Are You Marrying Someone from a Different Culture or Religion?[1]

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Figure 1. While marrying someone from a different culture or religion can present some unique challenges, it can also provide some beautiful and enriching opportunities for growth.
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It was the author Paul Sweeney who penned, "A wedding anniversary is the celebration of love, trust, partnership, tolerance, and tenacity. The order varies for any given year." Couples must make many adjustments as they learn to live with each other from year to year. When those adjustments include negotiating culture or religion, it adds another dimension to the process of trying to strengthen the relationship.

Helpful Information

In America today, more people are marrying someone from a different religion or racial/ethnic group. According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, nearly 37% of Americans are married to someone of a different faith.[1] Additionally, the 2010 U.S. Census reported that 10% of Americans are married to someone of a different race.[2] Researchers have offered several possible explanations for these growing trends:

Couples are more likely to marry outside of their faith when these contributing factors are in play:

1. They are more independent of their family, do not feel a need to be of the same faith as their parents, experience a divorce, or expect a more balanced division of household responsibilities.[3]

2. Diverse immigrants provide local residents knowledge about and and exposure to religious difference and build acceptance of other religions in American society.[4]

Interracial couples are more likely to marry when these contributing factors are in play:

1. They have a common religious orientation, education level, or global perspective.

2. Racial boundaries weaken, differences narrow, and language and residential barriers diminish, thus making intermarriage more likely to occur.

3. Immigrants of the third generation or later have become more comfortable with the local language and culture.[5, 6] Intermarriage can benefit immigrants or ethnic minorities to become part of the dominate culture, though they may lose identification with their own.[7]

Choosing a Suitable Partner

When selecting a life partner, values, beliefs, and other cultural and religious factors are evaluated in a filtering, stage-like process called Stimulus-Values-Roles or SRV. In the Stimulus stage, couples are attracted to each other. In the Values stage, couples analyze each other's values and beliefs, including cultural and religious traditions, to determine whether they are similar to or different from their own. In the final Roles stage, couples determine how various roles (e.g., childrearing, division of household chores, breadwinner, etc.) will be carried out in the relationship and whether or not the fulfillment of these roles can produce an enduring relationship. Couples determine partner-compatibility in each of these stages through filtering out potential partners who don't match their criteria.[8]

You may want to consider the SVR model as you think about your cultural and religious values; think about how you can leverage the challenges any differences may bring with the existing strengths in your relationship. As you do, you will be better prepared to determine the roles and responsibilities each of you will assume in your marriage.

Religious Differences/Similarities and Marital Happiness

Research indicates that couples are generally more satisfied with their marriages when their belief systems are more similar or homogamous.[9, 10, 11, 12, 13] In fact, the findings revealed that divorce rates were lower when spouses had the same religious affiliation,[14, 15] were generally more religious, [16, 17] and regularly attended religious services together.[18] Additionally, the degree to which couples did not share the same religious or theological beliefs predicted the frequency and type of conflicts they experienced, including an increased likelihood of divorce.[19] Interestingly, more disagreements were found among highly religious couples who had different belief systems.[20, 21]

Generally, religiousness, or religiosity, was found to be a predictor of marital satisfaction. Joint religious attendance among homogamous couples, for example, led to greater marital satisfaction,[22] and greater religiosity was related to higher levels of marital adjustment.[23] Regarding gender differences, the more that husbands attended religious services and were generally more religious, the lower the frequency of marital arguments and the higher the marital adjustment scores in first marriages and remarriages.[24, 25] For women in a remarriage, however, there were no differences in levels of marital adjustment regardless of the wife's level of religiosity. In fact, religiosity wasn't as strong for either men or women in remarriage, so it may not be a strong predictor of marital adjustment. However, when both the wife and husband were religious, they reported higher levels of marital adjustment.[26] The risk of divorce in first marriages increased when the husband attended religious services more frequently than his wife. Theories speculate that regular joint church attendance provides a protective effect for the marriage by providing consistent social networks of like-minded individuals and strengthens bonds by reinforcing ideology and lifestyles.[27] In addition to religious service attendance, regular in-home worship activities[28] and other joint religious activities, coupled with fewer religious differences,[29] increased marital satisfaction.

In sum, these findings seem to indicate that the greater the similarities in religious beliefs and behaviors, the higher the marital happiness. Further, couples are more satisfied in their marriage when they are similarly religious.

