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# Key topics of cross-cultural family psychological counseling for Russian women married to UAE nationals

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose.** Sociocultural analysis of the main topics of cross-cultural psychological counseling of Russian women in intercultural marriages with UAE nationals. **Context and relevance.** In the context of increasing migration and intercultural contacts, the number of cross-cultural marriages in which spouses face problems related to the socio-cultural context is growing, which in turn requires the counseling psychologist to understand this context and be culturally sensitive to all the components of the consultative process. **Research design.** The article presents a qualitative thematic analysis of the results of the research conducted in 2023. **Participants.** The research involved 11 Russian women living in UAE in cross-cultural marriages with Emirati men - UAE nationals. **Methods (tools).** The study is based on a semi-structured interview method and a thematic analysis of the results obtained. **Results.** The main topics of cross-cultural family counseling of Russian women married to UAE nationals were identified: ambivalence of the social status of Russian women married to Emiratis; difficulties in communicating with the husband's extended family and rejection of Russian women by the Emirati female world; loneliness and resources of religious coping; transformation of cultural identity; the need to sacrifice their professional ambitions and career restrictions; limitation of social contacts. **Main conclusions.** The use of the socio-cultural approach in modern Russian psychology, which involves taking into account the socio-cultural context when constructing the therapeutic process, establishing a therapeutic alliance, analyzing the request and all psychotherapeutic work, opens up opportunities and resources for psychological counseling in the situation of migration, adaptation in a new cultural environment, cross-cultural communication in marriage with a foreign-cultural partner.

**Keywords** *sociocultural approach, cross-cultural marriage, collectivistic cultures, transformation of cultural identity, multi-identity, cross-cultural competence.*

## Introduction

The rapidly changing world is promoting migration and increasing cross-cultural contacts, while social networks and the Internet space are stimulating the opportunities for people from different countries and cultures to meet and communicate (Emirati-Russian Psychological Encyclopedic Dictionary, 2024). In this regard, the number of cross-cultural marriages is increasing worldwide (Bandyopadhyay, 2021; Livingston, 2017). In the UAE, the number of intermarriages is growing rapidly: according to 2016 data, more than 30% of Emiratis married foreigners; in Dubai, such marriages are about 57% (data from the Federal National Council of the UAE<sup>1</sup>).

Marriage migration of Russian women, described as the phenomenon of "Russian wives", is characterized as a special socio-cultural phenomenon and covers representatives of different countries of the post-Soviet space, since this phenomenon has become a kind of brand on the international marriage market (Ryazantsev, Sivoplyasova, 2018). This phenomenon has been considered in scientific literature since the early 90s; marriage migration to the Middle East is one of the priority areas for Russian women and residents of the post-Soviet space (Ryazantsev, Sivoplyasova, 2018).

In this article we are not setting the task of conducting a comprehensive study of various aspects of cross-cultural marriages of Russian women with UAE nationals (this has been partly done in our previous publications, see Barinova, 2023; Barinova, 2024), but we will consider the main problems that Russian women face in cross-cultural marriages with Arabs from the UAE and the relevant requests they address to the counseling psychologists (Emirati-Russian Psychological Encyclopedic Dictionary, 2024). For this purpose it is important to consider what psychological features a cross-cultural marriage with a partner from the Emirates has.

Cross-cultural marriage is a model of family relations in which spouses belong to different cultural groups (e.g. ethnic, religious) (Campbell, Silva, Wright, 2012). That is, cross-cultural

marriages include marriages between representatives of different ethnic groups (peoples), religions (or confessions), countries (states).

According to the scientists, "when creating relationships between cross-cultural partners, two diametrically opposed socio-psychological factors are revealed: this is an interest in another culture and the opening opportunity to get to know it, on the one hand, and the desire to preserve the traditions, roots, and language of one's culture, which cause concerns about entering into a cross-cultural marriage, on the other" (Rostovskaya, Suleimanov, 2017). Therefore, one of the most important problems in marriage is the problem of transforming the cultural identity of the spouses. At the same time, the transformation process affects to a greater extent the family member who lives in the country of the other spouse in a foreign cultural environment (Pavlova, 2013; Sikevich, Possel, 2019; Zhigunova, Koptyaeva, 2016; Lepshokova, 2022; Ward, 2018). In our case, the transformation of cultural identity can be expected in Russian women who are married to an Emirati in the UAE, surrounded by a foreign culture of the Arab environment.

