

From Emotional Suppression to Self-Understanding: A Grounded Theory of Emotion-Regulation Development During Counseling

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1. Round 1

1.1. Reviewer 1

Reviewer:

The paragraph beginning “Emotional suppression refers broadly to attempts to inhibit, conceal, minimize, disconnect from, or prevent the expression and sometimes even the conscious experience of emotion” combines several theoretically distinct processes. Expressive suppression, experiential avoidance, emotional numbing, minimization, dissociation, distraction, and intellectualization are not interchangeable constructs. This conceptual broadening later affects the findings, where all of these processes are incorporated under “protective emotional suppression.” The authors should define emotional suppression more precisely and clarify whether the proposed theory concerns expressive suppression specifically or a broader family of emotion-avoidance strategies. If the latter is intended, terminology throughout the title, Introduction, Findings, and Discussion should be revised to prevent construct conflation.

In the Methods section, the sentence “This study employed a qualitative grounded theory design” is insufficiently specific for methodological reproducibility. Grounded theory encompasses distinct traditions, including Glaserian grounded theory, Strauss and Corbin’s systematic approach, and constructivist grounded theory. The manuscript subsequently refers to initial

coding, focused coding, theoretical coding, constant comparison, theoretical sampling, and memo writing, which appears most compatible with a constructivist approach, yet this is never explicitly stated. The authors should identify the specific grounded theory tradition adopted, explain its epistemological assumptions, and ensure that the terminology used for coding and theory construction is internally consistent with that tradition.

The paragraph describing interview procedures provides several useful example probes but does not identify who conducted the interviews or the interviewer's professional and methodological background. In grounded theory, the researcher is an active instrument in data generation and interpretation. The manuscript should report the interviewer's training in qualitative interviewing and counseling, relationship to participants, prior assumptions about emotion regulation, and whether the interviewer was independent from participants' treating counselors. A concise reflexivity statement is especially necessary because a researcher with clinical expertise may interpret narratives through pre-existing therapeutic models, which could influence both follow-up questioning and category development.

The statement that "Saturation was considered to have occurred when subsequent interviews no longer generated substantively new properties of the major categories" is conceptually reasonable but requires stronger empirical documentation. The authors should indicate approximately when major-category saturation began to emerge and how many additional interviews were conducted to test it. If, for example, no new major properties appeared after interview 22 and four additional interviews were used to verify category density and relationships, that should be reported. Because saturation is central to the justification of a final sample of 26 participants, a transparent account of how it was assessed would substantially strengthen the study.

Authors revised and uploaded the document.

1.2. Reviewer 2

Reviewer:

The participant-selection paragraph states that "Participants were recruited through purposive sampling during the initial phase of the study, followed by theoretical sampling as data collection and analysis progressed." This is methodologically appropriate in principle, but theoretical sampling is not adequately demonstrated. The authors should report concrete examples of how emerging categories altered recruitment decisions. For instance, if "emotional safety within the counseling relationship" emerged as an underdeveloped category, the manuscript should explain what characteristics were sought in subsequent participants and how those additional cases extended, contradicted, or saturated that category. Without such evidence, the distinction between ordinary purposive sampling and genuine theoretical sampling remains largely declarative.

The manuscript reports that participants came from "Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Monterrey," but the recruitment procedure within these sites is unclear. The authors should specify the number and type of counseling centers or psychological clinics involved, whether they were public, private, university-affiliated, community-based, or mixed, who initially approached potential participants, and whether treating counselors participated in recruitment. This information is important because recruitment through therapists may produce gatekeeping or selection bias, particularly if counselors preferentially refer clients who are articulate, improving, highly engaged, or perceived as emotionally stable enough to participate.

The Methods section states that participants had attended "between 8 and 32 individual counseling sessions" and had been engaged in counseling for "approximately three months to two years," yet the counseling modalities are not described. This omission substantially limits interpretation of the proposed theory. Emotion-regulation processes could differ across cognitive-behavioral, psychodynamic, humanistic, emotion-focused, acceptance-based, integrative, or other therapeutic orientations. The authors should report, insofar as these data are available, the principal counseling approaches, counselor qualifications, treatment settings, session frequency, and whether participants remained in treatment at the time of interview. If treatment modalities were heterogeneous, this heterogeneity should be explicitly treated as a contextual feature of the study rather than left unspecified.

The eligibility criterion requiring participants to report “a history of difficulty recognizing, expressing, tolerating, or regulating emotions” needs operational clarification. The manuscript does not indicate how this criterion was assessed or who determined eligibility. If participants self-identified these difficulties, the authors should state this directly. If clinicians screened them, the screening procedure should be described. The current wording could create circularity: individuals were recruited specifically because they experienced emotion-regulation difficulties, and the analysis subsequently identifies emotion-regulation difficulties as a central starting condition. The authors should clarify the screening process to demonstrate that the resulting theory was not excessively predetermined by inclusion criteria.

The ethical procedures are incomplete. Although the Methods section states that “Participation was voluntary” and that written informed consent was obtained, no institutional review board or research ethics committee approval is reported. For a qualitative study involving psychotherapy clients discussing potentially distressing emotional experiences, formal ethical oversight is essential. The manuscript should provide the approving institution, approval number, date where required by the journal, data-protection procedures, procedures for managing participant distress during interviews, and whether interviewers had a protocol for referral or clinical support if significant distress emerged.

The Data Collection Tools section states that interviews were conducted “either face-to-face...or through a secure videoconferencing platform.” The authors should report how many interviews were conducted in each modality and consider whether interview mode influenced depth of disclosure, privacy, rapport, or observation of nonverbal behavior. The manuscript also refers to field notes documenting “pauses, changes in tone, and researcher reflections”; however, these observations may not be equivalent across face-to-face and online interviews. A brief explanation of how modality-related differences were managed analytically would improve methodological transparency.

Authors revised and uploaded the document.

2. Revised

Editor’s decision after revisions: Accepted.

Editor in Chief’s decision: Accepted.