

“WHAT’S DIFFERENT BECOMES NORMAL:” A PHENOMENOLOGICAL  
INVESTIGATION OF RELATIONAL IDENTITY AND CULTURAL NEGOTIATION IN  
INTERCULTURAL RELATIONSHIPS

by

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(Under the Direction of David W. Wright)

ABSTRACT

Romantic intercultural relationships are becoming increasingly widespread given the influences of globalization, technological advances, and travel opportunities. The factors influencing successful entry and adjustment into intercultural relationships are reviewed. The reported study is a phenomenological one, focusing on the lived experience of being in an intimate intercultural relationship. Cultural negotiation and how it influences the relationship identity of intercultural relationships is also a primary focus of this study. Ten couples in which partners have cultural roots in different countries were recruited for participation. Two or three dyadic interviews were conducted with each couple, and interviews focused on relationship history, the couple’s views regarding the intercultural nature of their relationship, and their negotiation strategies. Phenomenological data analysis as proposed and described by Giorgi (1975) was used to derive essential themes from participants’ accounts of their experiences in intercultural relationships. Findings point to important issues left unexamined in the literature on intercultural relationships, such as how intercultural couples view and describe their own relationships, the negotiation practices they view as important in their everyday lives, and how

they manage to blend different cultures in their routines. Based on these findings, I provide a theoretical explanation for some apparent inconsistencies in the couples' accounts, using Reiss (1981) concept of the family paradigm. These findings contribute to a beginning understanding of relational identity and what factors intercultural couples use as the basis for the identity of their relationships. Empirically based recommendations for working with intercultural couples within the context of couple therapy are also provided.

**INDEX WORDS:** Intercultural relationships, phenomenology, cultural negotiation, relational identity, cross-cultural relationships, intercultural couples

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B.S., B.A., University of Georgia, 2004

M.S., University of Georgia, 2007

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2009

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August 2009

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to John, my intercultural partner, my soul's twin born and raised in a different motherland. I am so glad our paths crossed, against all odds. You are my rock and I am convinced the degree this dissertation represents would not be possible without you, in so many ways. This is your accomplishment too.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank first and foremost my family—the ones still with me in this world and the ones who have already gone on to a better one (I know you all have been watching over me for a while)--for being there every step of the way, however you were needed, and for *always* believing that I could do this even when I did not believe it myself. My heartfelt thank you also goes to David Wright, my advisor, who has been so much more than that—you have been and will always be my mentor, my teacher, my academic father, and my dear friend. Thank you for stepping up to the immense challenge of mentoring me and nurturing me in an often hostile environment, for believing in me when I did not believe in myself, for taking me on as a student and a cause (really!), for your staunch developmental view of my mistakes, my tears, and, yes, my “passionate” ways, and thank you for your respect, honesty, and unwavering support (and for the tissue box in your office in my honor). Thank you to Maria Bermudez for being my “*shero*” and a great mentor, for Lynda Walters for being the best role model a girl can have, and for Denise Lewis, for not hesitating to take me under her immense, powerful wing. Thank you also to Nicole Childs and Jennifer Gonyea, for being great academic big sisters, and Desiree Seponski for being my academic little sister and for trusting, befriending, and caring about me like a true little sister—you have been such a great comrade in this madness!

And last but *definitely* not least, thank you to the really wonderful, generous, impressive, inspirational, and above all, cute couples who participated in my dissertation study. Without your generous support and giving of your time this dissertation *truly* would not have been possible. You all have been such an inspiration to me, both professionally and personally, and I wish you

all the best. And, by the way, you are absolutely right: intercultural relationships *are* just so much better—trust me, I am a doctor now!!!



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

We live in an era in which 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). The current time period is unique because multiethnic social contact is intense and ongoing (McFadden & Moore, 2001). Each of these factors contributes to an environment of increased cultural exchange that allows diverse individuals to meet, interact, and marry more easily (Tseng, McDermott, & Maretzki, 1977; Romano, 2001).

It should be no surprise, then, that it is becoming increasingly relevant to speak of intercultural relationships and the opportunities and challenges they face. Intercultural marriages have been steadily increasing over the past three decades (Frame, 2004; Ibrahim & Shroeder, 1990; Kalmijn, 1993; Molina, Estrada, & Burnett, 2004; Negy and Snyder, 2000; Qian & Lichter, 2007; Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2000, 7.4% of all married-couple households and 15% of all opposite-sex unmarried-couple households involved partners of different races or origins; 3.1% of married-couple households had only one partner of Hispanic origin as well as 6.4% of all opposite-sex unmarried partner households (see special tabulation from Summary File 1 of U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

An intercultural relationship is defined here as the intimate union between two people from different nationalities, which may also include, but not necessarily, differences in race, ethnicity, religion, and language. The relationships in question are romantic in nature and involve long-lasting commitment even if marriage cannot, for one reason or another, be used to describe

them. Over the years, many terms have been used to describe intimate partners who have different cultural backgrounds from each other. For example, the terms intermarriage, cross-cultural marriage (or relationships), transcultural families, and cross-ethnic intermarriages have all been used in slightly different, yet largely overlapping ways (Breger & Hill, 1998; Roer-Strier & Ben Ezra, 2006; Sullivan & Cottone, 2006). Historically, the term intercultural relationship has been applied specifically to racially mixed couples (Crohn, 1998; Kalmijn, 1993; McFadden, 2001; McFadden & Moore, 2001; Sullivan & Cottone, 2006; Pascoe, 1991) because racial differences are usually considered cultural differences in most societies (Sullivan & Cottone, 2006). Many researchers, however, have argued that intercultural relationships need to be more broadly defined (Cottrell, 1990; Ho, 1990; Softas-Nall & Baldo, 2000; Sullivan & Cottone, 2006; Tseng, McDermott, & Maretzki, 1977; Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005) specifically because the definition of culture itself is so broad and all-encompassing (Geertz, 1973; Kashima, 2000; Rubalcava & Waldman, 2004). Most intimate relationships include paradigmatic differences which border on intercultural, because most people do not marry someone exactly like themselves in all social and demographic characteristics (Falicov, 1995). However, it is generally accepted (at least in the body of literature referring to intercultural relationships) that “intercultural couples are characterized by greater differences between the partners in a wider variety of areas, with race, religion, ethnicity, and national origin being the primary factors” (Sullivan & Cottone, 2006, p. 222).

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Entry into Intercultural Relationships

Given the premise of assortative mating, which indicates people generally choose to mate with others like themselves on a variety of social characteristics (Kalmijn, 1991a, 1991b), it might be surprising that intercultural relationships are so prevalent. To understand what factors lead people to marry outside their groups, it is important to understand the context that allows for them to meet, interact, and intimately relate to cultural others. The ecological perspective is useful for examining intercultural marriage because it describes development in terms of person-environment interactions (Moen, 1995). It considers individual and environmental factors that influence people to choose marital partners of different cultural backgrounds. The person (or individual) 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 five environmental systems in which people interact to produce developmental outcomes: the macrosystem, mesosystem, exosystem, microsystem, and chronosystem. In applying an ecological framework to the study of factors related to entry into intercultural relationships, the sections in this paper are organized into subsections for sociocultural influences (or macrosystem), community influences (or mesosystem and exosystem), family and individual influences (or microsystem), life-cycle changes influencing the relationship (chronosystem).

### *Sociocultural Influences*

Sociocultural influences on an individual or couple are associated with the macrosystem, that is, the broadest context of the social framework in which development occurs (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Intercultural couples are formed by individuals with very diverse cultural backgrounds and many factors in the cultural and societal levels are involved in bringing these individuals together in a way that promotes consistent, extensive, and intimate contact between these persons. Increasing globalization affects immigration and acculturation patterns, which lead to increased inter-group contact. Compatibility as manifest through similarities in beliefs, values, and attitudes also plays an important role in determining what groups tend to intermarry.

Immigration, globalization, and acculturation are important macrosystemic factors that influence the likelihood of meeting, interacting with, and marrying an intercultural partner (Alba & Nee, 2003; Berry, 1997; McFadden & Moore, 2001; Qian & Lichter, 2007). Globalization has increased the rate in which people travel and the reasons for these travels as well (Barbara, 1994). Although immigration is one of the main ways people come into contact with cultural others, individuals may participate in cross-cultural encounters through travel for work, for tourism, or for studies, for example (Barbara, 1994). For immigrants, the length of stay in a country influences one's chances of marrying interculturally (Alba, 1976; McGoldrick & Preto, 1984). Intercultural marriages increase in frequency within a generation or two of immigrating to a new country, after families become more acculturated (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002; McGoldrick & Preto, 1984). Acculturation refers to the cultural exchange between two or more cultural groups in close contact with each other, which may change all cultural groups in concrete as well as abstract ways. Individuals whose countries generally accept and welcome immigrants and



foreigners for work, tourism, and new beginnings are exposed to various cultural groups from young ages, especially if they live in or close to major ethnic enclaves (which generally tend to be located in major cities and urban centers) (McFadden & Moore, 2001). Individuals who have contact with and become knowledgeable about different cultures are likely to respond more positively toward foreign others and are consequently more likely to consider intercultural relationships (Khatib-Chahidi, Hill, & Paton, 1998; McFadden & Moore, 2001; Romano, 1997).

Partners who are involved in intercultural marriages have typically been socialized in different macro environments and the likelihood of entering an intercultural marriage is often based on having complementary (although not identical) attitudes, values, and practices (McGoldrick & 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 factors and values amidst their different cultural backgrounds (Molina, Estrada, & Burnett, 2004). For example, two individuals from cultures that emphasize family and groups 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 (Tseng, McDermott, & Maretzki, 1977; Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005) and what seems like a marriage between two very different people to outsiders is often viewed by the couple as a marriage between people who are more alike than different (Khatib-Chahidi, Hill, & Paton, 1998).

### *Community Influences*

Communities are an integral part of the mesosystem, which refers to the interaction among various microsystems, such as the family and the workplace, and the individual and the

religious community. The mesosystem can be said to filter large sociological forces to the family and individual through the community (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Communities provide the context for families, and any professional or researcher wishing to intervene or better understand families should consider how they are dependent on the communities around them (McGoldrick, 1998). Molina, Estrada, and Burnett (2004) argue that communities serve as proxies for extended families in many societies around the world, which makes them extremely important in bringing intercultural couples together. These couples' adjustment is also greatly impacted by the level of support their communities offer them, as will be discussed later.

Communities that tend to exclude people who are different are likely to discourage intercultural relationships (Molina, Estrada, & Burnett, 2004). These communities tend to be ethnic enclaves that become isolated because of societal prejudice and discrimination and because they are trying to hold on to their own cultural heritage. Because certain communities may be reluctant to accept or support intercultural relationships, the couple may become victims of discrimination, hostility, and violence, which are enough to prevent such relationships from forming or, if already in place, to end these relationships or exile couples to other communities (Biever, Bobele, & North, 1998).

A good example of how communities can serve as gatekeepers for these relationships is the case of religious communities. These communities help families define their social group identity and influence how individuals view intimate relationships with those from different cultural backgrounds (Crohn, 1998). Although education level and socioeconomic status are more likely than religious affiliation to predict assortative mating (Kalmijn, 1991a, 1991b), both religious devotion as well as religious apathy help shape a family's attitude toward intermarriage, albeit in different ways (Crohn, 1998). In general, the messages individuals receive at their place

of worship will either promote or reject intercultural marriage. Combined with factors such as a family's socioeconomic class, level of education, and work opportunities, religious communities can either encourage or discourage a person to enter an intercultural marriage involving religious differences.

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 others from diverse backgrounds (Khatib-Chahidi, Hill, & Paton, 1998; McGoldrick & Preto, 1984). It should be noted, however, that today's 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 in part to the increasing value of individuality and "crosscutting social circles" which makes individuals less dependent on any one group (Blau, Beeker, & Fitzpatrick, 1984, p. 585).

### *Family Influences*

Families are also thought to be a part of the microsystem, that is, the closest and perhaps most important developmental context for individuals and their relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The family transmits the messages and influences of the society and the community to the individual. Such transmission, however, comes with the family's own interpretation. An individual's family and the value they give to cultural exchange will influence whether that person travels to foreign countries and 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, etc.) and the tasks associated with each role (White & Klein, 2002). When families integrate diverse cultural customs into their practices, children learn from a young age how to respect, appreciate, and adapt to people with different backgrounds (Crippen & Brew, 2007). Exposing children to

different cultural norms and viewpoints also promotes children's greater social flexibility, stronger cognitive skills, less ethnocentric attitudes, and greater intercultural efficiency (Vivero & 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 & Moore, 2001; McGoldrick & Preto, 1984).

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

### *Individual Characteristics*

Certain intrapersonal characteristics differentiate people who marry interculturally from those who marry within their own social groups. Some reasons for marrying cross-culturally are similar if not identical to the reasons influencing people to marry within their own cultural groups (e.g. Khatib-Chahidi et al., 1998; Romano, 1997), however. 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 & Preto, 1984).

Some individuals are more attracted to people from different cultural backgrounds (Khatib-Chahidi et al., 1998). For example, Khatib-Chahidi et al. (1998) found that individuals who married interculturally were more likely to have a middle class background and to come

from families with previous cross-cultural marriages. Although these two factors can be said to be sociocultural and due to family influences (as opposed to individual characteristics), both a middle-class background and a culturally diverse family have distinct influences on personal characteristics such as higher tolerance for ambiguity and living with cultural differences, as well as more appreciation for cultural blending. Marrying later than the average age for one's particular group is also a characteristic of those individuals who marry cross-culturally. Some researchers report that individuals who marry outside their ethnic or racial groups tend to be highly educated (Crohn, 1998; McGoldrick & Preto, 1984; Qian & Lichter, 2007). Other researchers however, have found the opposite: individuals with lower levels of education tend to marry outside their culture more often (Hwang, Saenz, & 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 & Lichter, 2007).

Similarly, compared to individuals who do not marry interculturally, individuals who intermarry tend to be more assertive, adventurous, open-minded, and more differentiated from their families of origin (Khatib-Chahidi et al., 1998; McGoldrick and Preto, 1984). Research also shows that an appreciation or attraction to the “exotic other” is a major factor influencing entry into intercultural marriages (Kohn, 1998). In the same study by Khatib-Chahidi et al. (1998), the researchers found that women of different European countries who married interculturally frequently mentioned being highly attracted to their partners’ “difference”. ‘Different’ meant various things to each participant—for some, the real difference lay in their husbands’ personalities, for others the differences lay in their husbands’ social milieu or class. A lack of interest in the characteristics of potential mates from the same culture has also been observed,

particularly when individuals feel marginalized by their own culture (Khatib-Chahidi et al., 1998; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002; McGoldrick & Preto, 1984). Thus, intercultural marriages are seen as a good option for individuals who suffer from marginalization as well as for those who embrace their own marginalization. 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 own 'otherness' even further (a concept alluded to in Char, 1977, and further discussed in Crohn, 1998).

To summarize, an ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986) can be used to organize influential factors leading individuals to enter intercultural relationships. At the sociocultural level (or macrosystem), advances in technology, globalization, and immigration patterns all contribute to increased intercultural contact and exchange. In a global community, individuals have more chances of forming relationships across national and other social borders. At the community level (or mesosystem), intercultural relationships can be fostered or deterred depending on the amount of support individuals in these relationships encounter in the environments in which they participate. If ethnic communities, centers of worship, and neighborhoods accept intercultural relationships as normal and/or desirable, people have more of an incentive and chance to enter intercultural relationships. Once these relationships form, they are also more likely to succeed given the support they receive from the community. Communities that discourage intercultural relationships can be a powerful deterrent to this kind of relationship, however. At the individual level (microsystem), families socialize children to see cultural others in more or less accepting and welcoming ways. This socialization involves opportunities for social contact with cultural others, as well as direct and indirect messages regarding intimate social relationships of an intercultural nature. These messages often contribute

to an individual's affinity or distaste for "the exotic," which then leads to increased or decreased likelihood of entering an intercultural relationship. Social ostracism from one's own group—real or perceived--can also lead to increased interest in other cultures and increased intercultural contact.

### Adjustment to Intercultural Relationships

Relationship adjustment is a somewhat controversial topic among marriage and relationship researchers albeit an enduring concept (Spanier & Cole, 1974; Spanier 1976). It can be 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). Relationship adjustment is a concept applicable to both intimate relationships as well as other types of dyadic relationships (Spanier, 1976).

Obviously, it is a concept that applies to intercultural intimate relationships and marriages. What is important to note, however, is that if a low rating on any of the above listed factors can affect a couple's overall adjustment to (and satisfaction with) the relationship, then intercultural couples are at increased risk of experiencing low adjustment over the course of the relationship due to the many challenges these couples must face. The factors influencing a couple's adjustment to an intercultural relationship can also be organized according to an ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Molina et al., 2004). These factors are discussed below.

#### *Sociocultural Influences*

Macrosystemic factors influence not only whether individuals become involved in intercultural relationships, but also how well intercultural couples adjust to their intercultural relationships and how these are received by society. Adjustment into intercultural relationship is influenced by large sociocultural factors that contribute to racial, socioeconomic, gender, and

religious differences between the people involved in a relationship. Whether acknowledged or not, people relate to each other in ways that are often culturally prescribed by their own groups, which can lead partners in intercultural couples to view and act toward one another in very different ways.

Some of the main sociocultural factors influencing healthy intercultural relationship development are: the extent of difference in values between the cultural groups; religious and racial differences and how interfaith and interracial relationships are viewed within the particular society; the prescribed gender roles of each culture; socioeconomic differences in status and education; the immigration status of one or both partners; and the formal or informal barriers the groups involved place on marrying out (Crohn, 1998; Frame, 2004; Ho, 1990; Kim, 1998; McGoldrick & Preto, 1984). The influence of a couple's socioeconomic status on their adjustment to the intercultural relationship cannot be underestimated. Intercultural partners who experience differing levels of economic success are also likely to experience psychological and marital distress (Bratter & Eschbach, 2006; Negy & Snyder, 2000). Socioeconomic status is linked to culture because it deeply influences how people live their daily lives, what they prioritize and minimize in the course of their routines, and the values they espouse. Differences in socioeconomic status and financial success can create serious disagreements and large problems for the new couple.

The degree of adjustment required in intermarriage is largely based on spouses' levels of acculturation to each others' cultures (McGoldrick & Preto, 1984; Frame 2004) and to the cultural context in which they live (Kim, 1998). Although it is important to hold on to one's cultural identity, partners must become proficient in each other's cultural scripts (Killian, 2002). The concept of transnationality provides a healthy view of the cultural exchange necessary for



healthy intercultural relationships. A transnational perspective on migration challenges the assumption that immigrants must acculturate into a new society and abandon their original culture (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002). Instead, transnationality involves grounding one's identity, relationships, cultural repertoire, and transactions in two or more cultures (Chamberlain & Leydesdorff, 2004; Foner, 1997). A transnational individual crosses borders to optimize opportunities and resources in daily living (Parreñas, 2001). Optimally, individuals in intercultural relationships need to be proficient in each of the cultures represented in their relationships—their own culture, the partner's culture, and the mainstream or host society culture if it differs from their own (Tseng, McDermott, & Maretzki, 1977).

The ways in which an intercultural couple responds to the stereotypes of their different backgrounds can either propel the relationship toward long-term stability or toward its disintegration (McFadden & Moore, 2001; Molina, Estrada, & Burnett, 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 successful partnerships (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 all detrimental to the relationship (Molina, Estrada, & Burnett, 2004).

### *Community Influences*

Communities not only serve as gatekeepers for intercultural relationships, they also sanction or support the continuation of these relationships once they do materialize. Adjustment to intercultural marriage is related to the level of acceptance the couple experiences in their circle of friends, jobs, neighborhoods, and other social environments outside the family. The larger and

more supportive the social network, the more resources couples have to deal with those who oppose their relationship and to negotiate their own cultural differences (McGoldrick & Preto, 1984).

In general, intercultural couples experience much more social disapproval from their social networks than intracultural couples, which stresses the marital relationship (Baltas & Steptoe, 2000; Bhugra & De Silva, 2000; Biever, Bobele, & North, 1998). In extreme situations, financial or social estrangement from friends and/or family members as well as outright hostility from the community may occur (Biever, Bobele, & North, 1998; Gaines, Jr. & Leaver, 2002; Molina, Estrada & Burnett, 2004). There are some advantages to these hardships, however. Intercultural couples may become more committed to and involved with each other and the couple may even become more aware and accepting of their differences (Biever, Bobele, & North, 1998; Gaines & Agnew, 2003). At times, distancing from opposing social circles may be possible, and when it is, couples may be able to find support in other communities. It may be said intercultural couples strengthen their couple identity because of such hardships.

### *Family Influences*

The literature on intercultural marriages suggests that 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 the marriage (Frame, 2004; McGoldrick & Preto, 1984; Romano, 2001). Families can provide social, economic, and personal support as the couple learns to cope with challenges associated with being a couple at all and an intercultural couple at that. The way intercultural couples come to relate to each family of origin bears consequences for the couple's and each person's individual adjustment through the life cycle.

Individuals in intercultural relationships may distance themselves from their family and culture of origin (especially if the families are resistant to accept the foreign partner), which could later hinder their success in various roles such as parent and caregiver to family members (McFadden & Moore, 2001; McGoldrick & Preto, 1984). Consequently, partners tend to fuse into each other's family by conversion of beliefs or by completely adopting the other's cultural values. 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 & 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 itself are associated with higher conflict levels, particularly when partners have different cultural expectations and coping strategies for dealing with the events (McGoldrick & Preto, 1984; Negy & 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). The intercultural relationship may suffer because of partners' discontent with their personal cultural alienation.