Let us consider the main trends in studying the problems of cross-cultural marriages in the context of psychological problems that arise in them. For a consulting psychologist, understanding the context of family relations in cross-cultural marriages in general, as well as the specifics of family relations in the families of Russian women and UAE nationals, is extremely important, as this will help to establish rapport, a deeper understanding of the client's request, and the effectiveness of therapeutic work (Kiselnikova, 2023). It should be noted that, in general, the popularity of the UAE in Russia, the active establishment of businesses in this region contributes to the growth in the number of specialists who understand the Emirati cultural specifics, understand the practical context of cross-cultural communication with UAE nationals and can carry out advisory tasks to establish communication with UAE nationals.

In the context of using the sociocultural approach in modern psychology (Lebedeva et al., 2023), we will outline some comparative parameters of the ethnopsychology of UAE Arabs in comparison with Russians, using the most well-known systems of comparative cultural measurements at present.

One of the most important features of the Emirati culture for understanding is its collectivistic (Triandis, 2010) nature. According to G. Hofstede's model<sup>2</sup>, the level of collectivism is 64, which means that the UAE Arabs are characterized by a strong commitment to society and group norms and goals, loyalty to the group, interdependence and cohesion. Socialization in a world with a large number of social connections and role relationships, perceiving oneself as part of a larger whole leads to high attention to social connections and relationships. Let us give an example of an Arab proverb: "Some time - for your friends, some time - for your family, some time - peace for yourself, and do not be afraid for your future!" (Shaykhullin, 2019).

The famous medieval Muslim scholar Abdurrahman ibn Khaldun called **asabiyya** - "cohesion", solidarity - one of the most important features of Arab ethnopsychology. Let us quote Ibn Khaldun himself: "As for the tribes of the desert, they are kept apart by their leaders and elders, thanks to the authority and respect that the latter enjoy among the majority. Their camps are protected from outside aggression by noble young men known for their courage. Such defense can only be successful if they are united by a common origin and form a close-knit 'asabiyya group. This increases their pressure and forces one to stay away from them, since the attachment of each of them to their origin and the feeling of community are most important. Sympathy and affection for one's relatives on the maternal and paternal lines, which God has placed in the hearts of His slaves, is in human nature. And thanks to this, there is mutual assistance and support between them, and this increases the fear of them" (Alekseev, Syreishchikova, 2009, p. 209). Asabiyya, according to the medieval scholar, is based on blood kinship, which is important to maintain from the point of view of Islam. Ibn

Khaldun was the first Muslim scholar to show in the 14th century that moving to cities destroys asabiyya, since it leads to the loss of maintaining family ties and cohesion.

It is the high degree of collectivism and inclusion in the extended family (kinship group) that is the most important feature manifested in cross-cultural marriages, due to which for a woman marrying an Emirati, the most important task is to establish and maintain relationships with a large extended family, which may not always be interested in communicating with a foreign-culture spouse. The collectivistic nature of the culture is associated with such psychological features as the specificity of experiencing separation processes, an interdependent "Self" (Pavlova, 2024), which is also reflected in the processes of intra-family communication.

Describing the main feature of Arab values, Professor V.E. Shagal emphasizes that "the central place in the thoughts and beliefs, values and feelings of people in the modern Arab world, as in the Middle Ages, is still occupied by God, while in Western civilization it is assigned to man" (Shagal, 2001, p. 23). The Emiratis are Sunni Muslims, in whose lives Islam plays a central role, determining values, norms of communication, structuring the entire way of life. Islam is the state religion in the Emirates. That is why common religious values in a marriage situation can contribute to mutual understanding between spouses (Barinova, 2024; Al-Othman, 2012).

A study of attitudes towards interfaith marriages in 22 Muslim countries showed that they are quite negative (Van Niekerk, Verkuyten, 2018), so the adoption of Islam by a non-Muslim wife is socially desirable and creates the basis for common values and mutual understanding. In the Emirates themselves, where the Ministry of Tolerance was established in 2016, responsible for maintaining interreligious interaction, the level of interreligious tolerance is high (Brankovic, 2024). "Tolerance is a way of life and a key element of government policy to protect religious freedoms, promote interfaith dialogue and create an inclusive culture that values differences»<sup>3</sup>. The

multicultural composition of the inhabitants of both countries (Russia and the UAE), each of it is a home to about 200 ethnic groups, certainly contributes to cross-cultural marriages. At the same time, as our research has shown, "commonality of religious values with a foreign cultural partner helps to strengthen value harmony in marriage and neutralizes differences in other aspects of cultural preferences" (Barinova, 2024, p. 494). In particular, when the wife's perception of the patriarchal structure of the Emirati family, where the man is the unconditional leader and head of the family, is strengthened by religious values, this contributes to the acceptance of such a family-role model of relationships.

