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Intercultural Relationships: Entry, Adjustment, and Cultural Negotiations

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INTRODUCTION

In today's world, national boundaries are increasingly blurred because of the ubiquitous influence the media, the Internet, and technology exert in our everyday lives (e.g., Arnett, 2002; Wilding, 2006). These factors contribute to increased cultural exchange, which allows diverse individuals to meet, interact, and marry more easily (Tseng, McDermott, and Maretzki, 1977; Romano, 2001). Therefore, it is no surprise that it is becoming increasingly relevant to speak of intercultural couples and the opportunities and challenges these relationships face. Intercultural marriages in the United States have been steadily increasing over the past three decades (Frame, 2004; Ibrahim and Shroeder, 1990; Kalmijn, 1993; Molina, Estrada, and Burnett, 2004; Negy and Snyder, 2000; Qian and Lichter, 2007; Waldman and Rubalcava, 2005). In 2000, for example, 7.4% of all married-couple households and 15% of all opposite-sex unmarried-couple households involved partners of different races or origins (see special tabulation from Summary File 1 of U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

An intercultural couple is defined here as the union between two people of different nationalities, which may or may not include differences in race, ethnicity, religion, and language. Over the years, many terms have been used to describe culturally diverse couples. The terms intermarriage, cross-cultural marriage (or relationships), transcultural families, and cross-ethnic intermarriages have been used in slightly different, yet largely overlapping ways (Breger and Hill, 1998; Roer-Strier and Ben Ezra, 2006; Sullivan and Cottone, 2006). Historically, the term intercultural relationship has been applied to racially mixed couples (Crohn, 1998; Kalmijn, 1993; McFadden, 2001; McFadden and Moore, 2001; Pascoe, 1991; Sullivan and Cottone, 2006) because racial differences are considered cultural differences in some societies (Sullivan and Cottone, 2006). Many researchers, however, have argued that intercultural relationships require broader definitions, specifically because culture itself is broadly defined (Softas-Nall and Baldo, 2000; Sullivan and Cottone, 2006; Waldman and Rubalcava, 2005), and because racial difference does not equal cultural difference. Although partners in an intercultural relationship may have different racial backgrounds, what makes their relationship intercultural is that it is "characterized by greater differences between the partners in a wider variety of areas, with race, religion, ethnicity, and national origin being [some of] the primary factors" (Sullivan and Cottone, 2006, p. 222).

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In this literature review, the authors argue that intimate partner choice is the result of specific developmental outcomes, shaped as all other developmental milestones by the interaction of the individual with his or her environment. Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective (1979; 1986) is useful for examining intercultural relationships because it describes development in terms of person-environment interactions (Moen, 1995). The person refers to biological and psychological characteristics of the individual, and the environment refers to physical, social, cultural, and historical contexts in which humans live.

Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1986) identified various systems that influence the individual, and these systems are best visualized as a set of concentric circles. The innermost and smallest circle, or the microsystem, represents the individual and the social structures in which he or she participates directly, such as the family, school, work, or church (the interaction between these various structures of the microsystem is called the mesosystem). The larger circle enveloping the microsystem is the exosystem, and it represents the local and regional communities in which the person does not participate directly but that still influence his or her behavior (such as parents' workplace, neighborhood's structures of social or legal authority, etc). The largest circle is the macrosystem, which represents the influence of society at large with its customs, values and laws. The chronosystem can be visually represented as a line cutting across the concentric circles, and refers to the influence of time on developmental outcomes. This article describes how each environmental system affects the development and maintenance of intercultural relationships. A summary of the most important clinical ideas to emerge from the literature on intercultural couples in the United States, as well as clinical suggestions for therapists working with these couples, are provided at the end of the article.

ENTRY INTO INTERCULTURAL RELATIONSHIPS

Given the premise of assortative mating (Kalmijn, 1991a; 1991b)—the idea that people couple with others who are similar to themselves in various sociocultural factors—it might be surprising that intercultural relationships are so prevalent. To understand why people marry outside any one of their sociocultural groups, it is important to understand the context that allows people of different cultural backgrounds to meet, interact, and intimately relate. These personal interactions are described here using Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1986) environmental systems.