Partners who have core members of their extended families living in other countries (Parreñas, 2001) may be especially vulnerable to the risks associated with a lack of familial support. Family members in different countries cannot help with childcare, may not be able to acquaint themselves well with the foreign spouse (thus being more likely to hold on to prejudices or misgivings about the relationship), and may even put more financial strain on the couple if their livelihood depends on the family member who may be working abroad (Chavez, 1998; Parreñas, 2001). On the other hand, having geographically distant extended family may give the couple a chance to negotiate their cultural differences amongst themselves without too much

outside influence. The distance may actually insulate the couple from prejudiced family members or from family pressures to resist acculturation to the dominant culture or the partner's culture.

Generally speaking, 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). Such shifting alliances are important for the couple to begin to create a new paradigm for its new nuclear family, which is used to create meaning and present themselves to the immediate community and the world as a unit in its own right, separate from the families of origin (Reiss, 1981). Different cultures see this task as more or less important, however (Molina et al., 2004), which creates difficulties for intercultural partners who must blend both cultures' dictates in how they achieve this goal. Even geographical distance cannot protect the couple from misunderstanding and resentments associated with divergent cultural scripts on how extended families should be treated after marriage (Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005). This shifting of priorities may be especially tricky for those whose cultures view parental obedience to be of utmost importance and the lack of such obedience is viewed as disloyalty to one's family and culture (Molina, Estrada, & Burnett, 2004).

### *Individual Characteristics*

Certain personal and couple characteristics of how partners relate to each other may facilitate how well they adjust to the challenges posed by their intercultural relationships. Although certain characteristics such as one's socioeconomic class are indeed sociocultural factors, these characteristics can influence a person's personality by influencing individual attitudes and values. Generally, willingness to acknowledge and examine cultural differences,

reluctance to accept stereotypes, and flexibility are all characteristics shown to aid intercultural relationship adjustment.

Not unlike intracultural couples, people enter intercultural marriages believing it will last forever and that they can overcome any differences (Axinn & Thornton, 2002; Crohn, 1998). This is likely to enhance commitment and resilience, and help partners cope with prejudice, discrimination, and cultural conflicts (Gaines & Agnew, 2003). Some intercultural couples benefit from discussing their differences, whereas others minimize their differences and benefit from focusing on their similarities (Crohn, 1998; Killian, 2002; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002; McGoldrick & Preto, 1984). However, denying the existence of any cultural differences, or ascribing differences to personal characteristics instead of cultural variation may actually harm the relationship (Crohn, 1995; Perel, 2000; Romano, 2001; Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005). Researchers have suggested that in order to anticipate and prepare for future conflicts, partners should evaluate their own values to see how they are shaped and often dictated by their cultures (Hsu, 2001; Molina, Estrada, & Burnett, 2004; Romano, 2001; Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005).

In conclusion, adjustment to intercultural relationships is influenced by various factors in a couple's sociocultural environment, community, families of origin, as well as the individuals' personality characteristics. At the broadest level, how similar the different cultures are in worldview can either amplify or minimize the challenges the couple must face. Acculturation is also highly influential in intimate relationships—individuals must have a solid knowledge of their partner's culture in order for the relationship to work well. At the community level, the way intercultural couples are treated by those around them is also highly influential of the couple's relationship adjustment. Support, acceptance, appreciation, and even admiration from neighbors, co-workers, acquaintances, friends, and family members help fortify the intercultural

relationship, although sometimes facing outright adversity can also make partners more committed to the relationship. Finally, individual characteristics in how each person views the role of culture in his or her life and the life of the partner can also affect relationship adjustment in positive or negative ways.

*Relationship Identity: Adjustment over Time*

The chronosystem refers to the influence of time on the various developmental systems influencing an individual's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1986). The chronosystem's influence on intercultural couples' adjustment is at the forefront when discussing roles and alliances in families-of-origin which change with time and can wreak havoc in a couple's relationship if both partners do not deal appropriately with their relationships to both families. Another aspect of the chronosystem is a couple's relationship identity—how it is formed, how it is maintained, and what effects it can have on adjustment.

Although it is common to hear therapists and relationship researchers and experts refer to a couple's "relationship identity" (Crohn, 1995), this is a topic of research that has received scant attention. Theories and empirical studies on individual identity formation are prolific (for a brief overview, see Ting-Toomey, 1993) but little is known about relational identity that is not built by and does not belong to one person alone, but two persons who have an intimate relationship with each other.

In trying to apply what is known about individual identity negotiation--as proposed in Turner's (1987) identity theory--to relational identity negotiation, one may say that all persons carry with them images of their significant social relationships that are both articulated and unarticulated. These images "can be self-labels, adjectives, nouns, or visual metaphors that we associate with our self-identifications" (Ting-Toomey, 1993, p. 76). All of these images inform

categorizations of one's relationships that lead to conceptualizations of what these relationships are and what they mean. The work of upholding and even changing these relationship conceptualizations, much like the work of upholding and changing individual self-conceptualizations, is done primarily through language and interaction in an unending negotiation of symbols and positions. Thus, it can be said that identity theory is primarily informed by symbolic interactionism (Ting-Toomey, 1993).

The concept of family paradigms, as proposed by Reiss (1981), provides a good basis for a beginning theoretical understanding of relational identity. Reiss (1981) proposed that the family as a group of individuals holds central assumptions and expectations of the world. These assumptions are shared by all family members, and are constructed through family interactions. Although the fundamental assumptions of any given family are not explicit or even conscious, Reiss (1981) proposed that these shape how the family views and interacts with the world, and how they view the family's own roles toward its context. The concept of family paradigms is in accordance with the idea that individuals' identity is constructed through interaction with others in a person's cultural or social groups (Ting-Toomey, 2005). 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). It follows from this principle that personal identity does not exist (and is not created) in a vacuum, but in a process of negotiation. In this process of negotiation, people attempt to "assert, define, modify, challenge, and/or support their own and others' desired self-images" in an unending process of obtaining and maintaining both positive group-based and positive person-based identities (Ting-Toomey, 2005). The process of identity negotiation as it relates to cultural and ethnic identity negotiation is discussed in depth by Ting-Toomey (2005). A short (and limited) summary of

Ting-Toomey's (2005) propositions shows how concepts of identity negotiation and family paradigms can be used to start understanding the relational identity of couples.

Empirical investigation of relational identity in the context of intercultural relationships must begin by asking these couples how they view their relationship and how they construct an identity, or a “face”, for their relationship—in other words, what makes their relationship an intercultural one? What do these couples take the essence of intercultural relationships to be? These seem like central questions in this area of research, yet it seems no one is asking them. Researchers, clinicians, and other professionals working closely with intercultural couples have a strong sense of how these relationships differ from intracultural relationships. In fact, these professionals realize their own clients view their relationships as somewhat different and that this difference is important to them. However, no one is asking how the different nature of intercultural relationships may actually serve to create a relationship identity for these couples.

I propose that partners in all relationships, but specifically the partners in intercultural relationships do indeed hold joint conceptualizations of their relationship, its characteristics, its strengths and weaknesses, its meaning and significance, and its role in their lives. I assume the conceptualization of relationships emerge from the process of everyday life: the individuals forming a couple come together in everyday rituals and from those they construct their identity—who they are to themselves, what their relationship means in their lives, and how they, as a couple, wish the world to see them. Relationship identity, in this way, is a couple's sense of what is central to the relationship, what makes it unique and different from all others. Being that intercultural couples are generally aware of how their relationships differ from intracultural relationships, the idea of “difference” may be central to their perception of what makes them a couple.



### Cultural Negotiation: Inside and Outside the Therapy Room

Now that the factors influencing intercultural relationship adjustment have been reviewed, it is important to discuss what intercultural partners can do to minimize conflict and maximize understanding and satisfaction within the relationship. The strategies suggested below have been put forth by therapists and researchers working with intercultural couples. The consensus seems to be that intercultural couples should become quick experts of cultural negotiation by thoroughly familiarizing themselves with each other's cultures, by discussing important aspects of one's own culture with the partner, and by finding ways to blend cultural scripts in every day life.

#### *Familiarity with Each Other's Cultures*

In order to avoid problems in the course of the marriage, intercultural partners should be committed to becoming intimately familiar with each other's cultures prior to marriage. The more familiar couples are with each other's cultures, the better-adjusted they seem to be (McGoldrick & Preto, 1984). Clear communication about the cultural values they see as important to themselves and their culture of origin is paramount in the beginning phase of the relationship (McGoldrick & Preto, 1984; Frame, 2004; Romano, 2001; Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005). Effective navigation of the cultures relevant in one's life and relationships as well as the development of a transnational identity that spans various cultures without abandoning important familial and social relationships may be integral to successful intercultural relationships (Crohn, 1995). Such efficient straddling of cultures is indeed easier to achieve nowadays, with widespread technological advances that aid cross-national communication and contact (Wilding, 2006).

*Tactics to Bridge Cultural Differences*

Once each partner is well acquainted with the other's culture and with his or her own cultural influences, negotiation of various tasks in everyday life must occur if a healthy relationship is to develop. Several strategies may help in negotiating different cultures in everyday life.

Romano (2001) suggests the healthiest way to negotiate cultural differences is to blend aspects of each culture into everyday, routine, and major life-decisions, keeping the values and cultural dictates that are most important for each partner. Rohrlich (1988) states that "to marry an individual from another culture is to marry that culture as well" (p. 42), and that lack of interest in the other partner's culture, or assumptions about what the other values and does not value in his or her own culture gives rise to serious marital conflicts. Thus, partners should never underestimate the cultural differences that exist between themselves (Crohn, 1995; Molina, Estrada, & Burnett, 2004; Rohrlich, 1988; Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005); should always acknowledge differences; should rule out language incompetence and communication handicaps; and should consistently engage in communication about cultural differences. It is also helpful for partners to understand each other's preferred mode of handling conflict, as members of different cultures tend to use very different techniques for confronting relational problems (Crohn, 1995; Mackey & O'Brien, 1998). Blending of cultures to form a new cultural script for the family is also beneficial (Crippen & 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 still remaining connected and respectful of each partner's cultural self.

Conflict and polarization are essentially products of viewing one's worldview as how things really are and not allowing for the possibility of different perspectives (Perel, 2000). Unfortunately, this is common in intercultural relationships (Perel, 2000). Crohn (1995) suggests five tenets for conflict resolution within intercultural relationships, and he offers exercises that can help couples with each one of these. First, intercultural couples should identify their differences. Then, these couples should not assume they understand each other. Intercultural couples should use anger as their ally—as the “overheating gauge” of the relationships, which points to where the real issues lie (Crohn, 1995, p.105). Intercultural couples should always keep in mind that negotiating cultural differences is hard work and an ongoing process. And finally, these couples should not assume that cultural understanding equals acceptance of differences. These five tenets for successful conflict management seems to espouse Perel's (2000) proposed view of intercultural partners as immigrants or tourists in each other's cultures, trying to find ways to build a new home and feel comfortable in shifting contexts.

### *Intercultural Couples in Therapy*

Specific therapeutic models and frameworks for working with intercultural couples have been suggested. Most of the research in this area focuses on capitalizing on 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 of their differences, start to value these, and find resolutions to disagreements (Biever, Bobele & North, 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 these couples become more aware of the

role of culture in their differences by using a collaborative, curious stance; by helping clients stay open to alternative understandings of their issues; by encouraging a both/and stance that values both cultures' explanations of the issues at hand; by helping the couple search for liberating traditions within each culture—that is, the strengths cultural dictates may bring to the relationship; and by viewing impasses as an attempt to change the partner's beliefs and ideas (Biever et al., 1998; Frame, 2004; Ng, 2005; Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005).

Having therapists who are competent in multiple cultures and who are willing to remain questioning and open to a variety of cultural views is especially important for intercultural couples who seek therapy (Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005). It is extremely important for therapists (and clinical supervisors) to focus specifically on the intercultural couple's perceptions of their own differences and similarities, and their perceptions of how the dominant groups view their relationship (Estrada, 2005; Joanides, Mayhew, & Mamalakis, 2002; Killian, 2002). Thorough assessment of each partner's worldview, expectations, the couple's presenting problems, and relationship dynamics is necessary, although the literature on intercultural marriage therapy does not offer very concrete guidelines for how to do this (Ibrahim & Schroeder, 1990; Bacigalupe, 2003).

An especially relevant struggle for intercultural couples is to acknowledge their differences as stemming from their different cultures and not simply from their different personalities (Bacigalupe, 2003; Ng, 2005; Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005). Because culture is such an intrinsic force in human life and existence, we all have difficulty realizing and understanding how it has come to shape who we are, which makes us particularly prone to thinking that the way we view the world is how the world really is (Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005). But 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 behaviors and thoughts are logical, given these cultural values. Therapists should act as cultural mediators to these couples (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 disadvantage for having very different styles of emotional expression (Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005). A therapist who can help the couple understand each other's modes of emotional expression could have a significant positive impact on the relationship.

Finding cross-culturally competent therapists is no easy task for some couples who may live in rural or more isolated areas, or for couples who are influenced by cultures that do not see couple therapy as an appropriate means to cope with and resolve relationship conflict (Penn, Hernandez, & Bermudez, 1997; Root & Suyemoto, 2005). The training of culturally sensitive therapists is a subject that has received much attention in the literature of cross-cultural marriages (see Estrada, 2005; McGoldrick, 1998). The main conclusion that can be drawn from research in this area is that cross-cultural efficiency is no easy feat to accomplish, especially because it is difficult to establish what it consists of and whether it is even entirely possible given the multiplicity of cultural values existent in the world.

### Conclusion

Given the current age of globalization, intercultural relationships are becoming more widespread than ever before. Technological advances in travel, the media, and communications have enabled people from different countries to meet and interact in relatively quick and cost-efficient ways (Crohn, 1998; Wilding, 2006). In addition, worldwide immigration patterns have

created more diverse societies in which people can learn about and interact with others from different ethnic groups. It has therefore become crucial for professionals to learn more about intercultural marriage and the factors affecting entry and adjustment into such relationships. Therapists and researchers serve an important role in this process. They can help identify what leads individuals to form intercultural relationships and can explore the unique issues intrinsic to these. A thorough understanding of the systemic factors involved in the formation and maintenance of these relationships is paramount.

Empirical research on the topic of intercultural relationship is scant. Most of the literature reviewed here is based on clinical case studies and case examples. The few existing empirical studies based on carefully collected data focus on the intercultural marriages or relationships between specific groups such as Asian women and American men, or the marriages between individuals of the Greek Orthodox faith and individuals of other faiths (e.g. Hwang et al., 1997; Joanides, et al., 2002). Studies based on group level, aggregated data (e.g. Kalmijn, 1991a; 1991b; 1993) are also common. These studies are very limited in scope, generally concentrating on contextual influences for how these couples met and came to marry and what these marriages mean in their community of origin. Most of the discussed factors leading to entry into intercultural relationships and on factors involved in the adjustment into these relationships are theoretical in nature.

Conceptual pieces in this area of research are heavily dependent on clinical evidence (see Tseng, et al., 1977, for perhaps the first and best example of this), and rarely take into account what persons in intercultural relationships have to say about the strengths and challenges they face. One remarkable exception to this generalization is Khatib-Chahidi, et al.'s pilot study (1998) that consisted of in-depth qualitative interviews with women involved in intercultural

marriages. The researchers talked to the women about what attracted them to their partners, why they were attracted to the idea of an intercultural relationship, and how they felt about the decision to marry interculturally at that particular point in time when the interviews were being conducted. Although this was dubbed a pilot study, its depth was quite surprising and its findings very helpful to those interested in understanding the “how and why questions” of intercultural relationships.

These clinical papers and theoretical discussions have been helpful in providing a conceptualization of intercultural relationships, what seems to be important for these couples, and a general idea about important factors in working with these couples in therapy. Suggestions for applying theoretical models to therapeutic interventions aimed at improving intercultural relationships are still vague and abstract, however. For example, researchers seem to agree that cultural negotiation between intercultural partners is paramount to a successful relationship and they offer ideas of what the best negotiation tactics might be, but these suggestions are not grounded on any concrete sense of how intercultural partners are actually bridging their differences, or what these couples are actually doing at home when they disagree on how to celebrate a holiday, or what to buy at the grocery store. As a result therapists who work with these couples are often left without a clear picture of what must happen in and outside the therapy room so that positive outcomes can be reached.

This area of study has much to benefit from concerted efforts to collect data to test the verity of these conceptualizations—efforts similar to those made in this study. Such empirical evidence should be used toward expanding our limited knowledge of how to work with intercultural couples. Because little is known about the everyday reality of these couples and how they celebrate and cope with their differences, in-depth, qualitative investigations such as

the one reported here can help in understanding the depth of this research area. It is still not clear how couples that differ in one social dimension (e.g. race) are similar to or different from couples that differ in another social dimension (e.g. nationality or ethnicity). Until we know more about what makes intercultural relationships intercultural, and what is important to know about these couples, we cannot generalize from one type of intercultural couple to another. We also cannot know how to provide the best interventions and how to standardize these interventions without understanding how intercultural couples are similar and different from each other. And finally, if we do not clearly understand why and how these relationships need interventions or how these couples are already coping with their differences, any intervention methods we might create run the risk of being irrelevant. Only when we know the answer to these questions can large, quantitative studies comparing groups and testing the efficacy of specialized clinical work be helpful. Until then, asking the people involved in intercultural relationships about their experiences—exactly what is done in this study—is the best way to learn more about this phenomenon and how to best serve intercultural couples.

### Purpose of Study

Given the lack of empirical evidence supporting what is currently thought about how intercultural couples cope with their differences, the purpose of this study was two-fold. First, I set out to find out how intercultural couples view and make sense of their relationship. In other words, from their point of view, what are the essential elements of their relationships? And how do these inform an identity for their relationships? Secondly, I proposed to gain a more in-depth understanding of the cultural negotiation that is involved in committed, long-term, romantic intercultural relationships and what this negotiation means to the couples' relational identity.



The focus of the study is best summarized by one main research question composed of two sub-questions:

What is the lived experience of being in an intimate intercultural relationship?

- What is the essence of the couples' relational identity?
- What is these couples' experience of everyday cultural negotiation within their relationships?

Ultimately, I hoped to provide therapists with a better understanding of what intercultural relationships are like for the people in them and what these couples view as the strengths and challenges in their relationships. I also aimed to use study findings to make specific recommendations for how therapists can best intervene when these couples present for therapy.

The phenomenon that is the focus of the study is the intimate intercultural relationship, and more specifically, the relational identity and everyday cultural negotiation of this relationship. Past studies using phenomenology serve as a basis for using this methodology for the study of relationship processes and identity formation. For example, phenomenology has been used as a research methodology for investigating relationships such as same-sex relationships (Alderson, 2004), and processes and practices within relationships such as support processes for a partner with depression, practices for managing cardiac disease within the relationship, and the habitual use of silence for managing couple conflict (Harris, Pistrang, & Barker, 2006; Mahrer-Imhof, Hoffmann, & Froelicher 2007; Oduro-Frimpong, 2007, respectively). Individual identity development, such as the process of identity shift during the transition to motherhood (Smith, 1999), and the identity-shifting experiences of adolescent fathers (Parra-Cardona, Sharp, & Wampler, 2008) are also topics investigated through phenomenological methodology. Furthermore, results of phenomenological studies often involve

description of thematic processes aimed at elucidating the experience of the phenomenon in question (Connor, Robinson, & Wieling, 2008). In these ways, phenomenology is a suitable methodological framework for the proposed study.

Through studies such as the one reported here, mental health practitioners, researchers, community agencies, and other professionals can begin to gain a better understanding of the relevant issues in intercultural relationships. Intervention methods for problems that arise in intercultural relationships should consider the unique experience of these individuals and no one can better inform professionals and service providers of the needs of these couples than the people involved in these relationships. Intervention methods such as therapy, community education programs, and cultural sensitivity trainings may benefit not only intercultural couples but society at large by increasing knowledge which ultimately serves to counterattack prejudice and discrimination.

In-depth cross-cultural understanding is especially important for mental health professionals working in a diverse society. Unfortunately this kind of diverse cultural efficacy is not widespread in the field of Marriage and Family Therapy. I seek to conduct research that will change this reality not only by providing knowledge, but also by opening up a dialogue about the importance of multiculturalism in our society. Ultimately the ones to benefit are the intercultural families who will have easier access to quality services that are sensitive to their needs.

#### A Note about Culture

The purpose of this study was *not* to define what culture consists of or to get at participants' definition of their own cultures. Such inquiry is beyond the scope of this research study and simply too elephantine a task to be taken up as a peripheral research question. I trusted each participant to respond to the word "culture" as they saw fit, referring to whatever social

norms, values, and customs they consider relevant to what they view as their own cultural heritage. In fact, participants often referred to different groups and their norms when answering different questions (one participant spoke about his Jewish heritage much more eloquently than he did about his American one, and yet another participant spoke about both general American as well as Southern American values and norms he grew up with). As a researcher, I concerned myself with operationalizing culture as a way to design a study and define a group of people to be studied, but what the participants viewed as their own cultures—or at least the cultural traditions they feel are most relevant to who they are--may be very different from what I may have at first ascribed their cultural heritages to be. The fact that most couples volunteered for the study of their own accord, however, points to their view of their relationships as indeed intercultural.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHOD

#### Epistemological Framework

The study will be a qualitative interview study rooted in interpretative phenomenology (Heidegger, 1982). Social constructionism, which views knowledge as originating from the interaction between people and their contexts (Crotty, 2003; Patton, 2002), is the epistemological framework that serves as anchor for this study. Social constructionism has been defined as the theory of knowledge that proposes that all meaningful reality is based on and constructed from human practices and interactions (Applegate & Sypher, 1983; Crotty, 2003; McNamee, 2004). In this sense, the human mind works in conjunction with objects in the world to create meaning. Thus, the world outside of our human experience may indeed exist, but it is not available to us from our human vantage point. All that we know, we know from experiencing it, from interacting with it. Therefore, meaning is constructed and ever changing (Crotty, 2003).

