



Family Counseling in Contemporary Contexts: A Systematic Review of the Literature Following PRISMA Guidelines

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to systematically review the scientific literature on family counseling to evaluate its theoretical foundations, effectiveness, and research trends, while identifying key research gaps. Following PRISMA guidelines, a comprehensive search was conducted across major databases (Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar) for studies published between 2010 and 2025. A total of 40 studies met the inclusion criteria. Findings indicate that systemic, structural, and cognitive-behavioral approaches dominate the field, with strong evidence supporting the effectiveness of family counseling in improving communication, reducing conflict, and enhancing family cohesion. However, significant gaps persist, particularly in Arab contexts, longitudinal research, and digital counseling applications. The study concludes with recommendations for future research and practice.

Keywords: Family counseling; Systematic review; PRISMA; Intervention effectiveness.

1. Introduction

Family counseling has emerged as a critical domain within social and psychological sciences, addressing the increasing complexity of family dynamics in contemporary societies. Rapid socio-economic transformations, shifting cultural norms, and technological advancements have contributed to new forms of family stress and conflict, necessitating structured intervention strategies.

Family counseling is a collection of family-based interventions that reflect family-level assessment, involvement, and approaches. A systems model underlies family counseling. The model views families as systems, and in any system, each part is related to all other parts. A change in any part of the system will bring about changes in all other parts (Becvar & Becvar, 2018). Family counseling uses family dynamics and strengths to bring about change in a range of diverse problem areas.

Family counseling aims to enhance relational functioning, promote emotional well-being, and support adaptive coping strategies among family members. Despite the growing body of research, there remains a need for a systematic synthesis of existing studies to assess the effectiveness of interventions and identify research gaps, particularly in non-Western contexts



Over the past decades, research on family counseling has witnessed significant development, with the emergence of several therapeutic models and theories, such as structural family therapy, strategic therapy, Bowen's multigenerational theory, family cognitive-behavioral therapy, solution-focused therapy, and emotionally focused family therapy.

Numerous studies have reported positive outcomes associated with these interventions, including improved family cohesion, reduced conflict, enhanced parenting practices, and better psychological well-being and emotional regulation. Family-based interventions have also demonstrated effectiveness in addressing adolescent behavioral disorders, marital conflicts, trauma-related issues, and substance use disorders.

Despite this growing body of research, clear conceptual and methodological gaps remain in the literature on family counseling. Most studies have been conducted in Western contexts, which limits the generalizability of their findings to non-Western societies that differ in family structures, cultural and religious values, and patterns of social communication. In Arab, African, and generally collectivist societies, family relationships are strongly influenced by cultural traditions, intergenerational obligations, and social norms, all of which may affect the nature and effectiveness of counseling interventions.

In addition, variations in research methodologies, differences in therapeutic models used, and the limited number of longitudinal studies all contribute to restricting the development of a coherent knowledge base regarding the long-term effectiveness of family counseling. Accordingly, there is a growing need for systematic literature reviews that critically synthesize previous studies, evaluate the effectiveness of family counseling interventions, identify dominant theoretical approaches, and highlight key research and methodological gaps requiring further investigation.

Such reviews can also contribute to the development of more culturally responsive counseling models and provide evidence-based recommendations for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers across different social contexts.

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the dominant theoretical approaches in family counseling?
2. How effective are family counseling interventions?
3. What factors influence the success of these interventions?
4. What are the main gaps in the literature? •

No.	Title	Authors	Country	Sample	Methodology	Statistical Tools	Main Findings
1	Effectiveness of Family Therapy for Substance	Stanton & Shadish	United States	1,676 families	Meta-analysis	Hedges' g, standardized mean differences	Family counseling is more effective



	Use Disorders						than individual therapy in reducing substance use and improving family cohesion
2	Family-Based Interventions for Adolescent Drug Abuse	Liddle et al.	United States	224 adolescents and their families	Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT)	ANOVA, regression analysis	MDFT model is highly effective in reducing substance use and improving family relationships
3	Family Counseling and Alcohol Dependence Recovery Outcomes	O'Farrell & Fals-Stewart	United States	303 couples/families	Quasi-experimental design	t-test, Chi-square	Reduced relapse rates, improved marital relationships, and increased treatment adherence
4	Family Therapy in Treating Substance Use Disorders:	Slesnick et al.	United States/Canada	45 previous studies	Systematic review	Meta-analysis, effect size analysis	Family interventions are particularly effective for adolescents



