Embracing Differences: Understanding Intercultural Sensitivity in Mixed Marriage Families

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Abstract

This article examines the Intercultural Sensitivity of mixed-marriage families in their home environments. These families consist of couples and family members with different mother tongues from various Indian regions, specifically first-, second-, or third-generation migrants to Maharashtra now residing in Mumbai. A mixed-method approach, including questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, assessed Intercultural Sensitivity. Eighteen families, representing 15 mother tongues and diverse Indian regions, were selected through purposive, volunteer, and snowball sampling. Results indicated that most participants from mixed-marriage families exhibited high intercultural sensitivity. However, 'language' and 'nature of opinions' were both facilitating and hindering factors. Barriers included differences in 'perceptions,' 'situations,' 'upbringings,' and 'communication styles.' These findings align with the Sadharanikaran Model of Communication (SMC) and Chen and Starosta's Model of Intercultural Sensitivity.

Keywords: Intercultural Sensitivity, Intercultural Communication, Family Studies, Mixed-marriages, Multiculturalism, MAXQDA PRO.

1. Introduction

Mixed marriages are increasingly common, yet remain stigmatized in Indian society. A substantial proportion of Indians- 64% believe it is crucial to prevent women from marrying outside their castes, and 62% hold the same view regarding men. The variation in these views across different castes is minimal (Pew Research Center, 2021). Intercultural Sensitivity is an important aspect of family dynamics, particularly in mixed-marriage families. (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992), as cited in (Altan, 2018) suggests that Intercultural sensitivity is an individual's reaction to people from other cultures, which can predetermine their ability to work successfully with those people. They (1992:416) state that to be effective in other cultures, people must be interested in other cultures, be sensitive enough to notice cultural differences and also be willing to modify their behavior as an indication of respect for people of other cultures. A reasonable term that summarizes these qualities of people is intercultural sensitivity. (p.03)

Examining intercultural sensitivity in mixed-marriage families within their home environment may reveal how partners empathetically accept each other's cultures, strengthen their relationships, and form a positive cultural identity for their multi-ethnic children.

Mumbai, the financial capital of India, is also known as the 'city of dreams.' According to the 2011 Census, 25.54% of inter-state migrants migrated to Mumbai, with Uttar Pradesh leading the list, followed by Karnataka and Gujarat (Chaapia, 2019).

"Mumbai is increasingly becoming a predominantly Hindi-speaking city due to demographic changes driven by migration, with a growing number of Hindi speakers" (Shaikh, 2019). From 2001 to 2011, notable shifts occurred in the Mumbai Suburban and Thane districts of Maharashtra. In Mumbai Suburban, Hindi speakers rose by 43.46%, Gujarati by 3.4%, and Marathi by 2.74%, while Urdu speakers declined by 3.09%. In Thane, Hindi speakers increased by 80.45%, Marathi by 33.66%, Urdu by 33%, and Gujarati by 19.22%.

1.1. Scope of the Study

This study examined the Intercultural Sensitivity of individuals in mixed-marriage families within their home environments, focusing on "interaction attentiveness" and "respect for cultural differences." Participants, hailing from 15 different mother tongues across India but currently residing in Mumbai, included speakers of 14 scheduled languages—Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam, Konkani, Marathi, Gujarati, Sindhi, Kachchhi (a Sindhi dialect), Punjabi, Hindi, Nepali, Odia, Bengali, Assamese—and one non-scheduled language, Lotha.

1.2. Objective of the Study

To study Intercultural Sensitivity among mixed-marriage families in their home environments.

2. Materials & Methods

This section describes the type of data, method of data collection, universes, sampling design/framework, and techniques used for data analysis that were followed to conduct the research study.

2.1. Type of Data

The data were collected from primary sources. It includes different mixed-marriage families that belong to different parts of India but are currently residing in Mumbai.

2.2. Methods of Data Collection

A mixed-methods approach was used to collect data, which was divided into two stages. In the first phase, the data was collected by using a questionnaire. For that, a 2-item Likert scale was used and preliminary data were collected. The scale was used by using 5-point-Likert response options viz. *strongly agree, agree, uncertain, disagree and strongly disagree*. Based on the

data collected from the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The main purpose of the interviews was to collect qualitative inputs.

2.3. Universes, Sampling Design and Framework

Universe: This research study was conducted in two districts of Maharashtra: Mumbai Suburban and Thane. As per the Census 2011, 'Thane' (approx. 1.11 crore), and Mumbai Suburban (approx. 93.57 lakh) ranked 1 and 5 among the most populated districts of India (https://www.censusindia.co.in/, n.d.).