Macrosystem

The macrosystem is the broadest environmental level, thought to include the social and cultural frameworks in which individuals live their lives. Immigration, globalization, and acculturation are important macrosystemic factors that influence the likelihood of meeting, interacting with, and marrying someone from another culture (Alba and Nee, 2003; Berry, 1997; McFadden and Moore, 2001; Qian and Lichter, 2007). Globalization has increased the rate at which people travel as well as the reasons for travel (Barbara, 1994). Although immigration is a principal way people come into contact with cultural others, individuals also may participate in cross-cultural travel for work, tourism, or study (Barbara, 1994). For immigrants, the length of stay in a country influences the chance of marrying interculturally (McGoldrick and Preto, 1984). Intercultural marriages become more common within a generation or two of immigrating to a new country, once families become more acculturated (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002; McGoldrick and Preto, 1984). Individuals whose countries generally accept and welcome immigrants and foreigners are exposed to various cultural groups from young ages, especially if they live near ethnic enclaves, which tend to be located in major

cities (McFadden and Moore, 2001). Knowledge about different cultures and positive contact with cultural others make individuals more likely to consider intercultural relationships (Khatib-Chahidi, Hill, and Paton, 1998; McFadden and Moore, 2001; Romano, 2001).

Individuals from different but similar cultures are also more likely to enter intimate relationships with each other because these individuals tend to have more comparable attitudes, values, and beliefs. Intercultural partners have typically been socialized in different macro environments, and having similar or complementary orientations facilitates relationship development (McGoldrick and Preto, 1984). Although marriages linking two cultures with different and even conflicting values are possible, the decision to enter an intercultural marriage may be more easily made when the partners' cultures are similar or when the couple can find complementary values amidst their different backgrounds (Molina, et al., 2004). For example, individuals from cultures that emphasize collective over individual objectives are more likely to see each other as potential mates. Cultural similarities and differences between any two individuals, however, is a matter of perception and interpretation (Waldman and Rubalcava, 2005). What can seem like a marriage between dissimilar people to outsiders is often viewed by the couple as a marriage between partners who are more alike than different (Khatib-Chahidi et al., 1998).

Exosystem

Communities in which families and individuals grow and develop are considered the exosystem; the way these communities interact and influence each other is considered the mesosystem. Communities greatly impact mate selection and family formation (McGoldrick, 1998). Molina et al., (2004) argue that communities serve as proxies for extended families in many societies and are extremely important in bringing intercultural couples together. Communities that exclude people who are different are likely to oppose intercultural relationships. These neighborhoods may include ethnic enclaves within the United States that become isolated because of prejudice and discrimination and attempt to hold on to their own cultural heritage. Given that certain communities may be reluctant to accept or support intercultural relationships, individuals may encounter hostility and/or violence in trying to develop such partnerships. Couples already involved in these relationships may experience premature breakups or feel forced to go into exile in other communities (Biever, Bobele, and North, 1998).

Religious groups are a good example of how communities can serve as relationship gatekeepers. They help families define their social group identity and influence how individuals perceive intercultural relationships (Crohn, 1998). In some societies—especially western ones—the weakening ties to orthodox, dogmatic religious groups make is so that socioeconomic status is becoming increasingly more likely than religious affiliation to predict assortative mating (Kalmijn, 1991a; 1991b). Still, religious devotion as well as religious apathy both help shape a family's attitude toward intermarriage, albeit in different ways (Crohn, 1998). In general, the messages individuals receive at church may either promote or reject intercultural marriage.

On the other hand, the more open or neutral a community is to intergroup contact, the more likely individuals are to meet and form long-term relationships with people from diverse backgrounds (Khatib-Chahidi et al., 1998; McGoldrick and Preto, 1984). It should be noted, however, that communities in most of the United States and a large part of the Western world exert much less pressure on individuals than they once did, and this change is largely due to

the increased value on individuality and "crosscutting social circles," which makes individuals less dependent on any one group (Blau, Beeker, and Fitzpatrick, 1984, p. 585).

