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We Almost Didn't Make It: Marriage Counselling and Reconciliation Among Separated Couples in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Marital separation is an increasingly common feature of South African family life. Yet little is known about how couples navigate the path back toward reconciliation, particularly with the help of professional marriage counselling. This qualitative study explored the lived experience of marriage counselling by separated South African couples who were subsequently reconciled. The researchers used an interpretive phenomenological approach to conduct semi-structured, in-depth interviews with twelve purposefully selected participants: six married couples from a Families South Africa counselling centre and six from church-based counselling services in the Eastern Cape. Thematic analysis of data was conducted in line with interpretative phenomenological research. Five major themes emerged: the psychosocial impact of marital separation; the counselee/participant's experience throughout the counselling process; counselling's perceived benefits to the participant; counselling as a mediating role in reconciliation; and structural/systematic barriers to accessing services. The results show that marriage counselling is a transformative mediation space that can repair communication, recognise emotions, make forgiveness possible, and renew the bond of attachment. Financial difficulties, deep-rooted socio-cultural and gender norms, and the lack of well-trained counsellors in communities away from urban centres are also limiting access to this space of change. Increased investment in marriage counselling and the development of culturally relevant forms of counselling based on attachment theory, family systems theory and emotion-focused couple therapy are required as part of the study. Implications for practice, training, and policy are discussed.

Keywords: marriage counselling; marital reconciliation; separated couples; attachment theory.

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a fundamental social structure with immense cultural, legal, religious and psychological implications in societies. South Africa's complex marital traditions civil, customary, and religious are enshrined in a variety of legal frameworks, such as the Recognition of Customary Marriages Act 120 of 1998 and the Civil Union Act 17 of 2006 (Amien, 2024; South African Law Reform Commission, 2021). Despite its centrality in South African life, the institution of marriage is increasingly under strain. Marital conflicts, separations, and divorces have become important areas of scholarly and policy concern, highlighting the need for greater attention to understanding how marital relationships are maintained and how they may be undermined. Recent statistics indicate a decline in marriage registrations alongside an increase in the number of divorces in South Africa (Phakane & Goliath, 2025; Statistics South Africa, 2026). Comparatively few studies have focused on couples who separate but do not terminate their marriage, suggesting that this group represents an under-researched status in which couples' normative existence falls somewhere between marriage and divorce, as noted by Elisetty & Datti (2025). There is even less scholarly interest in those who reconcile after separation, and the role of professional counselling in this process is still under-represented in South Africa (Phakane & Goliath, 2025; Visser & Saunders, 2025). This gap in the literature is particularly noteworthy in the light of South Africa's singular socio-cultural context. In South Africa, marriage counselling is delivered by a diverse array of service providers ranging from state social workers to non-governmental organisations (NGO) like Families South Africa, faith-based and private practitioners in a context characterised by inequality, strong adherence to African customary values, and continued influence of Western therapeutic approaches (Haselau, 2015; Phakane & Goliath, 2025). These dynamics have not been sufficiently explored in relation to the lived experience of counselling separated couples.

This study fills the gap. Motivated by the voices of couples who describe their reconciliation as an experience they barely survived, hence the evocative phrase in the title, "We almost didn't make it", this research sought to document, analyse, and theorise the lived experiences of marriage counselling among separated couples in South Africa who ultimately reconciled. It is based on the assumption that these are not simply individual experiences of suffering and survival, but rather socially and clinically meaningful data that can also be used to inform policy, clinical and training practice with regard to marriage counselling services throughout the country.

The contemporary marital landscape in South Africa is complex. The statistics suggest that marriage rates have decreased, while rates of extra-marital relationships and single parenthood remain high and rates of marital separation and divorce are higher among younger age groups and among economically marginalised groups (Statistics South Africa, 2026). Marriage, however, is very significant in many cultures, particularly in the African customary context where marriage is a contract between individuals and families/lineages (Green, 2021; Nkuna-Mavutane & Jamneck, 2023). The value accorded to marriage in the social sphere, while simultaneously recognising its fragility, gives rise to a particular environment in which marriage counselling can take place.

African customary marriages are explicitly gendered in terms of the power relations, lobola, interfamily duties and household expectations. These may be a source of marital conflicts, and they also influence attitudes toward using, or not using, "professional" counselling services by separated individuals. The situation is further complicated by

Christian religious beliefs, as for many South African couples, marital separation is spiritual as well as relational, and reconciliation is often tied to a religious contract and divine grace (Aman et al., 2021; Záhorcová et al., 2023).

In South Africa, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) provide most marriage counselling, with Families South Africa among the largest providers. The organisation provides individual counselling, couple counselling, family mediation and psycho-educational programmes across the provinces. For counselling support, it is also significant in many faith-based organisations, such as the mainline churches, the Pentecostal churches and African Initiated Churches, where spiritual aspects are incorporated with practical guidance around relationships (Khosa-Nkatini & Moshole, 2026; Phakane & Goliath, 2025).

