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Socio-Psychological Determinants of Stability in Interethnic Marriages and Psychological Factors in Preparing their Children for School

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Abstract

The article examines the socio-psychological determinants that sustain the stability of interethnic marriages and analyses how these determinants shape the psychological readiness of children from such families for school. Using a theoretical-analytical design that integrates findings from family psychology, cross-cultural psychology and developmental psychology, the authors classify the determinants of marital stability into four levels: individual, dyadic, intergenerational and sociocultural. The analysis shows that the stability of an interethnic marriage depends less on the ethnic difference itself than on how the spouses manage it: intercultural competence, constructive communication, agreement on values and child-rearing goals, and acceptance by the extended family emerge as the key protective factors. A conceptual model is proposed in which marital stability influences the child's school readiness through three mechanisms: emotional security, a coordinated language environment and an integrated ethnic identity. Practical recommendations are formulated for family counselling services, preschool educational organisations and school psychologists in Uzbekistan.

Keywords: interethnic marriage, marital stability, socio-psychological determinants, intercultural competence, school readiness, bilingualism, ethnic identity, emotional security.

Introduction

The family is the primary institution in which a person's values, emotional patterns and social behaviour are formed. In multi-ethnic societies, a growing share of families are created by spouses who belong to different ethnic groups. Such unions bring together two languages, two systems of family traditions and often two sets of expectations about the roles of husband, wife and the extended family. Interethnic marriage is therefore not only a private union of two people but also a point of contact between cultures, and its stability matters both for the spouses and for the children raised in it.

Uzbekistan is historically a multi-ethnic country in which representatives of more than one hundred nationalities live side by side. Interethnic marriages between Uzbeks, Tajiks, Russians, Kazakhs, Tatars, Koreans and other groups have long been part of everyday social life. The state places the strengthening of the family among its priorities: the Family Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan establishes the equality of spouses and the protection

of the interests of children [17], while the Law "On Preschool Education and Upbringing" defines the preparation of children for school as a key task of the preschool stage [18].

International research gives a mixed picture of the stability of interethnic and interracial unions. Several large studies have found a somewhat higher risk of divorce among such couples compared with ethnically homogamous couples [2; 3; 10]. At the same time, these studies show that the risk varies widely depending on the specific combination of groups, the age of the spouses, their education and the attitudes of the surrounding community, and that much of the difference disappears once socio-demographic characteristics are taken into account [3; 10]. This means that ethnic difference in itself does not determine the fate of a marriage; what matters is the set of psychological and social conditions under which the spouses deal with this difference.

The question of how the characteristics of an interethnic family affect children has been studied far less, particularly at the critical stage of transition to school. The child's entry into school is a normative crisis that requires motivational, cognitive, emotional-volitional and social readiness [6; 11]. For a child from an interethnic family, this stage brings additional tasks: choosing the language of instruction, reconciling two cultural models of behaviour and forming a stable sense of identity. Whether these tasks become a resource or a source of difficulty depends largely on the climate within the parental couple.

In the national scientific literature, the stability of interethnic marriages and the school readiness of children from such families are usually studied separately. This creates a gap: the mechanisms through which the quality of the parental relationship is transmitted to the child's readiness for school remain insufficiently explained.

The aim of the study is to identify and systematise the socio-psychological determinants of stability in interethnic marriages and to substantiate the psychological mechanisms through which they influence the preparation of children from such families for school.

The objectives of the study are:

1. to analyse theoretical approaches to the study of marital stability and to the specifics of interethnic marriage;
2. to classify the socio-psychological determinants of stability in interethnic marriages by level;
3. to identify the components of school readiness that are most sensitive to the characteristics of an interethnic family;
4. to propose a conceptual model linking marital stability with the child's school readiness and to formulate practical recommendations.

Methods

The study has a theoretical-analytical design. Its material consists of three groups of sources:

— **theoretical works** on marital stability and family systems [1; 9; 16], acculturation and ethnic identity [4; 13] and the ecological approach to child development [5];

— **empirical studies** of the stability of interethnic and interracial marriages [2; 3; 10; 12], the effects of marital conflict on children [7; 8], the transition to school [14] and the cognitive correlates of bilingualism [15; 19];

— **classical works on school readiness** in the cultural-historical tradition [6; 11; 20] and **normative documents** of the Republic of Uzbekistan in the field of family and preschool education [17; 18].

The following methods were applied:

1. **Theoretical analysis and synthesis** – the concepts of marital stability, acculturation strategy and school readiness were compared and integrated.

2. **Classification** – the determinants of marital stability were grouped according to the levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model [5]: individual, dyadic, intergenerational (extended family) and sociocultural.

3. **Comparative analysis** – the conclusions of empirical studies conducted in different countries and on different samples were compared, and points of agreement and contradiction were identified.

4. **Conceptual modelling** – on the basis of the identified regularities, a model of the links between marital stability and the child's school readiness was constructed.

Sources were selected on the basis of two criteria: publication in peer-reviewed scientific journals or by recognised academic publishers, and direct relevance to marital stability, interethnic families or school readiness. Classical theoretical works were included regardless of the year of publication.

Results

1. Determinants of stability in interethnic marriages

Marital stability is understood here as the continuation of a marriage combined with a satisfactory level of marital quality. The vulnerability-stress-adaptation model of Karney and Bradbury shows that stability is shaped by the interaction of the spouses' enduring characteristics, the external stresses they face and the adaptive processes – communication, support and conflict resolution – through which they respond to these stresses [9]. In an interethnic marriage, cultural difference acts as an additional potential source of stress, but the outcome is decided by adaptive processes. The analysis of the literature made it possible to group the determinants into four levels (Table 1).

Table 1. Socio-psychological determinants of stability in interethnic marriages

Level	Protective determinants	Risk determinants
Individual	Intercultural competence; tolerance of ambiguity; an integrated ethnic identity; emotional maturity; motivation for marriage based on personal choice	Rigid ethnocentric attitudes; low self-regulation; marriage as a way to escape the parental family; idealisation of the partner's culture
Dyadic	Constructive communication; agreed family roles; a shared view of child-rearing, language and religion; a common "family culture" that combines both traditions	Escalation of conflicts; criticism and contempt; "cultural" explanations of personal disagreements; unresolved questions about the children's language and faith
Intergenerational	Acceptance of the spouse by both parental families; practical support from relatives; respect for the autonomy of the young family	Refusal to accept the marriage; pressure from relatives to choose "their" traditions; triangulation of the child or spouse in conflicts between generations
Sociocultural	Tolerant attitudes in the community; shared language of communication; support from social institutions; a multi-ethnic social network	Stigmatisation and prejudice; social isolation; economic stress; lack of family counselling services

The individual level. The key individual resource is intercultural competence – the ability to understand the partner's cultural codes without perceiving them as a threat to one's own identity. In terms of Berry's acculturation

model, the most favourable strategy for the spouses is integration, in which each partner preserves his or her own culture while accepting the partner's culture as equally valuable [4]. Strategies of assimilation (one partner fully abandons his or her culture) or separation (each partner lives in his or her own cultural world) create latent tension that often surfaces with the birth of children. An integrated ethnic identity, described by Phinney as an achieved and secure identity [13], allows a spouse to remain open to another culture without feeling a loss of self.

The dyadic level. Research on marital interaction shows that the stability of a marriage is predicted not by the absence of conflict but by the way conflict is handled. Gottman identified criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling as the most destructive patterns of interaction [1]. In interethnic couples, an additional risk arises when ordinary personal disagreements are interpreted in cultural terms ("this is how all of your people behave"). Such attributions turn a solvable problem into a conflict of identities. Conversely, couples who consciously build a common "family culture" – choosing which holidays, rituals and rules they will keep from each tradition – show greater cohesion. Agreement on child-rearing issues, including the language of the home and of schooling, is especially important, because it is precisely around children that cultural differences become most visible [16].

The intergenerational level. In Uzbek society, as in many collectivist cultures, the extended family plays a large role in the life of a young couple. Bowen's family systems theory emphasises that the degree of differentiation of the spouses from their parental families affects their ability to maintain their own boundaries [16]. In an interethnic marriage, rejection or conditional acceptance by one of the parental families is one of the strongest stressors. Pressure to raise the child "in our traditions" can draw the child into a conflict between generations and cultures. At the same time, when both families accept the marriage, the extended family becomes a powerful resource of practical and emotional support.