Emirati scientists draw our attention to the fact that Emirati families, when problems arise in family relationships, still rarely seek advice from a family psychologist, and psychologists, in turn, do not always have the cultural competence to see cultural characteristics and manifestations in family relationships (Al-Darmaki, 2017). Western secular individualistic values of such psychologists can conflict with the religious and ethnocultural values of the Emirati society, which can cause unconscious harm (Lambert D'raven, 2015). In this regard, an important resource for understanding the specifics of family relationships in Emirati families, including cross-cultural marriages with Russian women, requires that the psychologist develop intercultural competence, knowledge of the specifics of the Emirati culture and the main features of the culture of Russia and the UAE.

Arabic culture is characterized by high context (Hall, 1976), which affects the very content of communication (part of the information is not pronounced, but understood from the context), as well as the means of communication: representatives of high-context cultures use many non-verbal means, pauses, intonation possibilities in speech, trying to catch not the content, but the context of communication; much attention is paid to the eye contact of the interlocutors. Representatives of high-context cultures try to avoid direct expression of discontent and conflict, sensitively reacting to changes in the emotional state of the interlocutor. A striking example of avoiding direct communication is the avoidance of

unambiguous answers such as "yes" or "no", which is clearly manifested in the speech of representatives of Muslim peoples, especially characteristic of Arabs: Muslims use the Arabic formula "in sha Allah" - "if God wills." This can be used as a real promise to do something tomorrow or as a veiled refusal to do it. The true meaning of this expression is not always clear and follows from the context. It is important to understand that the interlocutor will avoid making specific and precise promises in every possible way.

According to Russian orientalists, in high-context cultures, "the individual is strongly integrated into the existing network of relationships; not his own merits, efforts, etc., but exemplary adherence to a canonized set of rules specific to a given detail is the key to success" (Introduction to Oriental Studies, 2017, p. 18).

Understanding these and many other communicative and ethnopsychological features of Arab culture becomes the most important resource for resolving problems in cross-cultural marriages. In this regard, there is a need for psychologists to understand the specifics of culture and cultural differences. This becomes possible when a psychologist has developed intercultural competence and formed ideas about a multicultural approach to psychological counseling (Pavlova, 2025). Intercultural competence of a psychologist (Melnikova, 2020; Khukhlaev, 2022) as a complex integrative characteristic allows a psychologist to effectively interact with representatives of different cultures. Its individual components, such as intercultural openness, sensitivity and interest, allow one to see cultural differences in all their manifestations and contribute to more targeted psychological assistance in working with women from cross-cultural marriages.

The conducted theoretical analysis allowed us to put forward a research question: what are the main topics of cross-cultural psychological counseling of Russian women in intercultural marriages with Emiratis and living in the husband's country? The aim of the study was a socio-cultural analysis of the main topics of cross-cultural psychological counseling of Russian

women in cross-cultural marriages with UAE nationals.

## Method

**Research design.** Our study used a semi-structured interview method with a prearranged list of questions - a guide (Kvale, 2003). The answers received during the interviews were subsequently transcribed and converted into text format for subsequent analysis. The interviews were conducted during face-to-face conversations with respondents and lasted an average of 150-180

minutes. Respondents were previously provided with information about the main topic of the study, the privacy policy and the subsequent use of the answers.

**Research sample.** The study involved 11 Russian women in cross-cultural marriages in the UAE with

Emiratis (UAE nationals). Age ranged from 22 to 50 years ( $M = 35$ ). Marital experience ranged from 2 to 25 years of marriage. The respondents had different levels of education: school education (2 respondents), secondary specialized/incomplete higher education (2 respondents), higher education (7 respondents). 10 respondents were legally married, 1 was officially divorced. 7 respondents had children in marriage (from 1 to 5), 4 respondents were married without children. 10 of the 11 women professed Islam at the time of marriage, 1 converted to Islam during her marriage. All families live in the UAE.

## Chart

### Main characteristics of the respondents

Respondent code	Age, years	Ethnicity	Region of origin	Place of residence	Period of residence	Spouse's ethnicity
Respondent 1	38	Russian	Russia	UAE	23	Emirati
Respondent 2	39	Russian	Russia	UAE	14	Emirati
Respondent 3	25	Tatar with Armenian roots	Russia	UAE	15	Emirati
Respondent 4	43	Russian	Russia	UAE	13	Emirati
Respondent 5	22	Russian	Russia	UAE	4	Emirati
Respondent 6	50	Russian	Russia	UAE	28	Emirati
Respondent 7	33	Russian with Jewish roots	Russia	UAE	9	Emirati
Respondent 8	32	Tatar	Russia	UAE	17	Emirati
Respondent 9	34	Russian with Armenian and Georgian roots	Russia	UAE	8	Emirati
Respondent 10	32	Tatar	Russia	UAE	7	Emirati
Respondent 11	36	Russian	Russia	UAE	9	Emirati

## Research methods

When developing the interview guide, the authors took as a basis the problems that arise in cross-cultural marriage, formulated as requests for psychological consultation with a psychologist.