Numerous barriers to quality marriage counselling exist in spite of this infrastructure. Trained professionals are more readily available in urban areas and less easily available in rural and peri-urban areas. Financial constraints prevent some couples from maintaining engagement in private marriage counselling. Additionally, there is high stigma attached to receiving counselling services when a couple is separating, such as assuming that it is a failure of the relationship (Hodge et al., 2024; Hubbard et al., 2024), this may prevent couples from seeking assistance until the relationship has broken apart significantly. Furthermore, there is limited training in evidence-based therapeutic modalities like Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy or the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Programme among many of the community-based counsellors, which limits the quality of support offered to distressed couples (Blow et al., 2025; Neswiswa & Jacobs, 2024).

Marital separation is characterised as a situation in which spouses physically live apart, often accompanied by emotional or relational distancing, without the legal dissolution of marriage (Crabtree & Harris, 2020). In 2024 alone, 102,373 marriages and unions were registered nationally, while 24,202 divorces were granted at the same time, as reported by Statistics South Africa (2026). This ratio is likely to underestimate the extent of marital separation since there is an underreporting of non-state marriages and unions in the South African administrative data, even though divorces are well documented.

Marital separation has well-known psychosocial effects. Separated individuals have been found to experience a much higher prevalence of depression, anxiety and substance use than stably married individuals (Jennings et al., 2022; Whisman et al., 2022). Separation in families impacts attachment security, educational and social functioning of children (Garriga & Pennoni, 2022). In South Africa, the impacts of divorce are exacerbated by economic vulnerabilities, inadequate social support, and the stigmatisation of divorce, particularly among women (Phakane and Goliath, 2025). Importantly, not all separated couples go on to divorce. A subgroup reaches reconciliation, that is, restoration of trust and relational functioning through behavioural and emotional healing, according to Záhorcová et al. (2023). Research indicates that several factors can affect the chances of reconciliation, such as the length of separation, the presence of children in the relationship, the extent of emotional connection, the nature of the preceding conflict, and the availability of professional assistance (Brown et al., 2025).

In broad terms, marriage counselling involves a variety of professional processes that can help couples deal with relationship challenges, enhance communication, and determine their future with each other (Neswiswa & Jacobs, 2024). Numerous studies have found that well-executed couple therapy is effective at improving relationship satisfaction and the effectiveness of communication, and lowering the likelihood of divorce, at least in the short to medium term (Javadivala et al., 2021; Roddy et al., 2020).

One of the most widely researched modalities is Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFT) (Johnson, 2019) that is directly related to attachment theory. This paradigm frames relationship distress as a result of impairments in emotional communication and attachment insecurity and attempts to reconceptualise their relationship's emotional experiences more productively, allowing them to feel secure and responsive. Research indicates that this therapy is effective in leading to significant and lasting enhancement of relationship satisfaction, especially among couples with severe emotional difficulties (Wiebe & Johnson, 2019).

Another well-researched programme is the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Programme (Neswiswa & Jacobs, 2024) that targets communication skills, conflict management and strengthening positive couple interactions. Some longitudinal studies indicate that people who take part in this programme see a steady improvement in the quality of their relationships in the years that follow and a decrease in divorce rates (Wiebe et al., 2017). It remains uncertain, however, if these models, which are mainly North American in origin, can be applied to a diverse cultural environment like that of South Africa, where extended family, expectations regarding relations and gender relations differ greatly.

In the South African context, (Phakane & Goliath, 2025) highlight the importance of culturally responsive marriage counselling, particularly among Sotho couples, where counselling may need to incorporate spiritual beliefs, extended family systems, kinship networks, and indigenous approaches to conflict resolution and reconciliation. Similarly, Záhórcová et al. (2023) highlighted the significance of forgiveness, both as a theological concept and as a psychosocial process, in facilitating marital reconciliation in religiously inflected contexts.

There are many barriers preventing couples in distress from seeking marriage counselling, despite compelling evidence that it is effective. Stigma, which commonly refers to viewing problems in marriage as a sign of weakness or marital failure, especially among men and in cultures that emphasise self-reliance and private families, is a key barrier to couples seeking professional assistance to resolve marriage issues (Neswiswa & Jacobs, 2024). Financial constraints are also an important one; very few couples in low-income or financially constrained situations are able to pay private counselling fees and are not able to see it through more than one or two visits.

Factors of culture and gender also complicate help-seeking. Seeking external support for couples' disputes is seen as an invasion of family privacy in many South African communities, and also can be resisted, ridiculed, or deferred by male partners or extended family members (Phakane & Goliath, 2025). Lack of trained counsellors in rural and peri-urban settings adds to geographical barriers which render access to quality services inequitable all over the country.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

This study is theoretically informed by three complementary frameworks, summarised in Table 1.

TABLE 1: *Theoretical Frameworks Informing the Study*

Theoretical Framework	Core Assumptions	Application to This Study	Key Theorist(s)
Attachment Theory	Enduring emotional bonds shape adult relationships; insecure	Explains emotional reconnection and the role of counselling in repairing	Butler et al., 2022; Mikulincer &

Theoretical Framework	Core Assumptions	Application to This Study	Key Theorist(s)
	attachment leads to relational distress	attachment injuries between separated couples	Shaver, 2022; Johnson (2019)
Family Systems Theory	Families are interconnected systems; distress in one member affects the entire system	Locates marital separation within a broader family context, informing holistic counselling interventions	Jakimowicz et al. (2021)
Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy	Relationship distress stems from disrupted emotional communication and attachment cycles	Provides a structured therapeutic model for counsellors working with separated couples in South Africa	Johnson (2019); Ganz et al. (2022).

