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A Grounded Theory Model of Family Sustainability with an Emphasis on Cultural Structures (Case Study: The City of Isfahan)

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study aims to develop a grounded theory model of family sustainability with an emphasis on cultural structures.

Methods: This qualitative study employed the grounded theory approach. The research field was the city of Isfahan, and the participants consisted of fourteen experts and specialists in family studies. Sampling was conducted using a purposeful–theoretical method, and data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Data analysis was carried out through open, axial, and selective coding.

Results: Findings revealed that the grounded theory model of family sustainability with emphasis on cultural structures revolves around several core categories. Causal conditions: the family-oriented cultural lifeworld, semantic foundations of family sustainability, dynamics of cultural–institutional disjunction within the family, normalization of rupture in the marriage institution, transformation in mate selection, cultural fragmentation, and social atomization. Contextual conditions: cohesive norms and interventionist cultural life. Intervening conditions: dialogical life, media dominance over family life, and structural tensions of social networks. Strategies: cultural socialization, regeneration of the local–cultural system, gradual formation of cultural order, and simplification of marriage rituals. Consequences: individual development, stability of the social system, and sustainability of governance structures. The core category emerging from these relationships is "family sustainability as the reproduction of interactive–institutional cohesion within a cultural context."

Conclusions: The study concludes that family sustainability is not merely an individual or institutional phenomenon but rather a dynamic and future-oriented process. It is continuously reproduced through interactions among family members in connection with broader cultural, social, and institutional structures.

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Introduction

The sustainability of the family institution is regarded as a strategic necessity for the cohesion and stability of society in most communities. Nevertheless, throughout history, the family institution has continually undergone structural and functional transformations due to various factors. In the modern world, influenced by profound social and cultural changes, the family has experienced significant shifts both in its nature and in its functions. Research on the family domain indicates that this institution has been subject to extensive transformations. In other words, in modern societies, the family is experiencing a fundamental structural and functional metamorphosis—one markedly different from what existed in the past.

Undoubtedly, these transformations, and their trajectories, have weakened the form, structure, and role of the family compared to previous eras in most societies. In modern Western societies—considered pioneers of social and cultural change—the processes of industrialization and modernization have, over past decades, contributed to the emergence of diverse family forms, the spread of cohabitation without marriage, shrinking family size, fragmentation of family units, the reduction of traditional functions, the flattening of family power hierarchies, inefficiency, and ultimately, instability and disintegration of the family (Giddens, 1992; Lash, 1997; Newman, 1999; Inglehart, 2000; Castells, 2001; Kiernan, 2004).

However, as Giddens (1989) observes, the transformation of the family is not confined to particular societies but represents a global phenomenon. Beyond Western societies, these changes are increasingly evident in other regions as well (Chitsaz, 2023, p. 90). In non-Western and developing societies, socioeconomic transformations, the process of modernization—particularly in urban settings—and the spread of modern culture across various social strata have deeply affected the family structure. One of the earliest impacts of modernity on the family institution was the widespread transition from the extended to the nuclear family. A major consequence of this transformation has been the weakening of familial bonds and the reduction of family stability (Jamshidieh et al., 2013, p. 184).

Studies on the family in Iran (Azad Armaki, 2016; Ghaeni Rad, 2017) likewise indicate that the Iranian family has undergone substantial structural and functional changes in recent years (Chitsaz, 2023, p. 91). Although the Iranian family maintained relative stability in earlier decades, evidence suggests that notable transformations began roughly a decade ago (Bagi & Abbasi Shavazi, 2020,

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p. 203). These include structural, functional, attitudinal, and cultural changes that have introduced new challenges to Iranian family life.