Microsystem: The Family

The microsystem is composed of the personal and familial factors influencing the individual. An individual's family and the value given to cultural exchange influence travel to foreign countries and opinions about whether it is acceptable to interact intimately with foreign others. Families provide the most direct means of socialization. Through families, individuals learn the roles society expects them to fill (i.e., daughter/son, friend, wife/husband) and the tasks associated with each role (White and Klein, 2002). When families adopt diverse cultural customs, children learn from a young age how to respect, appreciate, and adapt to people with different backgrounds (Crippen and Brew, 2007). Exposing children to different cultural norms and viewpoints also promotes greater social flexibility, stronger cognitive skills, less ethnocentric attitudes, and greater intercultural efficiency (Vivero and Jenkins, 1999). Individuals are also more likely to marry interculturally when their family of origin encourages them to seek knowledge from and maintain contact with other cultures (Khatib-Chahidi et al., 1998; McFadden and Moore, 2001; McGoldrick and Preto, 1984).

Parents' jobs and relationships with foreign others also impact the likelihood that a person will travel or be exposed to different people (Khatib-Chahidi et al., 1998; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002). Work and study abroad afford opportunities to participate in diverse social networks, which increase familiarity with cultural others. Even if individuals do not travel, they are likely to view foreigners as more similar than different, if their families participate in social networks that cut across cultural communities.

Microsystem: The Individual

Certain intrapersonal characteristics differentiate people who marry interculturally from those who marry intraculturally. Generally, reasons for marrying cross-culturally are similar if not identical to reasons for marrying within one's cultural group (e.g., Khatib-Chahidi et al., 1998; Romano, 2001). Motives such as love, attraction, and complementary personalities are of primary importance to individuals, particularly in Western cultures (i.e., North America, Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand) (Ingoldsby, 2002; McGoldrick and Preto, 1984). However, some individuals, specifically those who come from a middle class background or from families with previous cross-cultural marriages, tend to be more attracted to people from different cultural backgrounds (Khatib-Chahidi et al., 1998). People with middle-class backgrounds and culturally diverse families generally have higher tolerance for ambiguity, greater appreciation for cultural blending, and are better able to live with cultural differences. Individuals who marry cross-culturally also tend to marry later than the average age for their particular group. Some researchers report that individuals who marry outside their ethnic or racial groups tend to be highly educated (Crohn, 1998; McGoldrick and Preto, 1984; Qian and Lichter, 2007), whereas others find that lower education levels are more predictive of intercultural marriage (Hwang, Saenz, and Aguirre, 1997; Khatib-Chahidi et al., 1998). The discrepancy between findings may be because different groups tend to exhibit different patterns related to who marries out and to whom (e.g., Crohn, 1998; Qian and Lichter, 2007).

In terms of personality, individuals who intermarry tend to be more assertive, adventurous, open-minded, and differentiated from their families of origin (Khatib-Chahidi et al., 1998;

McGoldrick and Preto, 1984). Research also indicates that an appreciation for or attraction to the "exotic other" is a major factor influencing entry into intercultural marriages (Kohn, 1998). In one study, for example, women from different European countries who married interculturally frequently mentioned being highly attracted to their partners' 'difference' (Khatib-Chahidi et al., 1998). 'Different' meant various things to each participant—for some, the difference lay in their husbands' personalities; for others, different referred to their husbands' social class. A lack of interest in the characteristics of mates from the same culture also has been observed, particularly when individuals feel marginalized by their cultural group (Khatib-Chahidi et al., 1998; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002; McGoldrick and Preto, 1984). Thus, intercultural marriages are seen as a good option for individuals who suffer from marginalization as well as those who embrace it. For the first group, intercultural partnerships provide distance from aspects of a society they do not appreciate, whereas the second group gains an opportunity to exaggerate their 'otherness' even further (a concept alluded to in Char, 1977, and further discussed in Crohn, 1998).

Chronosystem

The chronosystem refers to the effect of time on the various systems influencing an individual's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1986). One influence of the chronosystem on intercultural relationships is that compared to the past, such relationships are now more socially accepted. For example, in the United States, prior to 1967, it was illegal for "White" individuals to marry non-Whites in several states. Since the law was changed, intercultural marriages and relationships became significantly more common (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).