Constructionism is the basis for the interpretist theoretical orientation, which views human beings as intentionally creating meaning (Crotty, 2003). When we think, we are always thinking about *something*, or *intuiting* it (Sokolowski, 2000; van Mannen, 1990). Consciousness and objects (or subjectivity and objectivity) exist in relation to one another and cannot be separated (Moustakas, 1994). They must be described and studied in conjunction or in constant reference to each other (Crotty, 2003). Phenomenology as originated and proposed by Husserl (1963) has been termed a science of subjectivity because it seeks to turn the scientific enterprise

to that which we experience and subjectively know in the life-world, thus arriving at a deeper understanding of objects as they are represented in our consciousness (Moustakas, 1994).

### Theoretical Framework

David Reiss' family paradigm theory (1981) is used as a theoretical framework to discuss the results of the proposed study. This theory is useful in conceptualizing group identity development processes. Because phenomenology focuses on the lived experience of the individual as opposed to *a priori* explanations and theories about a phenomenon, however, it is common practice for researchers using this methodology to refrain from approaching the phenomenon with pre-conceived notions about what it is, looks like, how it manifests itself, and what purpose it has (Moustakas, 1994). Thus, I will delay a discussion of substantive theory until the discussion portion of this research report, in an attempt to put aside all theoretical, abstract understandings of the phenomenon and focus on the lived experience of the participants, however it manifests itself. By consciously choosing to delay a theoretical discussion, it is my intent to help the consumers of this research study to begin to set aside their own biases about the topic.

### Subjectivity Statement

I became interested on the topic of intercultural relationships and how couples negotiate everyday rituals and routines many years before I married interculturally. At that time (as an undergraduate studying Psychology and Sociology), I was looking for research opportunities and a professor whom I admired invited me to work with her on this topic (she was in an intercultural relationship at the time). One of my first tasks was to review the literature, and the more I read, the more interested I became. I believe that in the back of my mind I already knew this subject would be highly applicable to me as a young, single, Brazilian immigrant in the United States

with no plans of returning to live in my homeland. At the time, my immediate social network was mainly composed of US-born individuals and my romantic interests were either American or from countries other than my own. Therefore, the topic seemed applicable to my life even if I was not in an intercultural relationship at the time.

Some years later I started dating an American who would eventually become my husband. Because of this relationship I became deeply reflective and interested in the factors lead some people to engage in intimate relationships with cultural others while most people prefer someone very similar to themselves. Throughout my relationship and even today I cannot help but compare what I have read and learned about intercultural relationships to my own marriage. Much of the knowledge fits, but there are still many questions left unanswered. More than anything, the mingling of my personal experiences with my research interests leaves me with the persistent urge to know how alike my husband and I are to other intercultural couples. I believe it is this curiosity, this urge to connect with others like myself, which fuels my passion for this research topic.

Of course I believe in the strengths of intercultural relationships—I believe these relationships can be very successful and certainly very adventurous and exciting. I also think it takes work—perhaps a little more work than intracultural relationships take. There are days I think my husband and I are really more alike than we are different, and in those days it is difficult to point to any large cultural “effects” on how we interact. I eventually remind myself that most intercultural couples think this of themselves and how this belief can, perhaps, if left unchecked, be harmful to the relationship. There are other days—usually when my husband and I are at odds with each other—that I certainly think we are entirely too different and I certainly view my worldview as The Right One. Eventually, I also remind myself of the differing cultural

holds on each of our personalities and characters. I find that I grow more patient when I think of this.

It is because of these personal experiences that I seek to understand more about these relationships. I expected that many couples in this study would have a hard time identifying any cultural differences. I also have a similar experience when I am asked this question. But I also thought (and still do) that these other couples also have days like I do—days in which they think nothing in their relationship can be taken for granted. I believe this research may have been beneficial to participants because it may have given them an opportunity to reflect on the meaning they make for their relationship and the role it has in their lives. One of my challenges throughout this research was to reflect ever more deeply on my own experience as an individual in an intercultural relationship so that I could bracket my experience—that is, make it as clear and blatant as possible so that I could better position myself outside of it when trying to understand participant's experiences as they view it. This was difficult because so much of culture falls to the background of my life and my own relationship—something many participating couples mentioned experiencing.

### Methodological Framework

The term phenomenology has been used to refer to a philosophical orientation that specifies ontological and epistemological frameworks, a scientific methodology, and the more practical application of certain methods of inquiry to everyday human experience (Patton, 2003; van Mannen, 2002). This multiplicity of uses for the term is further complicated by the various related philosophical orientations that have their origins in transcendental phenomenology as developed and proposed by Edmund Husserl (Patton, 2003). Phenomenology as a tradition of thought has its origins in Husserl's writings, although the term has been traced back to the

writings of Descartes, Hegel, and Kant (Moustakas, 1990). Aspects of Husserl's writings have served as the starting point for related yet different philosophical orientations such as existential, ethical, hermeneutical, historical, and language (or linguistic) phenomenologies (van Manen, 2002). Thus, it is more useful to speak of *phenomenologies* and to ground one's thinking, inquiry, and practices within a specific tradition. Below I present a general framework for understanding the scope of the work of phenomenology as a broad tradition of thought and inquiry and then I offer a brief overview of the specific tradition that anchors the proposed study.

Phenomenology is the study of objects and events, experience and meanings in the everyday world (Becker, 1992). A phenomenon is how objects, events, and experiences appear in our consciousness and can be said to be anything that "is perceived and is known through perception" (Littlejohn, 1991, p. 215). Van Manen (1990) has explained phenomenology through eight conceptualizations: a) phenomenological research is the study of lived experience; b) phenomenological research is the explication of phenomena as they present themselves to consciousness; c) phenomenological research is the study of essences; d) phenomenological research is the description of the experiential meanings we live as we live them; e) phenomenological research is the human scientific study of phenomena; f) phenomenological research is the attentive practice of thoughtfulness; g) phenomenological research is a search for what it means to be human; and h) phenomenological research is a poetizing activity. In summary, phenomenology is marked by constant attempts to return to human experience and gather descriptions of a particular phenomenon for structural reflective analysis that can elucidate the essence of the phenomenon as it is experienced (Moustakas, 1994).

Although a central focus in phenomenology as a philosophy and methodology, the idea of essences is a controversial one. In Husserl's writings, "essence" often refers to that which



“makes a thing what it is (and without which it would not be what it is)” (van Mannen, 1990, p. 10). Some phenomenologists, however, make a distinction between basic or fundamental essence (that which all representations of a particular thing in the world aims to be but never fully achieves) and empirical essence (the representations of a particular thing in the world with all their variations and constancies—representations that are oriented toward a fundamental essence) (van Mannen, 1990). Husserl believed that phenomenology could lead a person to the fundamental essence of a phenomenon through phenomenological reduction, a process that involves *bracketing*, or the setting aside of all preassumptions, understandings, and preconceived notions the researcher might have about the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl’s *Epoche* is a process similar to bracketing in which the researcher or investigator sets aside prejudgments and conducts an interview with a participant or co-researcher with an unbiased presence that is focused on the participant’s subjective experience and descriptions without any interpretation by the researcher. Other phenomenologists believe human experience is always unique, unpredictable, and inimitable, which makes the work of the phenomenologist the investigation of variations of experiences to arrive at a common thread that permeates the “regular” experience of a phenomenon and stands for its *essences* (Becker, 1992).

Now that phenomenology as a methodology of scientific inquiry has been sketched, it is possible to differentiate between its various strains. Husserl’s writings serve as the basis for phenomenology as a tradition of thought, and certain questions or problems in his writings were later taken up by other philosophers who advanced the phenomenological tradition (Littlejohn, 1991; Moustakas, 1994). One of these philosophers was Martin Heidegger who can be thought of as the chief critic of classical phenomenology (Littlejohn, 1991). Heidegger believed that only experience in the world can lead to understanding, not the setting aside of presuppositions

through processes of reduction as thought by Husserl (Littlejohn, 1991). Furthermore, Heidegger argues that interpretation cannot be separated from description (van Manen, 2002). Our experiences themselves are interpretive; in fact, our experiences are interpretations of the world (Gorman, 1977; van Manen, 2002).

This debate about description versus interpretation is an important one.

Phenomenologists differ in how acceptable they think interpretation is in data analysis and, more broadly, in the task of studying reality (Thorne, 2000). Heidegger's phenomenology is termed hermeneutic phenomenology (Littlejohn, 1991) or interpretive phenomenology (van Manen, 2002) because it views interpretations as valid sources of knowledge about the world.

Hermeneutic phenomenologists fall into two groups: those who study written texts through hermeneutics, and those who use hermeneutics to interpret actions. The second type of hermeneutics can be called social or cultural hermeneutics (Littlejohn, 1991). Social hermeneutics views presuppositions as unavoidable because we are beings in the world, situated within a long cultural history and community (Gadamer, 1975). In this sense, hermeneutic phenomenology calls for a hermeneutic take on Husserl's classical phenomenological reduction: one should reflect and become intimately familiar with one's assumptions, experiences, preunderstandings, and biases regarding a phenomenon—not because one can ever be free from these, but because a conscious awareness helps in becoming open to understanding the phenomenon from the vantage point of another person's experience (van Manen, 2002).

Hermeneutical reduction also assumes that new preunderstandings continuously arise as one attempts to understand a phenomenon from another person's point of view (or from the point of view used in the text), and once these are examined and put aside, new preunderstandings ceaselessly emerge anew in what is termed the *hermeneutical circle* (van Manen, 1990, 2002).

The methodology of this study is grounded within the tradition of hermeneutical phenomenology as a philosophical tradition. It is important to note, however, that the application of phenomenological philosophy to research methodology and social research inquiries has been termed *practical or applied phenomenology* (van Manen, 2002). This type of phenomenology is not deeply concerned with the philosophical underpinnings of the phenomenological method--instead, it is much more concerned with the use of this methodology for the purposes of science (van Manen, 2002). In accordance with the tradition of applied phenomenology, a discussion of phenomenology's philosophical roots is limited to what has been discussed so far in this document.

In sum, phenomenology is the scientific methodology that guided this study's central question, research assumptions, and orientation toward participants, data, and methods. The assumptions of phenomenology are implicit in my personal, professional, and human interest on the phenomena of relational identity creation and cultural negotiation within intercultural relationships; in the assumption that we can learn about these phenomena through participants' *interpretive accounts* of their lived experience; and in the assumption that whatever essences found in the study are situated essences determined by the temporal and contextual moment in which the research study will take place and thus, ungeneralizable (van Manen, 1990). I set out to study the phenomenon of intercultural relationships by seeking the rich descriptions that only those who personally experience these relationships can provide. The method of the study, which is discussed in detail below, used bracketing, enumeration and elucidation of themes in participants' accounts (to uncover the salient features of the phenomenon), and the formulation of descriptive portrayals. All this was done to arrive at the common thread of participants' lived experience of the phenomena—an essence of sorts—although I know full well that lived

experience is immensely variable and fluid, and the lived experiences of the phenomenon will inevitably be “fuller, richer, and slightly different from the product of the research” (Becker, 1992, p. 36). It is with this realization that I have sought to elucidate and present here the *essences* of these intercultural relationships, as opposed to one monolithic essence that is all-encompassing.

### Participants

Phenomenology as a method of scientific research views lived experience of the phenomenon as the basis for an essential understanding of the phenomenon (Becker, 1992). In pursuing such understanding, it is imperative to fully and deeply engage with the phenomenon and seek the accounts of others who have done the same. Because of this need for deep engagement with the topic at hand, it is common for studies in this tradition to include few participants who are asked to give multiple accounts of their experiences of the phenomenon of interest (Becker, 1992). Ten couples were recruited to participate in the proposed study. The participant selection criteria were:

1. Partners in the couple have different nationalities, and at least one partner is an immigrant to the United States.
2. Couples are married or living as married
3. Couples have been in an intimate relationship with each other for one year or more
4. Neither individual foresees an end to the relationship
5. Couples are not currently in therapy for relationship issues
6. Interviews must be in English, so both partners must speak enough English to be able to communicate about their relationship in that language.

Since this study sought to understand (a) intercultural couples' lived experience of cultural negotiation in everyday life, and (b) the essences of the relational identity of intercultural relationships, the couples' cultural differences needed to be salient enough for the couple to pay attention to these and think about how to best handle them. The first criterion ensured the couple would view themselves as intercultural, yet this criterion is so broad that it allowed for couples to participate in the study even if they differ from each other on only one of the aspects of race, ethnicity, language, religion, or nationality. Thus, the participants in this study would hopefully represent a wide variety of intercultural relationships, which enabled me to gain a better understanding of the aspects of these relationships that are essential to their identity as intercultural relationships, regardless of the particular cultural backgrounds of each partner in each couple.

To better understand cultural negotiation, the study needed to include couples who were invested in making the relationship work and endure the test of time. The second, third and fourth criteria ensured couples were in long-term, committed relationships and that these relationships were important enough to actively engage in cultural negotiation. The second criterion also ensured the couples would share enough of everyday life to encounter situations where outright negotiation was necessary. As for the second criterion, one way to quickly assess commitment was to ask individuals whether they foresaw an end to the relationship for any reason. This form of assessment was non-invasive, which was helpful when talking to potential participants who had not yet consented to participate in the research and may not have been prepared to fill out a preliminary questionnaire of a personal nature.

The fifth criterion ensured the couples who participated in this study were not actively distressed or in crisis over the relationship. Distressed intercultural couples would skew the

perception of intercultural relationships and its challenges. I was interested in taking a strengths-based approach to understanding the strengths and challenges inherent in intercultural relationships, and a clinical sample might not be able to provide a balanced view of the issues involved in this type of relationship.

Both individuals in the couple had to consent to participate in all phases of the study. Partners were interviewed together two or three times (Hodgson, Garcia, & Tyndall, 2004). By interviewing both partners together, I hoped to gain richer accounts of the couple's experiences (Pistrang, Barker, & Rutter, 1997). Because one of the central questions of the study related to relational identity, couple interviews were thought to help get at descriptions that are in themselves a blending of both partners' accounts instead of just accounts of individual experiences (Hodgson, Garcia, & Tyndall, 2004). Of course, dyadic interviews have some disadvantages, such as increased interruption of speakers and overlapping talk (both of which complicate transcription significantly), tangential lines of conversation, and some people may find it difficult to disagree with the other speakers (Hodgson, Garcia, & Tyndall, 2004).

The 10 couples who participated in this study represented 11 countries between themselves. Although it was not a participation criterion, all couples involved a person born and raised in the United States. Individual participants' ages ranged between 22 and 51 years. Relationship duration ranged between 2 and 14 years. Only one couple had children at the time of the interviews. A brief demographic sketch on the couples is presented on Table 1, and the couples' descriptive portraits can be read in Appendix A. Descriptive portraits were composed as a first step in analysis and because they summarize all the information each couple shared over the course of the study, a biographical sketch will not be presented in this section.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

ID	Names <sup>a</sup>	Ages	Countries of Origin	Years in US	Race/ Ethnicity <sup>b</sup>	Occupation	Faith Orientation	Relational	
								Status/ Time Together	Number of Children
1	Ablavi	35	USA	--	African	Graduate	Christian	Married 4 years	0
	&				American	Student			
	Leroy	38	Togo	7	Black African	Minister	Christian		
2	Patricia	26	Peru	< 1	White	Student	None	Together 3	0
	&				Hispanic			years;	
	Ron	26	USA	--	Caucasian	Student	None	Married 8 months	
3	Lily	25	India	12	Brown	Sales Clerk	Syrian	Married 3 years	0
	&						Orthodox		
	Alex	26	USA	--	Caucasian	Grad Student	Agnostic		

4	Catherine	34	USA	--	Caucasian	Realtor	None		
	&							Married	0
	Doug	39	South Africa	10	Caucasian	Pilot	None	~10 years	
5	Kathy	24	USA	--	Caucasian	Graduate	Christian		
	&					Student		Together	
	Lukaš (pronounced: <i>Loo-kah-sh</i> )	24	Czech Republic	21	Caucasian	Import/Export	Catholic, Non- practicing	5.5 years	0
6	Jasmine	22	Pakistan	16	Asian	Graduate	Muslim		
	&					Student		Married	0
	Cody	24	USA	--	Caucasian	Graduate Student	Muslim	>2 years	
7	Jina	35	Korea	6	Asian	Professor	None		
	&							Married	0
	Marcus	32	USA	--	Caucasian	Professor	Jewish	~5 years	



	Isabella	22	USA	--	Caucasian	Student	Agnostic		
<b>8</b>	&							Together	0
	Gus	51	Germany	25	Caucasian	Professor	Christian	>2 years	
<b>9</b>	Eva	33	Colombia	8	Latina	Student	Catholic		
	&							Married	0
	Macedonio	38	USA	--	Caucasian,	Graduate	Spiritual but	~5 years	(currently
					Non-	Student	not		trying)
					Hispanic		religious		
	Melanie	35	USA	--	Caucasian	Administration	Catholic		
<b>10</b>	&							Married	2
	Hugo	39	Italy	14	Caucasian	Restauranteur	Catholic	>10 years	

<sup>a</sup>Pseudonyms are used for all participants. Most participants opted to choose their own.

<sup>b</sup>Self-described

## Recruitment

Participants in traditional phenomenological studies are considered co-researchers whose input on the research process is not only welcomed but sought out (Moustakas, 1994). Often, participants in phenomenological studies have a say on the research questions, methods, and analysis of data. In keeping with this phenomenological stance toward participants, I sought participants' suggestions regarding interview content and structure and data analysis, but it would be an overstatement to say the participants in this study were considered my co-researchers—after all, they did not have much control over the central question of the study or the methods being used, due to temporal and contextual limitations inherent in dissertation research.

I approached potential participants by explaining exactly how important their experiences and deep reflections on the phenomenon of study were. Moustakas (1994) provides a good example and model for how an invitation letter can be worded in such a way as to help participants understand their important role, and such a model was used for a similar letter and for a preliminary conversation about potential participation in the study (see Appendix C). This preliminary conversation occurred either over e-mail (in most cases) or over the phone.

Participants were recruited by word-of-mouth and through flyers and announcements posted to community bulletin boards and listservs (see Appendix D for the flyer and Appendix E for the announcement). Couples who agreed to participate in the study were also asked to refer other couples like themselves for research participation. The final 10 couples recruited for the study did not know each other, however, and approached me independently of one another. I personally knew couples who fit the criteria for the study and started out by approaching these acquaintances for referrals or possible participation. Only one couple was an acquaintance of

mine at the time of recruitment. Couples received \$20 per interview session completed, up to 3 interviews. These participant incentives were made possible through the generous support of The University of Georgia's Graduate School Dean's Award.

### Procedure

I approached the first two couples recruited through an initial invitation letter sent over e-mail. These were couples I knew fit the selection criteria. All other couples approached me, volunteering to participate once they either heard of the study or came across an announcement of it. When couples volunteered to participate, I first asked them preliminary questions to check whether they qualified for participation and sent them the invitation letter explaining details about the study. Couples who met all inclusion criteria for participation then negotiated date and time of the first interview with me. Some demographic questions were asked either during the negotiation phase or in the first meeting, prior to the first interview. The dates and times for subsequent interviews were negotiated at the end of the prior interviews or over phone or e-mail.

The open-ended, in-depth interview can be said to be the main source of data in phenomenological studies, although it is not the only one (Moustakas, 1994; van Mannen, 2002). As in this study, interviews usually have a conversational tone and the participants are asked to become immersed in their accounts of their experiences with the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). In this study, 10 couples were recruited to participate in two to three semi-structured interviews, depending on whether a third encounter was necessary for generating more accounts or more details of accounts (see Appendix B for interview guides). Both partners were interviewed simultaneously as an attempt to get at richer, fuller accounts that both partners see as true to their lived experience. Interviews were voice recorded for later transcription and data analysis. The first two interviews were recorded in their entirety and segments of the third

interviews that contained new information not previously shared in the first two interviews with the couple were transcribed as well.

Most first and second interviews lasted around two hours (some lasted two and a half hours) and third interviews lasted one hour on average. Most interviews took place in the couples' homes, per their request, although three couples chose to meet me on a campus location that was central to all involved. Seven couples completed three interviews. Multiple interviews can help participants to have time to think about the subject of interest and formulate ever deeper narratives about the research topic (Silva & Wright, in press). I began by asking an open-ended general question aimed at generating accounts of participant's experiences that included whatever the couple thought important for me to know (Giorgi, 1975; Becker, 1992). Throughout the interviews, I probed for the couples' relationship history, cultural differences that impacted their everyday lives, routines, habits, and rituals they have created over the course of their time together, and how they handle and cope with their cultural differences (See Appendix B for a general guide to each interview). This method of interviewing is consistent with Becker's (1992) account of phenomenological interviews:

Structurally, the researcher follows an initial open-ended question with requests to elaborate on the events, feelings, memories, meanings, and thoughts that have already been mentioned. This inquiry follows the order of the phenomenon that was initially given in the subject's first descriptions. The researcher asks for specific examples, encourages the person to say more about things mentioned, and eventually asks if other moments or events come to mind about the phenomenon. This process continues until what the interviewee says sounds familiar, until examples and meanings repeat themselves, and until the person runs out of things to add.