2.4. Sampling Design/Framework

2.4.a. Sampling Procedure

A non-probability sampling procedure was used in this study.

2.4.b. Sampling Method

Purposive, volunteer and snowball sampling were used to select families with mixed marriages.

2.4.c. Sampling of respondents

18 mixed-marriage families (n= 47) participated in the study by filling out the questionnaire, whereas 12 (n= 34) of those 18 families gave their consent to continue their participation in the study by participating in semi-structured interviews. Demographic variables like 'mother tongue' and 'immigrant generations' were considered while choosing these families.

2.4.d. Sampling Unit:

The sampling units were defined differently for the inputs collected from the questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, as described below.

Questionnaire: 1 respondent = 1 unit

Semi-structured interviews: 1 family = 1 unit

2.5. Data Collection and Analysis

Respondents from ethno-linguistic families completed the questionnaire in English. For interviews, they used English, Hindi, and Marathi, as these languages were familiar to both the researcher and participants. Interviews were conducted in person and via Zoom, recorded with participants' consent, and later transcribed and translated into English. Quantitative data was analysed using IBM SPSS Version 26, while qualitative data was coded and analysed with MAXQDA Pro 2022 through content analysis, focusing on pattern-matching and explanation-building.

 The following section discusses the data findings on Intercultural Sensitivity among mixed-marriage families in their home environment.

3. Data Analysis & Interpretation of Data:

The research objective was to determine the Intercultural Sensitivity of mixed-marriage families in their home environment. This study was conducted in two stages. First, a 2-item Likert scale was used to measure intercultural sensitivity. In the second stage, the data collected on a Likert scale were used to frame follow-up questions for semi-structured interviews conducted with respondents from mixed-marriage families in their home environments.

The details of the Likert scale are as follows:

Statement I: "I am very observant when interacting with family members from different cultures"

Statement II: "I would not accept the opinions of people from different cultures."

The following section discusses the data derived from the Likert-scale responses and semi-structured interviews in detail.

3.1. Intercultural Sensitivity

The level of 'intercultural sensitivity' exhibited by individuals towards their 'immediate family members' from different cultures was studied. This was accomplished by examining two domains of intercultural sensitivity, which are discussed below.

3.1.a. Discussion of Questionnaire Results:

Two domains of Intercultural Sensitivity, "interaction attentiveness" and "respect for cultural differences," were assessed using two Likert scale statements to determine Intercultural Sensitivity levels in mixed marriage families in their home environments. The "interaction attentiveness" domain measured the observance level among individuals from ethno-linguistic families during cross-cultural family interactions. The "respect for cultural differences" domain evaluated whether individuals accepted the opinions of culturally diverse family members.

The total scores were categorized into quartiles to reflect different levels of intercultural sensitivity: 2-4 signified low, 4-6 low-to-moderate, 6-8 moderate-to-high, and 8-10 high sensitivity.

Please refer to Figure 1 for data visualisation of the distribution of the levels of intercultural sensitivity among the respondents.