Among the most significant transformations are the transition from extended to nuclear family structures, delayed marriage, declining marriage rates, rising permanent singlehood, changes in spouse-selection criteria, weakened family bonds, reduced family stability, increased divorce, and the growing prevalence of cohabitation and "white marriage" (unregistered cohabitation) (Abbasi Shavazi & Askari Nadoushan, 2005; Jamshidieh et al., 2013; Hajian Moghadam et al., 2015; Bagi & Abbasi Shavazi, 2020; Kazemipour, 2022; Chitsaz, 2023; Parhodeh et al., 2025; Moradi, 2021). Many scholars contend that these transformations cannot be explained solely by economic or structural shifts; rather, they are deeply rooted in cultural and social changes (Kazemipour, 2022, p. 97). Social and cultural changes in Iranian society—shaped by both global influences and domestic developments—have altered perspectives toward marriage and family stability (Moradi, 2021, p. 236). Empirical evidence and statistical indicators related to the family reveal that the transformations once seen predominantly in Western societies have now manifested, to varying degrees, within Iranian families. One of the most striking of these is the rise in divorce—a highly reliable indicator of marital instability—which has become particularly pronounced in large urban centers, challenging the endurance and continuity of family life.

Given that most major social transformations in Iran either originate within the family or are directed toward it (Azad Armaki, 2007, p. 3), and considering that any change in family relations reciprocally affects societal relations in a dialectical manner (E'zazi, 2008, p. 46), understanding family transformations—and particularly family sustainability—requires attention to multiple factors. Among the most critical of these are the changing cultural conditions that have shaped Iranian society in recent decades.

Indeed, the family should not be viewed as a closed or isolated unit, but rather as a dynamic institution influenced by wider social transformations, while also retaining the capacity to adapt to and influence these changes (Behnam, 2013, p. 25). In other words, changes within the family have not occurred abruptly or by decree, but rather have evolved organically through ongoing social dynamics and in interaction with other components of the social system (Moradi, 2021, p. 224).

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As previously noted, one of the most influential domains shaping family transformations is culture and cultural structures, which provide the contextual foundation for the formation, continuity, and functioning of the family institution. According to William Goode (1963), the impact of industrialization on family transformation is evident across the globe; however, the direction and nature of these changes differ depending on each society's cultural structure (Goode, 1963, p. 369). The family's functioning as the primary agent of socialization is thus deeply embedded within the broader cultural milieu. McDonald (1994) refers to this as the "familial moral order", arguing that it constitutes a fundamental element of culture in all societies (Abbasi Shavazi & McDonald, 2008).

Accordingly, culture—as a network of shared meanings, values, and norms—provides the framework within which families are formed, relationships are endowed with meaning, and processes of family stability or disruption unfold. Therefore, understanding family sustainability without considering cultural structures would yield a fragmented and inadequate analysis of the complex reality of family life and its transformations.

Consequently, the study of family sustainability requires a grounded, culturally embedded perspective that captures the lived realities of those directly engaged with this phenomenon. Such an approach allows for the development of a contextualized and functional model to inform policy and planning in this field. This study, adopting an interpretive qualitative approach, explores the lived experiences of family experts and practitioners in Isfahan, one of Iran's major metropolitan areas, where—according to available statistics—the family institution faces growing instability and fragmentation due to diverse cultural factors. The goal is to present a grounded theory model of family sustainability with an emphasis on cultural structures. The resulting model not only deepens understanding of the interaction between cultural structures and family sustainability within the studied context but also offers an empirically grounded foundation for policies and programs aimed at strengthening family stability.

Several studies have examined related topics. Afsharkohan and Rezaeian (2018) found no significant differences between generations in terms of value systems and attitudes toward family sustainability, though a meaningful relationship exists between traditional–value dimensions and family sustainability across generations. Mahmoudzadeh et al. (2019), in developing a model of family sustainability based on Islamic teachings, identified key themes such as theocentrism in

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family life, affection and compassion, adaptability and tolerance, adherence to Islamic ethics, commitment to rights and duties, mutual sexual satisfaction, and effective spousal communication. Abbasi et al. (2022) concluded that cultural factors take precedence over social ones in strengthening family foundations. Similarly, Majidnatari et al. (2023) emphasized characteristics of stable families rooted in Iranian–Islamic culture—such as moderate collectivism, spiritual–religious coping, social support, self-sacrifice, and avoidance of individualistic humanism—as indicators of marital stability. Finally, Heidari et al. (2024) reported that intimacy among family members, social respect for one's occupation, and household size exert the strongest influence on family stability and resilience.

