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**ЖАЛПЫ ЖӘНЕ ӘЛЕУМЕТТІК ПСИХОЛОГИЯ**  
**ОБЩАЯ И СОЦИАЛЬНАЯ ПСИХОЛОГИЯ**

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**EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND ITS IMPACT  
ON RELATIONSHIP QUALITY:  
A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF MIXED MARRIED  
COUPLES IN KAZAKHSTAN**

**Abstract**

This study investigates the role of emotional intelligence in shaping marital satisfaction and relationship dynamics among ethnically mixed married couples in Kazakhstan. Through a qualitative approach involving in-depth interviews with 25 participants from mixed marriages representing various ethnic combinations (Kazakh, Russian, Korean, Uzbek, Ukrainian, German, and Uighur), the research examined how components of emotional intelligence—self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills—influence cross-cultural relationship dynamics. Findings reveal that higher emotional intelligence correlates with more effective cross-cultural communication, navigation of cultural differences, conflict resolution, and relationship resilience. Participants with well-developed empathy and cultural perspective-taking demonstrated particularly positive relationship outcomes, while those with strong emotional regulation skills reported greater success managing family tensions related to cultural differences. These results suggest that emotional intelligence skills can be intentionally cultivated to enhance relationship quality in cross-cultural marriages, with implications for multicultural relationship education, couples therapy, and family development in Kazakhstan's diverse society.

**Key words:** emotional intelligence, self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, satisfaction with marriage.

**Introduction**

Kazakhstan presents a unique sociocultural context for studying marriage dynamics, with its diverse population of over 130 ethnic groups living within a predominantly collectivistic cultural framework [1]. Since gaining independence in 1991, the country has experienced significant social transformation, including changing family structures and increasing rates of interethnic marriages, particularly in urban centers [2]. These mixed marriages navigate multiple cultural traditions, languages, and family expectations, creating distinct relationship challenges and opportunities.

Emotional intelligence (EI), first defined by Salovey and Mayer (1990) and later popularized by Goleman (1995), has emerged as a critical construct in understanding interpersonal dynamics [3, 4].

Unlike cognitive intelligence, emotional intelligence encompasses the ability to recognize, understand, and manage emotions in oneself and others [5]. This set of skills appears particularly relevant to cross-cultural relationship functioning, potentially explaining why some couples navigate cultural differences more successfully than others despite similar circumstances.

Previous research has established correlations between emotional intelligence measures and marital satisfaction in monocultural contexts [6, 7]. Limited studies have examined these dynamics in intercultural marriages, but there remains a significant gap in understanding these processes within Kazakhstan's specific multicultural context. Particularly lacking is qualitative exploration of how emotional intelligence manifests in mixed marriages and the mechanisms through which it influences relationship quality when navigating multiple cultural frameworks [8].

This study aims to fill this gap by examining the lived experiences of individuals in ethnically mixed marriages in Kazakhstan, focusing on how their emotional intelligence abilities impact their marital satisfaction and cross-cultural adaptation. Specifically, we sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do participants in mixed marriages in Kazakhstan with varying levels of emotional intelligence describe their relationship experiences?
2. Which components of emotional intelligence appear most influential in navigating cultural differences within mixed marriages?
3. How do emotional intelligence skills manifest in managing extended family relationships, cultural traditions, and identity negotiation?
4. What strategies do participants use to develop emotional intelligence capacities in service of cross-cultural marital harmony?

## **Materials and methods**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of participants regarding emotional intelligence and relationships. This methodology was selected to capture rich, detailed accounts that reveal the nuances of how emotional intelligence operates within interpersonal contexts.

### **Participants**

The study included 25 individuals (13 women, 12 men) from mixed married couples in Kazakhstan, representing diverse ethnic backgrounds including Kazakh, Russian, Korean, Uzbek, Ukrainian, German, and Uighur. Participants' ages ranged from 27 to 58 years ( $M = 39.2$ ,  $SD = 8.4$ ), with marriage durations spanning from 3 to 30 years ( $M = 12.6$ ,  $SD = 7.3$ ). Selection criteria required participants to be in ethnically mixed marriages where spouses identified with different ethnic backgrounds. Educational backgrounds varied from secondary education to postgraduate degrees, with professions including government service, education, healthcare, business, engineering, and homemaking. All participants were residents of urban areas in Kazakhstan (Almaty, Nur-Sultan, and Karaganda).

