

Factors Influencing Psychotherapy Continuation and Premature Termination Based on Clients' Lived Experiences: A Phenomenological Study

Nastaran Sadat. Ghasemi¹, Shahram. Vaziri^{2*}, Farah. Lotfi Kashani², Saeed. Imani³

¹ Department of Psychology, UAE.C., Islamic Azad University, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

² Department of Psychology, Ro.C., Islamic Azad University, Roudehen, Iran

³ Department of Counseling, Faculty of Education and Psychology, Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran

* Corresponding author email address: vaziri@iau.ac.ir

E d i t o r	R e v i e w e r s
Ali Navidian  Professor, Mental Health Nursing & Counseling, Zahedan University of Medical Sciences, Zahedan, Iran alinavidian@gmail.com	Reviewer 1: Fahime Saied  Department of Psychiatry, University of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation Sciences, Tehran, Iran. Email: Fa.saeed@uswr.ac.ir Reviewer 2: Mahnaz Estaki  Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Central Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran. Email: P.esteki@gmail.com

1. Round 1

1.1. Reviewer 1

Reviewer:

In the participant section, the manuscript states that eligibility required “participation in at least five individual psychotherapy sessions” and “completion of at least part of the therapeutic process.” The conceptual and empirical justification for choosing five sessions as the minimum threshold should be provided. Five sessions may represent a substantially different therapeutic exposure depending on treatment orientation, session frequency, presenting problem, and planned treatment duration. The authors should explain why this threshold was considered sufficient for participants to develop a meaningful experience of psychotherapy continuation or termination. It would also improve methodological transparency to report whether individuals who terminated before five sessions were excluded and, if so, to acknowledge that excluding very early dropouts may systematically omit an important subgroup whose experiences could differ from those represented in the present findings.

In the sentence “individuals whose experience was limited to group psychotherapy or short-term counseling were excluded from the study,” the distinction between individual psychotherapy and “short-term counseling” is insufficiently operationalized. Many recognized psychotherapies are intentionally brief and may involve fewer than 10 sessions, while counseling

interventions may also contain psychotherapeutic components. The authors should define what they considered psychotherapy, counseling, and short-term counseling, describe how these categories were determined during participant screening, and indicate whether treatment modality was based on the service provider's formal designation, participant report, therapist credentials, or treatment duration. Without clear operational definitions, sample inclusion may be difficult to replicate and may introduce classification ambiguity.

The sentence "the fundamental structure of clients' experiences regarding the factors influencing psychotherapy continuation and premature termination was extracted" uses strongly phenomenological language, whereas the reported output consists primarily of hierarchical thematic categories. The authors should demonstrate more clearly how the analysis moved beyond topical categorization toward phenomenological interpretation of the essential structure of the lived experience. For instance, the manuscript could explain the temporal process through which motivation, alliance, disappointment, contextual pressure, and disengagement interact in participants' lived experience. Without such synthesis, the results may read more like a conventional qualitative thematic analysis than a phenomenological investigation. The authors should therefore either deepen the phenomenological synthesis or reconsider how the design is labeled.

In the trustworthiness paragraph, the manuscript reports that "a portion of the interviews was independently coded by a second researcher" and that "Holsti's coefficient exceeded .85." The exact number and proportion of transcripts double-coded should be reported, along with the unit of analysis used to calculate agreement and the exact coefficient rather than "greater than .85." More importantly, the manuscript should explain how disagreements were resolved and whether consensus discussions resulted in revisions to the coding framework. Because interpretive qualitative analysis does not necessarily assume that coding is objective or fully interchangeable between coders, the authors should clarify why intercoder agreement was considered appropriate for their phenomenological framework and avoid presenting numerical agreement alone as evidence of qualitative rigor.

Table 1 provides gender, age, treatment experience, and number of sessions but omits several characteristics that may be directly relevant to psychotherapy continuation and premature termination. The authors should consider reporting, where ethically and practically possible, presenting problem or broad diagnostic category, psychotherapy orientation, treatment setting, whether treatment was private or institution-based, online versus face-to-face format, therapist gender, number of previous psychotherapy experiences, and whether treatment was ongoing or already completed at the time of interview. Because the findings emphasize cultural mismatch, cost, accessibility, scheduling, and therapist responsiveness, these contextual characteristics could materially affect interpretation of the narratives and should either be reported or explicitly acknowledged as unavailable.