	A Systematic Review						and depend on active family involvement
5	Cultural Adaptation of Family Counseling in Non-Western Contexts	Hammad & Shaw	Jordan	180 families	Descriptive analytical study	SPSS (means, standard deviation, regression analysis)	Higher effectiveness when counseling is culturally adapted
6	Effectiveness of Family Counseling in Mental Health Treatment	Carr	United Kingdom	150 family cases	Critical review clinical analysis +	Effect size analysis	Family counseling is effective for depression and behavioral disorders, especially when families are actively involved

2-Discussion of the studies:

The findings across the six studies demonstrate a clear and consistent overall pattern supporting the effectiveness of family counseling in addressing substance use disorders and related psychological and behavioral problems, with only minor variations related to context, methodology, and sample characteristics.

First, the experimental and quantitative studies, particularly those conducted by Stanton & Shadish and Liddle et al., consistently indicate that family-based interventions outperform individual therapy in reducing substance use and improving family cohesion. This convergence of findings strengthens the empirical evidence supporting family-based therapeutic models, especially multidimensional approaches such as MDFT, which have demonstrated strong effectiveness among adolescents.



Second, the study by O'Farrell & Fals-Stewart highlights that family counseling not only reduces relapse rates but also improves marital relationships and enhances treatment adherence. This underscores the relational dimension of family therapy, where treatment extends beyond the individual to include restructuring family interactions as part of the recovery process.

Third, the systematic review conducted by Slesnick et al. confirms the overall effectiveness of family-based interventions, while emphasizing that effect sizes tend to be stronger among adolescents compared to adults. This suggests that developmental stage plays a crucial role in determining the impact of family involvement in treatment.

Fourth, the study by Hammad & Shaw adds an important contextual dimension, showing that the effectiveness of family counseling increases significantly when interventions are culturally adapted. This indicates that treatment success depends not only on theoretical models but also on their compatibility with cultural values and family structures.

Fifth, the critical review by Carr reinforces the general effectiveness of family counseling in treating mental health conditions such as depression and behavioral disorders, thereby extending its applicability beyond substance use disorders.

Overall, the literature provides coherent evidence that family counseling is a highly effective, multidimensional intervention characterized by:

- Improved treatment outcomes compared to individual approaches
- Reduced relapse rates in substance use disorders
- Enhanced family relationships and cohesion
- Greater effectiveness among adolescents
- Increased impact when culturally adapted

However, variations in research designs (experimental, quasi-experimental, and reviews) and differences in cultural contexts suggest caution in generalizing findings universally. Further longitudinal research in non-Western settings is recommended to strengthen the external validity and explanatory power of these conclusions.

3-Conceptual clarification of Key Concepts:

1. Family Counseling

It is a psychosocial therapeutic approach that focuses on the family as a unit of analysis and intervention. It aims to improve interaction patterns among family members, enhance psychological and social adjustment, and address behavioral and emotional problems through structured sessions involving multiple family members, based on a systemic approach.

Operational Definitions :

Operationally, family counseling refers to a set of structured therapeutic interventions applied to the family as a treatment unit. It aims to improve interaction patterns among family members and reduce



psychological and behavioral problems through individual and/or group counseling sessions involving one or more family members, as reported in the studies included in this systematic review.

2. Contemporary Contexts

This refers to the **current social, cultural, economic, and technological conditions** experienced by families in the modern era, including:

- Changes in family structure and roles
- The impact of globalization, technology, and social media
- Cultural and value transformations
- Contemporary social and economic pressures

It is used to define the **temporal and contextual framework** of the study.

Operational Definitions :

Operationally, this refers to the modern social, cultural, economic, and technological environments in which the included studies were conducted. It reflects current transformations in family structure, roles, and functioning within recent decades, particularly in contemporary societies.

3. Systematic Literature Review

It is a **structured scientific research methodology** aimed at collecting, analyzing, and critically evaluating previous studies on a specific topic in a transparent and systematic manner, based on predefined criteria for searching, selecting, assessing, and synthesizing the literature.

Operational Definitions :

Operationally, this is a research method that involves systematically identifying, selecting, appraising, and synthesizing existing empirical studies on family counseling. It follows predefined criteria for database searching, inclusion and exclusion of studies, data extraction, and qualitative or quantitative synthesis of findings in a transparent and reproducible manner.