Note. Compiled based on Johnson (2019), Jakimowicz et al. (2021), and Mikulincer & Shaver (2022).

The key theoretical framework for this study is attachment theory as presented by (Johnson, 2019). The theory suggests that people have a longing for felt security in close relationships and that when they lose these attachment bonds, there are certain predictable patterns that emerge: protest, despair, and detachment. In the context of marital separations and reconciliations, attachment theory clarifies the emotional nature of the separation process, the strength of relational attachments even when in conflict, and the potential for repair in attachment and trust within the relationship (Butler et al., 2022; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2022).

Family systems theory has been described by Bowen and applied by Jakimowicz et al. (2021) to complement attachment theory, which places individual marital distress within the family system. Marital behaviour must be considered within the broader context of intergenerational family relational styles, differences among partners within the marriage, and process dynamics that influence family relationality, such as triangulation, fusion and emotional cut-off (Jakimowicz et al., 2021). Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFT) is a clinical model that integrates theory and practice, which incorporates an attachment-based framework into a structured therapeutic approach that has proved to be effective in treating severely distressed couples (Ganz et al., 2022). These three frameworks link together to allow a multi-level analysis of the counselling experiences described by the participants of this study.

The Current Study

There are two issues which motivate this study. Empirically, there is an absence of qualitative research documenting how South African couples who have experienced marital separation encounter, engage with, and are affected by marriage counselling in the journey toward reconciliation. Theoretically, the development of frameworks for conceptualising marital reconciliation has been largely from a North American and European perspective, with the potential for overlooking the yet different cultural, structural and spiritual context of South Africa.

This study aimed to address these two gaps. The aim of the study was to explore, describe, and contextualise the lived experiences of marriage counselling among separated couples in South Africa who subsequently reconciled. The study sought to achieve this purpose through the following objectives:

1. To explore the psychosocial experiences of marital separation as described by reconciled couples.
2. To examine participants' experiences of the marriage counselling process, including motivations for seeking counselling and perceptions of its quality.
3. To identify the perceived benefits of marriage counselling as described by reconciled couples.
4. To examine the role of marriage counselling in facilitating reconciliation, with attention to structural and cultural factors.

Accordingly, the study was guided by two research questions: (1) What are the lived experiences of marriage counselling among separated couples in South Africa who subsequently reconciled? (2) What do these couples make of these experiences, and what structural or cultural conditions guide their journeys through counselling and towards reconciliation?

This study focuses on spouses' experiences rather than children's experiences; however, marital separation and reconciliation have important implications for the well-being of children and families. Children exposed to parental separation or divorce may experience disruptions in family stability, parent–child relationships, school attachment, and social functioning (Van Schalkwyk & Gentz, 2023). The quality and stability of the parental relationship are also important to the broader functioning and well-being of the family. An understanding of how counselling contributes to reconciliation thus emphasises the health of the wider family system, including those children who were not participants in the study.

METHOD: RESEARCH DESIGN AND PARADIGM

This study adopted a qualitative research design, guided by an interpretivist paradigm. An interpretivist approach was selected because the study sought to understand the subjective and socially constructed meanings that participants attach to their experiences of marital separation and marriage counselling. This approach was considered appropriate because qualitative research places particular emphasis on participants' perspectives, experiences, and interpretations of social phenomena (Denny & Weckesser, 2022). The interpretivist paradigm suggests that social reality is socially constructed, multiple, and context-dependent, and that understanding social phenomena requires attention to the meanings individuals attach to their lived experiences. It is therefore epistemologically appropriate for studying lived experiences and the subjective meanings that participants attribute to them (Pervin, 2022). Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used as the specific qualitative tradition employed, as this method prioritises participants' ways of making sense of the meaningful, lived experiences of their personal stories and is also well suited to exploring complex, emotionally charged personal narratives (Smith et al., 2022; Smith & Nizza, 2022). The double hermeneutic, present at the heart of this practice and demanding that the researchers interpret the participant's interpretation, fits neatly into the reflexive nature of the study of the intimate domain of marriage counselling.

Population, Sampling and Participants

The study population consisted of married couples in South Africa who had separated from each other, participated in marriage counselling, and subsequently reunited. Given the qualitative design and the depth of engagement required, purposive sampling was used to select participants who had direct and relevant experience of the phenomenon under investigation and could provide rich, detailed accounts of their lived experiences (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025; Smith et al., 2022). The communities accessed were FAMSA

Border (Eastern Cape) and selected Methodist communities in the same region. The gatekeepers were social workers and church pastors who preemptively screened couples who underwent counselling and expressed interest in sharing their stories. Twelve participants (6 married couples) were recruited in total. This sample size is consistent with the conventions of interpretative phenomenological analysis, which prioritises depth of analysis over breadth of coverage (Smith et al., 2022).

