



# The In-law Intercultural Relations: A Phenomenological Study

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## Highlights

- Marriage and family have a special meaning for Indonesian people because they are a source of happiness. Extended family in the same place of residence for a long time or even permanently opens up a space for relations between the son or daughter-in-law and the parents-in-law.
- This study added to understand the experiences of the son or daughter-in-law in intercultural relations with the mother-in-law.

## Abstract

*Background:* Family has a special role as the source of one's happiness. In Indonesia, with its various cultures, it is common to find a nuclear family joining the extended family in the same place of residence so that the relationship between a son or daughter-in-law with parents-in-law is intensely intertwined. *Study aims:* This research aimed to understand the experiences of a son or daughter-in-law in intercultural relations with parents-in-law. *Method:* The research was designed with a phenomenological approach. Participant inclusion criteria include a) male/female originating from outside Java; b) being married for 1 – 5 years; and c) having parents-in-law who come from the Javanese tribe. Based on these criteria, the study involved five participants (two women, and three men). Data collection using semi-structured interviews. Afterward, the analysis technique uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). *Result:* The results found that there were three main themes, namely (1) perceptions of parents-in-law's remark, (2) adjustment to culture, and (3) meaning of experience. The partner certainly participates in the psychological dynamics that are unique to each participant. *Conclusion:* The research has implications for the urgency of readiness and willingness, both for the son or daughter-in-law and the parents-in-law, in building assertive communication within the framework of intercultural relations.

Keywords: Phenomenological; Intercultural; Family; Relationship Between Son or Daughter-In-Law and Parents-In-Law

## INTRODUCTION

Marriage is an inner and outer bond between a man and a woman as husband and wife which aims to form a happy and eternal family or household based on Belief in One Almighty God (Law No. 1 of 1974). Marriage is the epiphany of forming a nuclear family. According to Olson et al. (2019), a family is two or more people who are mutually committed to sharing intimacy, resources, and responsibilities. The family fulfills the requirements to be called a group that has structure, goals, and perceptions of unity, and develops interdependence (Forsyth, 2015).

Marriage and family have a special meaning for Indonesian people because they are a source of happiness (Anggoro & Widhiarso, 2010; Afiatin, 2013). Someone will feel happy if they can make their family happy, and will feel sad if they experience conflict with their family. In Indonesia, the nuclear family and the extended family are psychologically related. Sometimes the nuclear family separates their place of residence from the extended family from the start of the marriage. However, it is not uncommon to find a nuclear family joining the extended family in the same place of residence for a long time or even permanently. This condition certainly opens up a space for relations between the son or daughter-in-law and the parents-in-law (Afiatin, 2013).

Several studies have examined marital satisfaction among couples who live with their in-laws. Research conducted by Saputra et al. (2014) found that the satisfaction of husbands and wives who live in different houses with their in-laws is higher than those who live in the same house. Marital satisfaction is subjective to the husband or wife regarding the overall assessment of their marriage. However, other studies have found no difference in the level of marital satisfaction between groups of married couples who live alone and those who live with their parents-in-law (Surya, 2013).

Other research examines the communication between the son or daughter-in-law and the parents-in-law. Saro et al. (2019) found that their communication can be done directly or indirectly. Direct communication allows both parties to face each other to exchange information. However, there are times when communication takes place indirectly using technological mediation, such as gadgets. In this communication context, a conflict between the son or daughter-in-law and the parents-in-law can occur in both verbal and non-verbal.

Sources of conflict between the son or daughter-in-law and parents-in-law vary. Research conducted by Rahmah et al. (2019) found that conflicts arise due to comments, in-laws' involvement in household affairs, and social comparisons of sons or daughters-in-law with others. Comments as a stimulus can be perceived differently according to one's meaning (King, 2020). Mechanisms of social comparison can give advantages and disadvantages to someone. Someone who wins in social comparison can increase his self-esteem, conversely, someone who loses in social comparison also can lose his self-esteem (Branscombe & Baron, 2017).

The relationship between a son or daughter-in-law and parents-in-law who come from different cultures is a necessity in Indonesia. Research that involves the perspective of a wife, as well as a husband who lives with her parents-in-law, is needed. Thus it can be explained comprehensively how the real dynamics of the son or daughter-in-law's experience in intercultural relations with the parents-in-law. Based on the description of the problems background above, the question that arises in this study is how is the experience of the son or daughter-in-law in intercultural relations with the parents-in-law? Therefore, this study aimed to understand the experiences of the son or daughter-in-law in intercultural relations with the mother-in-law.

## **METHOD**

### *Study design*

This study used a phenomenological approach. The justification for using this approach is related to the aim of this study to understand an individual's subjective perspective experience. Phenomenology guides researchers to understand phenomena and their unique context based on experience to the level of belief (Herdiansyah, 2012). A phenomenology approach was used to understand the experiences of the son or daughter-in-law in intercultural relations with the mother-in-law. This study uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The justification for using IPA is due to the research focusing on an in-depth study of how participants give meaning to their experienced personal and social life, by emphasizing understanding the meaning of certain experiences, events, and conditions for each participant. IPA pressure on the interpretation process to understand the unique personal experience (La Kahija, 2017). Researchers interpret how participants interpret their experiences.

### *Participant*

This study involved five participants with the following characteristics: 1) male/female aged 20-30 years; 2) has married status; and 3) have in-laws with different ethnic cultures. The participant was carried out using a purposive sampling technique, which allowed researchers to select participants according to predetermined criteria to achieve research objectives. There is no special relationship between researchers and participants, so we need to make building rapport first. To ensure research ethics, participants were explained research procedures and asked to fill out informed consent as a basis for participation.

### *Instruments*

Data collection was carried out by interviewing the research subjects. The interview is a method of collecting data through conversation with a specific purpose, which is carried out by two parties, namely the interviewer (interviewer) who asks questions and the interviewee (interviewee) who provides answers to questions (Moleong, 2011). Based on considerations of time, effort, and effectiveness, the researcher chose semi-structured interviews. The research instrument is in the form of an interview guide which has four main questions, they are: 1) How are the dynamics of your relationship with your in-laws who came from a different culture?; 2) How do you feel about your relationship with your in-laws?; 3) What is your wife/husband's opinion regarding your relationship with your in-laws?; 4) What do you think your life would be like if you had culturally similar in-laws?

### *Procedure*

Researchers conducted interviews with participants who met the inclusion criteria in March 2023. Before conducting the interviews, participants who would be involved in the interview were asked to fill out informed consent as proof of their willingness to become participants. Informed consent contains the objectives, procedures, and guarantees of confidentiality in research, as well as the right of participants not to answer questions and withdraw at any time if they are not comfortable. Data collection lasted for one week, with the interview duration for each participant ranging from 60 – 70 minutes.

### *Data Analysis*

The data analysis technique used in this study is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is a type of qualitative data analysis that is useful for interpreting the way participants are the first to experience a phenomenon in describing their experiences (La Kahija, 2017). Science is supported by three pillars, namely phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography. The qualitative data analysis refers to by La Kahija (2017), are: 1) Reading the data repeatedly; 2) Checking the meaning of the words contained and the language used by re-recording them; 3) Developing emerging themes; 4) Looking for the same relationship between themes; 4) Understanding all participants; 5) Look for the same patterns between participants; 6) Describe the parent theme.

## **RESULT**

### *Participant's characteristics*

The participants consisted of five people (see Table 1). All participants in this study were categorized as early adults. Age ranges from 28 to 35 years.

**Table 1.**

*Study Participant*

Number	Initial	Gender	Age (year)	Origin
1	ID	Female	30	Aceh
2	AR	Female	28	Palembang
3	AN	Male	31	Makassar
4	ST	Male	35	Medan
5	TT	Male	30	Padang

### *Research findings*

The research findings show that there are three main themes, namely perceptions of the presence of in-laws, intercultural adjustment, and the meaning of experience (see Table 2).

**Table 2.**

*Main and Superordinate Themes*

Main Theme	Superordinate Themes
Perception of the presence of parents-in-law	Feeling not free with the presence of in-laws Obtaining intervention in the household Feeling to be the wrong person in front of the in-laws
Intercultural adjustment	Feeling there is a difference in the way of interaction (quipping) Accept the condition of the relationship Self-adjustment
Meaning of experience	Evaluation is better if it has a common culture Relationships that must be lived as a consequence of marriage

### *Perception of the presence of parents-in-law*

Participants perceived that the presence of in-laws is something that curbs their freedom at home. This was expressed by Participant 1 or P1. P5 participants also felt psychological discomfort. Meanwhile, P2 participants feel free in their daily activities, such as cooking.

*“Honestly, the presence of in-laws makes me less free” (P1)*

*“All of my dishes are commented on, what is not tasty is, what is not salty, what is lacking is not enough, it is my fault, is these some dishes that I learned from Palembang” (P2)*  
*“I’m often uncomfortable at my in-laws’ house” (P5)*

Participants also felt that they had received intervention in the household. Participant P1 felt very annoyed with the intervention made by his in-laws. Participant P2 prefers if his parents-in-law live temporarily with their other children in another city. P3 participants felt that their in-laws did not trust him to make his wife happy. However, some participants saw that in-law intervention was also needed in certain contexts, for example helping to build a career path to becoming a director of a private company. For example, experienced by participant P4.

*“Not to mention the intervention really really annoyed me” (P1)*  
*“If my parents-in-law go to another child’s house for a long time or to her husband’s place in Jakarta, I feel more at ease” (P2)*  
*“There was a lot of intervention from my parents-in-law, it seems that my parents-in-law don’t believe that I can make their children happy, so they often arrange it here and there, it feels stuffy” (P3)*  
*“My parents-in-law found me a job and helped my career to the position as a director in a private company, because of their intervention I thank my parents-in-law” (P4)*

Feeling to be the wrong person in front of the in-laws. Most of the participants were also filled with the feeling of being the wrong person in the eyes of their in-laws. One of the behaviors that is often considered inappropriate is impolite behavior as expressed by participant P1 and participant P4. Participants also experienced expressions of disappointment in their in-laws, both directly as experienced by P2, and indirectly as experienced by P5.

*“I feel that I often get angry by my parents-in-law because my behavior when visiting them is considered impolite” (P1)*  
*“My parents-in-law often expressed his disappointment about me as a less dutiful daughter-in-law” (P2)*  
*“It’s normal to get angry often through your wife or directly. My in-laws are dissatisfied with me and often say I am a person who is not polite, arbitrarily lacks empathy for my wife, and lacks appreciation” (P4)*  
*“My mother-in-law, who often nags at me and at my wife. Cornered me of course my patience runs out.” (P5)*

### *Intercultural adjustment*

Participants realized that there were differences in how they interacted with their parents-in-law. Javanese culture is full of politeness and courtesy, as explained by Participant P1. According to P5, this interaction is different from their culture of origin, which prioritizes behavior based on openness. This makes participants, like P2, have to work hard to learn the culture from their in-laws.

*“The difference between us is related to the pleasantries of uploading” (P1)*  
*“I bother with this different culture I have to learn a lot” (P2)*  
*“Differences of opinion about how to behave in front of parents-in-law, politeness, in my culture, openness is number one, don’t play sarcasm” (P5)*

Unhealthy relationships create disharmony between in-laws and sons-in-law. The participants try to accept the current relationship conditions with defense mechanisms. For example, participant P1 saw it as fate and P2 saw it as a consequence of being dependent on where the in-laws live.

*“But it doesn't matter mate, no one knows my fate should be like this” (P1)*

*“Be patient, because we live in the in-laws' house and my husbands are still financially dependent on their parents” (P2)*

*“I accept it gracefully, it doesn't matter, the important thing is that I can be independent and materially successful” (P4)*

As the younger party, the participant adjusts to the code of conduct that is considered correct by the parents-in-law. P3 participants try to be good daughters-in-law and not speak harshly to their parents-in-law. P4 participants did the same thing, even though they realized that they had not been able to do as expected.

*“I am patient, and adapting” (P2)*

*“I try to be a good son-in-law, even though I don't like it, I just keep quiet and never say harsh things to my parents-in-law” (P3)*

*“I have done good to my parents-in-law. My wife also hopes that I should be able to please my parents-in-law and be polite in front of them and never hurt her, but until today I haven't been able to do that” (P4)*

*“I actually want to make my wife happy and try to be a son-in-law that makes my parents-in-law proud” (P5)*

### *Meaning of experience*

The participants evaluated that they had better in-laws with similar cultures. P3 and P4 participants feel confident that they will be able to understand each other better if they have the same culture. P2 believes that there are not many conflicts, while P1 imagines that he can become a favorite son-in-law if not intercultural.

*“Maybe the same culture will also be the favorite daughter-in-law” (P1)*

*“Maybe there won't be too many conflicts if I have in-laws who share the same culture” (P2)*

*“Maybe I could be happier if I had in-laws with the same culture because we could understand each other” (P3)*

*“I feel sure that if we share the same culture, my in-laws will understand me better” (P4)*

Even so, the participants interpreted this intercultural relationship as a relationship that must be lived as a consequence of marriage. Even though it was hard and there were many challenges, the participants tried to endure. One participant, namely P4, even enjoyed the relationship because he received extraordinary support for his future.

*“Having in-laws who are of a different culture makes my life feel less monotonous with lots of mines but I enjoy it” (P1)*

*“This different culture makes my life even more difficult” (P2)*

*“I need in-laws who are of a different culture but can support my future like that” (P4)*

## **DISCUSSION**

In Indonesian culture, it is common to find a husband and wife who still live with the extended family. This research found that the presence of parents-in-law makes the son or daughter-in-law feel not free. The presence of other people has different effects because it depends on the condition and quality of the relationship. The closeness of a person's relationship with in-laws is certainly different when compared to biological parents. This condition makes a person more sensitive to the words expressed by other people. A daughter-in-law feels that she is the wrong person in front of her parents-in-law. Research conducted by Saro et al. (2019) found that language and mindset are sources of conflict between a son or daughter-in-law and parents-in-law. Speech that does not reflect respect or misunderstanding in interpreting words has the potential to become a source of tenuous relations.

Research has also found that sons or daughters-in-law feel that they are getting intervention in the household. The existence of the participation of the extended family, in this case, the parents-in-law, is a consequence of a society with a collectivist culture. In collectivist cultures, individuals have interdependent or interdependence relationships with groups and make group goals and individual goals. The family structure that adheres to the nuclear family system encourages the creation of a collectivist society (Triandis & Gelfand, 2012). Well-managed interdependence will result in the harmonization of in-law relationships. The interdependence that is not managed properly will result in disharmony, including perceptions of intervention in the household.

In Indonesian culture, there are various cultural tribes with their respective philosophies in interaction. Research has found that there are differences in in-laws' interaction. Javanese culture is full of politeness and manners. Javanese people tend to maintain harmonious relationships (Wijaya & Faturochman, 2019). Javanese people also tend not to express disapproval frontally to other people. This is what the son or daughter-in-law encounters where he feels satire. This custom is different from the culture of origin of the son or daughter-in-law which prioritizes behavior based on openness. Differences often lead to cultural bias. Cultural bias is often found in embedding words (Durrheim et. al., 2022).

Four out of five participants lived at their parents-in-law's house. From the perspective of social domination (Sidanius, 2012), the one who lives in the parents-in-law's environment is the subordinate party. First, at a younger age. Second, have greater dependence. For example, residence and access to stability. These two things encourage their acceptance of existing relational and situational conditions. They also adjust to the personality of the parents-in-law, as well as typical Javanese social norms.

In intercultural relationships, research also found that there is a comparative evaluation. The son or daughter-in-law judges that it will be better relationally if they have cultural similarities with the parents-in-law. In social identity theory (Ellemers & Haslam, 2012), category similarities make other people an in-group, while differences make other people an out-group. Cultural differences play a role in explaining various misunderstandings in the interpretation of meaning in everyday life (Shirayev & Levy, 2016). They interpret the current relationship as a consequence of marriage. Marriage is a choice, and every choice carries responsibility.

Marriage is not only a legal union between a man and a woman, but also a union between a person and a partner's family (Alfaruqy, 2019). Disharmonious relationships that lead to conflict between in-laws and in-laws need to get a resolution strategy. There are various conflict resolution strategies for the son or daughter-in-law and parents-in-law that have been found in previous studies. Conflict reconciliation strategies include emotional management, positive

communication, and the younger voluntarily accepting input from parents-in-law (Rahmah et al., 2019). Conflicts related to language can be parsed by using the national language (Saro et al., 2019).

Marriages that involve intercultural interactions between son or daughter-in-law and parent-in-law need to be encouraged to reduce bias. Research by Pratti et. al. (2015) affirmed the positive impact of category and contact crossing to reduce bias between groups. The same categories need to be highlighted in interactions, for example, similar hobbies, gender similarities, or other relevant similarities. The established contact is based on empathy, so there is a process to understand each other.

Harmonization of the son or daughter-in-law and parents-in-law relationships can be fostered through training. For example, Suciati and Sofyan (2020) conducted training with educational presentations about *bir walidain* and interpersonal conflict management between the son or daughter-in-law and the parents-in-law. Furthermore, there needs to be openness between husband and wife in dealing with household issues related to communication with parents-in-law (Saputra et al., 2014). If it cannot be resolved properly, then there is an opportunity to produce frustrating conditions, which will end in the termination of the marriage relationship between husband and wife (Alfaruqy & Indrawati, 2021).

## CONCLUSION

The extended family system is one of the characteristics of collectivist societies, such as Indonesia. This condition gave rise to the social phenomenon of intercultural relations between in-laws and sons-in-law. The results showed that there were three main themes, namely (1) perceptions of the presence of in-laws, (2) intercultural adjustment, and (3) meaning of experience. The role of partner participates in coloring the psychological dynamics that are unique to each participant.

The research has implications for the urgency of readiness and willingness, both for the in-laws and for the in-laws, in building assertive communication within the framework of intercultural relations. Future research can be seen from the point of view of in-laws. Research can also use other methods, for example, grounded theory to develop theoretical concepts of intercultural relations between son-in-law and mother-in-law.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest.

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