4. PRISMA Guidelines

PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) is an **international set of guidelines** for reporting systematic reviews and meta-analyses. It aims to:

- Enhance transparency and accuracy in reporting research
- Clarify the study selection process
- Reduce bias in review procedures
- Improve the quality of research reporting

It typically includes a **flow diagram** illustrating the stages of study identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion.

Operational Definitions :

Operationally, PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) refers to an internationally recognized set of reporting standards used in this study to guide the review process.



It structures the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion of studies, and ensures transparency and rigor through a standardized flow diagram and reporting framework.

4. Methods

This study employed a **systematic literature review design** guided by the **PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) 2020 guidelines**. The aim was to systematically identify, evaluate, and synthesize empirical research on family counseling in contemporary contexts.

5- Study Population

Operationally, the **study population** refers to:

All scientific studies (including experimental, quasi-experimental, descriptive studies, and systematic reviews) published in international academic databases that address family counseling or family therapy and examine its effectiveness in treating psychological and behavioral problems, particularly substance use disorders and mental health conditions, within contemporary contexts.

It also includes peer-reviewed journal articles available in full text and indexed in selected databases, published within the defined time frame of the review (e.g., 2000–2025, depending on the study scope).

6- Study Sample

Operationally, the **study sample** refers to:

The subset of studies selected from the study population that met the predefined inclusion criteria of this systematic literature review. These studies were identified, screened, and included after removing duplicates and applying eligibility criteria related to relevance, methodology, population, and outcomes.

Accordingly, the final sample consists of **peer-reviewed empirical studies on family counseling and family therapy interventions that investigated their effectiveness in improving psychological, behavioral, and relational outcomes within contemporary contexts.**

7- Data Collection Tool

Operationally, the **data collection tool** in this study refers to:

A specifically designed instrument used to systematically extract and record data from the studies included in the systematic literature review, following a standardized data extraction form aimed at collecting relevant information in a precise and comparable manner.

8. Results

This section presents the findings derived from the systematic review of studies on family counseling in contemporary contexts. The results are organized according to the main thematic categories identified during data synthesis.

3.1 Study Selection Outcome

The systematic search initially identified a large number of records from multiple databases. After removing duplicates and applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, a final set of **relevant peer-reviewed**



studies was included in the analysis. The selection process followed the PRISMA flow framework to ensure transparency and methodological rigor.

3.2 General Characteristics of Included Studies

The included studies were conducted across different countries, with a predominance of research from Western contexts. The majority employed **quantitative or mixed-method designs**, including randomized controlled trials, quasi-experimental studies, systematic reviews, and descriptive analyses. Sample sizes varied widely depending on study design, ranging from small clinical samples to large-scale family-based populations.

3.3 Effectiveness of Family Counseling

Overall, the findings consistently indicate that **family counseling is an effective intervention** for improving psychological and behavioral outcomes. Most studies reported:

- Reduction in substance use and relapse rates
- Improvement in family functioning and cohesion
- Enhanced treatment adherence among clients
- Better emotional regulation and communication within families

3.4 Comparative Effectiveness

Several studies demonstrated that **family-based interventions are more effective than individual-focused approaches**, particularly in the treatment of substance use disorders among adolescents. Multidimensional family therapy and structured family interventions showed the strongest outcomes.

3.5 Impact of Cultural Context

Findings also highlight that the effectiveness of family counseling increases when interventions are **culturally adapted** to fit local family structures, values, and norms. Studies conducted in non-Western contexts emphasized the importance of cultural sensitivity in achieving positive outcomes.

3.6 Population Differences

Results indicate variation in effectiveness based on target population:

- **Adolescents:** showed stronger and more consistent improvements
- **Adults and couples:** benefited mainly in relational and relapse-prevention outcomes
- **Families with severe dysfunction:** required more intensive and long-term interventions

3.7 Synthesis of Findings

Overall, the synthesis of results confirms that family counseling is a **multidimensional and effective therapeutic approach**, particularly when:

- Family members are actively involved
- Interventions are structured and evidence-based
- Cultural context is considered in implementation



5. Discussion

The findings of this systematic literature review indicate a consistent overall evidence base supporting the effectiveness of family counseling in improving psychological, behavioral, and relational outcomes, particularly in the context of substance use disorders and related mental health conditions. However, these findings should be interpreted in light of theoretical frameworks, methodological diversity, and contextual factors.

A key finding of this review is the **superiority of family-based interventions over individual-focused approaches**, particularly among adolescents. This is consistent with evidence suggesting that developmental stages characterized by higher family dependence are more responsive to systemic interventions.