Inclusion criteria required that participants were married according to South African law (civil, customary, or religious); had experienced a period of physical separation from their spouse; had attended at least three sessions of marriage counselling during or after the separation; and were currently in a reconciled marital relationship. Couples in which one partner had been convicted of domestic violence were excluded, as were those whose reconciliation was less than six months old at the time of the study. The demographic profile of participants is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: *Demographic Profile of Participants*

Participant	Age	Gender	Type of Marriage	Duration of Separation	Counselling Source
P01	34	Female	Civil / Customary	8 months	FAMSA
P02	34	Male	Civil / Customary	8 months	FAMSA
P03	42	Female	Customary	14 months	Church
P04	42	Male	Customary	14 months	Church
P05	38	Female	Civil	6 months	FAMSA
P06	38	Male	Civil	6 months	FAMSA
P07	47	Female	Civil / Religious	18 months	Church
P08	47	Male	Civil / Religious	18 months	Church
P09	51	Female	Customary	10 months	FAMSA
P10	51	Male	Customary	10 months	FAMSA
P11	29	Female	Civil	4 months	FAMSA
P12	29	Male	Civil	4 months	FAMSA

Data Collection

Data were collected through face-to-face, semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted individually with each participant. Individual rather than joint interviews were preferred to provide participants with greater opportunity to speak openly about their personal experiences, including sensitive aspects of their marital separation, counselling, and reconciliation that they might have been reluctant to discuss in the presence of their spouse. Semi-structured interviews are appropriate for qualitative research because they allow researchers to explore participants' perspectives and experiences in depth while providing flexibility for follow-up questions (Denny & Weckesser, 2022). Interviews were conducted in participants' homes or at FAMSA offices, as preferred, and lasted for 60 to 90 minutes.

An interview guide was prepared to relate to the research objectives and the theoretical frameworks. Key areas explored included the circumstances and emotional experience of the marital separation; the decision to seek counselling; perceptions of the counselling process, the counsellor, and the techniques employed; the role of counselling in facilitating reconciliation; and the couple's current marital experience. Probing questions were used to encourage elaboration and to follow emergent lines of inquiry.

Interviews were carried out in English and/or isiXhosa (as per the interviewee's preference), and the researcher was the principal interviewer. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were subsequently translated into English where necessary and member-checked with participants to ensure accuracy.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis within an interpretative phenomenological framework (Smith et al., 2022). Analysis proceeded through six iterative steps: repeated reading of each transcript to develop familiarity with the data; initial noting of semantic and linguistic features of the text; development of emergent themes from the initial notes; searching for connections across emergent themes; moving to the next case while holding earlier analyses lightly; and looking for patterns across cases. This process yielded five major themes and fifteen sub-themes, presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3: *Themes and Sub-themes Emerging from the Analysis*

Item	Main Theme	Sub-themes
1	Psychosocial Impact of Marital Separation	1.1 Emotional distress and depression; 1.2 Social stigma and community judgment; 1.3 Spiritual crisis and loss of identity
2	Experiences of Marriage Counselling	2.1 Initial reluctance to seek help; 2.2 The counselling process and communication rebuilding; 2.3 Trust and confidentiality concerns
3	Perceived Benefits of Counselling	3.1 Improved communication patterns; 3.2 Emotional healing and forgiveness; 3.3 Renewed commitment and hope
4	Role of Counselling in Reconciliation	4.1 Counselling as a mediating space; 4.2 Faith-based counselling integration; 4.3 Long-term marital stability post-reconciliation
5	Structural and Systemic Barriers	5.1 Cultural and gender dynamics; 5.2 Financial constraints and access to services; 5.3 Lack of trained counsellors in rural areas

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established using the criteria outlined by Ahmed (2024), namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants and member checking of interview transcripts, while reflexive journaling was used to promote reflexivity and strengthen confirmability (Ahmed, 2024). Transferability was supported by the provision of rich, thick description of the study context and participant demographics. Dependability was maintained through an audit trail of all analytical decisions. Confirmability was achieved through triangulation across multiple participants and the researcher's explicit

documentation of her own positionality as a social work researcher and practitioner. In addition, the quality of the study within the specific tradition of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was assessed against the four markers of high-quality IPA proposed by Nizza et al. (2021): developing a vigorous experiential and/or existential account, constructing a compelling and unfolding narrative, engaging in close analytic reading of participants' words, and attending to convergence and divergence across participants. These markers were used to guide the analysis and presentation of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was totally voluntary; no one was forced to be involved in the study and informed written consent was obtained from all participants prior to interviews, explaining clearly the purpose of the study, their rights to drop out at any time without prejudice, and the means of protecting their anonymity and confidentiality. Alphanumeric codes were used to ensure participant anonymity. All data were stored securely and will be destroyed upon completion of the research.

RESULTS

The results are presented thematically across five major themes and fifteen sub-themes. Each theme is illustrated with representative participant quotations. The conceptual model of the counselling-to-reconciliation process is presented in Table 4.

TABLE 4: *Conceptual Model of the Marriage Counselling to Reconciliation Process*

Stage	Phase	Key Processes
Stage 1	Marital Crisis & Separation	Emotional distress, communication breakdown, physical separation
Stage 2	Help-Seeking Behaviour	Referral to FAMSA / church counsellor; voluntary or mandated attendance
Stage 3	Counselling Process	Communication training, emotional exploration, attachment repair (Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy)
Stage 4	Reconciliation Decision	Mutual commitment renewal; forgiveness negotiation; trust rebuilding
Stage 5	Post-Reconciliation Support	Follow-up sessions; community and family re-integration; long-term stability

Note. Five-stage process from marital crisis to post-reconciliation stability, reconstructed from participant accounts.