The interview topic guide had the following structure:

1st block. Introduction (establishing contact, explaining the procedure, informed consent, etc.).

2nd block. Reflection on the experience of marriage with a representative of the Emirati culture.

3rd block. Reflection on cultural differences and the complexities of family relationships in an cross-cultural marriage.

4th block. Completion of the interview (clarification of individual unclear statements in the respondent's answers, implementation of a tactful and careful way out of the interview situation).

The interview was conducted according to the following plan. The respondents were asked to discuss and reflect on the experience of cross-cultural marriage. The sequence of questions varied depending on the individual course of the conversation with the respondents. The interview was conducted both in person and via videoconference programs. When processing the results, thematic analysis was used (Braun, Clarke, 2022; Busygina, 2019), aimed at obtaining and identifying new meta-categories (themes) that allow for a more complete study of the phenomenon.

## Key topics of cross-cultural family psychological counseling for Russian women married to UAE nationals

By making a voluntary choice in favor of concluding cross-cultural marriages with Emirati men, Russian women find themselves in a situation of significant changes in living conditions and a change of environment, which inevitably has a

significant impact on the development of their personality, a change in life roles and lifestyle in general. In such marriages, women strive to both implement their choice of place of residence and to realize their potential. They are motivated to adapt and master new values, strive to create such living conditions in which the maximum number of needs will be satisfied, and they will be able to realize their life goals. Such ambitious goals pose many challenges for women and the need for psychological support, which they seek both in their inner circle and in the cabinets of professional psychologists.

Along with traditional topics of family and marital counseling, the following can be highlighted as the main cross-cultural topics that sound as requests during consultations with Russian women married to UAE nationals: ambivalence of social status in the multicultural space of the UAE, the topic of loneliness in the family, the topic of identity transformation, and the topic of self-realization. Let us reveal each of them in more detail.

Speaking about the **ambivalence of the social status** in which married Russian women find themselves, we mean the following. On the one hand, women note that the status of the spouse of a UAE national gives them grounds to feel their special position in society: the status of the wife of a representative of the titular nation - the Emirati - is felt as a great privilege and is accompanied by respect from others, including compatriots living in the UAE. At the same time, some Russian women emphasize that, having a fairly long experience of living in the UAE before marriage, they felt significant changes in the attitude towards themselves, having received the status of a legal spouse of a representative of the Emirati culture. For example: I felt how much the attitude of some of my acquaintances towards me changed after I got married, in their eyes I seemed to have climbed up the social ladder and even felt some fawning on the part of my friends who really wanted to marry an Emirati, they even asked me for advice on how I managed to do it, as if it were some special achievement in life. There are even entire groups and communities of local Arab's wives here and they often only befriend each other as some kind of high society, as if it is beneath their status to be friends with those



whose husbands are of other nationalities (Respondent 2). In other words, behind such a special attitude towards their position, women often feel insincerity, ill will and envy on the part of others, which in turn can become an obstacle to establishing close and trusting relationships and cause a certain frustration and sadness.

These feelings are continued in another frequently occurring issue in counseling: women talk about **a feeling of rejection**, which is connected with their position as a foreign wife of an Emirati husband. According to women, this feeling largely arises during moments of **tension in the relationship with the spouse himself**. During consultations, women often talk about the unfair and unequal, from their point of view, attitude towards them as foreign wives in comparison with wives of local origin. Let's start with the fact that in the khulasat (family book in which marriages are recorded - my note - B.N.), local men have special pages for registering local wives, where all the information is recorded and their photo is mandatory... and for foreign women it's just a line in the "notes" column. That's exactly how they seem to treat us... (Respondent 11). Women share their observations that Arabs are very sensitive and delicate in their attitude towards local wives, since they are protected by their families and any dissatisfaction of a local wife in marriage can lead to troubles for a local husband. Russian women worry that since they are in the country without their relatives, they feel without such protection and, knowing this, men do not show due trepidation and care for their feelings, are not afraid to offend them.