Second and third interviews began with member checks (Glesne, 1999) on my understanding of the previously gathered data (I listened to previous interviews multiple times before each subsequent interview to generate more questions). The goal of phenomenological research is to understand a phenomenon from the perspective of participants or those who have experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). Because participants in phenomenological research are viewed as co-researchers (Moustakas, 1994; van Mannen, 1990), it is important to make sure they agree with the researcher's interpretations or accounts of what they have shared. In this sense, participants can and should have liberty to give suggestions on the research process as well as liberty to add or retract information as they see fit (Moustakas, 1994). Member checks were conducted throughout this research study and the third interview was used as an extended member check. The third interview was not necessary in some cases in which I had asked all necessary clarification and confirmation questions in the first two interviews. Third interviews took place one to two months after the second interviews so that I had the opportunity to compose the couples' descriptive portrait in time to share it with them at the third interview. One couple's third interview was a continuation of the second interview, as this couple needed more than the allotted time to answer all the structured questions.

All but two participating couples had a chance to read the descriptive portraits composed on their account—either in person during the third interviews, or by e-mail prior to the interviews. I was not able to finish one couple's descriptive portraits in time for them to read it prior to this report, and one couple left the country for the Peace Corps the week after their second interview. The first couples to be interviewed a third time suggested that I send the descriptive portraits over e-mail to the participants prior to the interview so there would be more time for the couples to read and think about it. I took this couple's recommendation and started

sending couples their descriptive portraits over e-mail prior to the third meeting. The third interviews, which also took into consideration the couples' availability and schedules, served as a final opportunity for couples to talk about any other thoughts, opinions, and experiences they saw as important for an understanding of their intercultural relationship--although this was done at the end of the second interview for the couples who did not complete a third interview. During the third interviews the couples were also asked if they wanted to add to or retract any information they shared on the first two interviews. None of the couples wished to retract any information and all eight couples who read their descriptive portraits approved of these.

During all interviews I kept notes on the couples' nonverbal behavior, the setting, and other observations. These notes were used to compose more formal field notes after the interviews. These notes were used as a starting point for mentally processing the interviews, the data gathered in these, and reasoning about possible findings and their theoretical implications. I explained my note-taking to participating couples as a way for me to record brief observations I wanted to come back to during the interview or afterwards in my field notes.

Throughout the study I kept a journal in which I explored facets of my lived experience with the phenomenon of intercultural relationship. Through intense and reflective writing on my experiences with the phenomenon of intercultural relationships I attempted to proceed through phenomenological reduction as a process that involves "perceiving, thinking, remembering, imagining, [and] judging, each of which contains a definite content" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 91). This practice was intended as a form and process of bracketing; that is, a process of becoming intensely aware, conscious, and questioning of personal biases, assumptions, understandings, and opinions on the phenomenon. Bracketing in this sense is not intended as a way to get rid of my

own biases but as a way to better understand them (Becker, 1992; Giorgi, 1975) so that I can better control them instead of letting them control me.

### Analysis

The goal of phenomenological research is to provide a full, rich description of the essential features of a phenomenon—a description so clear and holistic that it could give persons who have never experienced the phenomenon a sense of what it is and what it might be like to experience such a thing (Becker, 1992). To this end, participants' descriptions and interpretations of their experiences are the primary source of data (through interviews) and should be reflected as directly as possible in the final descriptive portrait of the phenomenon the researcher puts together at the end of the research process. Having the end product of a descriptive portrait of the phenomenon in mind, the researcher dwells on the many manifestations of the phenomenon (including her own), analyzes all pieces of data as if they have equal weight (a process called *horizontalization*), identifies common themes, and proceeds to articulating how these themes fit together thus unveiling the underlying structure of the phenomenon (Becker, 1992; Moustakas, 1994).

In phenomenological studies data analysis typically begins once interviews have been completed and transcribed (Becker, 1992). Giorgi (1975) provides a lucid process for phenomenological data analysis, which is echoed by Becker (1992). Data analysis in this study was closely grounded on the prescriptions suggested by these authors. First, interviews were transcribed and divided into meaningful units or pieces. Each unit was then coded for its central focus or content. After this preliminary coding, I formulated a descriptive portrait tying together all non-redundant codes within the specifics of the situational account of each participant couple. Once these descriptive statements were created for each couple (and approved by the respective

couples), the process of open coding was repeated, this time using the descriptive portraits as the data (i.e. the process of horizontalization). Finally, non-redundant codes were organized into themes, and these were pulled together in a general, broad descriptive portrait of the essential features of the phenomenon, presented in the next chapter. As the study contains one central question divided into two sub-questions, the process was done separately for each sub-question (Giorgi, 1975). Through the use of such clear guidelines, I hoped to ultimately illuminate the process that led to the research findings, ultimately increasing trustworthiness.

### Trustworthiness

The accurate, clear, evocative portrayal of a phenomenon can be considered a test to the validity of the research process from a phenomenological point-of-view (Seamon, 2000). The research findings should echo with a person's experiences of the phenomenon. Those who have not experienced the phenomenon should be left with not only a clear cognitive understanding of what it might be like but also with a sense of experiential knowledge as well (Becker, 1992; Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological research can be considered trustworthy when: (a) the consumers of the research are able to identify experientially with the phenomenon described; (b) readers can relate their own experiences of the phenomenon to the description provided—that is, the description seems accurate given the person's lived experiences; (c) the description is so rich the reader can relate to it both emotionally and cognitively; and (d) the phenomenon has been described in simple yet holistic terms, or elegantly (Polkinghorne, 1983).

The issue of reliability also has parallels in phenomenological research. Giorgi (1975) summarized the key to reliability in qualitative research in general and in phenomenological research in particular when he stated: "The chief point to be remembered with this type of research is not so much whether another position with respect to the data could be adopted (this



point is granted beforehand), but whether a reader, adopting the same viewpoint as articulated by the researcher, can also see what the researcher saw, whether or not he agrees with it.” Therefore, by staying close to participants’ descriptions and interpretations of their experiences and by making one’s analysis and reflective process clear and overt qualitative researchers can achieve a certain accountability equivalent to reliability in quantitative research. The measure of such criteria is not whether other researchers can arrive at the same conclusions if they study the same phenomenon, with the same methods, through the same people, but whether they think this researcher’s conclusions are admissible given her experiences and process.

Another practice that enhanced the trustworthiness of this study was my journaling on my experiences as part of an intercultural couple. Journaling or memo writing is a way for the researcher to become more aware of biases, values, and attitudes, and to track one’s own involvement in the research process (Glesne, 1999). My journaling was extensive and personal in nature, in order to better showcase the expectations and ideas I brought into the study. I hope that through journaling I can give the consumers of my research a reliable view of my stake in the research process. Although these data were not included in the final data analysis, portions of my researcher’s journal may be used to illustrate analytical conclusions or demonstrate how I arrived at certain assumptions about the study and its participants.

### Ethics

Qualitative research frequently involves the participants’ disclosure of very personal information (Silverman, 2000). My careful listening may have benefitted participants in the telling of their personal stories, which may have been a positive experience (Kvale, 1983), especially since I am also a therapist trained in active listening. In an attempt to be as transparent as possible about the use of data, the consent form for the proposed study fully explained the

research topic and my intent in conducting interviews on the subject. Participants were assured their participation was voluntary and that they retained the right to stop the interview and its recording at any time, without giving any explanation. The consent form included information about counseling clinics the participants could contact if they decided they needed professional assistance at any time.

Because the role of the participant in phenomenological research is more active than in other types of research, they have more freedom to influence the study's design and methods (Moustakas, 1994). In keeping with this tradition, participants had an active voice on aspects of the study such as content and process of interviews (e.g. participants were given a copy of the interview guide), my interpretation and analysis of their data, my analytical methods, and whether they thought anything needed to be changed in how the study proceeded. The open-ended nature of the interviews (Becker, 1992) guaranteed a certain level of freedom for participants to bring forth information they viewed as appropriate and important for them to share. Although I probed for specific content areas, the conversational tone of the interview hopefully helped participants share control of the direction of the talk with me.

The main risk of this study was the potential distress some participants could have experienced as a result of talking about their intimate relationship in such detail. Participants were asked to think and talk about challenging aspects of their relationship and their history together. Fortunately, no distress was reported by any participants but I was prepared to refer distressed couples to the counseling clinics listed on the consent form (see Appendix F). I was also prepared to stop the interview and ask participants if they wished to discontinue participation in the study if any couple showed any distress during the interviews, but that did not happen.

By recruiting a non-clinical sample only, I hoped to make the boundary between relationship research and marital therapy much clearer and better delineated. Although I had to make my department and program of study known to my participants, I was careful to present myself only as a researcher and not as a therapist, so as to prevent any role confusion. Indeed, there were moments I prevented myself from asking questions that seemed more appropriate to couple therapy than research. I personally guided participants through the process of giving consent so as to clarify all points in the process. I also checked that participants were still fully willing to continue to participate in the study before every interview.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

Phenomenological research is said to have as its main goal the complete and detailed description of phenomena in the world—a description as comprehensive and carefully crafted as to give someone who has never experienced the phenomenon a vicarious sense of what it must be like (van Manen, 2002). It is not the goal of phenomenology to create theories that aim at explaining the phenomenon or that try to predict it in any way (van Manen, 2001). In an attempt to maintain this tradition, what follows is a descriptive portrait of intercultural relationships, composed in the same way and in the same style as the descriptive portraits of each participant couple, which were composed as a first step in the analysis process (see Appendix A). These couple portraits were composed as a record of my interpretation of what these couples shared with me, and whenever possible, their own words were used and examples they shared with me included.

This descriptive portrait includes all the non-redundant codes relevant to the complete description of these 10 intercultural relationships. The list of preliminary codes—those gathered from each couple’s interviews, which were used in composing their descriptive portraits—underwent very little paring down before the final list of codes presented in Tables 3-10. These are presented, one at a time, in the sections that correspond to them. The few preliminary codes eliminated from the final list were so idiosyncratic to any particular couple that they seemed to express more of the participants’ personal attributes and personalities than those of their relationship *as an intercultural relationship*.

The final codes were used to compose the descriptive portrait below, and these are bolded in the text as to be easily identifiable as a code. These tables also present which particular couples (identified by their participant numbers) exemplified in one way or another each code in the course of their two or three interviews—for those who might be more inclined to quantifying the significance of results. The codes, as well as the portrait itself, are divided into themes simply for the sake of organization—the subheadings found in the descriptive portrait should be viewed as an artificial organizational mechanism and not as an attempt at relating these codes to each other in any way that is intrinsic or relevant to how they were experienced or presented by the couples. Table 2 summarizes which themes correspond to which research sub-question.

Table 2: Themes Corresponding to Each Research Sub-question

	<b>Sub-question 1: What is the essence of the couples' relational identity?</b>	<b>Sub-question 2: What is the couples' experience of everyday cultural negotiation within their relationships?</b>
<b>Themes</b>	Elements of Attraction	Deciding What is Cultural
	Elements of Cohesion	Principles of Negotiation
	Elements of Strength	Concrete Negotiation Strategies
	Challenging Elements	--
	Elements of Relational Portrayal	--

The descriptive portrait is also divided according to the first and second sub-questions that are the focus of the study. Although analysis was indeed completed separately for each one

of these questions, as recommended in the phenomenological literature, this separation now seems unnatural. Over the course of transcription and analysis I came to realize that many of the themes and anecdotes the couples shared were repeated in each of their interviews, in response to different questions. This may, of course, mean that some of the interview questions overlapped in elicited content but it may also mean—and I believe this is equally likely—that when it comes to these couples' experience of their intercultural relationships, there is really no natural compartmentalization of negotiation and identity. It seems like one informs the other, a point that will be taken up again in more detail in the next chapter.

Glimpses of my interpretations are inserted along with the explanation of each code as they are fitting for a full explanation of what these relationships seem to look like. The great number of codes derived from the data also makes it prohibitive to treat each one of them separately in a later discussion section. Such an approach would not benefit the cohesion of the descriptive portrait either. Instead, my aim is to present a descriptive portrait of these relationships that is as close as possible to how these participating couples have described their intercultural relationships. Furthermore, the conversational tone of the interviews (and the splitting of the subject into more than one interview) makes direct quotation very tricky. Long segments of transcript would also interrupt the flux of the descriptive portrait, thus diminishing its cohesiveness and perhaps highlighting individual couples too much for a description of a phenomenon. Paraphrasing and indirect citation are often used as a way to still keep participant voices in the text. Of course, illustrative direct quotes are used as much as possible. Whenever they used unique wording and phrases to describe an idea, these are directly quoted in the text.

### Answering Sub-Question 1: What is the Essence of the Couples' Relational Identity?

This first part of the descriptive portrait serves as a snapshot of what intercultural relationships look like. All bolded terms together (codes) represent the essential elements of participating couples' relational identity—the codes compose a sort of x-ray image of these relationships as the description is a snapshot of what they look like from the inside, for those actually in it.

#### *Elements of Attraction*

This first theme refers to these couples' thoughts on the forces that pushed them to seek or unintentionally enter intercultural relationships. A list of these along with a list of the couples who demonstrated each of them in one way or another is presented in Table 3. The codes here were mostly derived from the first interview, when couples told me about the history of their relationships. The codes in this theme, as a group, show a delicate balance in referring to individual characteristics of one's partner and the cultural heritage the partner brings into the relationship.

Table 3: Couples Who Demonstrated Codes in "Elements of Attraction" Theme

<b>Code</b>	<b>Couples</b>
Attraction to exotic	1, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10
Other as out of ordinary	1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10
Attracted to each other's personality	2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8
Common interests, values, goals, and worldview despite cultural differences	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10
Rejecting norms and values of own culture	1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10
Common interest in other cultures	1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10

Fate or a greater force than themselves brought them together	1, 4, 6, 9
Intercultural couples are more adventurous and have broader comfort zones	3, 5, 6, 9

Most couples in this study reported feeling like the other person was somehow **out of the ordinary** as compared to cultural counterparts and others from that individual's culture. When remembering what first attracted her to Gus (Couple 8), Isabella said, "I like the way he says things, so, it's endearing to me some of the differences that show up just in language, in how we talk and how we say things. Just that he was different from anyone that I had ever met before. I don't know anyone like him. And that was an attraction." Like this couple, other eight couples reported thinking this of each other upon meeting, and to some extent, they continue thinking this way. Each partner tends to look at the other person as different from anyone they have ever met, especially their cultural counterparts, which is a main reason why they become attracted to the other person in the first place. Where all other potential partners seemed ill-fitting in one way or another, these couples found each other to be exactly what they were looking for—at times even without knowing it.

Half of the couples in this study reported some level of **attraction to the exotic** parts of each other. The fact that the other person was a foreigner, different from themselves in many ways and different from most others, piqued these partners' interests and kept them interested from the beginning. For example, Cody described his first impression of Jasmine: "So that was my first impression of her--I just saw her, for me, just this exotically beautiful girl. You know, I'd just seen the stereotypical White and Black people. And then this exotically beautiful girl



walks up.” The participants who mentioned this attraction to the exotic also mentioned liking the fact that the other person had something to teach them and had to be in some ways “figured out”—it made the other person appear more interesting and it made the relationship also seem that way from the beginning.

Neither the attraction to the exotic nor the perception of the extraordinary quality of one’s partner took away from these couples’ **attraction to each other’s personalities**, however. This is something that every couple made sure to mention several times, perhaps to make sure I knew they were not just looking at the other person as a cultural object that is merely entertaining. Marcus (Couple 7) expressed this idea well when, in the second interview, he turned to Jina and said, “You know, I think that if you weren’t Korean I still would have fell [sic] in love with your personality. It’s not like I was like, ‘Wow! She’s got everything I want *and* she’s Korean too!’” In the couple’s third interview (member check), they come back to this idea and highlight that it would be really offensive *not* to view the other person as an individual but only as a token member of his or her culture.

All but two couples mentioned the idea that they as individuals **reject certain norms and values of their own cultures**. Although they all say there is much they cherish and hold on to from their respective cultural heritages, they also feel like certain cultural values they grew up with are not consonant with the person each of them wants to be or the life each wants to lead. Jina (Couple 7) exemplifies this idea very well when she explains that this rejection is not the same as being marginalized from one’s own group as an ugly duckling is marginalized in his family; instead, this rejection is a conscious choice to rebuff some cultural scripts and to repudiate certain cultural mandates. She wanted me to understand that she does not fit in with some Korean norms “by choice.” It is intentional; for example, she questions the gender scripts

she grew up with and refuses to perpetuate the gender inequality inherent in many marriages between more traditional Korean men and women. Not fitting in is really a critical decision, then. It was not that she “could not fit in if [she] wanted to.” Eva (Couple 9) also spoke about this idea of separating oneself from aspects of one’s culture. She brought up her experience with people back in Colombia, where she is from, thinking that she had let her relationship with Macedonio change her in fundamental ways. Some may even still think that she abandoned some of her cultural values so as to better fit in with her partner and his culture. Eva thinks she was actually who she is now to begin with and she said:

It’s why I took the decision to leave the country. It’s not just that I had the American dream, that I just wanted to come and make money—it was like some things that I didn’t enjoy much, things that I wanted to change and it was hard for me to change there, living with that culture, with my family. I knew there it was more difficult to do it. Leaving was easier. I see it now—I didn’t see it back then—but I started feeling like, ‘I have to leave.’ I just have to change this place. Something was pushing me.

She already rejected traditional Colombian values, such as the societal pressure for women to be overly concerned with their physical image before she even left her country. Her relationship and life in the United States only gave her the liberty and opportunity to be herself and express these values in her everyday life more openly. The rejection of aspects of one’s own cultural norms seems to be related to these couple’s attraction to each other’s foreignness and their thrill at finding each other to be different from people from their own cultural backgrounds.

All couples mentioned having **common interests, values, goals, and worldviews despite the cultural differences** in their relationships. This particular perception seems to be a necessary part of these successful intercultural relationships because these commonalities help

minimize conflict over the cultural differences that do exist. This makes the individuals in these intercultural relationships feel like they are more similar than different from each other because they feel similar in their core values and views. Many also mention their **common interest in other cultures** in general, as a force that brought them together and made them interested in each other. Whether they were both involved in international missionary work as Ablavi and Leroy (Couple 1) were or they simply view themselves as “citizens of the world” who must travel frequently to feel at home as Lily and Alex (Couple 3) do, 7 of the 10 couples report a real passion for learning about the world beyond their immediate surroundings—a passion which I must say was quite contagious. This interest and urge to learn about that which is not like oneself probably has much to do with four couples viewing **intercultural couples in general as having broader comfort zones and being more adventurous**—something these couples thought pushed them into intercultural relationships in the first place.

A theme that several couples mentioned was the idea that **fate or a greater force than themselves brought them together** across all the distance, their differences and the obstacles they faced in their relationship up until the present time. In other words, some of these couples believe they were meant to be together, even in spite (or perhaps because) of their differences. Ablavi (Couple 1) summed up this theme when she explained how she met Leroy:

One of the things that Leroy and I have since come to realize is that maybe when we said that we knew each other, is that we knew each other in the spirit first, like, we didn't know each other physically, we maybe had never really seen each other before, but the fact that I felt like I knew him and he felt like he knew me [when we first met] was that, we believe, that at some point maybe we had met in the spirit first. And having, like I

said, been in prayer months prior about my mate, I think I was just more recept[ive] to him.

In terms of identity construction this particular code speaks volumes to the narratives these couples have created around their different cultural backgrounds and how these shape their relationships. This may indicate some tendency of the couples who mentioned or demonstrated this code in particular to view the intercultural aspects of their relationships as central to its relational identity. In talking about how Leroy was just the right person for her, Ablavi also mentioned, “And I was like, ‘Do you like fried chicken?’ and he was like “No, I’m not that into fried chicken.’ So I went up to the Lord and I said, “Lord, you’re even into the *small* details! You know I don’t know how to cook fried chicken!”

Once the people find each other across cultural and other social divides, feel attracted, and enter a relationship, what keeps them together? The next section takes up this question by describing what these couples have identified as the forces that keep them together.

### *Elements of Cohesion*

This theme (the codes within it are listed in Table 4) includes what the couples in the study referred to when talking about the positive aspects of their relationships, which keep them together and oriented toward the future. These themes refer to characteristics of the relationship as well as certain actions or processes that help it along. It is perhaps here, in this section, where the effort these couples make to succeed in their relationships is most apparent.