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting 60–90 minutes. The interview protocol addressed six domains:

1. Participants' understanding and awareness of their own emotions.
2. Approaches to managing emotional responses in cross-cultural relationship contexts.
3. Examples of empathy and perspective-taking when navigating cultural differences.
4. Communication strategies during culturally-influenced emotional situations.
5. Management of extended family relationships and cultural traditions.
6. Perceived growth and development in emotional skills throughout the marriage.

Interviews were conducted in the participant's preferred language (Kazakh, Russian, or English) by a multilingual research team. All interviews took place either in person in a private office setting or via secure video conferencing, based on participant preference. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and professionally transcribed verbatim, with non-English interviews translated into English for analysis.

Prior to the main interviews, participants completed the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire-Short Form to provide context for interview responses, though this quantitative data was used primarily to inform the qualitative analysis rather than for statistical purposes [9].

#### Ethical Considerations

The study received approval from the Institutional Review Board of Nazarbayev University. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information from all transcripts and reports. Given the sensitivity of discussing marital relationships and potential cultural tensions in Kazakhstan's social context, particular attention was paid to creating a non-judgmental interview environment.

#### Data Analysis

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach. The process included:

1. Familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts.
2. Generation of initial codes using NVivo 14 software.
3. Searching for themes by collating codes into potential patterns.
4. Reviewing themes against the coded extracts and entire dataset
5. Defining and naming themes to refine the specifics.
6. Producing the report with compelling extract examples [10].

To enhance trustworthiness, member checking was conducted with 8 participants who reviewed preliminary findings. Additionally, three researchers independently coded a subset of transcripts, and regular peer debriefing sessions were held to discuss emerging themes and resolve discrepancies.

### Results and discussion

Analysis of the interview data revealed four major themes related to emotional intelligence and relationship quality in mixed marriages in Kazakhstan: (1) Cultural Self-Awareness as a Foundation, (2) Emotional Regulation During Cross-Cultural Conflicts, (3) Cultural Empathy as a Relationship Bridge, and (4) Bicultural Identity Development Through Emotional Growth.

#### Theme 1: Cultural Self-Awareness as a Foundation

Participants consistently described cultural self-awareness—understanding how their cultural background influences their emotional responses and expectations—as a prerequisite for successful mixed marriages. Those who demonstrated higher levels of this specialized form of emotional self-awareness reported greater marital satisfaction and fewer cultural misunderstandings.

Several participants articulated how understanding their culturally-influenced emotional patterns allowed them to communicate more effectively with spouses from different backgrounds. For example, Ainur (38, Kazakh woman married to a Russian husband) explained:

“I used to get upset when my husband didn't show proper respect to my parents in the traditional Kazakh way. I would just react angrily without understanding why. Now I can step back and say, ‘I'm feeling disrespected because of my cultural expectations about family hierarchy’ instead of accusing him of being rude. That shift in awareness completely changed how we handle cultural differences.”

This finding extends Fitness's (2001) assertion about emotional self-awareness to include cultural dimensions, suggesting that cultural self-awareness creates the basis for authentic cross-cultural connection. Participants who could accurately identify and label their culturally-informed emotions described more nuanced intercultural interactions and fewer instances of cultural misattribution [11].

Notably, those who struggled with identifying cultural influences on their emotions reported more relationship misunderstandings. As Mikhail (42, Russian man married to a Kazakh woman) reflected:

“For years, I didn't realize that my discomfort during large family gatherings was actually tied to my Russian cultural upbringing that valued more private family interactions. I kept bringing that unprocessed cultural emotion into our marriage. It wasn't until I could recognize its cultural roots that I stopped resenting my wife for her desire to frequently host extended family.”