Often, during consultations, Russian women talk about their grievances against their spouses for their reluctance to introduce them to their extended families: My husband did not introduce me to his family for a long time, he assured me that they would never accept me and that all this would greatly complicate our relationship... For more than 10 years, his family did not know about me and I did not have the opportunity to meet them... (Respondent 2). The Emirati husband's concern about how his Arab family will perceive his foreign wife is often accompanied by a request for his wife to bring her appearance into line with local standards: My husband insisted that I wear a black abaya, because that is how it is supposed to

be... although this was mainly only in front of neighbours and relatives, somewhere in the city, where they could not see me, he did not particularly care how I was dressed. It is very important to him what his environment will say, that is, not who he himself is, but what they think of him (Respondent 9).

Another significant aspect of rejection that Russian women talk about is their **non-acceptance by the Emirati female world**. It reveals the peculiarities of the relationships of Russian women with the Emirati female circle both in the husband's family and in society as a whole. Often, the difficult and painful experience of communicating with women from the husband's family is the subject of serious worries for women seeking psychological help. They are concerned about the fact that they experience a certain degree of neglect, feel like "second-class" people in this contact, notice, and note the desire of women from the husband's family to put them in an awkward and humiliating position. This is often due to the language barrier. This is how clients describe such situations: When we came to his mother's house, I felt like an alien exhibit there. It was hard for me when everyone communicated in Arabic, and I did not understand anything, and in general, few people care about this. I felt very constrained at these moments (Respondent 5). When I meet with my husband's female relatives, I often find myself in a situation where they discuss me in front of me without any embarrassment and whisper among themselves in Arabic, deliberately putting me in an awkward position... (Respondent 6). My attempts to start speaking Arabic in the female family circle are constantly ridiculed with the words "oh, you speak so funny, you sound like a child, you better not do that." This is always very unpleasant for me, and I have completely stopped trying to speak Arabic... (Respondent 10).

Outside the family, as Russian women describe their experience, their interactions with Emirati women also lead to an unpleasant aftertaste and disappointment: I have had enough of racism towards me as a foreign wife of a UAE citizen from Emirati women... (Respondent 8). In the view of Russian women, close and friendly relations with Emirati women are practically impossible for them: Emirati women have a lot of hostility and

envy towards us... and despite the fact that I have lived in this country for half my life, I have never had any Emirati friends - neither through study nor through family channels through my husband... (Respondent 4).

The inability to fully integrate into the Emirati female community and the experiences of Russian women associated with this fact continue in the issue of **distant relations with the extended family of the spouse**. This is quite natural, given the fact that direct contacts with the extended family of the husband for Russian women are limited to the female part of the family. Contacts with the male audience, including the husband's relatives, are culturally strictly suppressed.

During consultations, women talk about private but rather formal meetings with their husband's family, about the impossibility of building deep family contact, about mutual misunderstanding and the impossibility of fully expressing themselves in these relationships. These processes and events are accompanied by the leitmotif of deep loneliness. We often visit relatives, but these are all some kind of formal visits - to drop in, to check in. I do not feel any quality communication... maybe, of course, it seems to me so because of the language barrier. But in general, I want closer communication, but so far it has not worked out... (Respondent 7).

Women generally have a greater need to feel part of "we" and, compared to other social groups, the family acts as a priority group in relations with which a woman seeks to find support in life. Russian women in cross-cultural marriages "immerse themselves" in the host family as a social group, with its help they seek to find psychological stability, but it is the ethnocultural factor that does not always allow this to be achieved. Difficulties in building relationships with Arab spouses and their extended families, especially in cases where family members openly display rejection, resistance and hostility towards Russian women, as well as when the family life of multicultural spouses is characterized by distance from the husband's relatives, lead to a decrease in satisfaction with family life. The rejection or discrimination perceived by Russian women on the part of their spouse or his extended family can

exacerbate the feeling of loneliness and negatively affect their subjective well-being.