Material and Methods

The present study was conducted within a qualitative research framework using the grounded theory method (systematic approach). The research field was the city of Isfahan, which, given its historical–religious identity, rich cultural and artistic heritage, traditional neighborhood structure, and its transitional state from traditional to modern family life patterns, represents a unique social and cultural environment for developing a model of family sustainability grounded in cultural structures.

The participants of the study consisted of fourteen experts and specialists in the field of family studies. Sampling was conducted through a purposeful–theoretical strategy. Considering the phenomenological nature of qualitative research and the criteria-based selection of participants, the study initially employed purposive sampling, followed by theoretical sampling in line with the grounded theory methodology. In practice, participants were first approached purposively, and subsequent sampling proceeded theoretically as the process of data analysis unfolded within the systematic approach. In other words, sampling continued concurrently with data collection and analysis, and was guided by the emergence of categories and concepts until theoretical saturation was reached.

The data collection instrument was semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which served as the primary source of qualitative data for this phase of the study. The interview protocol included a series of background questions followed by a set of core questions designed to explore themes related to the research focus.

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Data analysis was carried out through open, axial, and selective coding, using MAXQDA software to organize and manage the qualitative data.

To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the data and findings, two main validation techniques were employed: member checking and external auditing, as recommended by Creswell and Miller (2000). In the member-checking process, during the open coding phase, the accuracy and validity of the extracted codes and concepts were verified in a back-and-forth procedure with several participants. For external auditing, an independent family studies expert reviewed the interpretations and findings to confirm their consistency with the data. Additionally, to strengthen the credibility of the results, a researcher familiar with the grounded theory methodology supervised the processes of coding, conceptualization, and final reporting.

Results

In accordance with the systematic approach of the grounded theory method, the findings of this study are presented in three interconnected stages:

(1) Open coding (extraction of initial concepts), (2) Axial coding (identification of subcategories and main categories), and (3) Selective coding (extraction of the core category and development of the storyline). The following section presents the results related to causal conditions, which are the factors that directly influence the phenomenon of family sustainability.

Causal Conditions

Table 1. Causal Conditions Related to Family Sustainability

Initial Concepts	Subcategory	Main Category
Eastern family orientation; Iranian family-centered culture; identity as a stabilizing factor; role of identity in family sustainability; integration of national culture with family	National family-oriented culture	Cultural lifeworld of the family
Islamic family-centered culture; Islam as a facilitator of family life; foundational Islamic view of family; integration of Islamic culture with family; family as a core element of Islamic culture; sanctity of family in Islam; family as a discursive component of Islamic culture	Religious family-oriented culture	
Cultural elements as seeds; cultural values as binding agents; culture as the soft dimension of family sustainability	Culture as the seed of family sustainability	Semantic foundations of family sustainability
Emotional and affective nature of beliefs; internalized and heartfelt beliefs; stable and enduring convictions; beliefs as deep and lasting values	Beliefs as the cornerstone of family sustainability	
Values as cohesive cement; values as life compass; importance of shared values between spouses; love-based values	Values as the binding agent of family sustainability	