Figure 1 Levels of Intercultural Sensitivity with frequency of respondents
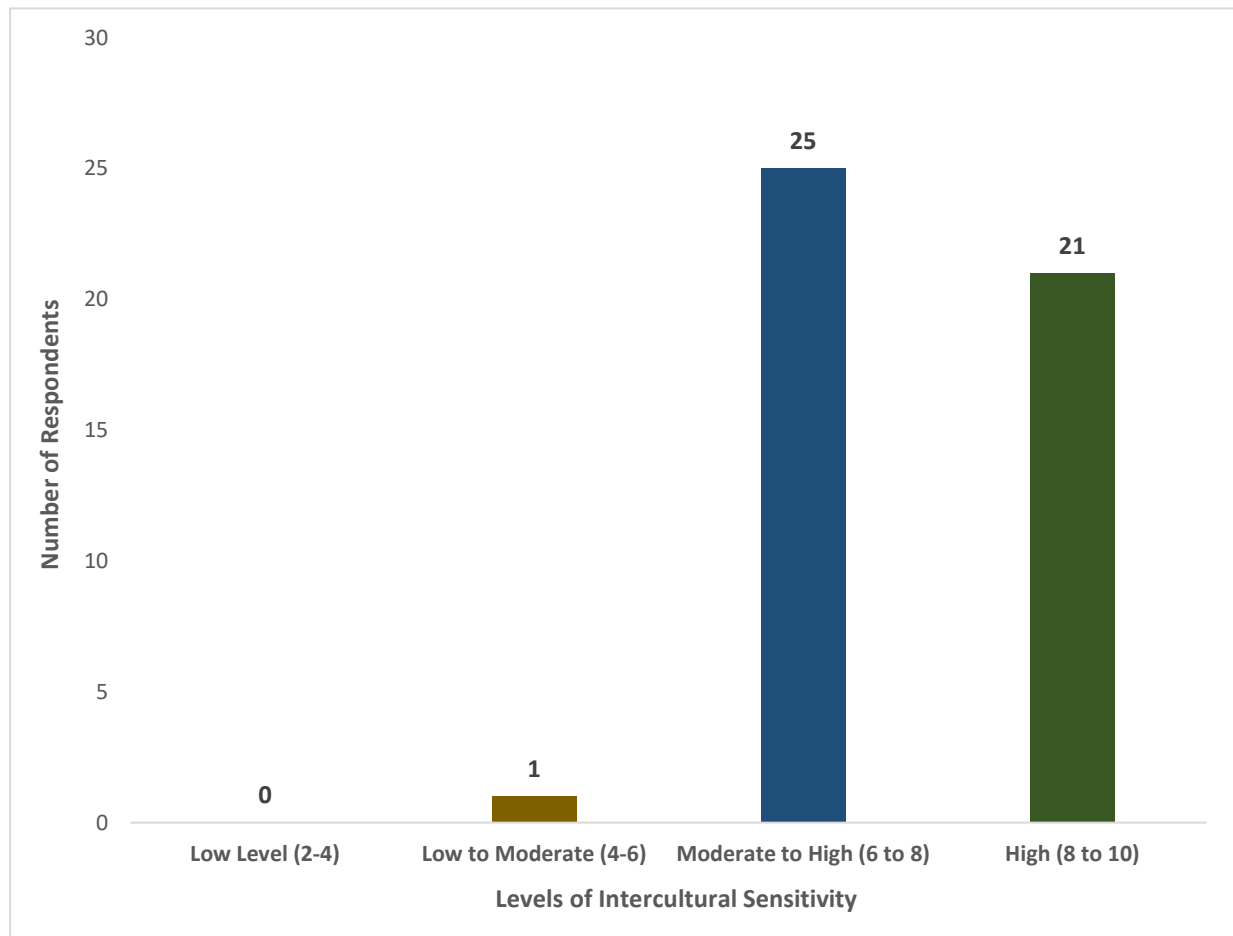

Figure 1 indicates that Intercultural Sensitivity levels are negatively skewed towards moderate to high and high levels (skewness value, $-0.120 < 0$). Logical consistency was observed in the respondents' responses to the two questions.

3.1.b. Discussion of the Interview Results

In the follow-up semi-structured interviews, respondents were asked to explain the reasons for their responses to Likert scale statements.

Refer to Figure 2 for a visual representation of factors influencing moderate and low intercultural sensitivity among ethno-linguistic families in a home environment. The weight of each factor is determined by the number of families listed alongside it. For instance, the 'nature of opinions' emerged as the dominant factor, cited by three mixed-marriage families.

