ISSN: 2717-3216 *Volume 13, Issue 1(2026)* https://www.ijfpjournal.ir/

Iranian Journal of Family Psychology

Research Paper

https://doi.org/10.22034/ijfp.2026.2088007.1509

Developing a Model of Marital Resilience in the Context of Family-of-Origin Interference: A Grounded Theory Study

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Article Info.

Received: 02 Feb 2026

Revised: 18 Apr 2026

Accepted:02 May 2026

Published:20 May 2026

Keywords:

Marital Resilience,

Family-of-Origin Interference,

Flexible Boundary-Making,

Grounded Theory

Abstract

Abstract

This study aimed to develop a model of marital resilience in the context of family-of-origin interference. A qualitative grounded theory design was utilized. Through purposive and theoretical sampling, 16 couples (32 participants) were recruited from Tehran in 2025. In-depth, semi-structured individual and couple interviews were conducted for data collection; data analysis was performed using open, axial, and selective coding. It led to the extraction of 187 initial codes, 32 subcategories, and 10 main categories. The core category was identified as "Flexible Boundary-Making: The Art of Preserving Marital Autonomy While Maintaining Family Belonging." The paradigmatic model included causal conditions (multiple forms of family interference and primary couple vulnerabilities), contextual conditions (family-oriented cultural norms and roles, and the structure and dynamics of the family-of-origin), intervening conditions (facilitative personality traits and supportive-moderating resources), strategies (couple boundary-making, strengthening the couple bond, and managing relationships with families), and consequences (transformation of the couple relationship and redefinition of intergenerational ties). The results indicated that marital resilience in the face of family-of-origin interference is a dynamic and multidimensional process in which resilient couples, by creating a balance between autonomy and belonging, not only maintain their relationship but also achieve growth and transformation. The presented model can serve as a culturally specific framework for designing clinical interventions, premarital counseling, and couples' educational programs.

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How to Cite:
Zarei, S. (2026). Developing a Model of Marital Resilience in the Context of Family-of-Origin Interference: A Grounded Theory Study. *Iranian Journal of Family Psychology. 13*(1), 1-4. https://doi.org/10.22034/ijfp.2026.2088007.1509

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Introduction

The family, as the first and most stable social institution, plays a fundamental role in shaping individuals' identities, communication patterns, and semantic systems (Goldenberg et al., 2017). However, emotional and structural ties with the family-of-origin after marriage have always been a major source of tension in marital life (Barrow et al., 2024). The interference of families of origin in various aspects of marital life, from everyday decision-making to fundamental values, can pose serious challenges to the stability of the couple's relationship (Chen & Busby, 2019; Komorowska-Pudło, 2021). The importance of this phenomenon is especially pronounced in societies with a collectivist culture, such as Iran, where interpersonal boundaries are traditionally more permeable (Rahmati & Kermani Baghestani, 2024). Studies on the impact of family-of-origin on marriage are rooted in intergenerational approaches and family systems theory (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The concept of differentiation has a central place in this theoretical framework and refers to the capacity to maintain an independent identity while emotionally belonging to the family (Neophytou et al., 2025). In line with the paradigm shift of the last two decades from deficit/damage models to protective processes (Walsh, 2016 Segrin & Flora, 2025), the concept of marital resilience has become central. Despite the significant number of research studies, two fundamental gaps are evident in the national and international literature. First, most studies in the context of Iran have focused on conflicts and harms resulting from family involvement and have paid little attention to successful coping processes (Mahmoodi et al, 2025). Second, in the international literature, marital resilience models have been developed mainly in the cultural context of individualistic societies and are not generalizable to collectivist cultures such as Iran (Daneshpour, 2009; Hiew et al, 2016). Therefore, this study aims to develop a data-based model of the marital resilience process in the context of family-of-origin intervention in Iran.

Methods

The present study was conducted with a qualitative approach and systematic grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The participants included 16 couples (i.e., 32 individuals) living in Tehran in 2025, living a marital life for at least five years, and perceived the interference of the family-of-origin as a major challenge and met the criteria for marital resilience in the screening interview. The male participants' mean age was 38.1 years, and that of female participants was 34.4 years. In addition, the mean length of marriage was 10.2 years. Sampling was carried out through purposive sampling with maximum diversity. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured individual and couple interviews. The interview protocol included 14 questions, the content validity of which was confirmed by the opinions of five family therapy experts. Individual interviews were conducted in one to three days, and couple interviews were conducted one week later. Data analysis was conducted in the three stages of open, axial, and selective coding. Theoretical saturation was achieved after 14 interviews, and two more interviews were conducted for assurance. Lincoln and Guba(1985) strategies, including credibility, transferability, reliability, and confirmability, were used to ensure the validity of the findings. Member check was performed by returning the summary of findings to the 12 participants, 10 of whom confirmed the findings and two suggested minor corrections. All stages of the research were documented in a 46-page notebook, and the audio files were deleted after implementation.

Results

Data analysis led to the extraction of 187 initial codes, 32 subcategories, and 10 main categories. The core category was identified as "Flexible Boundary-Making: The Art of Preserving Marital Autonomy While Maintaining Family Belonging." The paradigmatic model consisted of the following six main components: The causal conditions consisted of the two categories of multiple forms of family interference with four components, including informational interference (constant inquiring about details of private life), decisional interference (pressure to influence important choices such as buying an apartment or having children), behavioral interference (violation of physical privacy through uncoordinated presence or moving belongings), and emotional interference (coalition building and incitement against the spouse), which participants described as the most destructive form. The second category was primary couple vulnerabilities, including individual differentiation (inability to say "no" to parents and need for constant approval), lack of communication skills (silence, aggression, or withdrawal in the face of conflict), economic dependence (decreased bargaining power), and unresolved childhood wounds (institutionalization of unhealthy communication patterns).

The contextual conditions included two categories: 1) family-oriented cultural norms and roles, including collectivist values, the "good child" norm, and traditional gender roles that make boundary setting not only difficult but also culturally "incorrect" and equate expressing disagreement with parents with ingratitude. 2) The structure and dynamics of the family-of-origin, including a controlling parenting style that institutionalizes patterns of pure obedience and a history of interfering in the marriages of other children that normalizes this pattern and makes it more difficult to resist. The intervening conditions included two categories: 1) facilitative personality traits, including emotional maturity (patience and emotion regulation), cognitive flexibility (taking a perspective and revising beliefs), and assertiveness (expressing a respectful presence), which participants emphasized fluctuated over time; even emotionally mature individuals show impulsive reactions on stressful days. 2) Supportive-moderating resources included financial independence (increasing bargaining power and reducing dependence on family) and access to educational resources (counseling and self-help books) that are effective; the combination of these two resources provides couples with "dialogue power" and "dialogue style."

The strategies included three categories: 1) Couple boundary making in three forms: verbal (assertive conversation with parents), behavioral (management of contacts and family presence), and spatial (independence of the place of residence), which participants described as a gradual, layered process with frequent failures. Unlike Western models that introduce boundary making as a decisive and one-time action, Iranian couples, due to collectivist values, advance boundary making in a stepwise manner, from soft (verbal) boundaries to hard (spatial) boundaries. 2) Strengthening the couple bond, including empathetic communication (active listening and expressing mutual understanding), constructive conflict resolution (not arguing in the presence of families), creating shared meaning (considering the relationship as a team), and conscious emotional investment (conscious decision to spend quality time and energy together). 3) Managing relationships with families included managed respect (maintaining the relationship by setting rules for interaction, without breaking the relationship or absolute surrender), and clarifying expectations (declaring needs and boundaries to families clearly and respectfully). The consequences included transformation of the couple relationship and redefinition of intergenerational ties. They consisted of four components: strengthening "we-ness" (prioritizing the couple relationship over other relationships), increasing intimacy (the result of overcoming common challenges), growing after stress (making the relationship stronger after facing problems), and healthy redefining intergenerational relationships (creating a new pattern of communication in which both respect and privacy is maintained), which the participants spoke about cautiously and did not consider as definitive.

Conclusion

The findings of the present study showed that marital resilience in the face of family-of-origin interference is a nonlinear, dynamic process. Resilient couples, by using boundary-making strategies, strengthening the couple bond, and managing relationships with families, under the influence of facilitative personality traits and supportive resources in a specific cultural and structural context, achieve outcomes such as relationship transformation and redefinition of intergenerational bonds. The core category of "flexible boundary-making" indicates a constant effort to maintain couple independence. What separates resilient couples from others is not "permanent success," but "constant effort" to maintain this balance. This finding is consistent with previous research on family involvement (Abbaspour et al., 2024; Zohrei et al, 2025) and differentiation theory (Bowen, 1978), however, unlike Western models that present boundary-making as a decisive and one-time action, the model presented in the context of Iranian collectivist culture emphasizes its gradual, layered nature, accompanied by repeated failures. In Iranian collectivist culture, unlike individualistic societies, absolute independence is not considered a value, and flexible boundary-making, as the art of maintaining couple independence while belonging to the family, constitutes the core of marital resilience. It is suggested that studies comparing resilient couples and couples seeking divorce due to family interference be conducted to more accurately identify the differentiating factors. In addition, longitudinal studies can be conducted to identify critical points of intervention and outline the paths of boundary-making evolution. Furthermore, a national questionnaire to measure flexible couple boundaries can be developed based on the ten main categories of this study. The presented model can be used as a local framework for designing clinical interventions, premarital counseling, and couples' educational programs.

Acknowledgements
The researchers would like to thank all participants for taking part in the study.

Conflict of interest
According to the authors, this study had no conflict of interest.

AI Use Statement
The authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence (AI) or AI-assisted technologies were used at any stage of the preparation, writing, editing, analysis, or translation of this manuscript.

Ethical Approval
The authors declare that All procedures performed in this study were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible institutional and national research committee.

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