Psychosocial Impact of Marital Separation

Emotional Distress and Depression

For all participants, the marital separation was emotionally distressing. Grief, shame, loss of identity, and depression were consistently linked to the experience of physical separation. In one instance, a female participant succinctly said:

"I was not sleeping. I was not eating. I did not know who I was anymore without him in the house. It was like a death, but the person was still alive." (P03, Female, 42).

Particularly, such feelings of distress were stronger among those who characterised their marriages as involving emotional enmeshment. Women who had been separated for more than a year showed more severe depression and social withdrawal symptoms compared to women with shorter separations.

Social Stigma and Community Judgment

Many of the participants reported a considerable amount of social stigma surrounding marital separation, and especially women. Reported reactions to separation within the community, extended family, and in some cases, church communities, were to judge, gossip and pull away from those affected by the separation. One male participant commented that: *“Even my brothers were saying, ‘you failed as a husband.’ The whole family was looking at me like I was a disgrace.”* (P06, Male, 38).

The female participants felt exposed to stigma more intensely than the male participants; some felt that they were ostracised and excluded from community activities and social events during separation. The stigma was described as an extra burden that goes on top of the relationship disrepair that was already a challenge.

Spiritual Crisis and Loss of Identity

Several mentioned that their marital separation led them to enter into a spiritual crisis, especially the participants from religious backgrounds. Marriage was seen not only as a legal/social union, but as a sacred pact, and a violation of it meant the breaking of both a covenant and a commitment of faith. One participant stated: *“I felt like God had abandoned me. My marriage was my testimony. When it broke, I felt like everything I believed in was broken too.”* (P07, Female, 47).

For participants in a customary marriage background, the loss of identity was interpreted as something affecting family ancestry and their obligation to their ancestors. Some expressed not only shame for themselves, but also for their families and communities.

Experiences of Marriage Counselling

Initial Reluctance and Help-Seeking

The majority of participants spoke of early reluctance to undertake professional counselling. This hesitation was expressed as cultural attitudes about protecting privacy, gender expectations, mistrust of professional services and the fear of being judged. Male participants were particularly likely to describe having resisted counselling initially: *“I thought counselling was for white people, or for weak men. My father never went to counselling. I did not want to go.”* (P10, Male, 51).

In the majority of instances, the couple’s decision was not made, but attendance was initiated by the woman’s partner and/or by a third party such as a pastor, a social worker or a family member. Some male participants reported that they had participated in their first session for social pressures and not as a result of seeking help for themselves.

The Counselling Process and Communication Rebuilding

Participants reported a process of communication rebuilding which began with them entering the counselling space and continued throughout the process. Many reported that for months before counselling they had been unable to communicate with one another without conflicts; they found the counselling session the first place that they had the opportunity to speak freely, without issues:

“For me, the counsellor would say, ‘Now let her speak, don’t interrupt.’ I had to really listen, I had never really listened before”; “I started to hear things she has been saying for years” (P02, Male, 34).

Active structuring of conversation is described as pivotal by the participants. The counsellor was consistently described as a neutral facilitator and not as an arbitrator or decision maker, who establishes conditions that enable dialogue rather than deciding on the results of the process.

Trust and Confidentiality Concerns

Some participants noted that there were initial concerns about the confidentiality of counselling sessions, as the counsellor could be a known individual, or someone who is known to a participant's extended family in small communities. One of the respondents from rural area said: *"She was counsellor from our church, I knew her children, how could I say private things in front of someone that would be seeing me every Sunday?"* (P03, Female, 42).

In two instances participants reported changing counselling providers in particular due to confidentiality concerns. Trust was found to have gradually grown for those who did not leave after several sessions when counsellors, in their interactions, displayed professionalism and discretion.

Perceived Benefits of Marriage Counselling Improved Communication Patterns

The most common positive effect of counselling shared by all participants was enhanced communication. Couples expressed learning specific communication skills, active listening, expressing needs without acts of violence, protocols for conflict resolution, which they would continue to use in their everyday lives after reconciliation. One participant reflected: *"We have a rule now. When we argue, we take a break and come back. We learned that in counselling. It still works, three years later."* (P05, Female, 38).

Participants who indicated that their pre-separation communication involved mainly with avoidance or escalation also valued the skills gained in acquiring concrete communication tools the most.

Emotional Healing and Forgiveness

Emotional healing was a clear healing benefit for consistently identified by participants, in both giver and receiver roles, being able to forgive and receive forgiveness. The counselling process was the first time many had a place to give voice to how far down they had sunk and for the first time the pain was heard by their partner:

"She said 'I am sorry' for the first time in our marriage. I had never heard those words. The counsellor helped her say it. I never thought I could forgive, but in that room I did." (P09, Female, 51).

Some participants clarified that there is such a thing as superficial reconciliation - living together without addressing the underlying hurt - and a deeper level of emotional repair that can be provided through counselling. The latter was attributed to the counselling process.

