

Designing a Conceptual Model of Family Relationship Quality among Adoptive Couples: A Meta-Synthesis Study

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1. Round 1

1.1. Reviewer 1

Reviewer:

The sentence “The research process was organized according to the seven-step model proposed by Sandelowski and Barroso (2007)” is central to the methodological rigor of the study, but the manuscript currently lists the stages without demonstrating how each stage was operationalized. The authors should provide a transparent mapping between each of the seven stages and the concrete procedures performed in this study. For example, they should state who formulated the questions, who conducted database searches, whether screening was performed independently by more than one reviewer, how disagreements were resolved, how quality appraisal affected inclusion, and how synthesis moved from 764 codes to 27 concepts and nine themes. A procedural table or detailed narrative would substantially strengthen auditability.

The paragraph under “Stage One: Formulation of the Research Questions” presents three useful questions, including “What are the constituent components and dimensions of family relationship quality among adoptive couples?” However, the

conceptual boundaries of “family relationship quality” remain insufficiently defined before the synthesis begins. The manuscript should clarify whether this construct was treated as encompassing marital quality, coparenting, parent–child attachment, family cohesion, family functioning, and broader kinship relationships from the outset, or whether these domains emerged inductively during analysis. Without this distinction, there is a risk of circularity whereby search terms and inclusion criteria predetermine the conceptual model later presented as an emergent synthesis.

The paragraph beginning “In the second stage, a systematic search of the literature was conducted” needs substantially greater reproducibility. The authors provide databases and general keywords but do not report complete Boolean search strings, field restrictions, phrase searching, truncation, controlled vocabulary, or database-specific adaptations. At least one full reproducible search strategy should be reported verbatim for a major international database, with equivalent strategies for Persian databases provided in an appendix or supplementary material. The exact date on which the final search was conducted should also be stated, particularly because the review includes literature through 2026.

The transition from “764 initial codes” to “27 core concepts” and then “nine major themes” is one of the most important analytic steps in the article, but it is currently presented as a largely procedural statement. The authors should provide a clearer analytic audit trail showing how codes were merged, abstracted, and assigned to concepts and themes. Representative examples would be valuable—for instance, showing how “fear of judgment,” “concealment of adoption,” and “concern about disclosure” were integrated into a higher-order concept and subsequently into the theme “social pressure and adoption stigma.” Such examples would demonstrate interpretive depth and reassure readers that categories were not imposed post hoc.

Table 3 is excessively detailed and contains a potential duplication that requires correction. Frost and Goldberg (2020) appears twice, with highly overlapping but differently elaborated sets of initial codes. The authors should determine whether this represents accidental duplication of the same study. If so, retaining it twice could artificially increase the apparent weight of its findings in the synthesis. Each included study should appear once, with a unique study identifier, and the authors should clarify whether coding frequency was study-weighted, occurrence-weighted, or treated qualitatively without numerical weighting.

Response: Revised and uploaded the manuscript.

1.2. Reviewer 2

Reviewer:

The sentence “The search period was defined as 2001–2026 for Persian-language sources and 2000–2026 for English-language sources” requires justification. The one-year discrepancy between Persian and English searches appears arbitrary unless there is a methodological or historical reason. The authors should explain why these lower limits were selected and whether relevant earlier adoption literature was intentionally excluded. If the rationale is related to the emergence of contemporary adoption research or database coverage, this should be stated explicitly. Otherwise, the search should be extended or a sensitivity statement should be included acknowledging the possibility of time-window bias.

The inclusion criteria paragraph states that studies were eligible if they “employed an original qualitative approach” or constituted “the qualitative component of mixed-methods research,” but Table 3 includes sources that appear to differ markedly in design and publication type, including theses/dissertations and studies centered on adoptees rather than adoptive couples. This appears inconsistent with the stated exclusion criterion that “theses or dissertations” were excluded. For example, Groves (2012) and Ottaway (2012) are listed in the reference base as academic theses/dissertations, while the methodological section explicitly excludes these formats. The authors must reconcile this discrepancy by either revising the inclusion criteria, removing ineligible studies, or clearly explaining why these sources were retained.

The study-selection numbers require careful correction because the narrative is internally inconsistent. The manuscript reports that 1,053 records were identified, 628 were removed, and 425 remained; then 252 were removed, leaving 173; finally, the text states that “73 articles were excluded,” which mathematically would leave 100 rather than 20. By contrast, Figure 1 indicates 153 exclusions at the final stage, correctly yielding 20 included studies. This is a major reporting error because it

directly affects the transparency of the screening process. The narrative, table, and flow diagram should be fully reconciled, and reasons for full-text exclusions should preferably be disaggregated.

The sentence “The search process was iterative and continued until confidence in source saturation was achieved” is methodologically problematic in the context of a systematic literature search. Saturation is commonly applied to qualitative data collection but is not an appropriate substitute for exhaustive systematic searching when the review specifies databases and eligibility criteria. The authors should clarify whether “saturation” refers to conceptual saturation during synthesis rather than termination of database searching. If searching was stopped because no new conceptual categories emerged, this introduces a potentially important selection bias and should be explained and justified.

The paragraph describing quality control should specify the instrument used to assess methodological quality. The manuscript states that studies were evaluated for “scientific rigor and the richness of their qualitative findings” and later refers to theoretical validity, but no recognized appraisal tool is identified. The authors should indicate whether they used CASP, JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Qualitative Research, Joanna Briggs criteria, MMAT for mixed-methods studies, or a customized checklist. The number of appraisal items, scoring method, threshold for exclusion, and preferably study-specific appraisal results should be reported. Without these details, the claim that studies were excluded for “inadequate methodological quality” cannot be independently evaluated.

The paragraph reporting intercoder reliability requires greater statistical completeness. The sentence “Cohen’s kappa coefficient was calculated” is appropriate, and $\kappa = .82$ suggests strong agreement, but the sampling and coding procedure should be described more rigorously. The authors should report the exact number of coding units represented by the stated 10% sample, explain whether sampling was stratified across studies/themes, identify the unit on which agreement was calculated, and provide a confidence interval for κ . The current table also labels .11 as “Standard Error (Standard Deviation),” which conflates two different statistics; this heading should be corrected to “Standard Error” if .11 is indeed the standard error.

Response: Revised and uploaded the manuscript.

2. Revised

Editor’s decision after revisions: Accepted.

Editor in Chief’s decision: Accepted.