Racial Differences/Similarities and Marital Happiness

Couples of different racial and ethnic backgrounds tended to view their differences primarily as cultural rather than racial, with the exception of when they were initially attracted to their partner, or if they had experienced incidences involving prejudice or discrimination.[30]

Being of different races can definitely pose a challenge for intercultural couples. These challenges can definitely be overcome. However, if couples face disapproval and social pressure from families and society, their relationships may become highly stressful as a result.

Our review of studies on stress in intercultural marriages found at least five particular sources of stress:

1. Major differences in cultural and world views

2. Macrocultural reactions (negative responses from society and family) and microcultural differences (values, beliefs, and traditions within the couple)

3. Communication styles

4. Religious and ethnic beliefs

5. Having an unbalanced view of their intercultural marriage (i.e., they distort or deny the differences, rather than integrate the similarities and differences into an overall balanced perspective)

Further, stress experienced in intercultural marriages may also be related to childrearing, time orientation, gender role expectations, connections to extended family, and particularly, which family subsystem will take priority or be dominant.[31]

Not all intercultural marriages are stressful and divorce prone. However, research indicates that interracial marriages were 13% more likely, in one report, to divorce than same-race marriages.[32] Though interracial marriage did not predict divorce per se, they were generally less stable and the risks varied by ethnicity. Among Whites, the ethnic group least likely to participate in interracial marriage, women tended to report the most stress. Among Native Americans, the ethnic group most likely to be involved in an interracial marriage (at over 50%), the distress rate was about twice as high as it was for Native Americans who were not involved in an intermarriage. The distress rate for Hispanics was elevated only when they married non-Whites, reaching over twice the rate of those married homogamously to other Hispanics. Interestingly, studies have found that if intermarriage improved the socioeconomic status of Hispanics or White women, the distress rate decreased.

Intermarriages involving African Americans were the least stable (especially with a White wife).[33, 34] Rates of distress also increased among Hispanics and Native Americans who intermarried. Intermarriage among Asians did not elicit increased distress for any groups, which may be a result of the fact that they are among the most integrated minority group in American society.[35] In fact, marriages with an Asian partner were generally more stable than White homogamous marriages. Interestingly, the success of all of the marriages, except Asian–White, was predicted by the most divorce-prone group represented in the couple, rather than a balance of the two. The Asian–White couple's risk of divorce was a result of the balance of the two groups.[36]

Potential cultural differences that must be negotiated were highlighted in one study that focused on Asian Indian-White marriages. These couples found that their families of origin were outspoken about disapproval and concern about protecting future generations, transmitting cultural values and traditions, and connecting with other generations in the family. Marriage outside of the race or culture was seen as a disruption of a sense of community, cultural heritage, and identification.

Within the Asian Indian community, partner selection tends to be carefully orchestrated within social status and income, with education and employment as key variables for consideration. Staying within the same range on these factors assures power and status equity within the families. Because marriage is a communal affair for the Asian Indian community, Asian Indian–White couples are often concerned and aware of social image and potential censures that could limit their ability to integrate into the existing community.

Couples who overcome these challenges are more likely to focus on their similarities and perceive differences as strengths that broaden their view and enrich their relationship. They carefully discuss and negotiate the expectations and possible repercussions of conflicting cultures. Strengths in these relationships arise from spousal support, trust, and belief in each other. Immersion in either's culture can bring a unique sensitivity and awareness of differences, but also broaden their worldview.[37]

In sum, intercultural marriages across ethnicities experience different levels of stress and resiliency. The complexities can potentially be overcome successfully with careful negotiation and communication.

Other Factors of Marital Success

Other major factors that commonly influence marital success include age at marriage and educational level of the partners; premarital experiences, including cohabitation, birth of a child, and one's own parents' marriage and divorce; socioeconomic resources; and, couple-level characteristics, which include cultural backgrounds, interpersonal styles, and values. Research has shown that 48% of marriages end in divorce within 10 years if the wife was married before she was 18 years old, but that rate dropped to 25% if she was at least 25 years old when she was married. Behaviors such as cohabiting or having a child prior to marriage increased the risk of divorce. Moreover, higher income and education levels at the time of marriage were linked positively to a more enduring marriage.[38]

Things You Can Use

The strength of intercultural marriages can be evaluated, according to one study, by how well couples organize and manage their potential value and role differences through four relationship styles: integrated, co-existing, singularly assimilated, or unresolved. Couples who exhibit these first three relationship styles generally report being happy. The unresolved couples typically struggle with how to cope with their differences. Integrated couples meld their cultures together, celebrate, and validate each way of being. Co-existing couples manage their unique, separate ways of expressing their culture, though the differences are viewed as positive and attractive, with mutual respect. Among singularly assimilated couples, one partner essentially converts to the other's culture without resentment. In unresolved marriages, the couple does not yet know how to manage the differences and may either ignore or experience conflict about them.[39] Although it appears that the unresolved couples may experience the most challenges with regard to racial, ethnic, or religious differences, each of these four relationship styles can benefit from learning strategies to manage their differences, belief systems, and conflict and stress.

Managing Differences

Four primary strategies can be used to manage the differences found in intercultural marriages:

1. Create a "we" perspective – Reconstruct a shared meaning in your relationship based on friendship, common ground, similar goals, working together, and commitment.

2. Frame differences – Don't look at differences as racial or cultural, but with respect and as attractive, worth learning about and celebrating.

3. Maintain emotions – Communicate and deal with insecurities and emotions, make adjustments around culture, and find support from those who will be positive and helpful.

4. Foster relationships with your family and community – Establish boundaries with family and community, express the solidarity of your marriage, use humor to decrease the impact of prejudice and discrimination, and give family or community members time and space to accept your partner.[40]

Managing Different Belief Systems

The following strategies are recommended to help couples with different belief systems:

1. Communication skills – This is the most important task in creating a successful marriage for both couples of same and different faiths.[41] Research has shown that open communication about one's culture and faith, as well as partner support for the other's culture and faith, were related to lower relationship distress.[42]

2. A strong, cohesive relationship bond – This is a strong predictor of marital success.[43]

3. Respect and tolerance for differences – Love comes first. This strategy is designed to maintain separate and unique beliefs with the understanding that it isn't acceptable to deny someone's identity. [44]

4. Flexibly connecting with the two systems while also keeping them separate – It is important to find common elements of belief and practice. This strategy requires that the couple negotiate the meanings of their religious practices to build understanding and connection. They cross religious boundaries and celebrate both faiths.[45]

5. Reconstructing new rituals, traditions, and symbols of faith and identity of your blended systems – These couples oblige their families through the disestablishment and often domestication of religion so that their new form of blended faith accommodates their faith needs without offending anyone in the family.[46]

Managing Conflict and Stress

These strengths-based strategies were found to diminish the intensity of conflict and stress for intercultural couples:

1. Gender role flexibility – Couples talk about cultural expectations regarding household duties and are able to negotiate how the responsibilities will be assigned for their relationship.

2. Humor about differences – Couples use laughter to lighten potentially stressful situations.

3. Cultural deference or a tendency to defer to the partner's cultural preferences – One partner purposely chooses to assume the other's culture to a large degree to accommodate their differences.

4. Recognition of similarities in beliefs, values, traditions, etc. – Couples emphasize sameness or common threads in their relationship.[47]

5. Cultural reframing – Couples redefine their couple identity with a new framework or set of values.

6. General appreciation for other cultures – Couples notice, value, and respect advantages of each other's cultures.[48]

Conclusion

While marrying someone from a different culture or religion can provide some unique challenges, it can also provide some beautiful and enriching growing opportunities. If you are considering an intercultural marriage, you might find it helpful to use a chart to monitor your use of some specific strategies that can strengthen your marriage. Put this on your refrigerator or another prominent spot where each of you will see it regularly. Mark a "+" if you practice this strategy, and a "−" if you don't. If you find that doing this isn't enough, you may want to find a trusted therapist in your area for more assistance (see http://www.therapistlocator.net/).

Endnotes

[1] Online: http://religions.pewforum.org/reports/

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Table 1. Strategies for successful intercultural marriages

Target Behavior:	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	Totals
1. Create a "we" perspective	+ - ++							
2. Embrace similarities and respect differences	+							
3. Manage expectations and emotions	-							
4. Cultivate family and community acceptance	+							
5. Foster open communication (i.e., talk a lot)	+							
6. Solidify your friendship bond								
7. Set realistic boundaries								
8. Be flexible with gender roles and cultural systems								
9. Create new rituals, traditions, and customs								
10. Use humor to diffuse stress and conflict								