The sociocultural level. Large-scale studies show that the attitudes of the surrounding community and the socio-economic position of the family substantially affect the stability of mixed unions [2; 3; 10]. Kalmijn's analysis of intermarriage demonstrates that the "social distance" between groups, reflected in public opinion, language and religion, determines both the frequency of such marriages and the level of social pressure on them [12]. A tolerant, multi-ethnic environment, which is traditional for most regions of Uzbekistan, acts as a protective factor.

2. Components of school readiness sensitive to interethnic family characteristics

In the cultural-historical tradition, school readiness is regarded as a complex psychological formation that includes motivational, intellectual, emotional-volitional and communicative components [6; 11; 20]. Analysis of the literature shows that in children from interethnic families, these components are influenced by family factors in specific ways (Table 2).

Table 2. Components of school readiness and their links with the characteristics of an interethnic family

Component of readiness	Content	Influence of the interethnic family
Motivational	Desire to learn; the "internal position of the schoolchild"; cognitive interest	Depends on a shared positive attitude of both parents towards school and on the absence of conflict about the choice of school
Intellectual and speech	Arbitrary attention, memory, thinking; mastery of the language of instruction; phonemic awareness	Bilingualism can strengthen metalinguistic awareness and attentional control; an inconsistent language environment can delay mastery of the language of instruction

Component of readiness	Content	Influence of the interethnic family
Emotional-volitional	Ability to follow rules, regulate emotions and tolerate frustration	Marital conflict reduces the child's emotional security and self-regulation; a stable marriage supports them
Social-communicative	Ability to interact with peers and adults; acceptance of the teacher's role	Experience of two cultures can increase social flexibility; an unclear or conflicting identity can cause anxiety in a new group

The **speech component** deserves special attention. Children from interethnic families often grow up bilingual. Meta-analytic data indicate that bilingualism is associated with advantages in attentional control, working memory and metalinguistic awareness [19], although the size and universality of these effects remain subject to scientific debate [15]. These advantages appear when the language environment is consistent: each language has a stable "place" in family life, and the parents have agreed in advance which language will be the language of schooling. When the choice of language becomes a subject of conflict, the child may enter school with an insufficient command of the language of instruction.

The **emotional-volitional component** is most directly linked to marital stability. Davies and Cummings' emotional security hypothesis holds that frequent, intense and unresolved conflicts between parents undermine the child's sense of security in the family [8]. Grych and Fincham have shown that the child's interpretation of a conflict – especially self-blame and a sense of threat – determines how strongly it affects the child's adjustment [7]. A child who constantly monitors the tension between parents has fewer resources for the self-regulation that school requires.

3. A conceptual model of the links between marital stability and school readiness

Based on the analysis, a conceptual model was developed (Figure 1). It shows that the determinants of marital stability influence the child's school readiness not directly but through three mediating mechanisms.

DETERMINANTS OF MARITAL STABILITY: individual · dyadic · intergenerational · sociocultural		
↓ STABLE INTERETHNIC MARRIAGE (low destructive conflict, agreed child-rearing goals) ↓		
Emotional security of the child	**Coordinated language environment**	**Integrated ethnic identity**
emotional-volitional readiness	intellectual and speech readiness	motivational and social-communicative readiness
↓ PSYCHOLOGICAL READINESS OF THE CHILD FOR SCHOOL ↓		

Figure 1. Conceptual model of the influence of interethnic marriage stability on children's school readiness

Emotional security. A stable marriage with a constructive style of conflict resolution provides the child with a sense of a safe family base. This frees the child's resources for exploration, learning and self-regulation, which form the basis of emotional-volitional readiness [8].

A coordinated language environment. Agreement between the spouses on the role of each language in family life and on the language of schooling allows the child to use bilingualism as a cognitive resource. This supports the intellectual and speech components of readiness [15; 19].

An integrated ethnic identity. When both parents treat each other's culture with respect, the child perceives his or her dual origin as a source of pride rather than a source of conflict. Such a child enters the school group with a stable self-image, which strengthens the motivational and social-communicative components of readiness [13].

The model also shows the reverse direction: the child's entry into school is a new stress for the family. Choosing a school and a language of instruction, together with the child's first difficulties, can reactivate cultural disagreements between the spouses. Families who have already developed shared rules handle this stage as a joint task, which in turn strengthens the marriage [14; 16].

Discussion

The results confirm the central thesis of modern family psychology: the stability of a marriage is determined mainly by adaptive processes within the couple rather than by the objective differences between the spouses [1; 9]. For interethnic marriages, this means that cultural difference should be viewed not as a risk factor in itself but as a factor that increases the demands on the couple's communicative and adaptive resources. This conclusion is consistent with empirical data showing that the increased divorce risk among mixed couples is largely explained by socio-demographic conditions and the attitudes of the social environment [3; 10].

From a practical point of view, it is important that the determinants identified at the dyadic and intergenerational levels can be changed. Communication skills, agreement on child-rearing goals and the boundaries between the young family and the parental families are precisely the areas where family counselling and psychological education are effective. In the Uzbek context, where the extended family traditionally participates in the upbringing of grandchildren, work with grandparents is no less important than work with the couple itself.

The analysis also makes it possible to reconsider the widespread view that children from interethnic families are inevitably at risk of adjustment difficulties at school. The data on bilingualism [19] and on the role of ethnic identity [13] show that, under favourable family conditions, these children can have certain advantages: metalinguistic awareness, cognitive flexibility and experience of interacting with different cultural norms. Their realisation, however, depends on the stability and consistency of the family environment. Thus, the same family characteristic – dual ethnic origin – can become either a resource or a source of difficulty, and the decisive role is played by the quality of the parental relationship.

The proposed model generates hypotheses that can be tested empirically:

1. the level of constructive conflict resolution in interethnic couples is positively associated with the emotional-volitional readiness of their children for school;
2. agreement between the spouses on the language of schooling is associated with a higher level of speech readiness in the language of instruction;
3. the acceptance of the marriage by both parental families moderates the link between cultural differences of the spouses and marital stability;
4. the integration acculturation strategy of the parents is associated with a more positive ethnic self-image and better social adjustment of the child in the first grade.

Testing these hypotheses requires a comparative study of interethnic and ethnically homogamous families using standardised methods for assessing marital satisfaction, the style of conflict resolution, acculturation strategies and the components of school readiness.

The limitation of this study is its theoretical nature: the conclusions are based on the analysis of international and national literature, much of which was obtained on samples outside Central Asia. The specific weight of each determinant in Uzbek families must be established in subsequent empirical research.

Conclusion

The study leads to the following conclusions:

1. The stability of an interethnic marriage is determined not by ethnic difference itself but by the way the spouses manage it. The determinants of stability operate at four levels: individual, dyadic, intergenerational and sociocultural.
2. The key protective factors are intercultural competence and an integration acculturation strategy of the spouses, constructive communication, agreement on child-rearing goals and on the language of the family, and acceptance of the marriage by both parental families.
3. The school readiness of children from interethnic families is most sensitive to family factors in its emotional-volitional, speech and social-communicative components.
4. Marital stability influences the child's school readiness through three mechanisms: emotional security, a coordinated language environment and an integrated ethnic identity.

On the basis of these conclusions, the following **recommendations** are proposed:

— family counselling centres and mahalla-based family support services should offer premarital and early-marriage programmes for interethnic couples focused on intercultural communication and agreement on child-rearing goals;

— preschool educational organisations should identify the language situation of each child from an interethnic family in advance and give parents recommendations on the choice of the language of schooling;

— school psychologists should include questions about the family language environment and the child's ethnic self-image in the diagnosis of school readiness;

— psychological education programmes should involve grandparents, emphasising their role in supporting the young family rather than in imposing one cultural model;

— empirical studies should be carried out in Uzbekistan to test the proposed model on national samples.

In conclusion, a stable interethnic family has the potential to raise a child who is open, linguistically rich and well prepared for life in a multicultural society. Realising this potential depends on the psychological culture of the spouses and on the support they receive from their families and society.

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