Table 4: Couples Who Demonstrated Codes in “Elements of Cohesion” Theme

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Couples</b>
Relationship based on deep friendship and compatibility	1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8

Uncommon commitment	2, 4, 6, 9, 10
More at stake in intercultural relationships	4, 6, 5
Intercultural relationships more significant and intimate to the people involved	4, 5, 6, 10
Intercultural relationships take less ethnocentric people and it makes one less ethnocentric	1, 4, 5, 7, 9
Teaching and learning	1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10
Unwavering acceptance of the other person	3, 6, 7
Appreciating and embracing differences	1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10
Trying to understand issue from other's cultural perspective	2, 4, 5, 6
Taking on values of partner's culture	1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10
Becoming acculturated to other's culture	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10
Acting as cultural liaison to each other	2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10
Have to negotiate to move relationship forward	3, 6, 7, 10
Intercultural relationships need to be based on balance	4, 6, 9
Intercultural relationships more interesting	3, 4, 6

Although not all participant couples mentioned this code, even the four couples who did not mention it directly seemed to agree that their **relationship is based on deep friendship and compatibility**. This is important because as Patricia (Couple 2) stated, this is what makes sacrifices in the way of negotiation of cultural differences worthwhile. Patricia goes on to remind

me that one of the most important questions in the study is “Why do we do it?” When I turned the very perceptive question on her, she stated that she and Ron spend so much time and effort on a person so different from themselves because they love that person and feel like he or she and what they offer and bring to the relationship are worth it in many ways. I believe the compatibility these couples feel also serves a very useful purpose: to remind them that at the end of the day they are more similar than different.

Five of the ten couples mentioned the idea of having an **uncommon commitment** to each other. These couples said they think their relationship, because it is intercultural, takes more commitment than intra-cultural relationships. They view this as necessary so that the couple can overcome all the obstacles they encounter. Both Catherine and Doug (Couple 4) and Melanie and Hugo (Couple 10) talked about their trials and tribulations in applying for and obtaining visas and legal ways to move into the United States in order to be with each other and what this unique aspect of their relationship meant to its dynamics in the beginning—for example, both couples say that they got engaged, moved in together, and quickly became very serious about their relationships as a result of its legal aspect. This has afforded their relationship some benefits (it made them stronger in the face of obstacles, for example) and some disadvantages (Melanie and Hugo, for example, had a difficult adaptation to living together so suddenly). All in all, however, the couples view the stronger commitment as obviously very beneficial. Feeling like the other person brings unique characteristics and valuable resources—that one’s partner is somehow “out of the ordinary”—creates more incentive to being so committed to making the relationship work.

Another aspect of having to face so many obstacles is the feeling, which some couples mentioned, that there is **more at stake in intercultural relationships** like their own. This refers

to these couples' perception that there is more pressure on them to have a successful relationship, due to all the obstacles they already had to face, all the people who doubt their relationships' viability, and the closer scrutiny with which they feel they are treated. For example, Jasmine and Cody (Couple 6) had to go to great lengths to obtain Jasmine's family's approval for their relationship—including religious conversion, serious and direct debates with parents and other family stake-holders, and in some ways, a marriage and wedding that, although very desired by both of them, took place much sooner in the course of their history together than is most common in the United States. The meaning of marriage in their religion (Islam) and in her culture (Pakistan) is also so serious and sacred that a marital dissolution would certainly be met with worse social sanctions and repercussions than such an event in the lives of two American partners (and in some ways the lives of two Pakistani partners as well, who did not have to go through as much scrutiny as they had to go through).

Some couples talked about the idea that **intercultural relationships seem more significant and intimate to the partners involved in them**. At first this seems like an unfair comparison to non-intercultural relationships, but these couples make a convincing case for such distinction. Over the course of the study I noticed that these couples' relationships were noticeably insular inasmuch as couples often talked about protecting their relationship from the intrusive scrutiny of others but did not speak as much about sharing details of their relationship with people deemed safe or who seemed to comprehend the many facets and subtleties of intercultural relationships. Couples in which one of the partners immigrated to the United States for the sake of the relationship itself all talked about the loneliness and isolation they often feel despite having lived in the US for very long and even having a small social network here. Catherine expressed concern for Doug when she said, "We rely on each other very much for

friendship, and I *hope* and feel that just between the two of us we can fulfill a lot of those needs, but certainly I know there are needs that need to be met by outside friendships, and I know that I get that because I click with people and friends that I work with or that, you know, I grew up with (...) This lets [me] know [I'm] *home*, this is home. And I feel like for him it's got to be tough because this isn't home. I don't know that it will ever be home for any [foreign] person."

In this quote Catherine also hints at the special significance her and Doug's relationship acquired due to the fact that Doug is an immigrant to the United States. They both rely on each other for more roles than just those of husband and wife. Their relationship has become central in their lives much more than it seems to be for those who have family and friends close by and a wide array of colleagues in constant proximity. The couple says this has made their relationship stronger in many ways and made them more committed to each other as well.

The story of Jasmine and Cody's (Couple 6) relationship and the sacrifices and changes they each had to make to be together, exemplifies that in intercultural relationships it is often **necessary for each partner to follow some of each other's cultural norms in order to obtain approval for the relationship** (by the people who matter) **and to move the relationship forward**. Ablavi and Leroy's early dating is also a fine example of this idea. Leroy approached Ablavi in a very serious, no-nonsense way. He got her e-mail (instead of her phone number) after they met for the first time, carried on a conversation with her over e-mail for a couple of weeks, and then invited her to a "conference" instead of a "date." The relationship progressed swiftly and smoothly after the second or third conference, and his intentions toward her were made clear from the beginning. He explained his course of action to me as a result of their "being older" (although they are only in their thirties) but also as a product of his cultural worldview, which teaches him that marriage should be an endeavor taken on consciously and with purpose (as in



arranged marriages, for example) and that a person's most important asset is his or her reputation, which must be protected at all times. The way he approached her left very little to be guessed at and nothing that could be used to question his moral character.

**Negotiation is also necessary from the beginning of an intercultural relationship, in order to move it forward.** Catherine (Couple 4) explains this well when she reported that much of the active negotiation between her and Doug happened in the beginning of their relationship and that now they pretty much keep to the agreements and negotiations they made at that time. She concludes that this is likely because if they had not negotiated certain issues successfully (for example, how to deal with visits to and visits by each other's families) right in the beginning, the relationship would have dissolved under the weight of the conflicts that could have occurred.

When speaking specifically about what helps them continue to feel like they have common ground when they have to deal with inescapable differences in worldviews, the couples in this study talked about how they usually **try to see or understand certain issues through the other person's cultural perspective** or standpoint. This is a central element of their intercultural relationships as well as a negotiation strategy in and of itself. Macedonio (Couple 9) talked at length about the importance of trying to stand in one's partner's cultural shoes per se to try to understand why one's partner thinks, feels, and acts in certain ways. Although he admits this is not always easy, it is absolutely necessary, especially when one's partner seems most incomprehensible. Macedonio feels that this is the only way to really ever accept someone for who they are, after all, once a person understands why one's partner may be a certain way, acceptance comes much more easily.

**Taking on values from the other person's culture** is another way the couples in this study have found to create common ground in their relationships. Every single couple mentions this theme and examples of it are abundant. For example, Eva (Couple 9) is much more punctual now, in part because of her relationship with Macedonio. He, on the other hand, reports being much less materialistic and future-oriented when it comes to their finances, in part because of her. Marcus (Couple 7) reports he has taken on the value of hospitality and generosity from Jina's Korean heritage, which is not as central to his own Jewish heritage as he sees it. As for Jina, she has altogether rejected the Korean notions of what a good housewife should be like and reports being much more focused on her career than on the housework she should be doing according to Korean standards.

Adopting some of one's partner's values is one major way these partners have to embrace each other's culture--the act itself has significant meaning because it demonstrates commitment to understanding one's partner and **unwavering acceptance of who the other person is**. It is also the way to **become acculturated to the other person's culture**. Such acculturation serves to bridge differences in a couple's relationship, and in some ways eradicating these differences altogether. As Macedonio and Eva (Couple 9) explain, they have so successfully learned and taken on aspects of each other's cultures that in some ways he could be considered partly Colombian now while she could be considered partly American. This is evidenced by his interest in the Spanish language and literature—his major area of graduate study—and her focus on interior design as a career, which he describes as the “most Gringo of all disciplines” (indeed she was the only non-White person in her college program). They also shared another story that illustrates this idea well: on their first date, which happened before either of them could speak each other's language, they communicated through his attempts to speak Spanish and her

attempts to speak English. They said their communication on that date was so difficult and frustrating that it almost discouraged them from pursuing a relationship. Little did they know, however, that eight years later they would still be speaking to each other the same way. When asked what their couple language is (that is, the language they use to speak to each other at home) they said that they speak “Spanglish” to each other, but not in the way that one would imagine it. Instead of speaking her native Spanish to him, she continues to speak to him in English while he continues responding to her in Spanish. They view this as a metaphor for their relationship—they both went so far in the direction of each other’s cultural ends of the spectrum that they have almost switched cultural roles entirely.

**Appreciating and embracing differences** seems to be central to these couples relational identity. As Macedonio (Couple 7) explains, this involves making a mental shift from fearing difference to embracing it. Jasmine and Cody (Couple 6) say that it would not make sense for them to try to change each other, since they chose to marry one another because they each liked who the other person was, how different they were, and how these differences enriched their relationship. The couple adds that if they had not liked those differences they would not have even considered a relationship in the first place. Ablavi and Leroy (Couple 1) also say that they balance each other by being different on certain issues (for example, he is more frugal than she is, which irritates her sometimes although she admits that his frugality is for their wellbeing).

The idea of balance—as defined by a commitment to include in the relationship aspects of both cultures and preferences of both partners in equitable ways--is also very important for some of the participant couples, and they mentioned that **intercultural relationships need to be based on balance** in order to be successful. Catherine (Couple 4) says:

You have to be more committed and you have to keep a balance, too, of making sure that is both fair and equitable to both parties, you know, as far as where a culture comes in, and how you treat your relationship. The more balanced it is the easier it is going to be. And somehow you ha[ve] to get to that point. You know, through all the [years], you had to wade through a lot more *stuff* [laugh] than, than most couples do.

She is referring to the decisions and negotiations needed to take into account two people who come from very different places, who both need to be treated fairly. Although this is true to any marriage, it seems like the fairness or balance in negotiations in intercultural relationships is more of a prevalent issue, at least for these couples. Alex (Couple 3) found himself thinking “But I have a culture too!” whenever Lily’s parents took over the plans for their wedding—an example of a small problem created by a lack of balance in a particular moment in the relationship.

These couples’ appreciation of cultural differences and facility in taking on values associated with the other person’s cultural background seems to translate to a belief some of them hold that **intercultural relationships require less ethnocentric people and it makes individuals in the relationship even less ethnocentric** as well (a reflexive relationship). The adaptability and flexibility, as well as the willingness to claim aspects of one’s partner’s culture as one’s own, requires that a person let go of certain cultural holds in his or her way of viewing the world. It also makes one more likely to take the other’s perspective in general if this is frequently done to make an intimate relationship work. This tendency translates into better negotiation skills and more acceptance of the other person—relationship characteristics that seem to Patricia and Ron (Couple 2) to be central to intercultural relationships.

Another central part of what makes intercultural relationships cohesive entities with meaning and identity is what couples refer to as the **teaching and learning** that seems to permeate their relationship. Several couples reported they are always learning something new about their partner or their culture, even years into the relationship. All these couples give many examples of not only how they learn from the other person but also how they teach that person about culture. One way in which cultural teaching takes place is by **acting as a cultural liaison to each other**. Individuals go to great lengths to help their partners understand their cultures, appreciate it, and get proficient in its scripts and mandates. Partners also watch out for each other in their respective home turfs. This means translating, explaining certain aspects of the partner's behavior to family and friends, explaining friends' and family's behavior to the partner, and generally making sure the other person is being treated fairly and adequately. For example, Leroy (Couple 1) closely monitors Ablavi's one-on-one phone communications with his family in Africa, for fear that they will treat her as somewhat less authoritative than he is or view her assertiveness in a negative light. Jasmine does this for Cody at every weekend visit to her parents' house—she translates, makes sure he has food that is less spicy than the food her family normally prepares, and explains certain things about her family and culture to him; and Lily also does this for Alex when they go out to an event in the Indian community where she might need to translate for him. Although often difficult, the teaching and learning is a deeply gratifying experience for these couples, and they all feel like their **intercultural relationships are more interesting** because of it. When one is constantly learning something new, the thrill of discovery is always present in the relationship, which explains why they may feel this way.

All in all, by embracing each other's cultures, taking on each other's values, and being always open to learning new worldviews, individual participants in this study are able to **present**

**themselves as competent in their partner's cultural milieu**, which is something that most couples say is important to living and thriving with cultural differences. The relevance of presenting oneself as competent in a partner's culture is best explained with a segment of couple 7's descriptive statement (see Appendix A), which reads: "intercultural competence (...) seems to be a form of image management meant to bridge gaps—both concrete and those imagined by outsiders looking in. By embracing each other's cultures and showing intercultural competence, each individual (...) debunks cultural stereotypes that outsiders looking into the relationship may judge the couple by." It is worth adding here that such presentation may also serve to minimize the Othering that these couples experience (a concept that will be taken up later in this chapter), because it goes to show those around them that they really may be more similar than different. An example of how far these individuals will go to learn and become proficient in each other's cultural scripts is Ablavi's (Couple 1) initiative to meet African women whom she "took on as 'Aunties'." They explained to her, among other things, the importance of giving financial help to Leroy's family and relatives still in Africa.

The elements that make these relationships cohesive and enduring should be evident from the codes discussed thus far. All relationships have strengths and weaknesses. According to these couples, what are the unique elements of strength in their relationships? Do they view these as stemming from its intercultural aspects? These are questions that are taken up in the next section.

### *Elements of Strength*

Couples in the study were directly asked what they view as the strengths and weaknesses in their relationships. This section and the next (on challenges) summarize these couples' responses to this question. First, I turn to what these couples view as the unique strengths of their

relationships. The codes in this theme are presented in Table 5, along with the couples who demonstrated them.

Table 5: Couples Who Demonstrated Codes in “Elements of Strength” Theme

Codes	Couples
Noticing cultural differences	1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9
Straddling different cultural norms	2, 3, 6, 9, 10
Intercultural relationships help gain insight into own cultural norms and values	1, 2, 3, 9
Don’t really notice cultural differences when alone together	1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10
The different becomes normal	1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9
Individualizing other person and relationship	1, 2, 5, 7, 8, 9
Commitment to gender equality and flexible gender roles	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10
Commonalities in sociocultural characteristics make intercultural relationships easier	1, 4, 5, 6, 8

Most couples report **noticing cultural differences** between themselves, especially in the beginning of the relationship. Although these differences were not always problematic it is evident that all couples have always had some insight into the status of their relationship as an intercultural one. Their efforts **to straddle different cultural norms** make these differences apparent to at least some of the couples even today. For example, Lily and Alex’s wedding, as well as Jasmine and Cody’s, were big exercises in straddling cultural differences—the first

couple had a traditional Syrian Orthodox wedding as Lily's family wanted, although Alex and his family are not even very religious, and the second couple had a traditional three-day Pakistani wedding in which the very last day involved a traditional American ceremony in a church, lighting the unity candle, and kissing at the end of vows, traditions which are foreign to Jasmine's culture. There are also more routine examples of this straddling that takes place in these relationships. Melanie (Couple 10), for example, has learned that when she visits Hugo's family in Italy the time of meals is very different, which has not been a problem for her until the couple had children. Now, she says the meal times in Italy pose more of a problem for her in taking care of the children. Macedonio (Couple 9) also reported that he has had to adjust to the differences in diet when he visits Eva's family in Colombia.

Noticing cultural differences also helps some individuals in these **intercultural relationships to gain insight into the cultural norms and values one carries into the relationship**. For example, when discussing Patricia's family's visit to their home in the United States, Ron (Couple 2) at first insisted on finding out when the guests were thinking about returning home to Peru. In the course of their very heated conversations on the topic he realized that this rigid take on hosting people in one's home, which requires that the host knows exactly when the guests will arrive and when they plan on leaving, was a cultural norm in Ron's American culture. As most cultural norms go, this one could not be translated to Patricia's cultural context. She found herself unable to have a very clear and direct discussion with her family about this, simply because this is not the sort of thing that is commonly done in Peru. Ron only realized how American this concept was when the couple had to deal with the conflict that arose when Patricia was not able to answer all his questions.



Most couples said that, to a large extent, they stopped noticing cultural differences as the relationship progressed. They insist that **when they are alone together they do not notice many cultural differences** actually. It is generally when they are around each other's families of origin, or when they are around inquisitive friends and acquaintances that they are reminded that indeed they are not from the same clan, per se. This idea is confirmed by the following segment of Jina and Marcus' (Couple 7) first interview:

(Previously the interviewer asked if they consider themselves an intercultural couple:)

J: I don't think I consider my relationship an intercultural relationship.

I: Yeah? Okay.

M: I-, again, though, it only seems to become that (...) when other people do very particular things.

To a large extent, these couples feel like **the different becomes normal** in their daily lives. This is a thought first introduced by Gus (Couple 8) who reports that after being in the United States for so long, the idea of a relationship with an American is not as strange to him. Isabella (Gus' girlfriend) agrees that she doesn't think their cultural differences constitute a central element or force in their relationship. Although she enjoys the small ways in which his culture is infused in their everyday life, as she enjoys learning about his culture, Isabella makes it clear that the idea of being in an intercultural relationship is not a primary organizing principle in her and Gus' relational identity. As already mentioned by Gus, this idea of the different becoming normal has much to do with each individual in these couples becoming somewhat acculturated to the other's culture. Because of this, the couple does not feel their differences anymore and culture falls to the background of their relationship awareness.

Although this idea of forgetting the cultural differences in one's relationship is presented in the current literature as the kiss of death for intercultural relationships, these couples do not view it as something bad at all. When asked whether they feel this can be harmful to their relationship as it might cause them to personalize each other's flaws and shortfalls too much, some couples reported this individualization is not really problematic, and in fact, **individualizing the other person and the relationship** can be quite healthy and strengthening for the relationship. These couples reported that they start seeing each other more as individuals as time goes by. As Leroy (Couple 1) puts it, "I see her as my wife, my friend, so I see her [as] that before I see her as African American. Before I see her as an American, I see her as my wife." And to quote Jina and Marcus' descriptive portrait (and to paraphrase something that the couple reiterated during a member check), "this [individualization] may be a negotiation strategy in and of itself—a strategy that perhaps serves to minimize cultural stereotypes and the offensive nature of viewing a person solely as a representative of one's group." Eva and Macedonio (Couple 9), as well as Jina and Marcus (Couple 7), also note that such individualization gives people agency to change instead of just pegging their behavior and personality traits on cultural influences.

Individualization also occurs on the relationship level for some couples. To quote Jina and Marcus' descriptive portrait again (after all, these ideas first started acquiring thematic shape through their interviews), "[some couples] look at their lives and relationship as an unique, individual phenomenon and not as an example of an intimate cross-cultural encounter. They view their relationship as unique on its own, and not simply because it is an intercultural relationship. They also strive to individualize each other as much as possible in an attempt to not lose the person for the culture, per se." The tendency to minimize the "uniqueness" of

intercultural relationships is an idea that comes up again in later themes and will be further contextualized with more depth in the next chapter.

Another key element of strength in intercultural relationships, as identified by the couple in this study, is their **commitment to gender equality and flexible gender roles**. All couples mentioned equitable division of labor as being key to minimization of conflict and a successful relationship. Individuals whose cultural heritage taught them more traditional and rigid gender roles either came to reject these values once they entered their present relationships or conscientiously sought and chose partners who subscribed to gender equality to begin with--partners with whom a relationship based on more flexible gender scripts would be possible. For example, Eva explained, “There [in Colombia] is very [rigid]--the wife does this, the husband—that’s his job, that’s your job. You clean and then he works...So, when we go to Colombia and we see it (...) we’re just like, ‘Oh, my God! I feel like I can’t live like that.’ It’s how I feel when I see my sisters or my friends doing that. I’m like, ‘No way!’ So we come back and we start playing with [gender roles]” Macedonio cut in and completed Eva’s comment by saying, “I think it’s something we’ve negotiated little-by-little over the years we’ve been together. Something we’ve negotiated and basically done away with in a big part. Just doing whatever we feel like doing between us.” This common value between the partners is a good example of how similar values, interests and worldviews facilitate negotiation and the subsequent success of these relationships.

Some couples also noted that their **commonalities in sociocultural characteristics** such as race, ethnicity, religion, class, and education, **made their intercultural relationship easier** and stronger. Catherine (Couple 4) and Melanie (Couple 10) both mention how fortunate they are to have similar characteristics and external appearances to their spouses—something they

know not all intercultural couples have, which complicates their relationship. These sociocultural similarities insulate the couples from social prejudice and misunderstandings that could have a corrosive effect on the relationship. Melanie (Couple 10) addressed some of these issues when she said:

I feel bad for many couples, because I still think there is a perception that if you're dating or marrying a foreigner that it's just for a green card. That's the automatic assumption, especially traveling (...) We saw really bad abuse. [An] Indian woman coming back into America when we were [traveling] and she had just got married and she had to go home for an emergency. See, her American husband was still here. But they were making so much fun of her, and I don't know if they assumed we didn't speak English because we were sitting there, or what. They were being so nasty. She was genuine, you could tell she was genuinely just married. And there's always an assumption. When we first went to his immigration lawyer to do the paperwork after we got married, he said 'So, what's your situation.' And we said, 'Well, we're married.' He goes, 'You're just married? Like *in love* married?' [and we said,] 'Yeah, that's why we're married.' He goes 'Well, this is an easy one!' So there's definitely, I think, a perception, and I feel bad for it, especially for new couples or couples that don't have a green card (...) It's always assumed that you're here for the wrong reason, that you really shouldn't be here. And probably it's worse now, I would assume, because of all the (...) immigration stuff that's going on.

I now turn to the challenges these couples discussed encountering in the course of their time together.

### *Challenging Elements*

Lest people think that intercultural relationships are devoid of difficulties, these couples had plenty to say about the challenges they face due to their different cultural backgrounds. These challenges are not equally experienced by all couples in this study—just as the elements of strength and cohesion are different for each couple as well—but all couples agree that cultural negotiation adds a new dimension of challenges and opportunities for conflict that non-intercultural relationships do not necessarily have. The bigger the cultural difference, of course, the bigger the challenges posed. The list of codes related to the challenging elements of intercultural relationships is presented on Table 6.

Table 6: Couples Who Demonstrated Codes in “Challenging Elements” Themes

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Couples</b>
Cultural differences often cause misunderstandings	1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10
Cultural aspects of conflict gradually become apparent	2, 4, 5, 9, 10
Different conflict resolution styles	3, 4, 5, 6, 7
Different conflict resolution styles are influenced by specific cultural norms	3, 4, 5, 6, 7
Difficulty distinguishing cultural differences from differences that stem from family culture or personality characteristics	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9
Coping with one’s own and other people’s stereotypes of each other’s culture	1, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10

Looking at issues only through one's own cultural lenses leads to conflict	4, 6, 9, 10
Sacrificing connection to own culture is part of intercultural relationship	4, 10
Never feeling at home in other's culture	4, 8, 10
Going against cultural norms often cause internal conflict	3, 6, 9
Some families of origin disapprove(d) of intercultural relationship	3, 4, 5, 6
Not feeling fully accepted by partner's family of origin	3, 4, 5, 7, 10
Differences in family-of-origin dynamics can be quite stressful	1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 9, 10
Language barrier	1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 9, 10
Encountering Othering	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10
There is more to prove in an intercultural relationship	3, 6, 10

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**Cultural differences often cause misunderstandings**—this is an idea that most couples mentioned and to which others only alluded. At times the cultural aspect of a disagreement is evident, as when Ablavi and Leroy (Couple 1) have to negotiate what is considered appropriate clothing for certain functions (see their descriptive portrait in Appendix A). At other times, **the cultural aspects of a conflict only gradually become apparent** as when Kathy and Lukaš

(Couple 5) started noticing that their different conflict resolution styles—something that was a recurrent source of frustration and misunderstanding to them—is influenced quite strongly by their different cultural backgrounds and the ways they were raised. **Differing conflict resolution styles** is mentioned by many couples and it was quite surprising to hear how easily and insightfully these couples were able to determine that their **different conflict resolution styles are influenced by specific cultural norms**. For example, Kathy and Lukaš (Couple 5) seem to agree that Lukaš' more direct and persistent way of handling conflict is consonant with growing up in an Czech household where tempers often flared and a certain level of pragmatism (some would say pessimism) is culturally encouraged. Perhaps my surprise in the clarity of these insights comes from my acknowledgement of their **difficulty in distinguishing cultural differences from differences that stem from family culture or personality characteristics**. This is something that most couples mentioned experiencing during the interviews and my conjecture is that on some level this difficulty is related to their tendency to want to see each other as individuals first and foremost.

As well-intentioned as these couples may have been to treat each other as individuals, they often mentioned that it was challenging **to cope with one's own and other people's stereotypes of each other's culture**. Ablavi (Couple 1) mentioned having to consciously work toward putting aside her previous stereotypes about African men being chauvinistic and expecting submission from their wives. In the beginning of her relationship to Hugo (Couple 10), Melanie had to work hard to convince her friends and family—and in some ways, even herself, in the very beginning—that what they had was not just a romanticized fling the way movies make out intimate relationships between Americans and Italians to be. The couple who mentioned this theme explained that we all hold stereotypes about foreigners, no matter where

they are from, and part of creating a successful intercultural relationship—of any kind, but especially a romantic one—involves the acknowledgement and acceptance that one's partner may be very different from the idea that one has in mind of what a person from his or her country must be, behave, and think like. Sometimes these assumptions or stereotypes are positive ones, and yet they may be inapplicable to one's partner. For example, Ablavi remembered:

I always knew that I wanted to have an African-style wedding and [there] was always this whole thing like, okay, how am I going to convince this guy I want to have an African wedding, you know? And so then when Leroy came along (...) by the time we started dating and it was for real, I was like, "Okay, cool. I don't have to convince him." Here, he wanted to wear tuxedos! I was like, "No! We're having an African wedding!" [All laugh] I'm like, "No, I finally get the opportunity, don't rob me!"

Some couples explained that one sure-fire way to create conflict in an intercultural relationship is **to look at issues only through one's own cultural lenses**. Macedonio (Couple 9) talked about this problem quite eloquently and explained how important it is to try to put aside one's assumptions and worldviews to fully understand the other person's perspective as an equally valid and rational view of the world, especially when it comes to one's partner's behavior or the dynamics in the partner's family of origin. It is about making an effort to understand how the other's culture influenced his or her reasons for thinking, feeling, or behaving a certain way. An example of the repercussions of viewing issues only through one's own cultural lenses is, again, the ensuing conflict when Ron pressured Patricia (Couple 2) to find out when her family planned to return home after visiting the couple.

Catherine and Doug (Couple 4) as well as Melanie and Hugo (Couple 10) brought up the idea that a person often has **to sacrifice personal connection to one's culture as part of being**



**in an intercultural relationship.** These two couples had one commonality—both Doug and Hugo moved and settled in the US as a result of their marriage to Americans. Although Catherine and Melanie support both of them in their efforts to stay connected to South Africa and Italy respectively, the geographical distance and time spent in this foreign culture takes a toll on their relationship to their homelands. For example, both Doug and Hugo report **not feeling entirely at home in their partner's culture.** Doug talked at length about his difficulty in making solid friendships ever since he immigrated, and Hugo talked about still missing certain aspects of the Italian way of life and having difficulty adapting to some rules and social mandates of American culture (although less so now than in the beginning of the relationship).

**Going against cultural norms often causes internal conflict** for some of the individuals interviewed. Jasmine (Couple 6) experienced this when Cody started courting her—any potential relationship with him meant breaking multiple cultural norms such as dating before marriage, marrying a foreigner, marrying a White man, and entering a love-marriage instead of an arranged one. Understandably, this knowledge was something she struggled with for a long time before she even approached her parents to gain approval for engaging in a relationship other than a friendship with Cody (which was a marital engagement to begin with, as it was the only appropriate relationship possible between them according to her culture's mandates).

The issue of going against cultural norms may also be why **some families (of origin** that is) **disapprove of intercultural relationships,** at least in the beginning. Couples talk about this as partly due to disappointment that one's son or daughter did not follow certain traditions, partly due to misconceptions or stereotypes regarding the other person,--these usually disappear later on in the relationship--and partly due to worry that an intercultural relationship will be too challenging or fraught with problems even if the foreign partner is given the family's seal of

approval. For example, Catherine's (Couple 4) mother had a conversation with her right before she moved to South Africa to be with Doug about what her decision to enter that relationship entailed. One of the factors her mother mentioned was that Catherine would always have to be willing to be away from home for long periods of time if Doug decided that he needed to be in his home country. As another example, Kathy and Lukaš (Couple 5) report that to this day Kathy's father is not overjoyed with his daughter's decision to marry a European man with tastes and values very different from his own. Another factor in families' disapproval of their children's intercultural relationships is related to **holding the foreign partner to the same cultural standards the family holds**. This is manifested through behavioral and social expectations of the foreign partner that are simply not sensitive or appropriate considering his or her different cultural heritage, e.g., Kathy's (Couple 5) father's disappointment that Lukaš is simply not Dale Earnhardt Junior, his favorite NASCAR driver.

Obviously such family disapproval contributes to foreign partners **often feeling like they are not fully accepted or embraced by the other person's family of origin**, something that can be quite hurtful. The couples who mentioned this issue also mentioned that it only becomes a problem when they are around the disapproving family, but that is enough to create conflict in the relationship even if the partners generally try to act as each other's cultural liaisons and refuse to be influenced by their families. Even when the partners are a united front toward their families, the **differences in family-of-origin dynamics can be quite stressful** for these couples. Although the way in which one's partner relates to his or her family can be very different and stressful, many of these couples also notice differences in how the different family systems operate, independently of one's partner. For example, Melanie said Hugo's family members were too distant from each other and from them as a unit, something she would like to change

but cannot because of geographical distance, language barrier, and his own family's structure.

And speaking of **language barrier**, this is a challenge that many couples face or have faced at one point in their relationship. The most challenging language barrier is the one between one partner and the other's family of origin, although Macedonio and Eva (Couple 9) had serious language barriers to overcome when they first started dating. Although Jina (Couple 7) speaks English fluently, the couple said that at times small and generally benign misunderstandings will still occur due to mistaken word usage, etc. For most couples, however, such as Kathy and Lukaš (Couple 5) and Jasmine and Cody (Couple 6) the difficulty one partner has to speak the other person's first language (in these cases, Kathy and Cody are the disadvantaged ones) creates tensions, hesitations, and misunderstandings between the couple and the family of origin. The way around this problem is to make a serious effort to learn the other person's language, something which both Kathy and Cody are actively trying and have reported improvement in.

On a related note, the great majority of couples in this study report **encountering Othering** and feeling like it is one of the most prominent challenges related to their relationship that they must face. Othering is a term used to describe treating a person as someone irrevocably different from oneself and the differences between any two people as irreconcilable and problematic. Marcus (Couple 7) used this term to denote the way in which he and Jina are frequently reminded of their cultural differences by how people treat them in relation to each other and their relationship itself. He explains that some people magnify and problematize the differences between them, and they seem to even go out of their way to treat whoever they see as the foreigner (which obviously depends on the context) as intrinsically different. Marcus had some thoughts on why Othering is so prevalent, and he explained, "Yeah, difference is a threat. And maybe (...) that's why it's reassuring to hear that this difference produces trouble for your

relationship because, you know, it's just easier [to accept it], I suppose. Well, I guess people reify culture, so they assume there are these massive monolithic things out there, and these massive differences that can't be bridged.” The couple reports that Othering bears the stamp of insensitivity, racial and social prejudice, and ignorance. It can cause conflict in the couple relationship at times. Examples include when Marcus was asked by someone they had just met if he had married Jina just so she would cook for him, when some of Melanie's (Couple 10) friends and acquaintances warned her that Hugo might just be looking for a way into the United States by marrying her, and when people in the Czech Republic treated Kathy (Couple 5) with impatience just because of how she looked. All couples agree that people in intercultural relationships must unfortunately be ready for this. Othering seems so pervasive that it may even come from one's partner's own family of origin, as was the case with Jina and Marcus (see Couple 4's descriptive portrait in Appendix A).

To conclude, challenges such as encountering Othering, stereotypes, family's disapproval, and being held to one's partner's cultural standards are all factors that contribute to some of the couples in this study feeling like **there is more to prove in an intercultural relationship**. Cody (Couple 6) introduced this idea when he explained that he and Jasmine have no other choice but to make their marriage work—after all the obstacles they faced, all the people who did not believe they would even make it as far as they did, and all the sociocultural pressures put on their relationship, they have immense pressure to work out their differences and be happy together.

### *Elements of Relational Portrayal*

This section explains the codes related to how the intercultural couples portray themselves to others. Many of the ideas presented here arose as responses to the question “what

do you wish others would know about intercultural relationships like yours?” The couples’ responses are less interesting for the abstracted knowledge they impart on us about this kind of relationship, and more for what they tell us about what they view as essential in their own relationships as intercultural encounters. The codes related to theme of relational portrayal are presented on Table 7.

Table 7: Couples Who Demonstrated Codes in “Elements of Relational Portrayal” Theme

Codes	Couples
Not necessarily looking for intercultural relationship	1, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10
Consciously looking for someone very different	3, 4, 5, 7, 9
Intercultural relationships are more challenging	2, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10
Othering can be hurtful	3, 4, 6, 7, 10
People’s misconceptions about intercultural relationships	3, 7, 10
Pride in intercultural relationship	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10
Demystifying intercultural relationships	6, 7, 8, 9, 10
Cultural differences are not problematic	5, 6, 7, 8, 9
Relationship defined as intercultural	2, 4, 6, 9

It is particularly peculiar that for every individual who said he or she was **not looking for an intercultural relationship** when one presented itself there was one other person who admitted to **consciously looking for someone very different from themselves**. Those who said

they were not looking for an intercultural relationship asserted that they only had desirable characteristics of a potential mate in mind but being a foreigner was not necessarily one of them. Those who report consciously looking for an intercultural relationship say they knew they liked learning and relating to people from different backgrounds, that they were attracted to these differences (attraction to the exotic), and thrilled to find commonalities with people other than those in their immediate social milieu. When asked how he would explain these seemingly divergent findings, Cody (Couple 6) explained that he thinks it has to do less with consciously looking for an intercultural relationship and more to do with being open to look for what one wants in a partner in cultural others, while most people would not be willing or able to go that far. Cody explains that he knew what he wanted in a partner, and the women around him who had most in common with him in terms of cultural background did not seem to possess these qualities. He was willing to look for them in Jasmine, someone who he feels is very much like himself on the inside, even if born and raised in a very distant culture. This is by far the best way I have found to conciliate these seemingly discrepant findings.

As already mentioned, couples in this study feel that **intercultural relationships are in some ways more challenging** than non-intercultural relationships. More norms have to be broken, there is more pressure for the relationship to succeed, and there is much more negotiation to be done and details to be worked out—both small details such as how to cook to both people's tastes and large details like making sure the children (or future children) learn about both cultures equally. Kathy and Lukaš (Couple 5) certainly felt this way when planning their wedding. The geographical distance from his family, the different customs they had to straddle, and the lack of time and financial resources to do everything both ways (e.g. have two

wedding ceremonies) had them delay wedding plans for some time until they could find a solution pleasing enough to all involved.

Other challenges associated with intercultural relationships are: **Othering, which can be very hurtful**, as for the reasons already explained, and **people's misconceptions regarding the relationship**, its motives, dynamics, and strengths and weaknesses. The additional challenges seem to bring with them a positive side, however--it gives couples an opportunity to be **proud of their intercultural relationship**. Only Ablavi and Leroy (Couple 1) mentioned this theme directly but all other couples showed glimpses of pride or something very similar to it when talking about their relationship history and all the obstacles they had to face. It would not be an exaggeration to say that, in the course of this study, all couples constructed strength-based narratives of their relationships which highlighted many reasons they have to be proud of who they are as individuals, as partners, and as couples.

Paradoxically enough, however, many of the same couples who mentioned the additional challenges inherent in these relationships talked about the importance of **de-mystifying intercultural relationships**. These couples are reluctant to view or portray these as somehow exotic or abnormal. This almost seems a contradiction considering they do view intercultural relationships as more interesting and challenging than non-intercultural relationships. Even so, they refuse to think of them as somehow more fragile or incomprehensible. These couples wish people would not be too quick to judge what to outsiders might appear to be a couple who is too different to remain together. Although they come from very different cultural backgrounds, these couples report feeling more similar than different and being very compatible. In this sense, they feel their **cultural differences are not problematic**. Jina (Couple 7) says that when one takes a broader view of what a cultural group is—a group of people joined by common values,

worldviews, customs, goals, and knowledge—the similarities between her and Marcus makes their country of origin largely irrelevant in the everyday context of their relationship. These couples report their relationships have a high degree of harmony, unity, and appreciation and they want others to concentrate on that instead of concentrating on the differences and challenges.

Yet all couples in this study are well-aware of their cultural differences and some (but not all) are quick to **define the relationship as an intercultural one**. This makes the relationship “uncommon” in many ways because it shapes how they relate to each other, how they relate to those around them, and what the relationship stands for. No wonder they have to work so hard to de-mystify the concept of intercultural relationships.

Answering Sub-Question 2: What is these Couples’ Experience of Everyday Cultural

Negotiation within Their Relationships?

The second part of the main research question in this study focuses on intercultural couples’ subjective experience of negotiation in their relationship. The following sections constitute an integral part of a larger description of what it is like to be in an intercultural relationship. Although it is often the case that what we say does not match exactly what we do, the purpose of this study was to investigate intercultural couples’ perceptions of their own relationships to see if this experience is in accordance with what the research and theory on this topic tells us.

### *Deciding What Is Cultural*

In a study focused on how intercultural couples negotiate their cultural differences in everyday life, it is important to understand how these couples first decide which differences stem from differing cultural backgrounds. Any intimate, long-term relationship necessitates some



negotiation, even those between two people born and raised down the street from each other. For intercultural couples, however, the sources of difference are exponentially increased. So how do they know what is cultural? The codes related to this theme are presented in Table 8.

Table 8: Couples Who Demonstrated Codes in “Deciding What Is Cultural” Theme

Codes	Couples
Making a concerted effort to learn about the partner’s culture	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10
Resisting generalizations	2, 3, 5, 7
“Do as the Romans do”	1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10
Intercultural relationships do not exist in a vacuum	2, 3, 5, 7, 9
Look for patterns to decide what is cultural	1, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10
Differences are differences	1, 3, 7, 9

The first code mentioned in response to this question was the idea of **making a concerted effort to learn about the partner’s culture**. Such efforts include observation and immersion in each other’s culture by way of visiting and spending significant time in each other’s home countries, learning the language (or at least attempting to do so), getting to know the partner’s family of origin and friends, paying attention to norms, values, and lifestyles of the other’s culture, and showing active curiosity and desire to be a part of the other’s cultural traditions. As Marcus (Couple 4) said, “Have fun, be open-minded. When you meet the family, eat the food, do what they do, have fun, and view it as [...] growth and enrichment and a way to learn, and don’t assume that any difference is that big or insurmountable. Just have fun with it.”

Among these strategies, visiting each other's country of origin was especially mentioned as the best way to understand what behaviors or preferences of one's spouse have cultural influences. Indeed all couples expressed that getting to know the other person's culture is important. They also explained that the motivation for doing this is to get to know the other person more profoundly. This is extremely important as a gesture in and of itself and as means to an end: to find out what in one's partner's life and personality bears unmistakable traces of cultural influence. Learning about each other's culture also helps these couples **resist generalizations** about each other's cultural background. Only four couples talked directly about their hesitation to generalize about culture, but in the course of multiple interviews all couples showed some discomfort when asked to speak about the generalities of a group (any group) of people. This is perhaps just a reflection of their notions of social desirability, but it may also be yet another way to individualize one's partner and relationship.

**"Doing as the Romans Do"** is another way the couples have to learn from each other and each other's family and cultural milieu. This is also a way for these couples to "pass" for people who are much less different from one another than others may think. Most couples talked about the lengths they go to in order to do things in culturally-appropriate ways when immersed in the other person's culture or when around the other person's cultural network. For example, although Ron (Couple 2) does not drink as much as Patricia's brother does, nor does he feel very comfortable with the gender segregation that often takes place in her family's home, in an effort to bond with her brother and the men in her family in culturally-appropriate ways he has participated in drinking games with them in Peru. The couples view culturally-consonant behavior as a good way to learn about the other person's culture, which obviously helps in trying to take one's partner's perspective on issues in which cultural negotiation is necessary.

Participant couples also view efforts to learn about each other's cultures as important because they realize **intercultural relationships do not exist in a vacuum**. In other words, support from family and friends is important and should be sought out. Accommodating their norms and expectations can avoid some conflict and go a long way for gaining approval for the relationship. Couples must also find ways to cope with Othering because this too can be corrosive to the relationship and is unavoidable due to the social context the relationship is embedded in. Some ways couples have found to cope with Othering, for example, is by "biting their tongue" when confronted with certain comments or behaviors, trying to educate others about their relationship and different cultures, even when it seems ludicrous to have to do so.

Another way to decide what is culture can be described as the couples' tendency to **look for patterns** (in the partner's cultural network) **to decide what is cultural**. When asked how they know when a particular point of difference between them is influenced by cultural differences, many of the 10 couples say that they try to pay attention to other people from their partner's culture and how they behave and think to find out whether it is a pattern with people from that country or heritage. The couples say this helps in negotiation but other couples add that, all in all, **differences are differences**, and all involve compromise, accommodation, and understanding. Negotiating cultural differences for these couples is not that different from negotiating any other differences that may exist in any other type of relationship. These couples frequently remind others and themselves of that.

### *Principles of Negotiation*

When answering questions regarding their negotiation strategies, the 10 couples who participated in this study tended to talk about general principles or rules that govern their everyday negotiation, whether the issues at hand are intercultural or not. The eighteen codes that

represent these couples' principles of negotiation are presented in Table 9, along with the couples who demonstrated these principles.