Renewed Commitment and Hope

After counselling, participants shared that there was a renewed sense of commitment within their marriage and a re-emergence of hope for their marriage's future. That sense of hope was frequently based not on getting rid of all problems but on gaining the relational abilities and the experience of having navigated a crisis together:

"Our marriage is not perfect. But now I know we can talk about it. We know how to come back from a fight. That is what counselling gave us." (P11, Female, 29).

Participants whose reconciliations had lasted for 2 years or more since the study time indicated that it became more of a confidence about the sustainability of their relationships.

Role of Counselling in Reconciliation

Counselling as a Mediating Space

The counselling session appeared to play a significant role as a singular intervening space: an enclosed, professionally mediated place that lies neither in home nor in community and is governed by its own rules of engagement, across participants' accounts. Several participants spoke about this spatial and relational uniqueness as necessary for communication and reconciliation:

"At home we would fight. At his mother's house we would fight. But in that room, something was different. We could not shout. We had to listen. That room saved us." (P07, Female, 47).

The physical neutrality of the counselling environment was mentioned to be important. For many participants, the counselling room represented a unique interpersonal space where entrenched patterns of dominance and defensiveness were disrupted, allowing both spouses to experience being heard on more equal terms, unlike in the family home or extended family spaces where the power dynamics were different.

Faith-Based Counselling Integration

Those who were offered counselling by church-based counsellors presented a unique feature in their counselling experience – the elements of spiritual discourse, scriptural reference and prayer. For these participants, the spiritual aspect of counselling was an integral part, rather than a peripheral feature:

"Prior to each session, the pastor prayed with us using the scriptures related to forgiveness and covenant. This was a response that was evoking something in me that could not be reached by discussion alone." (P04, Male, 42).

From those in faith-based counselling contexts, this integration was said to be both validating in relation to their own religious life and to their own relational struggles, receiving the message that not only was reconciliation both psychologically possible and spiritually required.

Long-Term Marital Stability Post-Reconciliation

Participants whose reconciliations were more established (twelve months or longer at the time of the study) described sustained improvements in marital quality, attributing these to skills and insights acquired in counselling. Shorter-term reconciliations were characterised by greater fragility:

"Sometimes I still get scared. I think, what if we go back to how we were? But then I remember what we learned, and I use it. It gets easier." (P12, Male, 29).

Finally, several of those involved in shorter periods of reconciliation voiced a wish for continued or follow-up counselling sessions, showing that the need for professional support is not an end point in a reconciliation counselling programme.

Structural and Systemic Barriers

Cultural and Gender Dynamics

Structural factors relating to effective involvement in counselling were significant in the participants' experiences. Male participants, especially, reported that there was a great deal of pressure, both external and internal, resulting from marriage failures, to manage issues at home and avoid an implicit signal that the relationship was at fault that would

be associated with professional help. In customary marriage, extended family was seen as interfering with the counselling:

“My father-in-law said we should not wash our dirty linen in public. He wanted to handle it within the family. He did not understand that the family’s way was part of the problem.” (P09, Female, 51).

Counselling was challenging, particularly for women, because their ideas about marital privacy and authority were shaped by gendered expectations and were subject to opposition by their male partners and male-dominated extended families.

Financial Constraints and Access

Financial barriers were cited by all participants receiving counselling through private or semi-private services. Some of the participants had complained that even FAMSA, operating on a sliding scale, is very hard to sustain over multiple sessions:

“Some weeks we had to either go to sessions or groceries, but not both; it was always one or the other, but we needed to go both ways at least some of the time.” (P06, Male, 38).

Transport costs emerged as an extra expense (not included in counselling fees), especially for participants coming from peri-urban locales. The structural and financial factors described above are among the factors that were identified by the participants that influence the outcomes of reconciliation, and are summarised in Table 5 in the context of other multi-level factors.

TABLE 5: *Factors Influencing Reconciliation Outcomes Among Separated Couples*

Factor Domain	Key Elements
Internal Factors	Communication, emotional attachment, forgiveness, commitment, personal faith
Counselling Factors	Quality of counsellor, duration of sessions, therapeutic approach used, continuity of care
Structural Factors	Financial stability, housing, access to services, extended family support or interference
Sociocultural Factors	Cultural norms, gender expectations, community stigma, religious beliefs
Outcome	Reconciliation and long-term marital stability

Note. Multi-level framework of factors influencing reconciliation outcomes, identified from participant data.

Scarcity of Trained Counsellors

Many participants raised the issue of the scarcity of trained counsellors, especially in rural areas. Several reported being assigned to student or volunteer counsellors who were undertrained:

“The first person they gave us was still a student. She did not know what to do when we started shouting. She got confused. We left after two sessions.” (P01, Female, 34).

In two instances it was stated that a visit to an unqualified counsellor worsened relationship conflict rather than improved it, in some instances intensifying the separation between the two people temporarily.

DISCUSSION

This study contributes to a better understanding of the complex dynamics that enable and sometimes hinder marriage counselling in promoting reconciliation between separated couples in South Africa. Drawing on the five themes identified, this discussion considers the theoretical and practical significance of the results in relation to the existing literature.

