of psychotherapy, and the growing complexity of life, alongside the failure of traditional teachings to address these complexities, have contributed to the rising demand for psychotherapy. These themes were also noted by participants in the present study, who highlighted the role of family therapy theories and their transformations. Thus, it seems that, in a time when social changes are happening rapidly and in complex ways, relying on a single theoretical model and pre-prepared techniques that fit all families is oversimplification. Instead, a holistic and creative approach

must be adopted to engage with these changes and use them to create new forms of therapeutic structures for family subsystems and, ultimately, the entire family system. In line with this finding, some studies have regarded the responsibilities of family therapy at a macro-societal level, such as social interventions (Rojano, 2004; Tisher & Nichterlein, 2018). Therefore, to identify the "pain of family therapy and its treatment," there is a need for training for family therapists that addresses the current changes affecting the family system. According to the recommendation of some participants in this study, this can be achieved through continuous needs assessments in the area of new forms of dysfunctions in families, combined with novel theories.

Moreover, it should be noted that one of the factors influencing the family system is the unique cultural environment in which the family is situated. For this reason, one of the fundamental elements in family therapy is the concept of cultural competence, defined broadly as the ability of a family therapist to work with diverse cultural groups (Rivett & Street, 2009), and within a systemic perspective, considering the position of individuals within the family system as well as the family's position within the broader social environment and the factors influencing it (Mousavi, 2016). While prior research has often focused on examining the cultural challenges of theories within the framework of Islamic dimensions of Iranian society, it appears that this finding reflects the neglect of the influence of other socio-cultural dimensions within the context of a community. On the other hand, some studies (Holyoak et al., 2020) have recommended focusing family therapy interventions within the therapy room. However, according to Dehdashti and Ghobadi (2020), the emphasis on theories like the systemic theory, which focuses on the micro-level of the family, may lead family therapists to concentrate more on economic conditions, marital skills, and similar factors, neglecting the effects of macro-level societal changes, such as the transformation in the semantic structure of family, which are a product of modernity in Iranian society (Dehdashti & Ghobadi, 2020). This neglect could lead to overlooking social issues that, due to modernity, act as hindering factors for progress at both the individual and societal levels (Zahedi et al., 2015). Therefore, financial problems, economic instability, the lack of a financial support system for counseling, and the absence of a systemic perspective are referred to as cultural-economic challenges. In Iran, attention to this issue, both in scientific studies and policymaking, is of great importance at both the micro and macro levels. At the macro level, this concept can be

explored in terms of evaluating the effects of economic and social policies and socio-economic inequality within a society, while at the micro level, the focus should be on mechanisms for securing financial resources in the health sector and out-of-pocket payments. The more the funding in this sector comes from public sources and pre-payments (before the onset of illness), the more equitable the mental health system will be, and the more funding comes from out-of-pocket payments at the time of illness, the less equitable the financial health system will be (Baavash et al., 2017).

On the other hand, the neglect of the research field, ineffective needs assessment, lack of adaptation to clients, and the absence of effective theorists have led to differing opinions among theorists. In this regard, studies have suggested that family therapy research requires more prioritized studies (Asnafi & Omati, 2016), while one of the shortcomings of psychology in Iran has been the lack of attention to new perspectives and the practical application of interventions (Azarbaijani, 2012). Based on this, the lack of theory development was a challenge that also emerged as part of this study's findings. Regarding the need for theory development that aligns with the social conditions of today's families, it must be acknowledged that many theories, in addition to being influenced by the environment in which they were formed, are also evaluated by theorists using data from that same environment (Ghobari Bonab, 2006). Thus, some participants identified the lack of theory development as a serious problem within the educational system. Therefore, sensitivity to the context and cultural conditions of interventions presented in non-indigenous theories requires fostering divergent and creative thinking in students and therapists. As Azarbayjani (2012) pointed out, one of the weaknesses of psychology in Iran is the mismatch between existing knowledge and the issues and culture of Iranian society, encouraging mental health professionals to engage in ideation and theory development (Azarbaijani, 2012). Furthermore, the results of the research by Atashk (2011) indicated that the goals and curricula of family-related fields, such as family therapy and family counseling, require revision to align with new family issues and local cultural conditions (Atashak, 2011). Rezaei and colleagues (2021) also stated that the lack of research and therapeutic interventions aligned with cultural contexts is one of the challenges facing psychotherapy in Iranian society (Rezaei et al., 2021). Another common issue among Iranian therapists, as observed in the study (Moradi Abbas Abadi et al., 2021), is the interest in integrating theories. There was a widespread argument in the culture that because

psychological theories are not indigenous and come from the West, they can be adapted in practice. The issue was not that incompatible concepts should be discarded but that the integration of incompatible concepts with culture would also be created. Psychotherapists, despite recognizing the importance of theory and sometimes mastering it, did not feel the need to rely on a single theory but allowed a variety of theories to support their practice across a range of activities.