A major internal inconsistency appears in the paragraph immediately preceding Table 2. The text states that analysis "resulted in the extraction of 4 overarching themes, 12 organizing themes, and 36 basic themes," whereas Table 2 clearly contains five overarching themes and 15 organizing themes, with three organizing themes under each overarching theme. This discrepancy must be corrected throughout the abstract, methods, findings, discussion, and any graphical model. The authors should also recount the basic themes carefully, because the table appears to contain four basic themes under most organizing themes, which may not total 36 as currently reported. All numerical statements concerning the thematic structure should be systematically audited for consistency.

Authors revised and uploaded the document.

1.2. Reviewer 2

Reviewer:

The paragraph reporting the final sample states that participants included "seven individuals with successful psychotherapy experiences, six with unsuccessful treatment experiences or premature treatment termination, and five with mixed or alternating experiences of success and failure in psychotherapy." The manuscript should provide explicit operational definitions for "successful psychotherapy," "unsuccessful treatment," "premature termination," and "mixed experience." These classifications

currently appear to rely on subjective labels whose criteria are not reported. The authors should indicate whether success was defined by goal attainment, symptom improvement, mutually agreed termination, client satisfaction, therapist judgment, or participant self-classification. Similarly, premature termination should be distinguished from unilateral but clinically appropriate discontinuation, transfer to another therapist, financial discontinuation, therapist-initiated termination, and successful early completion. This clarification is essential because these classifications underpin the comparative logic of the study.

In the data collection paragraph, the manuscript reports that “the interview guide was developed based on the study objectives, theoretical foundations, and a review of the literature.” This procedure raises an important issue regarding inductive analysis. If interview questions were substantially derived from prior constructs such as therapeutic alliance, therapist role, family circumstances, motivation, and treatment discontinuation, then the analytic process may have been theoretically sensitized rather than purely inductive. The authors should provide the principal interview questions, preferably in a supplementary appendix, and explain how they minimized leading or confirmatory questioning. It should also be specified whether the guide was pilot tested, revised after initial interviews, or iteratively modified as emerging themes developed. Such details are needed to assess whether the resulting themes arose primarily from participants’ accounts or were partly structured by the pre-existing conceptual framework.

The statement that “the duration of each interview ranged from 45 to 90 minutes depending on the participant’s level of engagement” should be supplemented with information concerning the interviewers. The manuscript should report who conducted the interviews, their academic and clinical qualifications, gender if relevant to reflexivity, prior interviewing experience, relationship with participants, and whether any interviewer had previously served as a therapist or counselor for participants. In phenomenological research, the researcher is a central instrument of data generation, and interviewer characteristics can meaningfully influence disclosure, interpretation, and the relational conditions of the interview. A concise reflexivity statement describing the researchers’ professional background and assumptions regarding psychotherapy continuation and dropout would considerably strengthen methodological rigor.

The manuscript states that “data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached,” but the procedure for establishing saturation is insufficiently described. The authors should specify at which interview preliminary saturation was observed, how many additional interviews were conducted to confirm it, which member of the research team made the saturation judgment, and what criterion was used to determine that no substantively new themes were emerging. Because “data saturation” may refer to code saturation, meaning saturation, or theoretical saturation, the manuscript should identify which form was intended. A brief saturation table showing whether new codes or themes emerged across successive interviews would provide stronger evidence that the final sample of 18 participants was analytically adequate.

In the analytic paragraph, the manuscript states that “data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis within a phenomenological framework.” This combination needs a more explicit analytic protocol. The authors should identify the specific thematic analysis procedure used and detail the sequence from transcript familiarization to meaningful-unit identification, coding, theme development, theme refinement, naming, and construction of the final thematic structure. At present, the description moves directly from “meaningful statements” to “basic themes” and “organizing themes,” terminology that resembles thematic network analysis rather than generic inductive thematic analysis. The authors should either identify the formal analytic framework from which these hierarchical theme levels were derived or revise the terminology so that the analysis is methodologically coherent and reproducible.

Authors revised and uploaded the document.

2. Revised

Editor’s decision after revisions: Accepted.

Editor in Chief’s decision: Accepted.