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Ethics as reinforcement of culturally congruent behavior; ethics as restraint on anti-value actions; ethics as a control and guidance mechanism	Ethics as the moral framework of family sustainability	
Collapse of traditional boundaries; digital culture emergence; fusion with modernity and Western culture; absence of stabilizing metaphors for family	Cultural hybridization with modernity	Cultural–institutional disjunction dynamics in the family
Reversal of cultural values; cultural crisis; society in transition; erosion of moral capital; shifting belief systems	Value anomie	
Mercantile and exploitative family behaviors; economic opportunism; mediation for profit	Predatory family culture	
Consequentialist morality; loss of virtue ethics; reputation-based moral judgments; social obligation-based morality	Ethical transformation	
Lack of stabilizing family habits; protest identities; interference in personal preferences	Habitus of instability	
Lack of family-centered laws; dysfunctional governance and religious institutions; temporary marriage as a distortion of religious norms	Institutional dysfunction	
Stereotypical legal approaches; lack of qualitative assessment; misguided legal protection of family	Stereotypical approach to marriage	
Patriarchal culture; male-centered family structures; reinforcement of paternal authority	Patriarchy	
Marriage as captivity; marriage as restriction; collapse of marriage ideals; disbelief in marriage as social necessity	Semantic transformation of marriage	Normalization of rupture in the institution of marriage
Romantic love as innovation; white marriage; marriage without legal recognition; postmodern love as rebellion; hidden feminism	Innovation in marriage	
Acceptance and normalization of infidelity; rising infidelity; variety-seeking as destabilizing factor	Normalization of infidelity	
Divorce stigma reduction; social acceptance of divorce; divorce as liberation; transitional view of marriage	Normalization of divorce	
Materialistic spouse-selection criteria; transactional and emotional partner choice; profit-oriented marriages	Marriage as a transactional process	Transformation of spouse selection
Individualized spouse selection; reduced parental involvement; personal autonomy in marriage decisions	Individualization of spouse selection	
Decline of traditional attitudes; short-term relationships; friendship-based and modern partner selection	Modern spouse selection	
Lack of holistic perspective; poor partner choices; abandonment of spouse selection norms	Disorganized spouse selection	
“Sugar daddy/mommy” relationships; abnormal age gaps; generational asymmetry	Age asymmetry	
State–society divide as destabilizing factor; generational gaps as destabilizing factors	Generational gap	Cultural fragmentation
Religious divide; mockery of values; cultural and ideological conflicts	Cultural gap	
Class-based inequalities; social heterogeneity; class differences in marriage	Class gap	
Self-centeredness; prioritizing self-interest; ego-based relations; marginalization of family values	Egocentrism	Atomization of society
Individualism as self-centeredness; ego-based worldviews; weakening of social identity	Self-orientation	
Selfishness; destructive egoistic relationships; lack of mutuality in love; self-marriage tendencies	Selfishness	
Narrow individualism; “I” as axis of all meaning; dominance of personal over social self; stubborn individualism	Individualism	
Instrumental and transactional relationships; utilitarian interactions; quantitative marital relations	Instrumentalism	

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Contextual Conditions

Contextual conditions refer to a specific set of circumstances that, at a given time and place, shape the overall situation or issues affecting the phenomenon under study. In this research, contextual conditions describe the social and cultural settings within which family sustainability is formed, maintained, or challenged in the city of Isfahan.

Table 2. Contextual Conditions Related to Family Sustainability

Initial Concepts	Subcategory	Main Category
Importance of customs and traditions; maintaining family communication based on customs; respect for traditions; commitment to traditional norms	Bonding customs and rituals	Cohesion-building norms
Importance of tradition; respect for traditional values; family formation traditions; Islamic and religious culture; religiosity; religious orientation	Binding religious traditions	
Rigid moral frameworks in Isfahan; high expectations; perfectionism; conventional moral codes	Preserving moral framework	
Tribalism; collectivism; authority of elders; expectations of senior family members	Family determination	Interventionist cultural life
Family interference; control and monitoring by relatives; violation of couple's privacy; supervision of spousal behavior; curiosity about others' private lives	Family control	
Interference in couple's personal lives; intervention of others in marital decisions; parental involvement in couple's affairs; interference in spousal preferences	Family interference	