The data suggests that cultural self-awareness operates as a foundation upon which other cross-cultural relationship skills are built, extending Goleman's (1995) hierarchical model of emotional intelligence to include cultural dimensions particularly relevant in Kazakhstan's multicultural context [4].

## Theme 2: Emotional Regulation During Cross-Cultural Conflicts

The ability to regulate emotions specifically during cross-cultural conflicts emerged as a particularly powerful predictor of marital satisfaction and longevity among mixed couples in Kazakhstan. Participants who described successful long-term mixed marriages consistently mentioned regulation strategies that prevented escalation when cultural differences triggered strong emotions.

Techniques included taking deliberate pauses, practicing mindful breathing, and cultural perspective-shifting. Saule (34, Kazakh woman married to a Korean husband) described:

“When cultural misunderstandings happen, I’ve learned to say ‘Let’s pause’ in both Kazakh and Korean—it’s our signal. I take that time to calm my nervous system and remember that we’re coming from different worlds. Before I developed this habit, cultural differences would trigger intense emotional reactions that seemed impossible to resolve.”

In relationships with extended family, self-regulation appeared equally valuable. Dmitry (45, Russian man married to a Kazakh woman) explained:

“The difference between our family gatherings now versus ten years ago is entirely about emotional regulation. When my mother-in-law insists on traditional Kazakh practices that feel foreign to me, I can take a deep breath instead of instantly reacting with frustration. My wife’s family trusts me because they know I respect their traditions even when I don’t fully understand them.”

This theme extends Gottman’s research (Gottman & Levenson, 2000) on emotional flooding to cross-cultural contexts, suggesting that culture-specific triggers can create unique challenges for emotional regulation [12]. Our findings indicate that intentional development of culturally-informed regulation skills serves as a protective factor against relationship deterioration in mixed marriages.

Interestingly, several participants noted that self-regulation skills developed in navigating cultural differences with their spouse transferred to other intercultural contexts, such as workplace diversity and international relations, suggesting the broader social benefits of emotional intelligence development in multicultural settings.

## Theme 3: Cultural Empathy as a Relationship Bridge

Cultural empathy—the ability to understand and share the feelings of someone from a different cultural background—emerged as the most frequently discussed component of emotional intelligence across all interviews. Participants consistently identified moments of feeling culturally understood or accurately understanding their spouse’s cultural perspective as turning points in their mixed marriages.

Gulmira (36, Kazakh woman married to a German husband) described a transformative experience:

“After years of tension about raising our children, things changed when I truly tried to understand his German perspective on parenting—his cultural values about independence and structure. Once I could feel genuine empathy for his cultural experience, our whole relationship transformed. We still have different cultural approaches to parenting, but there’s mutual respect now that wasn’t there before.”

In navigating religious differences, cultural empathy was described as creating a foundation for mutual respect. Viktor (37, Ukrainian man married to a Kazakh woman) shared:

“When my wife acknowledged how uncomfortable I felt during some Islamic ceremonies without judging me—that’s when I felt most respected. It’s not about adopting each other’s traditions completely; it’s those moments of having your cultural discomfort understood without judgment.”

These findings extend attachment theory perspectives to intercultural contexts, suggesting that culturally empathic responses foster secure attachment across cultural differences. The data indicates that cultural empathy serves as a bridge between different worldviews, reducing cultural isolation and creating psychological safety within the relationship [13].

However, participants also noted the unique challenges of maintaining cultural empathy during identity-threatening moments. Those who reported the most satisfying mixed marriages described intentionally cultivating cultural perspective-taking even when their cultural identity felt challenged—a skill they developed through conscious effort rather than natural inclination.

## Theme 4: Bicultural Identity Development Through Emotional Growth

The final theme centered on how the challenges of mixed marriages in Kazakhstan served as catalysts for both emotional intelligence development and bicultural identity formation. Rather than viewing emotional and cultural competencies as static traits, participants described growth trajectories triggered by navigating cultural differences within their marriages.