ADJUSTMENT TO INTERCULTURAL RELATIONSHIPS

Relationship adjustment is defined as a process composed of "troublesome dyadic differences, interpersonal tensions and personal anxiety, dyadic satisfaction, dyadic cohesion, and consensus on matters of importance to dyadic functioning" (Spanier, 1976, p. 17). A low rating on any of these factors can affect a couple's overall adjustment to (and satisfaction with) the relationship. Intercultural couples are at a higher risk of experiencing adjustment problems over the course of the relationship. In this section, the ecological framework is used to identify factors influencing adjustment in intercultural relationships.

Macrosystem

The degree of adjustment required in intermarriage is largely based on spouses' levels of acculturation to each others' cultures (Frame 2004; McGoldrick and Preto, 1984) and to the cultural context in which they live (Kim, 1998). Although it is important to hold on to one's own cultural identity, individuals must become proficient in their partners' cultural scripts also (Killian, 2002). A transnational perspective on migration challenges the assumption that immigrants must acculturate into a new society and abandon their original culture (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002). Instead, transnationality involves grounding one's identity, relationships, cultural repertoire, and transactions in two or more cultures (Chamberlain and Leydesdorff, 2004; Foner, 1997). A transnational individual crosses borders to optimize opportunities and resources in daily living (Parreñas, 2001). Ideally, individuals in intercultural relationships need to be proficient in each of the cultures represented in their relationship—their own, their partner's, and the mainstream or host society culture if it differs from their own (Tseng et al., 1977).

The ways in which an intercultural couple responds to the stereotypes of their different backgrounds can propel the relationship either toward long-term stability or disintegration (McFadden and Moore, 2001; Molina et al., 2004; Ng, 2005). Individuals who respect their partners' culture and who are willing to adopt some of their partners' values and practices as their own, experience more stable relationships (Romano, 2001; Tseng et al., 1977). On the other hand, blaming personal choices and characteristics on cultural influences, accepting stereotypes and overgeneralizations as true, and refusing to accept cultural influences as real and legitimate sources of interpersonal differences are detrimental to the relationship (Molina et al., 2004).

Exosystem

Communities not only serve as gatekeepers for intercultural relationships, they also oppose or support their continuation. Adjustment to intercultural marriage is related to the level of acceptance the couple experiences in their circle of friends, at work, in neighborhoods, and in other social environments outside the family. The larger and more supportive the social network, the more resources couples have to cope with opposition and negotiate their cultural differences (McGoldrick and Preto, 1984).

In general, intercultural couples experience much more social disapproval than intracultural couples, which can strain the marital relationship (Baltas and Steptoe, 2000; Bhugra and De Silva, 2000; Biever et al., 1998). Although extreme, financial or social estrangement from friends and/or family members and outright hostility from the community may be experienced (Biever et al., 1998; Gaines and Leaver, 2002; Molina et al., 2004). There are some advantages to these hardships, however. Intercultural couples may become more committed and involved with each other and the couple may even become more aware and accepting of their differences (Biever et al., 1998; Gaines and Agnew, 2003). At times, distancing from opposing social circles may be possible for some couples, and when it is, these couples may be able to find support in other communities. In such cases, intercultural couples could strengthen their couple identity because of the unique hardships they face.

Microsystem: The Family

The families of both spouses can be key sources of social support and their approval of the relationship significantly affects the couple's adjustment to marriage (Frame, 2004; McGoldrick and Preto, 1984; Romano, 2001). Families can provide social, economic, and personal support as partners learn to cope with the challenges associated with being a couple and, in particular, the challenges of being in an intercultural relationship. People who experience strong, positive relationships with their families of origin are generally healthier, more satisfied, and better able to cope with life transitions and crises (McGoldrick and Preto, 1984).

Individuals in intercultural relationships may distance themselves from their family and culture of origin (especially if families are resistant to the foreign partner), which could hinder their success in various roles such as that of parent or caregiver to elders (McFadden and Moore, 2001; McGoldrick and Preto, 1984). When individuals abandon their own family, they are more likely to adopt or convert to the cultural beliefs and practices of their partner's family. Distancing from the family and culture of origin may be harmful for later life-cycle demands such as understanding intergenerational health patterns (Crohn, 1995; Ho, 1990; McGoldrick and Preto, 1984) and participating in caregiving networks (Aranda, 2003). Events such as the death of a parent, the birth of a new family member, and the ageing

process are associated with higher conflict levels, particularly when partners have different cultural expectations and coping strategies for dealing with these events (McGoldrick and Preto, 1984; Negy and Snyder, 2000). The reemergence of cultural loyalties during these times can lead to serious relationship conflict for couples who have minimized their differences over the course of their relationship (Crohn, 1998).