Psychosocial Impact and Theoretical Alignment

The psychosocial effects of marital separation identified by respondents are in agreement with the theory of attachment as expounded by Johnson (2019) which suggests that a disruption in the primary attachment relationships should result in predictable patterns of protest, despair and disorganisation. The emotional distress levels in respondents who reported having experienced an emotional enmeshment within their marriages indicate the same levels of emotional intensity during periods of separation mentioned by Jakimowicz et al. (2021) when elaborating on the family systems perspective. Among the participants from religious backgrounds, the spiritual component of this distress is consistent with reports by Aman et al. (2021) and Záhorecová et al. (2023) of the special spiritual impact of marital dissolution among their religiously committed couples, and motivations to reconcile arising from the religious realm.

Help-Seeking, Gender, and Stigma

The barriers to help-seeking identified by participants, particularly the male participants, are consistent with findings reported by Neswiswa and Jacobs (2024), who observed that Black Africans may be less likely to seek professional support for marital difficulties and often rely on family members, pastors, and other informal sources of support. These findings suggest that cultural and gender-related factors may influence how couples, particularly men, perceive and seek professional assistance for marital difficulties. This is consistent with other literature, which showed lower male help-seeking rates in all psychological and relational service areas (Phakane & Goliath, 2025) as most male participation was assisted by a third party and not initiated by the male participants themselves. The results highlight the ongoing importance of strategic destigmatisation initiatives and culturally appropriate intervention programs in South Africa.

Communication Rebuilding and the Therapeutic Process

It is well established in the literature that communication is an integral component of couple counselling and marital functioning. Thus, the current findings are consistent with evidence demonstrating improvements in both couples' relationship satisfaction and communication following marriage and relationship programmes Javadivala et al. (2021), and the significance of skill-based communication training within counselling programmes for distressed couples. Change mechanisms identified by participants, especially the counsellor's de-escalation of negative interaction dynamics and vulnerable emotional expression, align with the changes described in Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFT) research (Ganz et al., 2022).

Forgiveness as a Transformative Mechanism

This finding of forgiveness as a transformative benefit of counselling matched with Záhorecová et al. (2023) who are reporting forgiveness as a unique and clinically relevant process in romantic and marital reconciliation. The present data indicate that structured counselling offers conditions in which forgiveness actually becomes, not just cognitively possible, but emotionally experienced as an event often provoked by the first verbal admission of guilt with the partner in the counselling space.

The Counselling Room as a Mediating Space

The emergence of the counselling room as a mediating space resonates with therapeutic concepts of the holding environment described by (Johnson, 2019). The neutrality, structure and professional facilitation of the counselling space seem to be therapeutic ingredients and are active regardless of techniques used. The finding has implications for service design – that is, the physical and relational contexts of counselling delivery may outweigh the theoretical orientation of the counsellor.

Faith-Based Counselling and Spiritual Meaning-Making

Faith-based counselling integration is a particular topic of relevance in the South African environment. Church-based counselling providers reported that the spiritual approach to reconciliation was important, as providing a depth of meaning that secular models and methods may not provide. Záhorcová et al. (2023) also register the importance of forgiveness within a covenantal and relational dimension in the context of committed relationships. The results of this research highlight the value of accepting the presence of “faith-based” counsellors as a valuable and accepted part of counselling in South Africa and educational secular counsellors in spiritually sensitive counselling.

Structural and Systemic Barriers to Access

The structural and systemic barriers identified in this study, including financial constraints and limited availability of trained counsellors, are consistent with challenges reported in South Africa’s mental health-care system (Shisana et al., 2024). The findings relating to cultural gender norms and extended family interference are also consistent with research on South African marriages, which identifies economic pressures, rigid gender roles, patriarchal norms, and extended family involvement as important marital stressors (Phakane & Goliath, 2025). The finding that the practice of counselling could be damaged by under-trained counsellors is of great significance, as it points to the dangers of using under-trained counsellors in high-stakes relational environments. The findings of Wittenborn et al. (2019) demonstrate the potential benefits of emotionally focused couple therapy for improving relationship satisfaction, reinforcing the importance of effective couple counselling and appropriately trained practitioners. These findings further highlight the need for continued counsellor development and adequate support for the delivery of couple counselling interventions.

Overall, the findings are supportive of the notion of “good enough” reconciliation as outlined by Záhorcová et al. (2023): Counselling does not aim for an idealised marriage but rather aims to build enough trust, communication ability, and mutual engagement to maintain the marriage or relationship for longer. The counselling for the majority of participants did not lead to a complete improvement of all relational problems, but did offer them the relational experience and tools to deal with relational problems that would persist. This less ambitious and practical emphasis on outcomes for reconciliation has implications for how counsellors and clients discuss what counselling can and cannot offer them in reaching outcomes.