The theme of **loneliness**, which is clearly outlined in cross-cultural counseling of women married to Emirati men, is continued in the theme of **religious coping**. Turning to religion is one of the central resources that women turn to in moments of loneliness and difficult life situations. I cried so much in this marriage, I cried so much, I felt so bad that I had nothing left ... only the support and help of the Almighty, I could only sit and pray. I was very religious, I performed all the obligatory and additional prayers, I found peace only in religion (Respondent 5). Resorting to the protection of Allah, appealing to God as a mediator in the interpersonal interaction of spouses helps Russian women maintain a certain level of closeness and trust, as well as cope with marital conflict situations in marriages with Emirati husbands. At the most critical moment of our marriage, when I was pregnant with my second child and my husband at that time started a relationship with another woman, we did not understand each other, we are so different, our cultures are different. It was very difficult for me to communicate with him, everything was "on knives", and then I turned to religion, accepted Islam and took a completely different path in my relationship with my husband. I began to pray, study religion, go to an Islamic center. My husband looked at me completely differently, now he talks about how he saw me in those days: "when you marry the right woman, you will have a good family, a good future and a good life in general". I built a relationship with him through religion, and Islam strengthened our marriage (Respondent 6). The Islamic idea of acceptance and inner agreement with any state of affairs and confluence of life circumstances is a powerful tool that allows women to cope with the complexities of a cross-cultural marriage. The Almighty showed me various aspects of what life can be. Alhamdulillah, I have come to appreciate what I have now. I believe that I am loved by the Almighty and I try to see the positives even in the most difficult moments. I am grateful to Allah Almighty for my marriage, it was another lesson for me that led to my current level of understanding of life and



relationships, my prayers have never gone unanswered (Respondent 5).

Another major topic that can be identified based on the consultation requests of Russian women regarding their family life in the UAE is the topic of **transformation of cultural identity**. It is revealed through the women's statements about how their cultural identity in an cross-cultural marriage with an Emirati spouse was subjected to a certain load and changed towards the acceptance of significant elements of the spouse's culture. At the same time, new personal qualities and elements of cultural identity do not simply replace the old ones, but coexist, forming increasingly complex systems. As a result of this identification process, Russian women live simultaneously in two or more systems of ethnocultural coordinates, which is a certain difficulty for them and serves as a reason for seeking psychological support. Unfortunately, I have changed. More and more often people tell me: "You are the spitting image of an Arab." What you do, how you look, how you behave - all this is really the Arab Bedouin style. Of course, I love the Emirati culture: their traditional jewellery, traditional clothes are always on me. Even when I have the choice to wear jeans and a turban, I will still wear an abaya and muhawwar, it is like second nature to me and that is why when travelling I choose countries where I can continue to wear my hijab (Respondent 4).

A woman's mastery of the Arabic language, and especially the Emirati dialect, plays a key role in cultural transformation. Culturally, I define myself as an Emirati, ethnically as a Russian, and religiously as a Muslim. I have never hidden my origins and when people ask me where I am from, I say that I am Russian. But because I know the Emirati dialect well, many do not believe me and think that my father is a local Arab. Every morning from the moment I wake up, I am an Arab: I start my morning with Arabic and end it with Arabic. All my 5 sons are local Arabs, they practically do not speak Russian and all my communication at home is exclusively in Arabic. If I ever get married again, I cannot imagine my life with a man of another nationality besides Emirati. This is my culture, I know all the Emirati traditions and I can cook all the Arab cuisine. I don't even know what I could

feed a man of another nationality (Respondent 1). At the same time, without denying the fact of their internal transformations in cross-cultural marriage, some women in their reflections emphasize the stability of their ethnic identity and sometimes the strengthening of their own ethnic self-awareness: they are more clearly aware of their belonging to a certain ethnic group, different from the one to which their spouse belongs. When confronted with the local culture, I defined myself even more as Russian, the cultures of Russia and the UAE are too far apart for any smooth mixing to occur. I simply cannot even imagine how I can become an Emirati woman. That is, I will never become an Arab. My children, perhaps, will be able to, but I will not, I will never become an Arab, my Arabic will never be, say, smooth, viscous, melodious like the locals... (Respondent 2).

For many Russian women, marriage to a UAE citizen is also associated with another significant event - the conversion to Islam, which has had a significant impact on the transformation of their identity. My outlook on life has changed and I even probably experienced some kind of internal split with the adoption of my second, Muslim name. The name my parents gave me is about what I was like since childhood, a completely normal girl from our Moscow yard. My Islamic name with all its deep meaning imposes certain obligations on me so that I carry it with dignity and behave accordingly (Respondent 5).

Russian women experience significant changes in their personal transformation of their **gender self-determination**. The experience of marriage, which Russian women share during consultations, allows us to characterize its most striking feature - strict adherence to the female gender role in family relationships, which in turn makes its own adjustments to the system of values and ideas of Russian women about the functional and role purpose of a marital union with an Emirati husband and their role in it. Not all women will be suited to marrying an Emirati, because in a relationship with him you need to be able to be "behind the husband", to be slightly behind the man, in no case to command, not to conflict ... I also did not succeed with this right away, even when we went somewhere together, my husband always cut me off so that I would not walk in front

of him... (Respondent 7). In this marriage, I reconsidered my personality, my everyday life and focus of attention. As if I saw another example of female well-being: it should focus on domestic, family affairs, on femininity in my appearance and way of thinking. And I began to turn in this direction, realizing that if I want to realize myself as an Emirati wife, I need to reconsider my approach...., the local home and life are arranged so that the lady of the house is always beautiful, in these elegant dresses with embroidery, sitting on rich sofas, decorating the space with her femininity ... and at first I made an effort to be in this image of stateliness and femininity, and now it has become a part of me, and I am happy with it (Respondent 2). In the UAE, like in the Caucasus, they teach what a girl should be like, what is important in life and what is secondary. As a result, a woman's entire life rests on family, not on a career (Respondent 10).