Intervening Conditions

Table 3. Intervening Conditions Related to Family Sustainability

Basic Concepts	Subcategory	Main Category
Right to express an opinion / right to exercise an opinion / right to make remarks / dialogue as a factor in goal-setting for life / dialogue as a factor in rational behavior / dialogue as a factor in support during hardships / dialogue as a factor in family success	Dialogue as life purposefulness	Dialogical Living
Dialogue as a bonding factor / deeper understanding through dialogue / dialogue between spouses / dialogue as intimacy / conversation as a connecting factor	Dialogue as a bonding factor between spouses	
Having communication skills / speaking beautifully / quality of dialogue between spouses / quantity of dialogue between spouses	Communication skills	
Constructive dialogue / quality of verbal relationship / dialogue as the quantity and quality of life / verbal communication as a determining component	Constructive dialogue	
Dialogue for listening without bias / dialogue for sincere listening / dialogue based on non-judgment / listening as avoidance of judgment	Unbiased dialogue	
Media as an alternative to face-to-face interaction / media as an alternative to dialogue / social networks as a place to express emotions / disappearance of traditional relationships / reduction of the quantity of couples' interactions due to social networks / social networks becoming substitutes for family members	Media as an alternative to face-to-face interaction	Media Dominance over Family Life
Media domination / the significant role of media in shaping beliefs / the significant role of media in lifestyle / the significant role of media in learning	Media domination over life	
Media as a factor destroying interaction and dialogue / media leading to individualism / technology moving from collectivism to individualism / technological individualism / social networks threatening social capital	Media-driven individualism	
Length of media use / excessive media use / addiction to cyberspace / excessive use of cyberspace / cybersex	Media overuse	
Attractiveness of social media platforms / social networks as spaces for need fulfillment / attractiveness of social networks	Attractiveness of social networks	Structural Pull of Social Networks

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Quick and easy responsiveness in social networks / rapid formation of interactions in social networks / efficiency of social networks / desensitization of social networks to issues / diversity in social networks	Speed of social networks
Willpower in social networks / freedom in social networks / ability to choose one's audience in social media / lack of self-restraint in social networks / social networks as a personal domain	Willpower in social networks

Core Phenomenon

Table 4. Core Phenomenon [Family Sustainability]

Basic Concepts	Subcategory	Main Category
Long period of being together / long duration of marital life / length of marriage / duration of shared life	Long-term shared living	Sustainability as the Interactive–Institutional Coherence of the Family's Future Horizon
Self-reliant family / functional institution / family functions and abilities / ability to solve internal family problems / overcoming challenges and difficulties / ability to resolve conflicts / family's level of commitment to its functions / family planning for its functions	Functional family	
Recognition of all family members / having identity within the family / feeling of security in the family	Family identity	
Sustainability as good and intimate couple communication / continuity of love and affection / reduced separation / reduced disconnection	Continuity of intimate living	
Reduced fluctuations / stability over time / family as a qualitative institution / maintaining the full and comprehensive identity of the family / preserving family processes	Structural–semantic stability of the family	
Having mutual understanding and constructive interaction for mutual growth / shared conceptual and semantic goals in life / facilitating establishment and consolidation of mutual acceptance / family as a reciprocal commitment	Committed understanding between spouses	
Absence of conflict / absence of tension / lack of disagreement / creating a calm and low-tension atmosphere / reduction of tension / being free from destructive factors	Sustainability as tension reduction	
Faith in the family and spouse / belief in staying together / belief in building / belief in living through joys and hardships	Sustainability as belief-building	

Strategies [Action–Interactions]

Strategies refer to strategic tactics, routine practices, and ways of managing situations when facing challenges and various family-related issues.

Table 5. Strategies Related to Family Sustainability

Basic Concepts	Subcategory	Main Category
Flexibility and acceptance in socialization / flexibility and acceptance in law-abidance / flexibility and acceptance in norm internalization / education within the context of society and culture	Culture-oriented socialization	Cultural Life Socialization