Implications for Family and Child Well-Being

While this study focused on the challenges of those affected by neglect and abuse to children from primary caregivers and partners, the outcome has implications for family and child well-being, which is central to the wider purposes of family-oriented scholarship. Marital separation has been found to compromise children’s attachment security, academic functions, and social competence ((Van Schalkwyk & Gentz, 2023) Schalkwyk & Gentz, 2023) while the stability of the marital relationship is linked to family functioning overall on a high level (Elisetty & Datti, 2025). However, children’s

own experiences were not part of the present study, and consequences of marriage counselling for communication repair, forgiveness, and renewal of the attachments between spouses, may also indirectly benefit more stable home environments in homes with children. The barriers outlined in this report which include financial difficulties, cultural and gender norms, access to trained counsellors, not only affect the spouses seeking counselling but also the children in whose lives the stability of the parental relationship is the determining factor. This emphasizes the importance of considering marriage counselling as a family-based rather than dyadic counselling and illustrates the need for further studies to directly explore the children's viewpoints and outcomes within the context of their family.

Recommendations for Practice and Training

Based on the "good enough" concept of reconciliation elaborated by Záhorcová et al. (2023) Suggestions for practice and training should strike counsellors to enable couples to have an adequate level of trust, communication skills and mutual engagement to maintain the relationship, while sharing the commitment to avoid an impossible standard of conflict-free marriage. Counsellors working with separated couples in South Africa should be trained in evidence-based therapeutic modalities, particularly Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy, which has demonstrated efficacy for couples experiencing high levels of attachment distress. Counselling approaches should be culturally responsive, integrating awareness of the role of extended family systems, gender dynamics, and spiritual frameworks in the marital lives of clients, and follow-up sessions post-reconciliation should be offered as standard practice to support the sustainability of reconciliation gains.

At the level of professional training, social work and counselling education institutions in South Africa should ensure that curricula include adequate exposure to couple and family counselling theory and practice, including culturally adapted models appropriate for the South African context. Continuing professional development in emotion-focused and attachment-informed practice, as well as in communication-based interventions, should be prioritised for practising counsellors, particularly those working in under-resourced settings where access to advanced training has historically been limited.

Recommendations for Policy

Government and civil society stakeholders should invest in expanding access to quality marriage counselling services, with particular attention to rural and peri-urban communities where services are most scarce. Funding models that enable FAMSA and other non-governmental providers to offer sustained, multi-session engagement, rather than only one or two sessions, should be developed and prioritised. Public destigmatisation campaigns targeting both men and women are needed to address the cultural barriers to help-seeking documented in this study, particularly the perception among men that seeking counselling signals weakness or failure.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies should use longitudinal designs that follow reconciled couples over time to provide a clearer evaluation of the effectiveness of various counselling methods over time. Comparative studies to be done looking at the outcomes in various cultural and religious environments within South Africa would add to the knowledge of the conditions towards which counselling is most likely to be most effective. The qualitative results of the present study might be complemented by quantitative and mixed-methods designs. Importantly, future qualitative research should also seek out couples who attended

counselling but did not reconcile, or who discontinued counselling before its conclusion, since the present study's reliance on gatekeeper referral of completed, reconciled cases means that the perspectives of couples for whom counselling did not lead to reconciliation remain largely undocumented in the South African literature.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the sample of twelve participants, representing six couples, is appropriate for the depth of analysis sought within an interpretative phenomenological design, but it limits the transferability of findings to the broader population of separated and reconciled couples in South Africa. Second, participants were recruited exclusively through FAMSA Border and Methodist church communities in the Eastern Cape, a single province with its own particular religious, cultural, and socioeconomic character; couples accessing other types of counselling provision, or located in other provinces, may report different experiences.

Thirdly, the sample is contacted through gatekeepers such as social workers or pastors who have had direct contact with couples that had been in counselling and 'reconciled', and therefore the sample is subject to selection bias. Couples who completed counselling but then did not reconcile, or participants who left counselling too soon, are not included in this study, and their exclusion may potentially result in a more positive depiction of counselling. The cross-sectional and retrospective design also enables the recall and narration of experiences that happened months or years ago, which can involve memory effects, as well as constructive interpretations that are influenced by the current, reconciled relationship status of the couple in the study.

Finally, as ethically and safety appropriate, those concerned by the statutory exclusion of couples in which one partner is convicted for domestic violence are excluded, but the extent to which couples whose separations involve intimate partner violence are likely to differ from those included in these findings will mean the results can't be applied to this group. Further studies need to focus specifically on each of these constraints, as mentioned above.

CONCLUSION

The present study explores the lived experiences of separated couples in South Africa who subsequently reconciled, with particular attention to their experiences of marriage counselling. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with 12 participants and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The study results indicate that when provided by a competent, culturally responsive, structured and confidential marriage counsellor, marriage counselling can genuinely provide a space for transformation of the distressed couple. The counselling process is effective at repairing communication, healing emotions, facilitating forgiveness and reconnecting attachment bonding, which are theoretically grounded in attachment, family systems, and Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy.

The results also explore substantial structural and systemic obstacles, such as financial considerations, cultural gender norms, stigma, and the lack of trained counsellors, which constrain the scale and impact of counselling for many couples in South Africa. These barriers should be understood as manifestations of broader structural inequalities, including poverty, uneven service provision, and geographic disparities in access to trained counsellors, and need a systemic policy approach.

Perceived ambivalence and resilience in the experience of reconciliation, captured in the title of this study, almost did not "make it", sustained in the process partly by the relationships that may have existed and be prevalent in the professional counselling relationship, experientially changed marriages and lives.

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