Among the participants, some referred to the benefits of localizing interventions by the therapists themselves. Using techniques without regard to culture, superficiality, lack of attention to practicality, the limitations of culture-bound interventions, and neglecting the Iranian family culture were among the primary concepts of this theme. This aligns with the findings of Moradi Abbas Abadi et al. (2021), who noted that family therapists, in an effort to overcome the challenge of culture-bound Western interventions, often embrace eclectic approaches (Moradi Abbas Abadi et al., 2021). In this regard, Zarani and Sadeghi (2017) emphasized that attention to cultural context throughout the stages of diagnosis, causality, and treatment is crucial, encouraging therapists to be aware of its impact on their work (Zarani & Sadeghi, 2017). However, it is noteworthy that therapeutic exploitation through the development of indigenous knowledge generally occurs by generating hypotheses aligned with the culture, followed by scientific evaluation (Ghobari Bonab, 2006). Therefore, the process of family therapy, from the therapists' perspective, is shaped by activities they engage in, activities in which theory plays a central role to create a framework that guides the interaction between the therapist and the client. Given that family therapy deals with a range of human dimensions, it cannot establish rigid and unchangeable rules. It can be concluded that, despite the need to select a precise protocol, adherence to it is often difficult. It seems that flexibility is an inherent part of psychotherapy rules. Therefore, the disagreement found in the current research regarding the localization of interventions through strengthening theory development versus localization by therapists themselves, using techniques from other approaches, is summarized in how it is implemented. This is because participants who did not consider the process of localization as an effective solution focused more on identifying new social issues and, consequently, on developing appropriate and efficient theories rather than coordinating cultural aspects with existing Western approaches.

In conclusion, the findings of this study, consistent with previous research, highlight the significant and effective role of socio-cultural factors in providing therapeutic interventions and the quality of therapeutic outcomes. The findings indicated that the emergence of new issues in today's family, which result from rapid social transformations, combined with the religious culture of Iranian society, has intensified the challenge of culture-bound interventions. Western, outdated family therapy theories have proven ineffective in addressing these recent changes in the family structure. In this context, despite some differences in opinion regarding the localization of interventions, the weakness of research in the realm of theory development and a more precise identification of new socio-cultural factors affecting the family were also recognized as important.

This conclusion offers a new perspective on the impact of societal context on the efficient or inefficient implementation of interventions proposed in non-indigenous theories, opening a path beyond the examination of religion and written texts in research on the challenge of culture-bound interventions.

5. Suggestions and Limitations

Some limitations should be considered. One of these is the limited generalizability of the results. This research was conducted with specialists in various fields of couple and family therapy in Tehran, so the results cannot be generalized to other regions or cities. The second limitation is the difficulty of accessing therapists due to time constraints, which affected cooperation. The present study focused on examining the implementation context of family therapy from the perspectives of therapists and counselors in the field, so it is recommended that future research also explore operational strategies for resolving these challenges. Furthermore, given the importance of family therapy, it is suggested that senior officials from the Welfare Organization, the Iranian Psychological and Counseling Organization, and other counseling centers use this research as a foundation for empowerment programs for counselors to develop intervention protocols and counseling programs. These programs should aim to familiarize counselors with family therapy models and provide training for proper diagnosis and their implementation in family therapy centers. Additionally, as the need for further attention to and follow-up on facilities that play a facilitating and impactful role in the successful implementation of family therapy

interventions was highlighted, it is recommended that actions be taken to assess the status of these centers and then standardize the physical facilities and staff training at family therapy service centers. It is hoped that this article will serve as a means for raising awareness among counselors and mental health officials.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

The ethical code number from the Royan Research Institute Ethics Committee is IR.ACECR.ROYAN.REC.1400.052. It is noteworthy that before conducting the interviews, participants were fully informed about ethical issues, including confidentiality, the right to withdraw from the study at any stage, and the voluntary nature of their participation in answering questions.

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