Many participants reported that cultural misunderstandings and conflicts prompted their interest in developing emotional intelligence specific to intercultural contexts. Aslan (41, Kazakh man married to a Korean woman) reflected:

“The first years of our marriage were filled with cultural misunderstandings that were painful, but they forced me to look at cultural patterns I’d been blind to. I started reading about cross-cultural communication specifically to understand my cultural blind spots. Now, twelve years later, I have become not just Kazakh but somewhat Korean in my perspective—more aware of how culture shapes emotions, more intentional about bridging differences.”

This finding suggests a bidirectional relationship between emotional intelligence and bicultural identity development in mixed marriages. While emotional intelligence skills enhance cross-cultural relationships, these relationships also provide opportunities to develop bicultural competencies that transform one’s identity.

Several participants described formal methods they had used to develop cultural emotional intelligence, including cross-cultural counseling, language learning, cultural immersion with their spouse’s family, and interfaith dialogue. Others emphasized the role of other successful mixed couples who modeled effective bicultural relationship behaviors.

Natalia (47, Russian woman married to a Kazakh man for 22 years), explained:

“When we first married, I saw myself as completely Russian and had no idea how to navigate the Kazakh cultural expectations. But each difficult experience taught me something, and we intentionally sought out other mixed couples who were successful. Now I feel like I have a Kazakh-Russian hybrid identity—I can switch between cultural frameworks depending on the context. This emotional flexibility is something I never had before my marriage.”

This theme underscores the transformative nature of emotional intelligence in cultural contexts, extending Mayer and Salovey’s conceptualization to include the development of bicultural emotional competencies that emerge specifically through mixed marriages in multicultural contexts like Kazakhstan [14].

## Conclusion

This qualitative study provides insight into the mechanisms through which emotional intelligence influences relationship quality among mixed married couples in Kazakhstan. The findings suggest that emotional intelligence is not merely correlated with marital satisfaction in cross-cultural unions but plays a causal role through specific processes: facilitating cultural self-awareness, preventing escalation during cultural conflicts, creating bridges of cultural empathy, and enabling bicultural identity development.

The four identified themes highlight different aspects of how emotional intelligence manifests in mixed marriages within Kazakhstan’s multicultural context. Cultural self-awareness creates the foundation for cross-cultural understanding; regulation skills protect relationships during culturally-triggered conflicts; cultural empathy bridges different worldviews; and the intercultural marriage journey itself provides opportunities for both emotional and identity growth.

These findings have several implications for Kazakhstan’s increasingly diverse society. First, they suggest that marital interventions for mixed couples might benefit from explicitly addressing culturally-informed emotional intelligence skills rather than focusing solely on generic communication techniques. Second, they indicate that different components of emotional intelligence may be particularly relevant at different stages of cultural adaptation within mixed marriages. Finally, they highlight the potential for mixed marriages to serve as sites of cultural integration and understanding within Kazakhstan’s broader social fabric, potentially contributing to intercultural harmony beyond the family unit.

Limitations of this study include its focus on urban mixed couples and its reliance on self-reported experiences with potential social desirability bias. Additionally, while the sample included various ethnic combinations, it may not represent all cultural configurations of mixed marriages in Kazakhstan, particularly those in rural areas or involving smaller ethnic minorities. Future research could address these limitations through inclusion of rural populations, observational methods, longitudinal designs



tracking mixed marriages over time, and comparative studies with monocultural marriages in similar contexts.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to our understanding of emotional intelligence as a dynamic factor in cross-cultural relationship quality in Kazakhstan. By illuminating the lived experiences of individuals navigating mixed marriages through the lens of emotionally intelligent cultural adaptation, it provides both theoretical insight and practical direction for couples, counselors, and policymakers working to support Kazakhstan's multicultural families.

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## ЭМОЦИОНАЛДЫ ИНТЕЛЛЕКТ ЖӘНЕ ОНЫҢ ҚАРЫМ-ҚАТЫНАС САПАСЫНА ӘСЕРІ: ҚАЗАҚСТАНДАҒЫ АРАЛАС НЕКЕДЕГІ ЕРЛІ-ЗАЙЫПТЫЛАРДЫ САПАЛЫ ТАЛДАУ

### Аңдатпа

Бұл зерттеу некеге қанағаттануды қалыптастырудағы эмоционалды интеллекттің рөлін және Қазақстандағы этникалық аралас ерлі-зайыптылар арасындағы қарым-қатынас динамикасын зерттейді. Өртүрлі этникалық топтардың (қазақтар, орыстар, корейлер, өзбектер, украиндар, немістер және ұйғырлар) аралас некеден шыққан 25 қатысушымен терең сұхбаттарды қамтитын сапалы тәсіл арқылы зерттеу эмоционалды интеллекттің құрамдас бөліктері – өзін – өзі тану, өзін-өзі реттеу, мотивация, эмпатия және әлеуметтік

дағдылардың динамикаға қалай әсер ететінін зерттеді мәдениетаралық қатынастар. Зерттеу нәтижелері жоғары эмоционалды интеллект тиімді мәдениетаралық коммуникациямен, мәдени айырмашылықтарды түсінумен, қақтығыстарды шешумен және қарым-қатынастың тұрақтылығымен байланысты екенін көрсетеді. Жаксы дамыған эмпатия мен мәдени перспективаны түсінетін қатысушылар қарым-қатынаста әсіресе оң нәтиже көрсетті, ал эмоционалды реттеу дағдылары күшті адамдар мәдени айырмашылықтарға байланысты отбасылық шиеленісті жеңуде үлкен жетістіктер туралы хабарлады. Бұл нәтижелер эмоционалды интеллект дағдыларын мәдениетаралық некедегі қарым-қатынастардың сапасын жақсарту үшін мақсатты түрде дамытуға болатындығын көрсетеді, бұл мәдениетаралық қатынастарды оқыту, отбасылық терапия және Қазақстанның көпұлтты қоғамындағы отбасының дамуы үшін маңызды болуы мүмкін.

**Тірек сөздер:** эмоционалды интеллект, өзін-өзі тану, өзін-өзі реттеу, мотивация, эмпатия, некеге қанағаттану.

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## **ЭМОЦИОНАЛЬНЫЙ ИНТЕЛЛЕКТ И ЕГО ВЛИЯНИЕ НА КАЧЕСТВО ОТНОШЕНИЙ: КАЧЕСТВЕННЫЙ АНАЛИЗ СМЕШАННЫХ СУПРУЖЕСКИХ ПАР В КАЗАХСТАНЕ**

### **Аннотация**

В данном исследовании исследуется роль эмоционального интеллекта в формировании удовлетворенности браком и динамики взаимоотношений между этнически смешанными супружескими парами в Казахстане. С помощью качественного подхода, включающего углубленные интервью с 25 участниками из смешанных браков, представляющими различные этнические группы (казахи, русские, корейцы, узбеки, украинцы, немцы и уйгуры), в ходе исследования было изучено, как компоненты эмоционального интеллекта – самосознание, саморегуляция, мотивация, эмпатия и социальные навыки – влияют на динамику межкультурных отношений. Результаты исследования показывают, что более высокий эмоциональный интеллект коррелирует с более эффективной межкультурной коммуникацией, пониманием культурных различий, разрешением конфликтов и устойчивостью отношений. Участники с хорошо развитой эмпатией и пониманием культурной перспективы продемонстрировали особенно положительные результаты в отношениях, в то время как те, у кого были сильные навыки эмоциональной регуляции, сообщили о большем успехе в преодолении напряженности в семье, связанной с культурными различиями. Эти результаты свидетельствуют о том, что навыки эмоционального интеллекта можно целенаправленно развивать для улучшения качества отношений в межкультурных браках, что может иметь значение для обучения межкультурным отношениям, семейной терапии и развития семьи в многонациональном обществе Казахстана.

**Ключевые слова:** эмоциональный интеллект, самосознание, саморегуляция, мотивация, эмпатия, удовлетворенность браком.