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Article 21

Working with Intercultural Couples and Families: Exploring Cultural Dissonance to Identify Transformative Opportunities

Paper based on a program presented at the 2011 American Counseling Association Conference and Exposition, March 23-27, 2011, New Orleans, LA.

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The increasing rate of intercultural marriage in the United States has been well documented in the literature (Lee & Bean, 2004, Waters, 2000), yet the dominant discourse of homogamy persists (Karis & Killian, 2009). In the broad literature on intercultural couples, there has been a lack of empirical research to support conclusions about the role of cultural differences in intercultural relationships and families (Sullivan & Cottone, 2006).

Although all relationships are inherently complex, dimensions of difference are magnified for intercultural couples and families because they combine at least two distinct cultural reference groups, different levels of acculturation, and influences on social location such as family, peers, school, and work (Molina, Estrada, & Burnett, 2004). For intercultural relationships to persevere, a degree of cultural adjustment must occur, which can facilitate adaptive outcomes such as cognitive flexibility, improved social competence (Ting-Toomey, 1999), increased self-awareness, and personal growth (Kim, 2001). Yet a substantial focus of research has relied on clinical populations, reinforcing cultural differences as a source of instability, conflict, or dissatisfaction for couples (Cottrell, 1990; Hsu, 2001) rather than an opportunity for transformation (Crippen & Brew, 2007). Many conclude that intercultural couples face higher levels of marital challenges (Crohn, 1998; Ho, 1990); are more prone to failure (Gurung & Duong, 1999); and are embedded with conflicts related to dormant allegiances of worldview, family structures, and communication patterns (Perel, 2000).

This article will discuss the dynamics of cultural dissonance and transformative opportunities for intercultural couples and their children, based on findings from a qualitative study on the experiences of intercultural parents from different (first- or

second-generation) countries of origin (Crippen, 2008). Using culture as a lens, treatment considerations for counselors working with this growing population will be presented to better understand how others can benefit from diversity within their families.

Cultural Dissonance in Intercultural Relationships

Cultural Dissonance and the Individual: Culture Shock

It is extremely difficult for me to be away from my family and I have come to feel very lonely and isolated...because I don't have my family [or] social network. [Zinzi]

Individuals crossing any cultural boundary can experience culture shock, a strong affective response that includes expectancy violations, vulnerability, and a profound sense of disorientation or disequilibrium associated with outsider status (Ting-Toomey, 1999). Culture shock for individuals in intercultural relationships includes outsider status, cultural losses, and divided cultural homes. These examples of culture shock are not unlike those experienced by travelers or immigrants to a new culture; what is unique is that these experiences are reactions to the culture of an intimate partner.

Outsider status.

I always feel like I am at a parlor game and I am the only one who doesn't know the rules. [Samantha]

A common theme among intercultural partners is the persistence of discrepant identity status. The alternating out-group membership of partners in an intercultural relationship has destabilizing and isolating effects on each partner at different times. This dynamic frequently remains invisible to the in-group partner who can rely on his/her own cultural codes to interpret social interactions.

It's like I didn't really have a place [in Nigeria]... The family treats me as a guest...on one hand I was a mother which conferred a special status, but as a wife I wasn't quite up to par because I couldn't properly look after my man... and I didn't speak the language anyway. It was pretty isolating, and Ola would say that everything was just "too complicated" to explain. [Christine]

Ceremonies that punctuate important traditions are common transgressions of implicit rules by cultural outsiders. Rules surrounding these occasions are embedded at an early age, and those surrounding the significance and meaning of food are a frequent source of violation and cause for mutual offense.

Her mom would offer me something to eat... And, culturally, to just say "Yes" would be like you were expecting it... So, I say, "Oh, no thanks, that's OK." And that would be my cultural way of responding, and we are supposed to do it probably three times. She is supposed to offer again. And I am supposed to say "no, no, no" and by the third time, I say "OK." So... initially I felt hurt... I think Katherine and her family [thought], "he said

he doesn't want it, so if he doesn't want it, he doesn't want it and if he did he would say so." [Daniel]

And I thought when [his] parents would keep offering and I would say, "Oh, no thank you," and they would offer it again, and I am thinking, "I SAID I didn't want any!" And I was feeling like it was pushy. [Katherine]

Cultural losses.

I miss my friends...I have some American friends too, but it is difficult to find friends that both my husband and I would find interesting. [Sandra]

Partners who immigrated to the culture of their spouse often express cultural loss of familiar cultural references such as holidays, popular culture, food, and humor.

The main cultural difference is conversation. In Spain, you sit to have a meal, and the conversation... is an art that could be prolonged for hours and hours and hours. In the U.S. you say, "Oh, we have to do something!" [Antonio]

I like to hear Spanish television because it is familiar, from childhood. And it taps into a memory from childhood or high school and I don't have access to on a daily basis. [José]

I wish I could prepare Indian food for my daughter more often, it's just that it takes so much time... most Indian mothers will spend all day cooking! And I really can't find most of the food or bread or spices here [in the Midwest]. [Anya]

Divided cultural homes.

I still think of Peru as my home, nearly 30 years later. [Sandra]

Intercultural couples from distinct countries of origin are unique in that they have at least two cultural homes, and at least one partner resides outside of his/her home country at any given time. Frequently, one or both partners experience losses associated with this physical separation.

[O]ur biggest problem here is that disconnect...from both families. So in terms of imparting our culture to [our children], it is difficult. It's not like our parents are next door that can help impart those values...that is something we miss. [Ola]

My brothers and I were very close. It was hard for me, to raise my children without their Spanish aunts and uncles around. Yes, it is one of the hardest...It is sad that they don't see them very much, but that is what happens. [José]

Cultural Dissonance and the Couple: Cross-Cultural Challenges

It's not easy... people said to me, "It's not going to be easy" and I thought, "Yeah, yeah." But I love him... and it still isn't easy because you don't think through these things that you have never really discussed until they arise. [Christine]

Intercultural couples face various cross-cultural challenges as they progress through different cultural transitions (Falicov, 1995). Many of these challenges are the result of dissonant cultural orientations or worldview.

I think it is part of the white thing...be who you are and don't worry about what people think. I remember growing up, my mother telling me, "Why do you care so much about what other people think?" And Daniel remembers his mother saying, "You can't do that, what would people think?" [Katherine]

Specifically, discrepant styles of communication and values related to childrearing are common examples of cross-cultural challenges experienced as an intercultural couple.

Communication.

I think we were nine or ten years into our marriage until I realized that there was a subtext. The "I don't like turkey" translated as "I don't like the [Thanksgiving] holiday celebration; do we have to get together with your family?" [Samantha]

Communication is a common source of discord, in particular the less obvious variations in communication style. Patterns of communication are imprinted early and typically persist through adulthood. Miscommunication can occur because of the tendency to send and interpret messages based on one's own cultural code and cues for communication.

Japanese culture is very indirect... If Daniel was doing something that was bugging me, like leaving his bag right by the door, in my culture it's OK just to say, "Would you not leave your bag right there by the door?" But that is so direct for Daniel; that implies that I am really angry about it. So, I've had to learn to say... "Does it help you to have your bag right there by the door so you remember it?" ... I have to do a little more of the indirect thing. [Katherine]

In Trinh's [Vietnamese] culture...you don't necessarily talk about everything. You just kind of...sweep it under the rug and nobody else on the outside needs to know that you are having a fight or an argument. [Jackie]

Childrearing.

Cultural relativism only works when people agree with your point of view. [Ola]

Many cultural values remain dormant until couples have children, and the question of which values and traditions to adopt or transmit becomes an investment. One potential conflict for couples is defining the roles of parents and children.

And she could go [to the DRC], stay with [her grandparents] and be exposed to her African heritage, and we could go see her in the summer. But see that is my African perspective... [My husband] sees us as the primary caregivers and I see the entire family is involved. For him, it is

like sending our daughter AWAY, and I see it as sending her TO my family. [Zinzi]

It seems to me that in Zinzi's culture, the extended family can be considered equal to the Western notion of the nuclear family. The problem is that I wasn't raised with that notion and it is difficult for me to accept. [Tad]

For others, conflicting perspectives on discipline evolve from different overarching cultural goals such as relational versus behavioral orientations.

A lot of Japanese discipline comes with negative discipline and the use of shame, which is a relational thing: our relationship is bad because you are bad... And I think Katherine [believes], "It was a bad thing, the behavior was bad, and it needs to be corrected." And there is a consequence. [Daniel]

Cultural Dissonance and the Family: Cross-Cultural Cleavages

Putting together two families, that was the hardest part. [Marie]

Families with multiple cultural identities often experience cross-cultural cleavages or externally-imposed divisions as a result of the broader social environment, and differences in cognitive and behavioral socialization across extended families. Some of these cleavages include discrimination, preferences for endogamy, and discrepant family systems.

Discrimination and racial stratification.

But that is the problem in this country...it is just so polarized and is so difficult. My children will always have to choose. [Christine]

Discrimination and racial stratification are often profound realizations for partners who were socialized as part of a dominant culture with presumptions of identity, privilege and insider status.

I didn't think about [racial identity] before my daughter was born...I didn't grow up with those racial divisions so it really wasn't in my frame of reference [in the Congo]. But she will be identified as a minority in Texas...and I guess I need to accept that. [Zinzi]

I want to raise a colorblind child because [in the Bahamas], there is so much interracial mixing you don't even think about it... here everything is a racial issue and Hannah will have to deal with that because most people here just see her as "black", not biracial, and definitely not Bahamian. [Monique]

The simple fact is that there is still a lot of racism in the world, and because we are an interracial couple there are always people who will mistreat us based on that, or make assumptions, or make us feel different... I just never noticed before because I could always blend in and not take notice. [Tad]

I don't want to raise Suria [in the Midwest] because it is so intolerant and not open to difference. The people are superficially friendly, but we are never invited to anyone's house, for example. [Samuel].

Preference for endogamy.

It is still somewhat of a stigma to her family to this day. [Samuel]

In addition to the broader social cleavages confronting diverse family systems, there can be challenges associated with integrating families from disparate cultural backgrounds that did not necessarily sanction exogamy, nor value diversity within the extended family.

[My in-laws] felt that he should marry a Vietnamese girl. They felt that I wouldn't understand the culture, that I wouldn't understand how a Vietnamese man needs to be taken care of...that I wouldn't know how to cook Vietnamese food, that I wouldn't know how to make him happy. [Jackie]

My family always had hopes that I would marry a Nigerian...I think they accept [my marriage] because they HAVE to. I mean, that's what they do, but I wonder how left out they might feel. [Beni]

Discrepant family systems.

My mother would always say [about my husband's Persian-Mexican family], "You aren't dealing with a family; you are dealing with a tribe." [Lucia]

Cultural norms that delineate family boundaries are another example of a cleavage that is not visible until it is contrasted with another.

The tribe is the most important grouping. That is why when he goes to Nigeria, there are so many aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers, and I'm like, "How can you have so many relatives?" And he explains that they are from his village. And I still struggle with that. [Christine]

Likewise, family systems are characterized by different roles and obligations conferred on family members according to cultural norms.

My parents want to be involved in all of our decisions for when it comes to picking a house or how we landscape something... I have never not had them be a part of it, that's just the way our family is. And it's a little too much for [Chad] I think... I think if we lived [near my family] there would be more problems. [Anya]

I realize now that his family was miles away and I didn't have to deal with them on a day-to-day basis. If they had been here, I doubt that we would still be together because it would have been too great of a leap for me to behave in the role that they would have wanted me to behave in. [Christine]

Although cultural dissonance is a challenge inherent in intercultural relationships, the process of negotiating these cultural stressors can lead to transformative opportunities for intercultural couples and their children that would not have been realized in an endogamous union or monocultural family system.

Transformative Opportunities in Intercultural Relationships

Transformative Opportunities for Individuals and Couples

I like the adventure. I think it has made me develop as a person, having to step outside my way of thinking. [Beni]

My world is richer because I have two cultures. [Anastasia]

For an individual in an intercultural relationship, cultural competency can be enhanced through the development of a broader frame of reference, increased cultural sensitivity, and tolerance for diversity.

In many ways, she has opened up my world, and she has helped me think outside of the Western philosophical mindset. This has enhanced my own way of thinking and dealing with problems. I have learned to be more considerate and caring towards people of other races and backgrounds. I think I have developed a more inclusive worldview. [Tad]

It has opened my eyes to dealing with difference, adapting to different ways of doing things, being more tolerant about difference, more open-minded. [Samuel]

I hope I am developing a little more sensitivity to the people around me. I think that is a good thing. [Katherine]

It really challenges my perspectives that were a given... there is a bigger culture, a different way that they see it, and that can be a very valid way of seeing things. So I think we have less focus on trying to change each other and more focus on trying to understand. [Daniel]

Within the context of intercultural parenthood, there are other transformative opportunities for individuals and couples, such as access to other models of parenting and the opportunity to confront and negotiate imprinted cultural values.

Coming from a different set of values, it does bring about a lot more discussion and reflection and that's a good thing... And I think we discussed that a lot more than we would have had to if we were both Japanese or if we were both white because I guess we would have just assumed that we were going to do certain things. It's almost like we were liberated because the rulebooks were a little more open. [Katherine]

It is easier to disregard traditional parenting practices that either of us disagrees with because we are married to someone who wasn't raised with the same model. Instead of just doing things by rote, we are forced to confront our differences and discuss what is best for our family situation. [Tad]

I think if we were in England, maybe we would have more pressures...I guess I would revert to bringing the kids up much more the way I was brought up...and that would engender more conflicts than living here [in the U.S.]. [Christine]

For others, the process of parenting in another language provides an opportunity to learn or create a different style of parenthood than that which was modeled in childhood.

I'm raising our kids in a language different than the one that I was raised in. I am a different parent in English than I am in Spanish. Because I have scripts in English... but I don't have any imprint in Spanish. I don't have a script in Spanish. So I can reinvent myself as a mother in Spanish, I can pick and choose. [Marie]

Transformative Opportunities for Children

We are a global family... Our aim would be for our kids to grow up being comfortable in any country, and to be able to live... and to experience other cultures and to choose how they want to live. [Christine]

Intercultural parents perceive innumerable benefits, opportunities, and privilege for their children associated with being raised in culturally diverse households. These opportunities include cultural belonging, increased cultural literacy, culturally adaptability, and heightened empathy.

Cultural belonging.

She has benefited in other ways...she fits in more. [Samuel].

Although frequently cited in the literature as a source of confusion for children, the dual heritage status of intercultural children also can convey a sense of connectedness.

Anju has both, so maybe she won't feel as isolated as I was when I was growing up. She has an Indian cultural heritage with me, but she is also half white so she is part of the dominant society here too... hopefully it will be the best of both worlds. [Anya]

I think the beauty of it is, when they meet somebody who is Persian or Muslim or Middle Eastern, they feel an affinity. Or if they meet someone who is Mexican or Latin American, they feel an affinity. It breaks down barriers; they have all of these multiple levels of connections, as opposed to just one... I think they seek friends who are culturally diverse. They have this multi-cultural point of view. [Lucia]

Cultural literacy and adaptability.

They can see that the world is not just the United States. They have a broader frame of reference, more open-minded. [Sandra].

Cultural literacy and an enhanced cultural adaptability are other examples of opportunities for children exposed directly to more than one culture. Specifically, expanded worldview and multilingualism are transformative opportunities for children living in culturally diverse households.

I feel they have benefited from different approaches...certainly they have benefited in terms of us traveling and being exposed to both of our families. They have visited Europe several times and Nigeria. So they have exposure to different ways of life, which we both think is beneficial. [Christine]

We will send her to Chinese language classes when she gets a little older so she can develop some language skills. [Our city] has a pretty large Chinese community and places like the Chinese Cultural Center where she can maintain the language outside of school. [Julia]

Further, the ability to code switch, or switch cultural codes according to context, is another adaptive, transferable skill for children who learn to negotiate cultural differences within their families.

[The children] are getting good at learning different rules and applying them in different situations because they have to. They have to because they have seen it firsthand. They have seen the fireworks even if they were pretty young. [Lucia]

There is a flexibility that comes in there when they are learning from what the need is of the situation they are in. [Katherine]

Cultural empathy.

She won't have rigid beliefs about, "this is how all people are," because she will have grandparents that are so different if nothing else. [Beni]

Finally, a heightened cultural awareness and empathy are significant benefits for the children of intercultural couples. Specifically, sensitivity to and appreciation for cultural differences are interpersonal skills that can be developed from the experience of living in a culturally diverse household.

A big benefit I believe is that Hannah will be less inclined to see racial differences in people in a polarizing way when she is older. [Monique]

[My daughter] has been exposed at an early age to different cultures and understanding that there is diversity, there is not just one way of thinking, of doing things. [Zinzi]

I don't know, but if you are from really similar backgrounds you probably don't think about it or talk about [cultural differences] ...or if they do, then [they don't have] the experience of living and experiencing different cultures. [Daniel]

Counseling Intercultural Couples and Families

There are the multiple dimensions of cultural dissonance for partners in intercultural relationships that emerge from competing frames of reference, rules, norms of behavior, and worldviews. For intercultural couples or families in therapy, counselors can use culture as a lens to explore these aspects of difference and opportunities, being mindful to avoid over- or under-emphasizing the significance of cultural differences within the family based on prior assumptions. Intercultural couples and families are as heterogeneous as the societies in which they reside. Their dimensions of difference may include disparities in privilege, power, and social location; language; ethnic/racial status; religion and/or nationality. They may experience social resistance from their respective families of origin or in the larger community. Intercultural couples and families may express vastly divergent cultural values, norms, and expectations, or they may have areas of commonality that supersede all other aspects of difference. Their commonality is in their diversity, or *interculturalness*, and the dynamics that characterize it. As such, a cultural framework [see Appendix] can be used to clarify the salience of cultural factors and to illuminate opportunities for enhancing each unique family system.

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Appendix

Framework of Cultural Assessment, Intervention, and Integration: Working with Intercultural Couples and Families

Cultural Assessment

Individual

- a. Instruments such as the Cultural Assessment Interview Protocol (CAIP: Grieger, 2008) can be used to conduct an in-depth assessment of an individual's cultural heritage and multi-faceted identities.
- b. This foundation enables each partner to situate his/her own cultural identity to better understand relational dynamics.

2. Extended Family

- a. Family cultural assessment (McGoldrick, Giordano, & Garcia-Preto, 2005) and cultural mapping, such as cultural genograms (McGoldrick, Gerson, & Petry, 2008; Thomas, 1998), of intergenerational dynamics can be employed to situate the broader cultural context of the respective extended family systems as well as those created through marriage or partnership.
- b. This technique permits each partner to identify intergenerational transmission and blending of cultural values through patterns of migration and marriage, as well as a map of opportunities and challenges in the construction of their own intercultural partnership and family.

3. Couple

- a. Relational dynamics can be assessed by identifying the couple's stage of cultural transition and their strategies of intercultural adjustment.
 - i. Intercultural couples progress through various stages of cultural transition (culture shock, mutual accommodation and adjustment, and mutual acculturation) during their relationship. (Falicov, 1995).
 - ii. Intercultural couples employ different strategies of adjustment to negotiate cultural differences. Their strategies are an interaction of their degree of mutual acculturation (e.g., low, asymmetrical, convergent, or high) and their constructions of cultural difference (e.g. minimized, acknowledged, or emphasized; Crippen, 2008).
- b. This case conceptualization enables the counselor and couple to clarify and enhance areas of strength in their relationship, and to formulate goals to remediate conflict appropriate to their stage of transition and strategy of adjustment.

Cultural Interventions

1. Facilitate Cultural Awareness
 - a. The Multiple Heritage Couple Questionnaire (MHCQ; Henriksen, Watts, & Bustamante, 2007) facilitates dialogue for intercultural couples and promotes the exploration of sources of strength and cooperation through a constructivist approach of describing different perspectives and experiences.
 - b. The Family Values Clarification Exercise (Perel, 2000) can be used to clarify different cultural styles within a family, and to increase awareness of their own and their partner's/children's assumptions.
2. Enhance Cultural Communication
 - a. Tools such as the Cultural Relationship Interview Matrix (CRIM; Li, Lin, & Eckstein, 2007) can be used to consider the role and effect of culture for each partner as a child and in the context of the current relationship and family system. The structure of CRIM requires active listening to communicate findings to the other partner to stimulate dialogue to enrich the relationship.
 - b. Different styles of communication, such as high- and low-context, can be a source of misunderstanding for intercultural families. Experiential activities or simulations can be used to illustrate these differences and promote enhanced intercultural communication within the family (Crippen, 2011).
 - c. A Mindfulness Approach to manage intercultural conflict assists couples to engage in "meditative consciousness" and to develop empathy through understanding the language code and cultural rhythm of each partner (Ting-Toomey, 2009).
3. Cultural Translation
 - a. Therapists can function as a "cultural referee" (Hsu, 2001) to reframe behaviors that are misinterpreted, and to de-code areas of conflict for the couple/family using culture as a more neutral lens.
 - b. Cultural reframing depersonalizes conflict and it helps the couple to decipher what is culturally based and what is not; to determine the significance of the value/tradition/norm within each culture of origin; and to address the salience of each value to family members.
4. Cultural Mediation
 - a. As cultural mediators, counselors can distinguish cultural differences within the family system as sources of opportunity and challenge, as well as loci of complementarity and cleavage.
 - b. Counselors can suggest decision-making methods and problem-solving strategies that are culturally appropriate and effective for the characteristics and attributes of the intercultural family. Typologies of

intercultural decision-making can be found in Crohn (1995), Ho (1990), McDermott and Fukunaga (1977), and Romano (2008).

5. Cultural Bibliotherapy

- a. Tools for the therapist:
 - i. Resources for working with intercultural couples and families (Henriksen & Paladino, 2009; Wehrly, Kenney, & Kenney, 1999).
 - ii. Resources for working with couples with specific interracial, interethnic, and interfaith backgrounds and other intersections of diversity (Karis & Killian, 2009; McGoldrick et al., 2005; Rastogi & Thomas, 2009; Thomas, Karis, & Wetchler, 2003).
- b. Tools for intercultural families
 - i. Resources with case studies, research, essays, and personal narratives on intercultural love, relationships, and marriage (Breger & Hill, 1998; Gillespie & Kaeser, 1997; Grearson & Smith, 1995; Kennedy, 2003; Mathabane & Mathabane, 1992; Reddy, 1996a; Root, 2001).
 - ii. Resources with exercises and practical advice for intercultural couples (Crohn, 1995; Romano, 2008; Shelling & Fraser-Smith, 2008).
 - iii. Resources related to raising children in intercultural households (Nakazawa, 2003; Reddy, 1996b; Root & Kelley, 2003)

Cultural Integration

1. Acknowledge the existence of cultural differences; the relevance of these differences depends on the characteristics, context, and construction of the intercultural system.
2. Recognize that different constructions of intercultural family systems require complementary case conceptualizations. For example, assimilated monocultural family systems; third culture, blended transcultural hybrid systems; pluralistic multicultural systems; and mutually acculturated bicultural systems employ different strategies and goals for system stabilization and growth (Crippen, 2008).
3. Maintain therapeutic balance between an acknowledgement of the challenges and potential cleavages while promoting the sources of strength and opportunities.
4. Integrate the cultural context of the individual, couple, and family with enhanced cultural awareness, communication, and problem-solving techniques to realize the transformative opportunities benefitting from their diversity as a family.