Partners who have core members of their extended families living in other countries may be especially vulnerable to the risks associated with a lack of familial support (Parreñas, 2001). Family members in different countries cannot help with childcare, and they may not be able to acquaint themselves well with the foreign spouse—especially if language barriers exist—thus being more likely to hold on to prejudices or misgivings about the relationship. And they may even put more financial strain on the couple if their livelihood depends on the family member who is working abroad (Chavez, 1998; Parreñas, 2001). On the other hand, having a geographically distant extended family may give the couple a chance to negotiate their cultural differences without excessive outside influence. The distance could serve to insulate the couple from prejudiced family members or from family pressures to resist acculturation to the dominant culture or the partner's culture.

One important task for anyone involved in a long-term, committed intimate relationship is to shift emotional and economic alliances from the family of origin to the new partner (Molina et al., 2004). Different cultures see this task as more or less important, which creates difficulties for intercultural partners who must blend both cultures' perspectives on achieving this goal. Even geographical distance cannot protect the couple from the misunderstandings and resentments associated with divergent cultural scripts regarding how extended family should be treated after marriage (Waldman and Rubalcava, 2005). Shifting priorities may be especially tricky for those whose cultures regard lack of parental obedience to be indicative of familial and cultural disloyalty (Molina et al., 2004).

Microsystem: The Individual

Certain personal and couple attributes may facilitate adjustment within intercultural relationships. Not unlike intracultural couples, people enter intercultural marriages believing their relationship will last forever and that they can overcome any difficulties (Axinn and Thornton, 2002; Crohn, 1998). This is likely to enhance commitment and resilience, and help partners cope with prejudice, discrimination, and cultural conflicts (Gaines and Agnew, 2003). Some intercultural couples benefit from discussing their differences whereas others minimize their differences and focus on similarities (Crohn, 1998; Killian, 2002; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002; McGoldrick and Preto, 1984). Denying the existence of cultural differences or ascribing them to personal characteristics instead of cultural variation could harm the relationship (Crohn, 1995; Perel, 2000; Romano, 2001; Waldman and Rubalcava, 2005). In order to anticipate and prepare for future conflicts, partners should evaluate their values to see how they are influenced by their cultures of origin (Hsu, 2001; Molina et al., 2004; Romano, 2001; Waldman and Rubalcava, 2005).

Chronosystem

The chronosystem is relevant when discussing an intercultural couple's relationship identity—how it is formed, maintained, and its effects on adjustment. Partners initially develop their ideas about how the world works in their families of origin. Reiss (1981) stated that the family as a group of individuals holds central assumptions and expectations that are constructed through interactions. Starting in early childhood, the family is the source of a

person's internalization of values, goals, and even preferences, thus being referred to as the child's main source of socialization (Ting-Toomey, 2005). When people come together in an intimate relationship, they must negotiate their learned assumptions and expectations to develop a shared meaning system. In this process of negotiation, partners create, modify, and/or maintain desired identities in a never-ending process (Ting-Toomey, 2005). Adjustment in intercultural relationships is likely to be more stable when partners merge desired elements from each person's existing cultural and familial identities.

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVED ADJUSTMENT

Building on the preceding section, the authors now address what partners can do to minimize conflict and optimize their relational adjustment and satisfaction. The strategies suggested below have been put forth by therapists and researchers working with intercultural couples. General consensus exists that intercultural couples should become experts in cultural negotiation by familiarizing themselves with each other's cultures, discussing important aspects of these cultures, and finding ways to blend different cultural scripts in everyday life.

Macrosystem

The likelihood of entering an intercultural relationship is enhanced when intercultural contact is frequent and partners agree on core values. It is recommended that partners be committed to learning about each other's culture prior to marriage (Frame, 2004; McGoldrick and Preto, 1984; Waldman and Rubalcava, 2005). Successful intercultural relationships generally are characterized by partners who hold transnational identities that span various cultures and which do not abandon important familial and social relationships (Crohn, 1995). Compared to the past, efficient straddling of cultures is easier to achieve today given the widespread use of technology to assist with cross-national communication and contact (Wilding, 2006).

Conflict and polarization result from viewing one's worldview as an objective reality and not considering the possibility of different perspectives (Perel, 2000). Unfortunately, this is common in intercultural relationships. Crohn (1995) suggests tenets for conflict resolution within intercultural relationships, and offers exercises that can help couples. First, partners should identify their differences and not assume they understand each other. They should use anger as an ally—as the "overheating gauge" of the relationship, which points to real issues that require attention (p.105). Couples are encouraged to remember that cultural negotiation is hard work and an ongoing process. These couples should not assume that cultural understanding equals acceptance of differences. It is also beneficial to blend cultural scripts from each partner in order to create a new, unified couple script (Crippen and Brew, 2007; Ho, 1990). Perel (2000) suggests that the creation of a "third reality" should not be about creating an undifferentiated 'mix' of partners' cultures and personalities, but about creating room for each person to be a separate self while remaining connected to and respectful of the other partner's cultural self.

Exosystem

As noted, communities can either encourage or discourage intercultural relationships depending on how open they are to cultural exchange. Supportive communities provide resources to help couples handle relational difficulties (McGoldrick and Preto, 1984). It is recommended that couples create a chosen family—that is, a network of individuals who offer emotional support and who function similarly to biological relatives. This is especially

important for individuals who do not have support from their families of origin. Furthermore, intercultural couples may benefit from contact with culturally diverse, socially liberal communities (towns, neighborhoods, and so on) in which their relationship would be perceived as 'normal'. Such communities would be more likely to have family therapists who are trained and experienced with multicultural clients. Additionally, intercultural couples may be less likely to be viewed as unique, exotic, or somehow ideal, which would reduce the pressure on their relationship.

Microsystem Factors: The Family

Family support greatly facilitates adjustment to intercultural relationships. Tension is more likely to occur when families do not accept the intercultural relationship and view the family member's choice as uncharacteristic or unprecedented. This typically occurs when cultures do not encourage intimate cross-cultural contact with specific cultural groups. In such circumstances, it is beneficial for the couple to conduct an in-depth, joint exploration of each family's views on intercultural relationships, the role families will play in the couple's life, and the couple's strategies for handling disapproval. Ideally, these explorations should occur in the beginning stages of an intercultural relationship (Crohn, 1995). Family or couple therapy can provide much needed support and resources for couples with disapproving families.

Microsystem: The Individual

Tolerance for ambiguity, attraction to the exotic, greater appreciation for cultural blending, and a sense of curiosity are characteristics associated with intercultural marriage partners (Khatib-Chahidi et al.,1998). These characteristics may make intercultural partners more willing to acknowledge and examine cultural differences, more reluctant to accept stereotypes, and more flexible in their roles, which may facilitate relational adjustment. Once partners are well acquainted with each other's culture, a negotiation of daily tasks must occur. Several strategies can help this process. One of the healthiest ways to negotiate cultural differences is to blend aspects of each culture into everyday and major life-decisions, and to keep the values and cultural dictates that are most important to each partner (Romano, 2001). Rohrlich (1988) states that "to marry an individual from another culture is to marry that culture as well" (p. 42), and that a lack of interest in the other partner's culture, or assumptions about the other person's values gives rise to serious marital conflicts. Thus, partners should not underestimate their cultural differences (Crohn, 1995; Molina et al., 2004; Rohrlich, 1988; Waldman and Rubalcava, 2005). Instead, they should rule out language incompetence and communication handicaps and consistently reflect upon their cultural differences. It is also helpful for partners to understand each other's preferred mode of handling conflict, as members of different cultures may use different techniques for confronting relational problems (Crohn, 1995; Mackey and O'Brien, 1998).

CLINICAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TREATING INTERCULTURAL COUPLES

In addition to the above suggestions given directly to couples, therapists have identified various frameworks for working with intercultural couples, most of which focus on expanding the therapists' multicultural knowledge and competence. Narrative therapy, with its focus on forming a cohesive 'story' of one's life, externalizing problems, and creating narratives of change may help couples become aware and start to value differences and find solutions to disagreements (Biever et al., 1998; Frame, 2004). The postmodern tradition in

psychotherapy, which is prominent in narrative therapy, provides effective techniques for treating intercultural couples who may struggle with the multiplicity of meanings in their lives (Biever et al., 1998). For example, therapists can help couples become more aware of the role of culture in their relationship by using a collaborative, curious stance; helping clients stay open to alternative understandings of their issues; encouraging a both/and perspective that values both cultures' explanations of the issues at hand; helping the couple search for liberating traditions within each culture—that is, the strengths cultural dictates may bring to the relationship; and viewing impasse as an attempt to change the partner's beliefs and ideas (Biever et al., 1998; Frame, 2004; Ng, 2005; Waldman and Rubalcava, 2005).

Therapists who understand multiple cultures and who are willing to remain open to a variety of perspectives are especially important for intercultural couples who seek therapy (Waldman and Rubalcava, 2005). Therapists (and clinical supervisors) should focus on the partners' perceptions of their differences and similarities, and their perceptions of how the dominant group views their relationship (Estrada, 2005; Joanides, Mayhew, and Mamalakis, 2002; Killian, 2002). The therapist should also conduct a thorough assessment of each partner's worldview, expectations, presenting problems, and relationship dynamics. The literature on intercultural marriage therapy, however, does not offer concrete guidelines for such an assessment (Bacigalupe, 2003; Ibrahim and Schroeder, 1990).

An especially relevant struggle for intercultural couples is to acknowledge that many of their differences stem from cultural, rather than personality characteristics (Bacigalupe, 2003; Ng, 2005; Waldman and Rubalcava, 2005). Because culture is such an intrinsic force in human life, its influence in shaping us is often not clear, which predisposes individuals to think that the way they view the world is in fact reality (Waldman and Rubalcava, 2005). Because it is so important for intercultural couples to acknowledge their differences as not being a product of character flaws or ill will, it is paramount for therapists who work with these couples to help them evaluate how each partner's culture has shaped his or her values, and how their behavior is logical, given these cultural values. Therapists should act as cultural mediators (Falicov, 1995). One example of an area that might be especially problematic in intercultural relationships is the role and expression of emotion. Emotion is shaped by culture and thus intercultural couples may be at a particular disadvantage if they have different styles of emotional expression (Waldman and Rubalcava, 2005). A therapist who can help partners understand their different modes of emotional expression and help facilitate such expression, could significantly enhance the quality of the relationship.

Intercultural couples may experience unique barriers to seeking therapy. Finding cross-culturally competent therapists could be difficult for couples who live in rural or more isolated areas. Additionally, some cultures perceive couple therapy as an inappropriate means to cope with relationship conflict (Penn, Hernandez, and Bermudez, 1997; Root and Suyemoto, 2005). Training culturally sensitive therapists is a subject that has received much attention in the literature on intercultural marriage (see Estrada, 2005; McGoldrick, 1998). The general consensus is that cross-cultural competence is difficult to accomplish, especially because of its ambiguous definition and the multiplicity of cultural values that exist in the world. As such, therapists can strive for cultural awareness and sensitivity instead.

CONCLUSION

Given the current state of globalization and worldwide immigration patterns, intercultural

relationships are becoming more widespread than ever before (Crohn, 1998; Wilding, 2006). It has, therefore, become crucial for professionals to learn more about intercultural marriage and the factors affecting entry and adjustment into these relationships. Clinical papers and theoretical discussions have thus far been helpful in providing a conceptualization of intercultural relationships but empirical research on the topic of intercultural relationship is scant (e.g., Hwang et al., 1997; Joanides, et al., 2002). Because little is known about the everyday reality of intercultural couples and how they celebrate and cope with their differences, qualitative investigations are needed. This article represents a first-step in summarizing the literature on intercultural couples and suggesting strategies for successful adjustment. However, many avenues remain to be explored on this topic and its relevance will continue to grow with time.

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