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Educating the family to uphold family values / raising children to observe family norms / raising children within the framework of family / necessity of sexual socialization education / necessity of sex socialization	Family-oriented socialization	
Necessity of biological–sexual anthropology / necessity of sexual sociology education / necessity of learning the sociology of spousal behavior	Emotional–sexual cognition	
Recognizing the ecological context of Isfahan in terms of citizens' habits and attitudes / recognizing the ecological context of Isfahan in terms of traditions / localization of strategies / study of local culture	Cultural ecology	Reconstruction of the Local Cultural System
Creating the groundwork for neighborhood development / creating the groundwork for community enhancement / creating the groundwork for environmental improvement / strengthening neighborhoods / neighborhood-centeredness	Local capacity building	
Providing grounds for cultural processes / activation of local cultural centers / strengthening customs and traditions / reinforcing cultural and local values	Revitalization of cultural capital	
Qualitative nature of cultural matters / process-oriented nature of cultural programs in context / emergence of cultural programs as gradual processes / cultural matters as gradual developments / intrinsic nature of cultural matters	Process-oriented nature of cultural matters	Gradual Formation of Cultural Processes
Non-volitional nature of cultural matters / culture as a spontaneous process / non-rhetorical nature of cultural work / culture as an unconscious process	Involuntary nature of cultural matters	
Non-bureaucratic and non-directive nature of cultural work / culture as a formative process / culture as a foundational process / avoidance of authoritarian cultural programs / avoidance of project-based cultural initiatives	Non-prescriptive nature of cultural matters	
Facilitating simple marriage / promoting simple marriage / more comprehensive spouse selection model / more precise spouse selection model	Promotion of simple marriage	Simplification of Marriage Rituals
Combating luxury-seeking / combating elitism / promoting a culture of modest living / promoting desirable traditions in marriage	Combating luxury-seeking	

Consequences

Whenever a specific action–interaction is undertaken or avoided in response to an issue or in order to manage or maintain a situation by an individual or group, certain consequences emerge. Some of these consequences are intended, while others are unintended.

Table 6. Strategies Related to Family Sustainability

Basic Concepts	Subcategory	Main Category
Flexibility and acceptance in socialization / flexibility and acceptance in law-abidance / flexibility and acceptance in norm internalization / education within the context of society and culture	Culture-oriented socialization	Cultural Life Socialization
Educating the family to uphold family values / raising children to observe family norms / raising children within the framework of family / necessity of sexual socialization education / necessity of sex socialization	Family-oriented socialization	
Necessity of biological–sexual anthropology / necessity of sexual sociology education / necessity of learning the sociology of spousal behavior	Emotional–sexual cognition	
Recognizing the ecological context of Isfahan in terms of citizens' habits and attitudes / recognizing the ecological context of Isfahan in terms of traditions / localization of strategies / study of local culture	Cultural ecology	Reconstruction of the Local Cultural System

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Creating the groundwork for neighborhood development / creating the groundwork for community enhancement / creating the groundwork for environmental improvement / strengthening neighborhoods / neighborhood-centeredness	Local capacity building	
Providing grounds for cultural processes / activation of local cultural centers / strengthening customs and traditions / reinforcing cultural and local values	Revitalization of cultural capital	
Qualitative nature of cultural matters / process-oriented nature of cultural programs in context / emergence of cultural programs as gradual processes / cultural matters as gradual developments / intrinsic nature of cultural matters	Process-oriented nature of cultural matters	Gradual Formation of Cultural Processes
Non-volitional nature of cultural matters / culture as a spontaneous process / non-rhetorical nature of cultural work / culture as an unconscious process	Involuntary nature of cultural matters	
Non-bureaucratic and non-directive nature of cultural work / culture as a formative process / culture as a foundational process / avoidance of authoritarian cultural programs / avoidance of project-based cultural initiatives	Non-prescriptive nature of cultural matters	
Facilitating simple marriage / promoting simple marriage / more comprehensive spouse selection model / more precise spouse selection model	Promotion of simple marriage	Simplification of Marriage Rituals
Combating luxury-seeking / combating elitism / promoting a culture of modest living / promoting desirable traditions in marriage	Combating luxury-seeking	