Figure 2 Factors Determining Moderate and Low levels of Intercultural Sensitivity with frequency of ethno-linguistic families
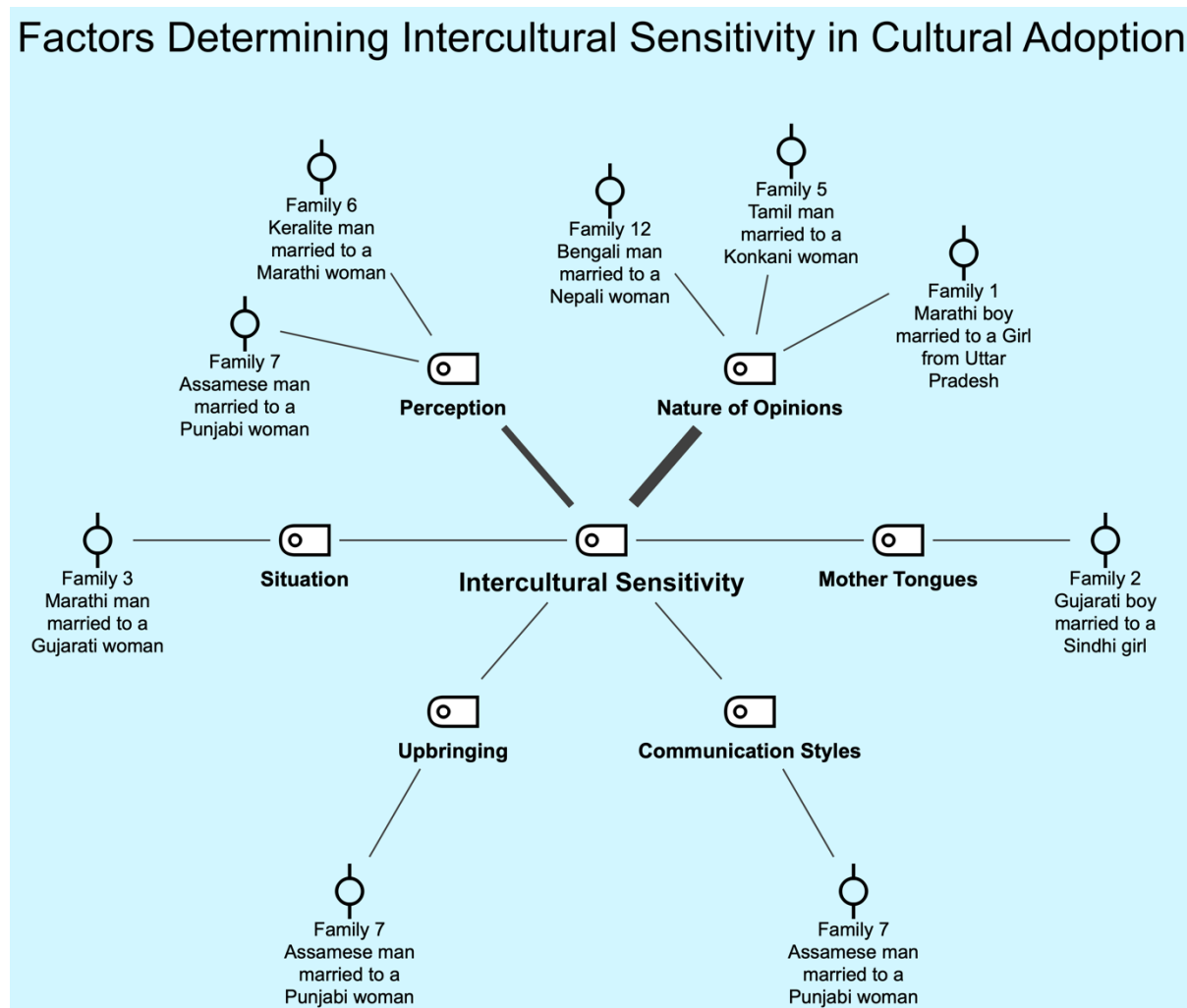
The key reasons for determining the intercultural sensitivity among mixed-marriage families are discussed below.

Regarding the first statement, **"I am observant while interacting with people from different cultures"**, respondents pointed out that **'sharing different mother tongues'** was the only key reason that led to a moderate level of IS among its members, as reported by one ethno-linguistic family.

> *"My spouse's family communicates with each other in 'Sindhi' language. Still, I try to observe things, but I could not grasp them as I am not familiar with the language." said a Gujarati boy from Family 2 married a Sindhi girl.*

Regarding the second statement, "I would not accept opinions of people from different cultures," the primary reason was the 'nature of opinions,' leading to moderate intercultural sensitivity. Other factors like differences in perception, situations, upbringing, and

communication styles resulted in low intercultural sensitivity among respondents from mixed-marriage families.

a. Nature of Opinions:

The nature of opinions led to a moderate level of intercultural sensitivity among respondents from the three **ethno-linguistic families.**

A man from family 1 who is Marathi and married to a girl from Uttar Pradesh shared that, "I don't follow my own culture strictly. I also believe that people from other cultures do not necessarily have knowledge of my culture. Why should I consider their opinions? I may accept or ignore their opinions"

b. Perception:

Differences in perception between men and women led to a low level of intercultural sensitivity, as reported by **the two ethno-linguistic families**.

A man from Family 6, a Keralite married to a Marathi woman, believes his worldview differs from those of other cultures, leading him to reject their opinions. Likewise, an Assamese man from Family 7, married to a Punjabi woman and raised in Assam, felt his emotions and thought processes did not align with his spouse's culture.

c. Situation:

One nuclear ethno-linguistic family reported a low level of intercultural sensitivity, which they attributed to their lack of experience receiving opinions from family members from different cultures.

A man from Family 3, Marathi, married to a Gujarati woman, asserts that he never received suggestions or opinions from his spouse's family, thus eliminating the need to accept or reject their input.

d. Upbringings:

Differences in upbringings caused low levels of intercultural sensitivity, as reported by **one ethno-linguistic family.**

A man from an Assamese family 7, married to a Punjabi woman, feels that upbringing differences affect his thinking. He finds Assamese people to be very 'emotional' and 'touchy,' making it difficult for him to accept opinions from his spouse's cultural background.

e. Communication Styles:

Differences in communication styles cause low levels of intercultural sensitivity, as reported by **one ethno-linguistic family.**

An Assamese man from family 7 who is married to a Punjabi woman shared that: *"There are communication differences between Assamese and Punjabis. The Punjabi people **interact** in a **very direct manner**. They frequently use abusive words while communicating which hurts me as we don't communicate in such manner in my culture."*

The following section discusses the findings of the current objective in relation to the existing literature.

3.3. Discussion of the Current Study's findings with the Existing Literature

The existing literature indicates that some studies support the findings of the current research objective, whereas others show inconsistency or partial consistency.

Family members from ethno-linguistic backgrounds exhibit high "interaction attentiveness" and "respect for cultural differences," enhancing intercultural sensitivity. Influencing factors include language competency and incompetency, perception and communication style differences, and upbringing.

This is consistent with the findings of (Hou, 2010; Moradi & Ghabanchi, 2019; Chen & Hu, 2023)identified "respect for cultural differences" and "interaction attentiveness" as major factors contributing to intercultural sensitivity.

However, (Wattanavorakijkul, 2020) found that 'language proficiency' alone could not predict intercultural sensitivity, which is not in line with the findings of the present study.

The present study's findings are partially consistent with (Savage, 2018) conclusion that adaptability to different communication styles and socialisation norms facilitates intercultural sensitivity. However, the study also stated that 'language competency' alone is not sufficient for living and working abroad, which is inconsistent with the findings of the current study.

After discussing the present study's findings in relation to existing literature, the following section explores the theoretical linkages with the significance of intercultural sensitivity in mixed-marriage families.

3.4. Theoretical Linkages of the Current Findings

A couple of theories, such as the "Chen & Starosta's Model of Intercultural Sensitivity" and "Sadharranikaran Model of Communication" (SMC) were used to provide a theoretical foundation for the findings of the current research objective.

I. Chen & Starosta's Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (2000)- Prof. Guo-Ming Chen and Prof. William Starosta

The model of Intercultural Sensitivity was developed by Guo-Ming Chen and William Starosta in 2000 which measures five domains: interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences,

interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness. This study focused on two domains—"interaction attentiveness" and "respect for cultural differences"—to examine intercultural sensitivity in mixed-marriage families at home. **The findings confirm the model, showing that these two domains enhance intercultural sensitivity in such families.**

II. Sadharanikaran Model of Communication (SMC) (2003)- Dr Nirmala Mani Adhikari

The 'Sadharanikaran' theory/model, derived from the 'Rasa Sutra' in Bharata's Natyashastra, posits that communication results in commonalisation, fostering compassion (atmiyata). Individuals with shared emotions (Saharidaya) experience Rasa Utpatti (production of Rasa) and Nishpatti (realisation of Rasa). The Rasa theory identifies four bhavas: Sthayibhava (permanent emotions), Vibhava (excitants), Anubhav (responses), and Vyabhichari or Sanchari bhava (transitory feelings), which collectively generate the necessary rasa for communication. **The findings endorse the 'Saharidaya' concept within the Sadharanikaran Model of Communication (SMC).** 'Language competency' through a 'shared language' among family members enhances 'Saharidaya' and intercultural sensitivity, while 'language incompetency' or differing mother tongues undermine these feelings and sensitivities.

4. Conclusion

Individuals from mixed-marriage families exhibited high "interaction attentiveness" and "respect for cultural differences," indicating Intercultural Sensitivity towards their family members' cultures. Factors such as 'language' and 'nature of opinions' both facilitated and hindered Intercultural Sensitivity. Barriers included differing perceptions, situations, upbringings, and communication styles. The study underscored the importance of Intercultural Sensitivity in mixed-marriage families, highlighting it as a crucial aspect of 'intercultural communication' that fosters an 'inclusive' home environment.

5. Limitations and recommendations

This study investigated Intercultural Sensitivity in mixed-marriage families in Mumbai and Thane, Maharashtra, India. Future research should explore intercultural sensitivity among inter-state and intra-state migrant families in various regions of India and globally. The findings offer valuable insights, but further research is essential to enhance our understanding and support cultural diversity and inclusion.

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