From the topic of modification of female identity and the need to observe social and family hierarchy, the ability to be in the "second roles", follows another frequent request for consultation from Russian wives of Emiratis - **the need to sacrifice their professional ambitions**. The experience of Russian women in this matter can be formulated as follows: marriage to a representative of the Emirati culture is difficult to combine with a career. In this marriage, if I wanted to go to work at some point, and I was often offered the position of a translator, my husband immediately cut it all off, and at some point I literally lost interest in everything, I no longer wanted anything ... and so, of course, since I speak Arabic well, I wanted to be a translator, or an assistant in court working with foreigners ... I often asked myself the question "what have I done in this life? What is my talent? Yes, I gave birth to 5 sons, but that is something completely different... I never got an education while I was married, so I don't even have many ideas about what I could do professionally... (Respondent 1). In fact, there are very few options for social fulfillment for me in this country. Not to mention that my marriage has been trying to put an end to this idea for a long time. Although I have been very career-oriented and ambitious since my youth. In Russia, it has always been important for me to

have a good job, a high social status, a certain type of activity... (Respondent 2). When I came here, with my diplomatic education, I planned to work in an intellectual job, not as a photographer. I feel undervalued in this country... I realized that over all these years that I spent with my children and husband, almost all of my intellectual potential was wasted... (Respondent 11), I always had professional interests outside of office work, but my husband forbade everything. He smashed my computer when I was sitting at home studying and said that I should learn better how to make 250 dishes from meat than this... (Respondent 4).

Russian women often express regret about the consequences of such restrictions: My husband wants me to focus exclusively on children... but I have to admit that I am used to being the best in everything, I have always strived to be at the forefront. Everyone predicted a brilliant career for me, a super successful business and all that, but here I just became a mother of four children and have not achieved anything special. And I still have not found my main professional interest, I can do many things, but I do not know what exactly yet. If I had the opportunity to rewind my life, I would have acted differently. Of course, I do not regret anything, but instead of having children, I probably would have made a career and only then consciously, perhaps, would have come to motherhood and one child would have been enough for me. But now I do not even feel that I have my own life, I have completely dissolved in the family. Now I need to collect myself piece by piece and, from this collected state, think and understand where, what and how I want to do (Respondent 11).

The topic of **career restrictions** is related to another more general topic of requests for consultation - how married life with UAE men imposes serious **restrictions on external social contacts** of Russian women. In marriage, I was extremely limited in communication. And even in front of my sons, I have some fears about talking freely to someone, saying "salam" to someone, even to service personnel, they immediately cut me off (Respondent 1). My husband set a condition for me "if you marry me, you stop communicating with your girlfriend." He constantly checked my phone, translated all my correspondence in

Russian and even voice messages. If, for example, I went out somewhere with girls, then literally 2-3 hours later they started calling with demands to return home. He limited me very much, did not want me to have any freedom at all (Respondent 5). Yes, my husband told me the rules of my new married life, like “you can’t communicate with the opposite sex”, and you can’t post photos on social networks... but for some reason, these rules don’t apply to him... (Respondent 7). After getting married, many friends turned away from me because my husband forbade me from communicating with men. He immediately discussed this with me, that there shouldn’t be any male acquaintances, even the husbands of my friends, who give me rides somewhere or interact with me in some other way... But here, it was more painful for me not because my husband was limiting me, but because my friends didn’t want to understand me... and almost 8 years have passed, and I still worry about this and since then I have been avoiding any close friendly communication, because I don’t know what other claims might come my way (Respondent 10).

According to respondent’s narrative, these barriers to external communication are indirectly introduced by Emirati spouses through restrictions on leaving home and mobility in general: My husband does not allow me to drive, otherwise, according to him, I can go somewhere else without his knowledge... (Respondent 3), I actually once felt bad because my husband told me: “my mother never drove a car, and you won’t get behind the wheel either”, because we had a driver for some time, and now he has left and I am not mobile at all (Respondent 11).