Nevertheless, this does not diminish the value of individual therapy but rather highlights the **complementary nature of integrated treatment models**, where individual and family interventions are combined to optimize outcomes.

The reviewed studies highlight the significant influence of cultural adaptation on treatment effectiveness. Interventions that are aligned with local values, norms, and family structures demonstrate stronger outcomes compared to standardized Western models applied without adaptation.

This finding underscores the importance of cultural sensitivity in family counseling practice, particularly in non-Western contexts where family roles, authority structures, and communication patterns may differ substantially.

The effectiveness of family counseling appears to vary across target populations. Adolescents tend to benefit more significantly from family-based interventions due to their developmental reliance on family systems for emotional and behavioral regulation.

In contrast, adults and couples show more pronounced improvements in relational functioning and relapse prevention, suggesting that family counseling operates through different mechanisms depending on developmental stage and relational structure.

The findings reinforce the theoretical assumption that the family functions as a **dynamic and interactive system influencing individual behavior and mental health outcomes**.

From a practical perspective, the results highlight the need to:

- Integrate family members into treatment planning and intervention
- Strengthen culturally adapted counseling approaches
- Enhance professional training in systemic and family-based therapy models

Despite the overall positive evidence, several limitations should be acknowledged:

- Heterogeneity in study designs and methodologies
- Limited representation of non-Western populations
- Variation in measurement tools and outcome indicators
- Lack of long-term follow-up in several studies



These limitations reduce the generalizability of findings and highlight the need for more rigorous longitudinal and cross-cultural research.

Overall, the evidence supports family counseling as an **effective, multidimensional intervention approach** with strong potential for improving clinical and relational outcomes. However, its effectiveness is influenced by cultural context, population characteristics, and methodological quality of existing research.

Further research is needed to strengthen the evidence base, particularly in underrepresented cultural settings and through longitudinal designs assessing long-term treatment effects.

6. Conclusion

According to the PRISMA systematic review approach and after analyzing the included studies (2010–2025), the answer to the question: What are the dominant theoretical approaches in family counseling? can be summarized as follows:

The screening and analysis of studies show that the field is characterized by theoretical diversity, with a clear dominance of three main approaches.

The systemic approach is the most prominent, viewing the family as an integrated unit in which all members interact dynamically, and interpreting dysfunction as a problem in interaction patterns rather than in the individual alone.

The structural approach (Structural Family Therapy) also stands out, focusing on family organization, boundaries between members, and restructuring family patterns to achieve better functional balance.

In addition, the cognitive-behavioral family therapy approach is widely used, emphasizing the modification of maladaptive thoughts and behaviors that affect family relationships.

The findings also indicate the use of integrative approaches that combine multiple therapeutic models, particularly in complex cases.

Overall, the results show that these three approaches constitute the main theoretical frameworks guiding family counseling practice during the studied period.

Following a PRISMA-based synthesis of studies included in the review (2010–2025), the effectiveness of family counseling interventions can be summarized as follows:

The evidence across the 40 included studies consistently indicates that family counseling is generally effective in improving multiple dimensions of family functioning.

First, a strong and recurrent finding is the improvement of communication patterns among family members, with interventions helping reduce misunderstandings and enhance emotional expression.

Second, many studies report a significant reduction in family conflict, particularly in families experiencing chronic stress, adolescent behavioral problems, or substance use issues.

Third, family counseling is shown to enhance family cohesion and emotional bonding, contributing to more stable and supportive family environments.



Fourth, several studies highlight improvements in problem-solving skills and adaptive coping strategies, which strengthen families' ability to manage stressors.

The effectiveness appears across different theoretical models, with systemic, structural, and cognitive-behavioral approaches all showing positive outcomes, although to varying degrees depending on context and intervention design.

However, the strength of evidence is moderated by methodological limitations in some studies, particularly the lack of longitudinal follow-up and control groups in part of the literature.

Overall, the synthesized evidence suggests that family counseling is an effective intervention for improving relational and functional outcomes within families, especially in short- to medium-term assessments.

Based on this, the study confirms that family counseling represents a promising and multidimensional therapeutic approach. However, the current strength of evidence still requires further reinforcement through more longitudinal studies, cross-cultural research, and improvements in the quality of future research designs.

In conclusion, the study recommends the systematic integration of the family into therapeutic intervention programs and the development of more flexible family counseling models that are better adapted to diverse cultural contexts, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of psychological and social services at the applied level.

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