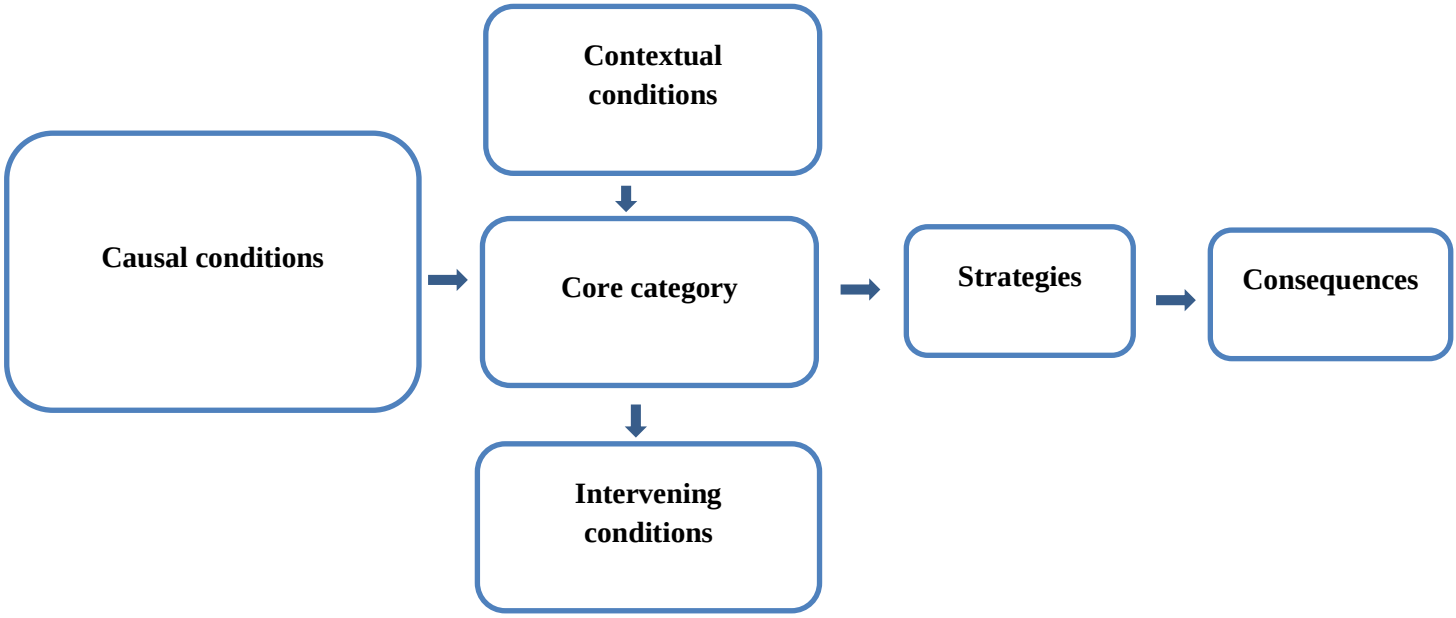

Figure 1. Paradigmatic Model of Family Sustainability

The central category in grounded theory research is the most important step for integrating all findings. In fact, the central category must be able to explain all main categories within a single framework, have the strongest connections with other categories, and cover both the semantic and

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functional dimensions of family sustainability. Considering these criteria, “Family sustainability as the reproduction of interactive–institutional coherence within a cultural context” was chosen as the central category of the present study. This category demonstrates that family sustainability is not merely an individual or institutional matter, but a dynamic, forward-looking process in which interactions among family members are reproduced in connection with cultural, social, and institutional structures. Accordingly, sustainable families maintain their cohesion by leveraging cultural values and norms, managing internal interactions, and adapting to environmental conditions, while simultaneously contributing to social stability, governance sustainability, and individual development.

The findings indicate that families are subject to a set of causal conditions. On one hand, semantic foundations (beliefs, values, and ethics) and a culture-oriented lifeworld provide the basis for cohesion. On the other hand, the normalization of fragmentation, the atomization of family life, transformations in spouse selection, and cultural pluralism threaten family cohesion and sustainability. Simultaneously, cultural–institutional rupture dynamics (e.g., value anomie and patriarchy) create instability within the family environment.

In this context, contextual conditions, such as cohesion-promoting norms (customs, traditions, and ethics) and the culture-mediated lifeworld of families, create a dual environment: on one hand, they enable strengthening of family bonds, while on the other hand, excessive control or intervention can act as an obstacle. Within this environment, intervening conditions play a key role in facilitating or weakening family cohesion and sustainability. Dialogical life among spouses, as a source of meaning-making and conflict resolution, strengthens family communication loops. In contrast, media dominance and the structural pull of social networks—when media literacy and management are absent—lead to individualism, replacement of face-to-face interactions, and erosion of bonds.

To respond to these pressures, social–cultural institutions and families employ a set of strategies:

Reconstructing the local cultural system (through revitalization of cultural capital and cultural ecology)

Gradual formation of cultural processes (through process-oriented and non-prescriptive cultural practices)

Simplification of marriage rituals (combating luxury and promoting simple marriage)

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Cultural socialization of family life (transmitting emotional and sexual values and skills within the family context)

These strategies activate the loops for reproducing interactive–institutional cohesion. Ultimately, these processes materialize in the central category of the research, “Family sustainability as the reproduction of interactive–institutional coherence within a cultural context.” A sustainable family is one that not only possesses interactive and institutional cohesion but continuously reproduces it in a forward-looking manner.

The outcomes of family sustainability and associated strategies extend beyond the family level to include:

Individual development (personal enrichment and individual utility)

Social system stability (increased social cohesion and security)

Governance sustainability (cultural, economic, and legal continuity)

Therefore, the storyline of this research illustrates how families, amidst conflicting causal and contextual conditions and facing complex intervening conditions, can achieve self-reproduced cohesion through cultural and communicative strategies, thereby not only maintaining their own sustainability but also contributing to social sustainability, governance resilience, and individual growth.

Discussion

The main objective of this study was to present a grounded model of family sustainability with an emphasis on the cultural structures of the city of Isfahan. Overall, the findings indicate that family sustainability, when emphasized within cultural structures in the study context, exhibits a complex and multilayered internal logic that is formed and maintained on the basis of interactions among cultural, institutional, and interpersonal layers. This logic can be explained through the central category, “Family sustainability as the reproduction of interactive–institutional coherence within a cultural context.” In fact, this category reflects that the continuity and sustainability of families are not static phenomena solely dependent on traditional values, but rather dynamic, reproduced processes embedded within the cultural lifeworld of the society.

Based on the central category of the study — “Family sustainability as the reproduction of interactive–institutional coherence within a cultural context,” which narrates the story of family

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sustainability in the studied context—it can be concluded that family sustainability in this setting is a multidimensional and culturally embedded phenomenon, shaped and sustained through the interaction of traditional and modern forces as well as media influences. To survive and endure in this complex environment, families must be capable of reproducing meaning, strengthening dialogical life, and creating internal and institutional cohesion over a long-term horizon. Consequently, family sustainability can be interpreted as a process of endogenous cultural reconstruction, through which society can maintain social cohesion and preserve its cultural identity.

From a theoretical perspective, regarding the interpretation of family sustainability, as Abbasi Shavazi and McDonald (2008) noted, structural and ideational forces simultaneously influence family dynamics in Iran. Similarly, although structural explanations still account for a significant portion of changes and developments in the family institution—including sustainability—they alone are insufficient. The impact of structures on the family institution is mediated through changes in values and cultural meanings. In other words, structures exert influence, but the ultimate manifestation of their effect depends on cultural and meaning-making processes.

This argument underscores that understanding family sustainability and its related factors requires simultaneous analysis of both structures and values. Structural explanations provide the context for changes within the family institution (including sustainability and instability), while ideational explanations clarify the mechanisms of change in minds, preferences, and attitudes.

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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by ethics committee of Islamic Azad University.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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