Thus, the main intra- and interpersonal conflict with which Russian women seek counseling can be formulated as follows: on the one hand, it is important for women to be fully involved in family life - both in marital relations, and in parent-child relations, and in relations with relatives, and to be equal, valuable and respected participants in such communication. But at the same time, no less important for them is caring for themselves, their personal interests and self-actualization, including professional. Objective restrictions on career and professional realization, which are imposed on Russian women by the status of the official spouse

of an Emirati national, the discrepancy in the views of marriage partners regarding the professional career of the spouse, the impossibility of realizing some personal and professional needs, can have a critical impact on the subjective well-being of women and their sense of satisfaction in marriage.

### Discussion of results and conclusions

Thus, the thematic analysis of the interviews conducted to study the main topics of cross-cultural family counseling of Russian women married to UAE nationals shows that the main problems that Russian wives of Emirati men turn to a psychologist with are:

- Ambivalence of the social status of Russian women married to Emirati men,
- Difficulties in communicating with the husband’s extended family and rejection of Russian women by the Emirati women’s world;
- Loneliness and resources of religious coping;
- Transformations of cultural identity;
- The need to sacrifice their professional ambitions and career limitations;
- Limitation of social contacts.

The results obtained in the research allow us to see that a significant share of requests for consultation is directly related to the migration status of Russian women in their husband’s country. Migration status plays a certain role in their social position in the country of residence, in their psychological state, in the processes of adaptation to a new cultural environment, which is emphasized by numerous studies of migration processes and their consequences (Lebedeva et al., 2023; Berry, 2019; Lepshokova, 2022). Limitation of social contacts, search for areas of professional development, language barrier, problems with documents and much more are an integral part of the acculturation processes manifested in migration. In this sense, psychological counseling of Russian-speaking women in cross-cultural marriages with Emiratis

and living in the UAE largely fits into the consultative discourse in migration processes.

Queries related to communication with the husband's extended family, including its female half: mother and sisters, are a context typical of many collectivist cultures, where marriage implies the unification of extended families (Triandis, 2010). The state of social isolation in which a woman finds herself in the context of migration is intensified by communication in a collectivist culture, where, on the one hand, there may be extremely close contacts that will be perceived as excessive for the more individualistic culture of Russian women (Pavlova, 2024); and on the other hand, representatives of collectivist cultures build relationships with "their own" and "others" differently (Triandis, 2010), which can increase the feeling of social isolation.

Marriage in a culture with a patriarchal type of relationship, where the husband is the unconditional leader of the family, requires a woman to conform to the traditional gender role, that is, to regulate her own behavior in such a way that her behavior fits into the family-role expectations of her husband and his extended family. A resource in this can be religious identity, which promotes the acceptance of a traditional gender role associated with the unconditional primacy of a man in the family (Barinova, 2024), and also becomes the foundation for the processes of socio-cultural adaptation in a new cultural environment.

One of the central topics of psychological counseling, as the study showed, is the problem of the transformation of the cultural identity of Russian women in marriages with Emiratis. As a result of the complex process of acculturation in a new cultural environment, Russian women live simultaneously in two or more systems of ethnocultural and religious coordinates, which is a certain difficulty for them and serves as a reason for seeking psychological support. It is important for a psychologist to have cultural sensitivity when working with a complex identity structure, which, in accordance with the concept of multicultural identity styles (Ward et al., 2018), can be a hybrid style or an alternating style (Verbnaya, Lepshokova, 2024).

## Conclusion

The conducted research allowed us to analyze the main topics of cross-cultural family psychological counseling of Russian women married to UAE nationals and living in the husband's country. The originality of our study is associated with the consideration of the psychological problems of relationships in cross-cultural marriages through the prism of the socio-cultural approach in modern Russian psychology (Lebedeva et al., 2023), which involves taking into account the socio-cultural context when building a therapeutic process, establishing a therapeutic alliance, analyzing the request and all psychotherapeutic work. The use of the socio-cultural approach opens up opportunities and resources for psychological counseling in a situation of migration, adaptation in a new cultural environment, cross-cultural communication in a marriage with a foreign cultural partner. The development of this discourse in psychological counseling and psychotherapy has great potential both for the practice of psychological counseling and for the scientific substantiation of this paradigm.

The main directions for overcoming the limitations of the conducted study may be to expand the sample of respondents; optimize data collection methods, when a semi-structured interview can be supplemented by other methods (questionnaires, observation), which will reduce the risk of information distortion. Taking into account the ethnic diversity of respondents will allow us to analyse how the cultural characteristics of women from different ethnic groups affect the dynamics of family relationships, which requires a separate analysis.

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests.