

Couples Therapy: Decision-Making Processes within a Sample of Successful Inter-Cultural Couples

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Abstract

Objective: The objective of this study was to understand how educated, professional, inter-cultural couples in harmonious marriages make important family decisions.

Background: Globalization and has led to widespread inter-cultural relationships, particularly in pluralist societies. Inter-cultural relationships tend to have a higher risk of divorce and lower marital satisfaction than same background marriages yet many inter-cultural marriages are stable and successful, even with the added challenge of raising children in a country with a culture different to either parent.

Method: Six educated, professional inter-cultural couples in regional Australia, with children growing up in Australia, were interviewed with a focus on understanding their experiences and marital decision-making processes. Interviews were transcribed, coded and analysed for the emergence of themes. Participants also independently completed the Schwartz value survey to elicit their values priorities for the analysis.

Results: Four main themes emerged: Couples celebrated a global culture; cultural differences within the family was not so important; cultural difference was regarded and accommodated in family decisions. Family decisions were jointly made and involved negotiation. The fact that children, growing up in a different culture to either parent, was celebrated. There were many common values priorities between husband and wife and in all couples, shared goals, deep knowledge of the partner's culture, an attitude of support for the partner, and open communication were the critical to success. Couples often focused on what was best for the family when making decisions. Each spouse perceived they had a great deal in common with their partner, despite the cultural differences.

Conclusion: The study revealed that cultural differences were features of the marriage but did not prevent effective decision making.

Implications: Findings suggest interventions for inter-cultural couple counselling can focus on decision-making and celebration of culture within a marriage.

Keywords: Inter-cultural couples • Cultural differences • Decision-making processes • Globalization

Introduction

Perel defines inter-cultural marriage as a marriage with partners from different nationalities, cultures, or religions [1]. Globalization has provided greater opportunities for people to have contact with others from diverse backgrounds resulting in more inter-cultural relationships, and a consequent greater acceptance of these relationships in society [2]. Inter-cultural couples are increasing in

prevalence in many countries including Australia where marriages of people born in different countries accounted for just under a third of all marriages in 2016 up from just under a fifth ten years earlier [3].

A number of studies on inter-cultural marriages suggests that cultural differences can be a source of relationship conflict particularly as a result of different attitudes to parenting and financial decision-making [4]. Notes that inter-cultural relationships fail more often than intra-cultural relationships. According to inter-cultural couples are

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more likely to have conflict arising from divergent beliefs and values compared to couples from the same culture. Studies by Crippen, et al. and by Romano, et al. also suggest that childrearing was a source of conflict for inter-cultural couples [5,6].

This study focused on the direct experiences of inter-cultural couples with self-reported well-adjusted relationships so as to discover factors underpinning successful inter-cultural marriages. The approach is motivated by positive deviance theory perspectives reviewed by where insights into social phenomena are gleaned from an examination of those that deviate from the norm. Positive deviance theory examines outliers who succeed against all odds, to find solutions to problems encountered by their peers. Most studies have observed that inter-cultural couples have higher levels of conflict and divorce so, inspired by a positive deviance perspective, this study recruited inter-cultural couples that were comfortable socio-economically, highly educated and do not report marital conflict [7].

This study sought to explore the decision-making how educated, inter-cultural couples negotiate important family decisions. Decisions are a frequent source of arguments and conflicts in marriages [8]. According to decisions regarding how family income is to be spent is a significant factor in marital conflict. Perceived differences in parenting decisions between husband and wife was also found to be associated with marital conflict [9]. Found that shared decision-making was associated with happy marriages with less conflict [10].

Previous research focused on inter-racial couples, especially Caucasian/African-American and Caucasian/Hispanic couples [11]. In recent years, studies extending beyond inter-racial to inter-cultural relationships has emerged [12]. Understanding inter-cultural couple dynamics is significant in Australia, a country with a significant increase in the number of inter-cultural couples in recent years. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics census marriages of people born in different countries accounted for just under a third of all marriages in 2016 up from just under a fifth ten years earlier [13].

This qualitative study explored the way six successful inter-cultural couples make important decisions. The review of the literature demonstrates the need for additional research on how inter-cultural couples who are highly educated negotiate significant decisions. Three primary research questions were:

- **RQ₁**: How do successful inter-cultural married couples go about the process of making decisions?
- **RQ₂**: What are the factors that impact on inter-cultural couples' decision-making?
- **RQ₃**: How do successful inter-cultural couples negotiate their cultural differences, religious differences and integrate their values, when making important family decisions?

A review of relevant literature is provided in the next section. Following that, the methodology is described before describing emergent themes that answered the research questions.

Literature Review

This section provides a review of the research relating to the experiences of educated inter-cultural couples, which includes identifying and analyzing current studies and highlighting gaps in the literature. Researchers from psychology and social sciences

disciplines have recognized the need to examine cultural issues relating to inter-cultural marriages [14]. Many complex issues have been identified from numerous cross-cultural studies on, culture, cultural differences, transcultural cultural communication, and especially inter-cultural marriages and their relationships.

The search used the keywords, culture, inter-cultural, inter-racial, cross-cultural marriages in the following databases: Google Scholar, Pro-Quest, JSTOR, Web of Knowledge, Informit, APA-FT, EBSCO, Scopus, ASAP, Factiva, Wiley on Line Library and Expanded Academic. There is limited literature overseas on inter-cultural couple's decision-making processes, and no studies on were found that focused on inter-cultural couples' decision-making processes in Australia. It was also difficult to locate literature relating to the experiences of inter-cultural couples in either a clinical or non-clinical population in Australia. There is a need for further studies of this phenomenon on inter-cultural couples in Australia and other multicultural societies. The focus of this study was to inform and fill this gap.

McClendon affirms that inter-cultural marriage has become more common, however religious differences remains one of the most significant factors in today's marriage market. Despite the differences these characteristics generally serve as strengths to overcome some of the many challenges that do not exist in a monocultural relationships. Thus, reiterating once more, a small proportion of the literature focuses on the increasing number of inter-cultural marriages in general and even fewer address couples' decision-making, specifically.

Methodology

For the purpose of this study, inter-cultural marriages were defined as adults who were living together in a relationship they describe as significant for at least ten years. Each person had a self-identified cultural background that was different from their partner and they have a commitment to share their life together, with direct implications for important family decisions. In-depth interviews were employed to investigate how couples in an inter-cultural dyad relationship co-create meaning as well as how these couples handle and resolve potential conflicts. Inter-cultural marriages are described through the eyes of inter-cultural partners as part of their lived experiences. In-depth interviews allowed the researcher to solicit the decision-making processes by which couple/partners negotiated meaning from their own perspectives, as well as made sense of their lives together. Qualitative research allows phenomena to be studied and analysed in considerable detail. The goal of qualitative researchers is to preserve and analyse the situated form, content, and life experiences of participants. By sharing their individual thoughts, journeys and stories, persons in an inter-cultural relationships are provided with the opportunity to divulge their personal and cultural experiences evident in their specific, inter-cultural relationships.

Six inter-cultural couples were interviewed. No individual or couple refused consent to be interviewed, nor withdrew from the study. The couples consisted of individuals who are married to someone from a culture other than their own. The researcher purposively selected the participants from a regional city in Australia as a microcosm of the wider Australian multicultural society. The regional center in Victoria

has a small but growing diversified culturally pluralistic community. Participants represented diverse cultural backgrounds, high educational attainment (at least a Bachelor's degree), at least one spouse had a professional vocation, a self-reported high level of acculturation, were married for many years, and had children with each other. Every individual interviewed was over the age of twenty. The specific couples consisted of the following cultural sets (wife/husband): Russian/French, Iranian/Australian-Canadian, Indonesian/Australian, Filipina/Australian, Filipina, Australian-Turkish/Australian. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this study to protect the identity of the participants and their confidentiality. Other details were modified so that individuals could not be identified.

All participants were asked to complete a version of the validated Schwartz Values Survey [15-19]. Participants age ranged from 25 years to 55 years old with an average age of 37. Marriages ranged from eight to 13 years in length with an average relationship length of 8.6 years. The number of years married ranged from 10 years to 12 years.

Ethics approval was obtained to conduct this study from Federation University, Australia. The data analysis began after the first interview had been transcribed and continued for the duration of the study. No new themes emerged following the sixth couple so data saturation was assumed. All of the face to face interviews were conducted in locations convenient for the participants and ranged in length from 1 hours-3 hours. Some couples were interviewed in their homes by the researcher and some were interviewed over dinner at the researcher's home. Data for this study comprised the transcriptions of the interviews, value survey, and notes of the interviewer. All transcripts of interviewee responses and the researcher's case notes were coded, sorted and grouped to reveal higher order themes. During the process, recurring themes as well as unique instances about the couples' and individuals' experiences with cross-cultural marital adjustment emerged [20-23].

Results and Discussion

Four main themes emerged:

- Celebration of a global culture
- Cultural differences are not so important
- Accommodation of cultural difference in negotiated decisions
- Celebration of children with a third culture

The celebration of a global culture

Acculturation is the occurrence of change in values, attitudes, and behaviours of persons who come into permanent contact with another culture [24]. Acculturation typically occurs as a result of migration, colonization, or another form of contact [25-28]. All couples interviewed felt that their willingness to embrace aspects of other cultures enhanced their children's lifestyle and opportunities. Acculturation was reflected in the following quotes.

"There are no borders anymore. It's incredibly easy to travel worldwide. The world is increasingly a multicultural society. That's what we are trying to do with our children. For me, I see that I have two Pilipino-Australian children. To me, it's very important that they learn aspects of both cultures".

"I think because our children were born here, we will grow up here. I think it's absolutely Aussie, but if they have more culture it's good for the future (Lauren) [29,30]. Links reverse acculturation, the change in acculturation back to the culture of origin with globalization, pointing to a more dynamic acculturation process driven by individual agency and life and family events. This was apparent in couples in the current study who believed that reverse acculturation was prominent in their marriage and derived from shifts towards acceptance of the coexistence of cultural difference and greater tolerance of diversity. This theme has not been found in the literature because previous studies on intercultural marriages have not been specifically looking at perceptions of globalization or looking at some aspects such as socialization. Interviews revealed that intercultural couples seem to practice a kind of emerging global culture. Peter described how Australia is a multicultural society and most Australians are "outwardly thinking". His wife Sarah, encouraged their son to be part of a global society and be connected.

"Like most, more liberal-minded Australians are culturally aware because we are a country where almost 50 percent of the population was either born elsewhere or their parents were Australians are multicultural and outwardly thinking".

"So I would really want him to feel as part of the wider culture. And that's how we are raising him, it's about the connectedness".

The present study supports findings of the stepwise development of a scale of global identity consistent with analysis of lay peoples description of global identity [31-33]. Couples in their study described that they have a global identity and they were interested and willing to learn from other cultures. The traits of global identity listed by McFarland and Brown were directly observed in the successful intercultural couples interviewed in this study and included: Respect and acceptance of cultural differences, wide knowledge about different cultures, adapt and live in other cultures, travel around the world, open mind, speak several languages, global consciousness, care for culturally different, identify as a citizen of the world, non-racist thinking, not bounded by the local community but identify with a world community, lack of superiority of own culture.

Another theme to emerge from interviews related to the role of cultural differences in decision-making discussed next.

Cultural differences are not so important for inter-cultural couple's decision-making processes.

A number of studies show that equity in decision-making is related to increased relationship satisfaction [34]. All the couples in this study believed that their decision-making process was intimately related to relationships satisfaction. They explicitly expressed views that if they had poor decision-making processes, did not hear one another, or did not match on their opinions, their relationship satisfaction would suffer. This current study did not see any different perceptions about decision-making processes they both make the decision.

Data obtained from the interviews suggest that although cross-cultural differences existed between the couples, differences were not considered to play a large role in couple's decision-making processes. Couples shared many examples about aspects of their spouses' culture different from their own and the way they have developed an understanding of such differences. For example,

Couple 6 addressed the presence of "awareness," "understanding," and "acceptance" with regard to cultural differences within their life:

Wife: I will not be pretending that I'm a Filipino and he is not going to be an Australian so we need to understand that we are both from different places to bring that into what we do.

Husband: We never really had a disagreement about cultural differences.

For most couples, awareness developed first, followed by sensitivity or understanding, which subsequently resulted in acceptance or accommodation. These steps were made possible through negotiations and compromises. In other words, the data revealed an overall cultural awareness and understanding of the cultural framework and practices by both husbands and wives.

Negotiations of cultural differences

Most couples presented a great awareness and acceptance of differences. There were many cases in which they had to negotiate around such differences. Couples interviewed tried to meet each other halfway through compromises, and this was possible by discussing expectations. If a particular cultural aspect was very important in one spouse's life to maintain or one that required adaptation, it was communicated early on in the relationship, and compromises were made accordingly by the other spouse. For example couple X:

Wife: A lot more coming and going with our family, so every week you will have a family gathering. It's just how it's, all kinds of very interconnected and always things going on with family, whereas so it's kind of very foreign to him and a bit hard for him to have to deal with. Having to go all the time to family events and catch up and gathering is a bit much, whereas I am used to it. I mean that's how I grew up, that's always the case.

Husband: Family's values I think are a little bit different and I do not think that mine is better I like the idea that she is/has very different, I like the idea, it's very united, but I'm not used to it. I feel, I like the idea but I am not used to it. The other thing privacy is more important for me, than her, I think. My family for example if somebody buys a new book, and I say, can I read your book and she says-no no just my book I want to read it first, after I finish reading, no no do not touch my book you know and so occasionally there is a balance so I learned to be a little bit more sharing and at the same-time; she learns to be more understanding, but I am more protective.

This couple negotiated cultural differences because the wife's family had cultural expectations, but the husband's sensitivity to and understanding of this cultural issue allowed for some negotiations around these differences.

Another example of negotiations made in inter-cultural marriage is the wife in couple 6. We do not make a decision based on our culture but we respect each other and listen to each other. We do not think that we are from different culture. We celebrate two separate and distinct Christmases [35,36].

In fact the level of multicultural understanding and sensitivity between intercultural couples can be significant towards assessing successful intercultural couples. In this regard, the interviews demonstrate that indeed, successful intercultural marriage is

achieved through multicultural/intercultural awareness, and the understanding, tolerance, or acceptance of cultural differences.

The husband in Couple 6 stated that

Husband: "How do we make decisions? I would say, we do not look at our cultural differences, when we're faced with a decision, we rarely disagree on a decision! Generally all the times we don't agree, we negotiate. And I think 90% of the time we negotiate or resolve like a common agreement. Like 10% we just disagree or never agree. (Would you say that's fair?) Most of the time we agree, when we don't we generally negotiate and come up with an agreement."

All cases encourage children to adopt Australian as a third culture (Creation of a Third-Culture in inter-cultural marriage)

Intercultural couples in this study tried to take the best of both cultures to enrich their daily activities, plus their children's lives. It is recognized that most parents would like their children to have an identity based on the collective background of both parents [37,38]. Couple 4, Husband: "We made the decision that we have a multicultural home, and our children were nurtured in that perspective of course children differ but you do your best to raise them. If they find their own place in that multicultural home that's fine, but our home is clearly multicultural in nature. This is again a decision that we made, so we try to really embrace each other's culture, as much as we can. So from that point of view in raising children, I do not think there was any significant issue, you know the values, that we have are very similar."

Participants with children mentioned the importance of multicultural teaching to their children so that their lives would be enriched by the diversity of culture, understanding of its uniqueness, and sensitivity to differences. Couples wanted to ensure they were not limiting the child to one culture in particular, and they hoped that the diversification in their lives with cross-cultural teachings, events, and involvements would influence their appreciation and sense of identity as bicultural children. Intercultural couples in this study tried to take the best of both cultures to enrich their children's lives and help them become multicultural sensitive beings.

The proposition advanced by that inter-cultural couples brought two cultures together when they formed a relationship, and eventually developed a third culture, which included amalgamating aspects of their two individual cultures in an effort to recognise, appreciate and sustain their cultural differences and enhance their relationship and family. In this study, this was apparent however the emerging "third culture" was more like a "fourth culture" as couples all had children growing up as Australians and rather than amalgamating aspects of each culture into a single "family culture" each spouse and child did so with some individual variation that was tolerated and even, celebrated [39-41].

Conclusion

Intercultural marriages is a growing phenomenon in Australia as an integral component of the multicultural society. All the couples in this study saw their intercultural experience as positive. The couples developed their own approaches to resolving conflicts and building a supportive family environment. Couples were found to have very positive attitudes and commitment to their marriage and each other, and a firm belief that they were not so different from their partner. In

this study the success of intercultural relationships was reported by participants to be partly dependent on their individual behavior and personal characteristics, within the cultural context.

This study suggests that this specific group of highly educated, articulate intercultural couples have realities of their own and should not be generalized; as they also present a great deal of variation. Having shared values, mutual understanding, shared decision-making, respect and open communication, brought these spouses closer to each other.

This study has added to the literature on inter-cultural couple's decision-making processes by providing a more inclusive account of the contributing factors used by couples to reach a decision. Involvement of shared values and faith have been explored and reported to be a major contributing factor to the ways that inter-cultural couples were made decisions. The emergence of global culture is another contributing factor is noting and understanding how decisions are made by inter-cultural couples. The findings may help practitioners to support inter-cultural couples and also provide implications for all who are involved in inter-cultural settings.

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