Table 9: Couples Who Demonstrated Codes in "Principles of Negotiation" Theme

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Couples</b>
Tolerance	1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9
At times tolerance involves sacrifices	3, 4, 6, 7, 8
Tolerance = Respect for other's culture and heritage	4, 7, 8, 9
Important to remain personally connected to own culture to remember who you are and where home is	2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9
Must have genuine interest in partner's culture	2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10
Letting oneself be culturally influenced	5, 6, 7, 8, 9
Negotiation takes time and effort	4, 5, 6, 9, 10
Do what is best for the relationship not just each person	1, 4, 9, 10
Staying open to change	4, 10
Negotiation often takes into account mainstream (American) culture	6, 9, 10
Some negotiation just happens	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10
Negotiation is different for each couple	2
Creating bicultural or multicultural reality	1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9
Creating a new culture	2, 3, 5, 7

Infusing certain existent or created rituals with cultural meaning	1, 5, 6
Active negotiation seems to decrease with time	4, 5, 7, 9, 10
Being firm and assertive about management of relationship	1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 9
Keeping a sense of humor about relationship	3, 4, 7, 9, 10

Perhaps the broadest and most important of these is what these couples have dubbed **tolerance**, which can be summarized as learning to live with some ideological differences. The couples who demonstrated this code understand that they are not always going to see eye-to-eye with each other. Most of the time these differences in worldview are not large points of discord, and the couples say that they will just accept each other's quirks and move on—as when Marcus learned the hard way not to interrupt Jina's "Korean Naps"<sup>1</sup>. At other times, different worldviews translate themselves into ongoing arguments (what Gottman, 1999, would have termed "gridlock"). Catherine and Doug (Couple 4) know this well. Although they admit that they have had some very intense, even "nasty", arguments about some points of difference, they have also learned to live with these, which for them means simply concentrating on the similarities and not discussing the differences that perhaps do not need to be discussed all the time. Jasmine and Cody (Couple 6), on the other hand, feel like some issues are too big for them *not* to agree on. One example is how they might parent their future children. When asked how they plan on

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<sup>1</sup> Jina talked about a habit of hers that she likes to call "Korean Naps." These are short bursts of napping that Korean students have learned to fit in the course of their very long, very strenuous day at school or in college in order to put in as many hours of productivity as they are required to do. The Korean Nap is characterized by sudden, immediate heavy sleep in unlikely places such as libraries, cafés, cars, offices, hallway waiting areas, lobbies, or anywhere else studying can be done. One time Marcus made the mistake of waking her up from her Korean Nap. She was so furious that he learned never to do that again.

negotiating this, they simply say that they are trying to figure it out before they actually have children (not a bad idea!). They realize that **at times tolerance involves sacrifices**, an idea that other couples mention when talking about having to figure out what each can give up on in order to get what they cannot live without. Jasmine and Cody try to take a rational approach to the issue of parenting, engaging each other in dialogue about empirical and scientific evidence related to “best practices.” Although in this instance they may be trying to change each other’s point of view, they also talk about engaging each other with respect. They are one of the couples who views **tolerance as a matter of respect for each other’s culture and heritage**. The idea is to discuss both worldviews as equally valid, even if they seem personally unacceptable at times. This keeps the other person from feeling controlled, which naturally helps avoid conflict.

The idea of control touches on another important aspect of cultural negotiation: the **importance of remaining personally connected to one’s own culture**. Many couples said that this helps them remember who they are as individuals and where home is. There are a number of ways these couples accomplish this continued connection with far-away families, friends, countries, and cultures, all of which will be discussed in the next section on specific negotiation strategies (certain strategies for blending cultural norms and values in everyday life also go a long way to keep each individual connected to specific cultural traditions). For now, however, it is sufficient to say that this connection helps each partner stay in touch with their individuality, which is obviously important in any relationship, especially one that in many ways is defined by the dialectic of difference and similarity.

It was clear that the partners encouraged each other to remain connected to their different cultures. This was perhaps because they understood exactly how significant cultural influences were to each other’s personalities. Each individual in each couple also showed **genuine interest**

**in his or her partner's culture**, something that all couples agreed was indispensable for a successful intercultural relationship. Macedonio (Couple 9) noted that being culturally insulated is harmful to an intercultural relationship, something he learned first-hand from his previous marriage to someone from a different cultural background. He talked in depth about the factors that contributed to the failure of that relationship, one of the primary ones being each other's ethnocentrism. Macedonio learned the lesson and has spared no effort in becoming as versed as possible in Eva's culture. Ablavi (Couple 1) is also someone whose example stands out here. Her interest in African cultures in general predates her relationship with Leroy, who jokes that she is the real African in the relationship.

**Letting oneself be culturally influenced** seems easy to do in a context of genuine appreciation for each other's culture. This flexibility is reportedly paramount to negotiation—the more values and norms the couple can share the less difference a couple has to bridge. For example, Kathy and Lukaš (Couple 5) report that Kathy has taken up many customs and practices that are traditionally European,—small habits such as how they clean the home and having inside and outside clothes—which makes them largely forget cultural differences as they go about their routine. The couples who mentioned this theme report that allowing yourself to be culturally influenced will fundamentally change who you are, which is a scary thought to many people. For intercultural partners, however, it is almost a requirement.

The couples also talked about specific lessons about negotiation they have learned over the course of their relationships. First, many of them said that **negotiation takes time and effort**. It is not always clear how to bridge differences that are rooted in cultural scripts and expectations. Sometimes it's necessary to just keep discussing the topic over and over for a period of time before a consensus can be reached. Sometimes an occasion presents itself where

doing things in accordance with both traditions is not possible (doing it one way precludes doing it the other way, for example) or an event or opportunity for cultural meaning-making only happens once (as in a wedding or other ritual). Negotiation in these instances is not very clear from the gathered data, except for the idea that in such moments the couple needs to be willing to live with certain ideological differences or make a sacrifice. Jasmine and Cody (Couple 6) also brought up the idea that the couple has to realize that things are not going to be resolved in one conversation; at the same time, the discussion cannot be left for when a decision must be made. They say the bigger the issue (and the more re-occurring it is) the more negotiation is needed instead of just an acceptance of one person's point of view. The couple feels this would be a sure-fire way to create long-standing resentments between the two people.

One guideline that may help when a middle ground is not clear is to **do what is best for the relationship, not just one or the other person**. Catherine and Doug (Couple 4) talked at length about their decision to move and settle in the United States. This was something that was, and in some ways still is, quite difficult for Doug, who often feels homesick and wonders about opportunities he would have if he were still in his native South Africa. The couple decided to come to the United States, however, because it was important for Catherine to be near her family and to feel safe in her surroundings—something that she felt was truly important for her general wellbeing. Because her wellbeing obviously affects the quality of the relationship, and also because living in the United States afforded good career opportunities to both of them (especially her as a woman), it fell on Doug to make a sacrifice for the sake of the relationship this time--which obviously does not mean Catherine has not had to make sacrifices of her own. In fact, **staying open to change** is essential in an intercultural relationship, and Melanie (Couple 10)



talked about being ever ready for the possibility that one day Hugo may come home and say he wants to go back to Italy.

These couples also shared that much of their **negotiation often takes into account the mainstream American culture** that is the context for their everyday lives. If they were living in Togo, Peru, India, South Africa, Czech Republic, Pakistan, South Korea, Germany, Colombia, or Italy there would be much in their relationship that would be different. For example, Ablavi and Leroy (Couple 1) say they imagine they would be sharing a much smaller home than they have now with relatives. Catherine (Couple 4) thinks that her career opportunities in South Africa would be much more limited because she is a woman. And Isabelle and Gus (Couple 8) believe the age discrepancy in their relationship would not be as conspicuous in Germany as it is here in the U.S., as many Germans do not seem to think that a large age difference between romantic partners is as strange as Americans view them. These examples all point to contextual differences that could possibly affect each of these relationships in ways that fundamentally change some aspects of these couples' everyday lives. Of course, this idea relates directly to these couples' perception that **some negotiation just kind of happens**, without much overt discussion or conscious thought on the couple's part. None of the couples were able to really explain why this happens with some issues and not with others, but this is not all that surprising considering so much of human communication is not verbal or overt at all.

Furthermore, one couple shared--and I also observed--that **negotiation is different for each couple**. Some talk more about their differences than others do, some probably feel the need to agree more than others, and it is likely that the issues deemed important to have agreement on are not the same for each couple. Therefore making generalizations about negotiation is contraindicated—something that can only be avoided to a certain extent in a research study

report. The couples in this study did demonstrate extensive agreement in how they view their relationships and their cultural negotiation, however. Not least of these agreements is the objective to **create a bicultural or multicultural reality** for themselves and their children. Straddling cultural differences is clearly something these couples enjoy, and living in between cultures seems exciting and desirable. Some couples talked about breaking with many cultural norms altogether and **creating a new culture** of their own by blending cultural norms from both heritages and also adding norms of their own making. This seems to be a concept similar to the cultural adhesion model of intergenerational acculturation in immigrant families proposed and explained by Foner (1997), Kim, Kim, and Hurh (1991), and Lewis (2008), a model that explains that immigrant families borrow aspects from the home culture and the host culture to create a new culture of their own. For example, Lily (Couple 3) said, “I think we sort of make our own culture (...). There are things that I was exposed to in the culture that I had my early experiences in, and then here too, so it kind of has become of my being. And then I see a lot of similarities between us and I think we have kind of created our own culture.” She then goes on to list some of the aspects of this third culture they have created for themselves—sharing things like the goal and value to live abroad, communion with nature, participation in the United Universalist Church—and all the ways these things are different from their individual cultural heritages.

Lily’s and Alex’s (Couple 3) example also points to something other couples shared as an important principle of negotiation--**infusing certain existent or created rituals with cultural meaning**. Kathy and Lukaš (Couple 5), for example, shared at the time of the third interview, that they had finally figured out a way to have a wedding that fit with their personalities and their identity as couple, taking into consideration the aspects of their cultures that are important to them (i.e. a wedding outside, on a farm, with locally grown food and certain Czech dishes, with

both of their immediate families present, small, etc).. It seems like both of these strategies—creating a new culture and the infusing meaning into rituals-- help bridge cultural differences and even decrease negotiation.

**Active negotiation also seems to decrease with time** for some couples. Negotiation decreases over the course of the relationship as the couple finds ways of compromising on most of their differences so that they can stay together (if their cultural differences had posed insurmountable obstacles in the beginning, they probably would not have lasted together very long). After finding and implementing successful negotiation strategies on certain issues, only "maintenance negotiation" is necessary--that is, keeping up with agreements made in the past that still seem fitting to the present context. In talking about this idea, Doug said, "Cultural differences that we experience lately aren't as profound just because we've been married for a long [time] (...) If something is different, we do talk about it."

There is also the couples' commitment **to being firm and assertive about the management of their relationships**. Because intercultural relationships have so many stakeholders, as discussed earlier, the couple runs the risk of being pulled apart by all of the expectations and hesitations of outside parties. Although couples must often act or behave in ways that take into consideration family and friends who may view their relationship very differently from them, many couples talked about how important it is to become an united front in dealing with nosy and often impertinent people who would convince them to do as they would otherwise not be inclined to do. For example, Lily's (Couple 3) family puts enormous pressure on her and Alex to follow in the traditions of the Syrian Orthodox church, for her to take on a more traditional wifely role towards him, and for the couple to be more active in the Indian-American community in general. Although the couples' wedding planning fell largely on her

parents' hands, Lily and Alex soon learned to take charge of their decisions and what kind of relationship they want to have.

Last but not least, the couples talked about the importance of **keeping a sense of humor about the relationship**, with all its errors, difficulties, and misunderstandings. Jina and Marcus (Couple 7) explain that couples must refuse to let these obstacles permeate the relationship and the time partners share with each other. Indeed, every interview with each one of these couples was evidence to the wonderful sense of humor these individuals have cultivated about their relationships. Few things were sacred or taboo for these couples and laughing at themselves and others was often a way to talk about really difficult issues without losing sight of what is good in the relationship.

#### *Concrete Negotiation Strategies*

Whereas the principles for negotiation provide the participant couples some guidance on how to negotiate, concrete negotiation strategies make up a repertoire of accommodation and consensus building. These strategies refer to both individual and joint responsibilities these couples have found useful in engaging with differences in efficient ways. It is worth remembering here that these couples do not view their cultural differences as problematic, which means that many of the strategies noted here are not aimed at eradicating differences at all—some might even have the effect of highlighting some. As already mentioned in the previous section, the couples report that in the process of blending cultural norms, both individuals and their cultural heritages are fundamentally changed. The strategies mentioned below may be better understood as strategies for blending cultural norms instead of strategies for cultural negotiation. The concrete negotiation strategies, along with the couples who talked about each of them, are presented in Table 10.

Table 10: Couples Who Demonstrated Codes in “Concrete Negotiation Strategies” Theme

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Couples</b>
Important to keep connected to own culture	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10
Incorporation of cultural artifacts in everyday life	2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9
Supporting each other’s interests	3, 4
Eating and preparing the foods from one’s home country	3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10
Listening to music associated with each other’s cultural backgrounds	4, 6, 9, 10
Staying connected to family of origin to remain connected with culture	3, 4, 6, 9
Speaking own language as way to stay connected to culture	2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 10
Literature and news as way to stay connected to culture	4, 5, 8
Blending norms from both countries	1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10
Sharing and teaching aspects of one’s culture to the partner (as way to stay connected with culture)	4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10
Enacting customs and traditions as a family	5, 7, 9, 10
Raising children bicultural	2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10
Conscientiously choosing which norms and	1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 9

values to adopt	
Initially (and often) following cultural norms at expense of own preferences	3, 5, 6
Keep own preferences but don't impose them on other person	3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10
Direct, clear communication regarding views and preferences	1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10
Paying attention to find out what is culturally important to the other person	3, 7
Be mindful of language when discussing differences	4, 6, 8
Picking your battles	1, 4, 6

All couples have talked about how **important it is for each person to remain connected to his or her own culture**. Connection to one's cultural heritage maintains these people's sense of individuality, personal history, and continued relationship with family and the larger group of origin. The way to foster this connection is through **incorporation of** cultural symbols, **artifacts**, and products in the couple's or family's everyday life and routine. Partners can ensure this by **supporting each other's interests** or partaking in them when appropriate and possible. **Eating and preparing the foods from one's home country** seems to be an especially important and effective strategy, as most couples mentioned this. Melanie (Couple 10) has learned from Hugo how to cook in traditional Italian ways and this has become so much a part of their couple and family life that their four-year-old refuses to eat macaroni and cheese or any other child-geared

“fake Italian” products. Patricia and Ron (Couple 2) report that their home is decorated with very traditional Peruvian decorations and Isabella (Couple 8) reports enjoying the international feel Gus’ German artifacts and decorations give their home. Eva and Macedonio (Couple 9) **listen to music associated with each other’s cultural backgrounds**—she has learned to enjoy country music with him and he has spent hours trying to understand and memorize lyrics to a Carlos Vives song “where he goes too fast and I can’t understand, and I try to read the lyrics so that I understand because it’s a song about Colombia and iconic things within Colombia, so it would give me some cultural and social understanding of where she’s coming from.” Macedonio has even learned how to dance. Lukaš (Couple 5) has also found ways to stay connected to the Czech Republic despite having lived in the United States most of his life—for one, he **stays connected to his parents and other relatives who still live in his country of origin**, through phone calls and the internet; **speaking the language** (in these conversations and encounters with family of origin) is also a way for him to feel closer to his family and culture; and, finally, he has taken up **reading the literature and keeping up with news from the country** to maintain the language and stay informed of what is happening over there. Lastly, Jina and Marcus (Couple 7), like most other couples, shared how important it is for them to frequently visit Jina’s native Korea to feel connected to her cultural heritage.

Another effective means **to blend norms from both countries**--which really is these couples’ ultimate goal in taking up all these patterns and routines—is **to share and teach aspects of one’s culture to each other**. This has a three-way effect: it helps each person feel more connected to his or her own culture, it makes partners feel closer as they share knowledge and history, and it also helps the partner learn about the other culture and become gradually more and more acculturated. Teaching about culture is one task and responsibility of being each

other's cultural liaisons—a role these couples take very seriously. It often involves **enacting and adopting customs and traditions (such as specific holidays or celebratory rituals) from each other's cultures** as a family. Jasmine and Cody (Couple 6) are good examples of this because she really was his first teacher and guide to the Islamic faith--which she views as intertwined with her Pakistani culture. Although Cody reports wanting to convert for personal reasons, which were separate from his relationship with Jasmine, her instruction was thorough enough to provide him with the basis he needed to make the decision to convert and take part in the rituals and traditions of his new faith community.

For these couples, the work of cultural instruction does not stop in teaching each other about their different countries, however. It also involves teaching their children about both cultures as part of a larger effort **to raise the kids bicultural**. This seems to be in itself a way these couples have to feel connected to their cultures. It also provides them with meaning and a sense of continued development as cultural consumers and stakeholders. Couples mentioned taking their children to visit the foreign country often, teaching them the language, providing them with opportunities to bond with foreign relatives, teaching them specific cultural traditions and norms, and simply talking to them about the foreign country. Hugo, for example, said that he often tries to tell his children about how things are done in Italy and how they were when he was growing up there. Even some of the couples who do not yet have children talked about the idea of teaching future offspring to straddle cultural norms and blend cultural identities from a young age. This is also one of the reasons why these couples work so diligently in blending cultural norms in very concrete, detailed ways.

Couples must **be conscientious in choosing which norms and values to adopt**, however, and try to resist those that are not fitting with their vision for their relationship and life



together. These intercultural couples are or have been, at last at some point in their relationship, under pressure from their social networks to follow certain cultural norms. Although they say that they **must often follow cultural norms at the expense of their own preferences, especially initially** (to obtain approval and advance the relationship), these couples have learned that to make their relationships work they must go against the grain on some issues. For example, Eva (Couple 9) refuses to wait on Macedonio's needs as carefully as her mother thinks is appropriate (e.g. by serving him his food, preparing dishes just for him that are separate from everybody else's, etc), not only because she is not comfortable in that traditional wife role but because Macedonio himself does not want that from her.

So far this discussion has focused on the ways in which the partners in this study willingly blend their different cultures. What happens, though, when an individual's tastes and preferences are not consonant with his or her partner's cultural specifics? When faced with this question, most couples talked about having to accept that, as Doug (Couple 4) said, "at some point the other person is just not going to be involved." This can be small instances of taste differences such as Catherine's (Couple 4) distaste for certain dishes and staples of South African cuisine, or it can be larger disagreements such as Eva and Macedonio's (Couple 9) differences on spending habits. The main point the couples stress over and over again is the idea that partners should be able to **keep their own preferences but not impose these on the other person**. Any family therapist would be able to recognize this as a main tenet of good differentiation. Lily and Alex (Couple 3) summed up this idea in the following segment:

L: I'm just thinking in terms of, like, if there is a cultural event and if one of us can't make it, the other person is free to go participate (...) There isn't this thing about "Oh, we have to do it together!" We can explore it ourselves or do it together.

Later, Alex completes the thought:

A: I see what you're saying. Yeah. So if there's something going on, some gathering, [we're] not like, "You have to come to this! It's culturally important!"

**Direct, clear communication regarding views and preferences** is perhaps the paramount strategy for couples to move through disagreement. When asked what this looks like, Eva and Macedonio (Couple 9) say that it involves being forthright with each other about what they want, why it is important to them, and what it would mean to go without it. A large part of this process involves talking to each other about cultural influences in how an individual views a certain issue, and it also involves **paying attention to find out what is culturally important to the other person**, that is, the aspects of one's culture that a person seems most committed to. Cultural insight is not always possible, but the couples who mentioned this style of communication insist on discussing decisions and challenges, even if repeatedly.

Some couples mentioned that the habit of discussing issues and challenges so directly with each other has helped them get better at communicating. Two couples in particular (couples 4 and 6) have talked about learning to **be mindful of language when discussing differences** and other sensitive topics. All these couples have overcome the language barriers between them in one way or another. Still, language is subtle enough to contribute to some difficult misunderstandings if people are not careful with it. Jasmine and Cody (Couple 6) experience this difficulty first hand when Jasmine, in an attempt to deflect arguments, will make a joke about something Cody says in seriousness, which will often contribute to his hurt feelings and her feeling confused as to why he feels hurt in the first place. The way they found to get through these situations is by dealing with conflict directly and expressing feelings as clearly as possible, even though they both know that Jasmine comes from a family where that was not encouraged.

Other negotiation strategies are centered less on communication and more on set processes for handling certain situations. The first such strategy is what Catherine and Doug (Couple 4) have termed “**picking your battles.**” It refers to choosing to pursue issues and points of disagreement only when these have a direct effect on the relationship’s immediate stability. Catherine explains:

I guess after ten years too it’s so hard to think of what’s culturally different and what’s just different in a person, as (...) a couple is two people. I think that a lot of times we’ll talk about [differences] and the communication is definitely there and sometimes, I think you, as in anything, you kind of pick where you want to be more explanatory, I guess, of your feelings and other times where you just say, well, it’s not that big a deal, I don’t really want to highlight the difference or whatever it may be. You know, it’s cultural as far as just simple things like what you choose to watch on TV or what you choose to listen to in the car or how loud you choose to listen to [it]. Those different things I think we just kind of skirt around them and, you know, make peace and do what we do. More ideological things such as, you know, the [presidential] election that is coming up now that is kind of in your face all day every day so obviously you have a thought and sometimes that thought becomes a comment and that comment is a difference from the person you are with and that’s where it gets to the point where--is it a difference and can you talk about it or is it a difference and it leads to, you know, something a bit more divisive? So, I don’t know that we have a planned way of dealing with it and I think it differs on the day as well.

Although they like to jokingly “pick on each other” about their different political leanings, this is one example of an issue that they do not pick to fight or negotiate about—they just accept the

difference. This comment also highlights their difficulty in figuring out which differences are cultural and which are personal. Jasmine and Cody (Couple 6), on the other hand, continue to discuss and try to negotiate a better way to resolve conflict, because they know that her natural tendency to be non-confrontational could be detrimental to their relationship.

Other set strategies for handling differing opinions and views on everyday life situations is to **do things both ways** whenever possible or **alternate how or what to do** in each instance of the same situation. **Meeting in the middle**, which involves both partners each letting go of some preferences in order to have the other person accept some demands, is also a widely mentioned negotiation strategy. Jasmine and Cody's (Couple 6) decision to have two different wedding ceremonies—one in the traditional Pakistani style and the other in the traditional American Christian tradition—is also an example of doing things both ways, which also exemplifies the thrill and pleasure this negotiation strategy often evokes for the couples. Jasmine said about her wedding, “It was a dream-come-true. What girl can say she had two weddings?” As for alternating how to do things, Kathy and Lukaš (Couple 5) try to alternate who they spend their holidays with, which usually changes how said holidays are celebrated. This is necessary at least for now as his family is in the Czech Republic and hers is in the United States. This alternation means the couple does not have a set way of celebrating the holidays, and instead prefer to do what seems most feasible or desirable at the moment. And, as for meeting in the middle, this is a strategy used by several couples in creating a new conflict resolution style acceptable to both persons.

At least half of the couples in the study said that **flexibility is key** in their relationships. Indeed, it has to be, considering all that must be learned, taught, and generally negotiated. Flexibility is also useful because these couples must often **negotiate issues case-by-case**, which

is usually necessary when a particular disagreement seems to stem from differences in values. Because values are not as easily changed, these differences are some of the most difficult to negotiate on. Couples end up having to simply re-negotiate agreements depending on each set of circumstances. **Accepting each other's ways of doing things** around the house is also something that takes a great deal of flexibility and that many couples deem necessary for successful partnerships. In describing Leroy's (Couple 1) Togolese culinary skills, Ablavi says, "He likes everything to kind of have a saucy feel, so he uses tomato sauce or spaghetti sauce (...) with anything. So if it's beef, it's chicken, it's pork, whatever, he uses that same sauce. But you know (...) I praise God because sometimes I come home from school or work or whatever and, thank God, he's cooked! So I can deal with the same flavor every day!" When one or the other person is adamant about a **specific way of doing things**, the person just does it herself, a rule that three couples seem to live by. For example, Jina (Couple 7) told me about her struggle to keep her Korean clothes from shrinking in the wash (they do not come pre-shrunk)—she and Marcus have decided that she better do the laundry herself so she can be sure it is done right.

A concept related to that of accepting each other's unique ways of accomplishing certain things in the home, is the unique division of labor so many of these couples describe. All couples in this study stated that they strive for a more egalitarian way to divide household labor. That being the case, some couples divide household responsibilities according to ability—in other words, **each person does what he or she is best at**. For example, Jina (Couple 7) explains why Marcus does so much of the cleaning around the house by saying, "Here [in the US] they have this for that, that for that, this for that, and I don't watch TV, or I don't really look for what's the best [way to clean something]. And he knows (...) how he cleans things. He's very good at it.

Once he cleans, everything really glitters. So, I feel like he knows better about the cleaning products.”

Although these couples’ reported negotiation strategies are often general enough that any couple may use them in their everyday life,—whether they are in an intercultural relationship or not—what is most telling is that these intercultural couples identify such strategies as applicable to their unique relationships. This only serves as further evidence that the dynamics in healthy, successful intercultural relationships may actually be very similar to those in their healthy, successful, non-intercultural counterparts. Such similarity only goes to further highlight how inappropriate and ill-founded Othering actually is.

### Conclusion

The descriptive portrait of the ten intercultural relationships studied provides a detailed idea of what it is like to be part of an intercultural couple. The couples interviewed for the study seem to all have a firm idea of who they are as a couple and what the main characteristics of their relationships are. Interestingly, these couples’ accounts are highly consistent with one another, which resulted in a cohesive descriptive portrait of the essences of their relationships as a group. Yet, as phenomenological methodology dictates, a conclusion about the essence of the phenomenon in question is in order, and the descriptive portrait of these intercultural relationships is perhaps too extensive to stand without a conclusion of sorts.

Among so many essential elements, the one characteristic that seems to constitute the essence of the relational identity of these intercultural couples is an idea I have come to refer to as a *measured uniqueness*—that is, these couples’ perception that although they trace their origins to very different cultures, they are really more similar than different from each other, and their relationships are really not that different from non-intercultural relationships. Related to this

essential quality is these couples' perception and presentation of their cultural negotiation in everyday life as seamless and subtle,—sometimes even imperceptible—which can be said to be the essence of their cultural negotiation in the everyday manifestations of their relationships.

These two phenomena—relational identity and cultural negotiation in everyday life—are linked by the fact that one informs the other in these couples' presentation of their relationships as unique yet ordinary at the same time; healthy and viable yet challenging at times; and finally, more interesting and fun and quite routine too. For the observant reader the descriptive portrait has already raised one central question: how can these couples believe in and live with so many seemingly contradictory ideas about their relationships and still have a solid sense of their relationship as an entity? This question will be discussed in the next chapter and the link between the two phenomena subsumed by the main research question will be discussed in more detail as well.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

In the last chapter I described the essential elements of the intercultural relationships studied in this project. My interpretations of how elements of these relationships fit together were interwoven with the description of such elements. Here I turn to a discussion of a larger issue alluded to in the data and only mentioned in the last chapter: a central paradox in how these couples experience their relationships. This is perhaps the core of the relational identity of these intercultural relationships and will be explained through theory. I will begin by summarizing the main tenets of Reiss' (1981) model and then I will elaborate on how it applies to this study's findings (both related to relational identity construction and cultural negotiation). It is worth noting here that although Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework (1979; 1986) was used to organize and explore the literature on the topic of intercultural relationships, this theoretical framework is no longer fitting for discussing the findings of this research study. The phenomena of relational identity and cultural negotiation are so specific to the microsystem of the intercultural relationship, and the data were so focused on couples' own perceptions of their relationships, that a continued discussion of systemic levels other than the microsystem would not be fitting, and may in fact elude the data gathered in this study.

After a theoretical interpretation of the findings, I present a therapeutic plan for working with intercultural couples in exploring their cultural differences—a plan that takes into consideration some central findings of this study. Finally, I discuss the limitations of the study



and make suggestions for future research. A final thought concludes the chapter and hopefully alludes to the importance of studying intercultural relationships.

### Summary of Reiss' Model

*The Family's Construction of Reality*, by David Reiss, was published in 1981, detailing over 17 years of laboratory work and its accompanying theoretical interpretation. Its main purpose was to detail the unexpected findings of Reiss's social interaction laboratory. In the first phases of investigation, the team's major interest had centered on schizophrenia and how families of schizophrenics compared to non-schizophrenic families regarding environment exploration, information distribution within the family, and conclusion development and interpretation. In the course of study, they found that families came to the laboratory with different versions of what the study was focused on, what was expected of them, and how they were to present themselves.

From this unanticipated finding the researchers concluded that "the family, through the course of its own development, fashions fundamental and enduring assumptions about the world in which it lives. The assumptions are shared by all family members, despite the disagreements, conflicts, and differences that exist in the family" (Reiss, 1981, p.1). These shared assumptions constitute what Reiss terms the *family paradigm*. Family paradigms are developed in times of family crisis and they persist even after such crisis, organizing how the family continues to think, experience, and react to the external world. These findings were applied to ideas of family development, change, crisis, and the relationship between the family and its social network and context. The researchers hoped that their model would be "applicable to other areas of inquiry" (Reiss, 1981, p. 3).

Reiss (1981) argued that the family paradigm has three dimensions with two poles each. The first dimension, coherence, refers to each family's unique view and experience of the world as orderly, structured, and "knowable" through reason and persistent exploration. Some families are *stable* in this dimension, which means they believe in this fixed underlying structure of the world. Other families are *mobile* in this dimension, which means they experience the world as less structured and whatever existent, underlying structure as changing of its own volition. Experience, therefore, only serves to signal changes in the outside world, external to the family and its actions.

The second dimension, integration, focuses on the family's view or belief in their experience of the world as universal or individualistic. Families that exemplify *universal* integration believe that individuals experience the world as mainly the same. Members in such families believe they can have very similar experiences to each other and that the external world perceives them as a cohesive group as opposed to individuals bound by random ties. Families that have a *particular* view of integration tend to view each person's experience of the world as different and unique and therefore inaccessible to others outside the family.

And, finally, the third dimension, called reference, refers to each family's unique experience and views of novelty in the world. Families that mostly experience and understand information in the external world with some reference to their family history and group cohesion are said to have *internal* reference. Those families who seem to put the past behind them and experience the world anew with each new incident—which they tend to see as unrelated or uninfluenced by who they are as a family—are said to have an *external* reference.

The family paradigm—that is, the family's unique ways of viewing, experiencing, and relating to the world and to themselves as a group—is said to "reside" or be conserved in the

family's routine and ritualized interaction patterns. Reiss (1981) calls family rituals "ceremonials of family life" (Reiss, 1981, p. 225). Ceremonials are formal, repetitive patterns of action and interaction that hold special meaning and significance to the family and its identity. These only occur on special occasions and the family is at least marginally aware of taking part in and deriving meaning from these rituals. In contrast to ceremonials are the "pattern regulators" (Reiss, 1981, p. 226) of each family. These are the routine, continuous, and non-symbolic patterns of interaction that largely go unnoticed to the members of the family. Although they hold significance—after all, they perpetuate and exemplify the family paradigm—they are not imbued with overt meaning. Through close scrutiny, Reiss (1981) and his team were able to identify the paradigmatic meaning contained in both the ceremonials and the pattern regulators of the families they saw in their laboratory.

Now that the concept of the family paradigm has been defined and its basic structure has been explained, I turn to how it relates to the study. In the following section I aim to explain some of the most interesting and puzzling findings of the study through the use of the family paradigm model. Hopefully, such use of the model furthers its author's desire to have it applied to different areas of inquiry.

#### Using Paradigms to Understand Intercultural Relationships

Although Reiss' (1981) paradigm concept relates to a family's characteristic views of itself and the world, it seems fitting to any relational context, be it the transactions of a couple, those of an agency's staff, or even the transactions of a group of couples or agencies. It seems that for a group to be a group—which involves seeing and presenting itself as such—it must not only have a set of beliefs and rules it uses to govern its behavior and expression; it must also have at least an inkling of such beliefs. Thus, the possibility of self-reflection exists and must be

observable. Indeed it is, as evidenced by the previous chapter's descriptive portrait based on intercultural couples' reflections on their own relationships. The furthering of Reiss' (1981) concept begins with its application to these couples' account of their own paradigms and the contradictions that seem inherent in it.

### *Relational Identity Formulation*

Over the course of 27 dyadic interviews conducted for this study, the ten couples talked at length about their history, the forces shaping their relationships, and how they negotiate issues both small and large. There was one major area in which these couples seemed to be ambivalent, however, and that was their joint identity as an intercultural couple and the identity of their relationship (i.e. their relational identity) as an intercultural relationship. Their ambivalence often took a turn toward contradiction as they spoke eloquently about their cultural differences and how they perceive this and soon after would directly state they did not view themselves as an intercultural couple. When I gently yet persistently challenged the perceived discrepancy they would react either by admitting they were indeed contradicting themselves—and they would go no further in the way of elucidating a solution to the problem—or they would find a way to reconcile their seemingly split positions. The solution they most often put forth was the idea that they only *felt* as an intercultural couple, or were reminded that indeed they were in an intercultural relationship, when around other people; when alone in the privacy of their homes they simply did not think of their relationship as so exotic. This idea is exemplified here, again, by a small segment of Melanie and Hugo's (Couple 10) first interview:

I had just asked if they consider themselves an intercultural couple:

M: Um, no. I don't think I do anymore. We've been here too long. [to Hugo] Your English is too good. Maybe if your English was worse. (...) I don't think we have the intercultural challenges anymore.

I: Well, that's interesting, because I've heard that from other couples, too. If you take the challenges away, if it becomes easier, in time, does it make [the relationship] less intercultural?

M: Right. That's kind of how I feel. Yeah.

Later, Hugo takes up the issue again:

H: I always get asked, "Did you marry an American?" And I sa[y] "Yes, I did." And, you know, when that question is asked, that makes me feel even more of a, you know--

I: --An intercultural--

H: But um...I do [feel like we're an intercultural couple]. She had a good point, though. She had a good point, because when we go there [to Italy] she feels like "Oh, we are an intercultural couple." But being here and me being so adapted to everything, she probably doesn't feel like it. But I do.

M: Right. I think that's why. And over there, when we visit over there I do.

H: You do. Oh, yeah. I'm sure you do.

M: Especially because I don't speak Italian. And I have to rely on him all the time.

The segment above points to the subtle and not so subtle reminders these couples find in contexts, people, and places, which serve to bring their differences to the forefront of their thoughts and experiences. It was only after I heard these comments many times—and only after I spent nights wondering how I would possibly find a solution to this contradiction--that it started

occurring to me that my job is not to put forth a neat solution to these couples' dual experiential positions. In fact, the contradiction at the center of their accounts is not a problematic contradiction at all, but a very practical paradox masterfully produced and wielded to create and present relational cohesion in relationships at risk of being dismissed as incapable of being successful.

The paradox at the crux of these couples' relational identity is that the relationship straddling their different cultures, with all the cultural influences on the individuals, is not in fact an intercultural relationship. The essence of the relational identity seemed to reside in the dialectic of difference and similarity. Dialectics here refer to the common tension between two opposing forces or motivations that are encountered in relationships (Baxter, 2004). Dialectics require constant balancing because as people move toward one goal they move away from the other, as in a relational see-saw (Baxter, 2004).

The tension between difference and similarity is evidenced not only in the larger contradiction of the couples' awareness of difference but insistence on similarity, but also on a number of other smaller contradictions in the accounts of their relationships. For example, these sets of partners felt they were: more similar than different; in an atypical relationship with similar dynamics to any other but also in a type of relationship that is more fun, interesting, and challenging than any other; attracted to each other's exotic attributes and backgrounds but only interested in the other person as an individual; de-emphasizing of their cultural differences, but acutely aware of the ways they try to negotiate and learn about their different cultures to make the relationship run more smoothly; and not interested in how others view the relationship but also deeply bothered by others' problematization of the relationship or attempts to "place" it (which one couple equaled to Othering).

Their situation seems to contain an inherent struggle that shapes the relationship: any time the couple is in danger of viewing or presenting themselves as too different, they are presented with signals—usually internal to the relationship, taken from their everyday life and routine—that they are really more similar than different. And any time they run the risk of viewing or presenting themselves as too similar, they are presented with signals—this time external to their relationship, received from family and friends in how they treat the couple—that there are still considerable differences between the two of them. Somewhere in the midst of this constant struggle the couples still find a way to create a cohesive identity for their relationship.

In explaining how a paradigm or an explanatory system of a family's internal and external worlds gets formulated, Reiss (1981) explained:

Interpolations and extrapolations [of a family's basic beliefs about itself and the world] will select certain hidden properties more than others. This will enable the formulation [of the explanatory system] to achieve a high measure of integration. (...) As the explanatory system becomes more and more elaborate it reaches an asymptote. It is not the particular elements of the system that become fixed. They may be replaced and endlessly modified. Indeed, a "good" system is one that is enthralling enough to invite such changes (which may be the product of experience, imagination, or both). What reaches an asymptote is the structure or form of the most fundamental hidden potentials [of the paradigm]. (...) In this critical sense, a process of repeated social interpolation and extrapolation serves as an abstraction of certain crucial elements of an explanatory system. (p. 205)

This idea can be applied to my findings to explain how the dialectic tension between difference and similarity becomes the core of these relationships' identity, or these couples'

paradigm, to use Reiss' (1981) term. Below, I take up a systematic translation of these ideas to the study at hand.

The development of these couples' relational identities entails a selection of certain properties of their ongoing cultural negotiation and certain characteristics of their cultural backgrounds over others when presenting the relationship to the world. In other words, these couples seem to experience, or at least to highlight, certain cultural and personality similarities and differences more strongly than others in order to present themselves as not so similar as to be ordinary or as too different as to not belong together (a measured uniqueness, *per se*). Such careful editing of their similarities and differences becomes in itself, as a process, symbolic of who these people are as individuals and how they come together as a couple. Each time these intercultural couples must showcase their relationships, this careful editing is done, and in general, the relationship is successful in demonstrating its viability. As a result, the relationship identity becomes more and more cohesive and the dialectical tension more and more central to it.

As the expressed relational identity becomes increasingly elaborate, including ever more paradoxical qualities, it also reaches an asymptote, as Reiss (1981) explained—that is, the relationship gets successfully portrayed time and again as similar enough to a non-intercultural relationship but never quite the same. At the same time, the intercultural relationship never deviates so much from their non-intercultural counterparts (or curve that represents them, to use the mathematical term to which an asymptote refers) as to be completely defined as a relationship between truly different individuals (and perhaps irreconcilably so).

Based on the findings, I propose that the symbolic strategies of negotiation and the specific cultural differences and similarities selected for such representation of the intercultural relationship are never fixed (the segment from Melanie and Hugo's interview, quoted above,



describes the fluidity of their awareness of their cultural differences). Instead, the strategies and even what the couples consider noteworthy differences and similarities seem to be constantly in dynamic flux given their time together, how much negotiation has been done prior to any point in time, the particular life cycle stage they find themselves in, or simply their changing situational context. Just as Reiss explained that a “‘good’ system’ is one that is enthralling enough to invite such changes,” (1981, p. 205), a healthy, functional relationship must also be portrayed consistently with its contextual forces. What reaches the asymptote is the relationship identity itself—that is, it successfully remains balanced between the dialectic of similarity and difference in a way that no one (not even the partners themselves) can doubt the relationship’s viability for fear of its differences or doubt its originality for overemphasizing its ordinary qualities.

The diminished attention to differences may not be an entirely conscious process, however. It may be a common outcome of how our human brains work. Reiss (1981) stated that: “When an individual is faced with a complex pattern of stimuli, he will tend to organize these stimuli to produce good form. This universal facility becomes an integral part of a process of social simplification as well” (p. 207). The family paradigm is thought to arise from the patterns of behavior and organization a family adopts during times of crisis. Although not a crisis, the initial face-to-face intercultural encounter can be considered a critical event that greatly influences the history of the couple. In facing another person’s cultural schemata both people’s worldviews must be adjusted, reinforced, and amplified to be combined. In other words, the two individuals must build common ground, mutual interests, and appreciation right away so that the relationship can move forward. It is very likely that when two people from different cultures are face-to-face, left to interpret, condense, and perhaps even combine their two sets of worldviews,

they will tend to organize them “to produce good form” (Reiss, 1981, p. 207)—that is, they will look to the conspicuously clear and articulated similarities between their worldviews; after all, these are more readily noticeable anyway. This emphasis on similarities is then translated into a perpetual pattern of interaction and a stance that repeatedly presents to those outside the relationship as well as the couple itself why it is possible for the relationship not only to work but also to thrive.

The paradox at the center of the relationships’ identity may serve a very important purpose. As Reiss (1981) noted, “the crisis construct also screens out or excludes from the family’s awareness aspects of the crisis which were too painful for the family to acknowledge” (p. 202). In the same way, the couples’ “measured uniqueness” may exclude from the couples’ own awareness—and, indirectly, others’ attention as well—realities too problematic to be acknowledged or emphasized. That is, the reality of differences strong enough to pull the couples apart or, conversely, the superficial façade of similarities that may blind the couples to significant cultural differences between them, which could potentially hurt the relationships if ignored (in fact, the literature on intercultural relationships, as already explained in the first chapter, mentions this de-emphasis of differences as potentially problematic—see Crohn, 1995). Melanie (Couple 10) spoke about this tension between noticing cultural differences and trying to minimize them when she said, “I don’t think that we not notice differences—I think that we ignore the differences (...) I notice the differences between me and him every day, but I might not bring it up [so as not to cause ‘unnecessary arguments’].”

Now that the central tenet of these intercultural couples’ relational identity has been explained through theory, I turn to a theoretically-informed discussion of their negotiation of cultural differences in the course of everyday routines. Once again, the goal here is not to create

a model of how negotiation is used within intercultural relationships or a model of what it accomplishes, but to highlight some central and interesting findings to come out of the data and the data collection process itself.

*Negotiation of Cultural Issues in Everyday Life*

To be consistent with Reiss' (1981) nomenclature, the focus of the research question regarding cultural negotiation in everyday life focused on pattern regulators as opposed to ceremonials of family life. Pattern regulators are said to be "second nature, a matter of course, and so familiar as to be invisible. (...) The background character of pattern regulators derives from their routinization" (Reiss, 1981, p. 246). It is exactly because of the routine, background nature of pattern regulators that they are the primary means for reification of the family paradigm.

All couples had at least some level of difficulty recognizing and explaining how negotiation happens in their relationship—the pace of the interview slowed down significantly when talking about this. I had to give examples of areas in which this kind of negotiation could occur, and couples communicated strategies mainly through anecdotes and small narratives that I had to then decipher for underlying themes of reported interaction (and check back with each couple to be sure my interpretation was consonant with their experiences). For example, I first suggested thematic codes such as "meeting in the middle" or "doing things both ways" to couples when I heard them talk about compromising on certain issues or trying to follow both cultural scripts at any particular moment (such as when Ablavi talked about dressing more conservatively, as Leroy likes, when around his acquaintances, and celebrating American holidays as well as African ones). Such difficulty points to perhaps the status of these strategies as patterns of interaction that occur outside these couples' full awareness. Furthermore, the

couples' lack of eloquence in talking about their negotiation strategies is in itself a way to present the relationships as not holding the partners' individual differences as a central organizing principle of its identity. Isabella spoke directly to this idea of a central organizing principle when she said:

Do I define it as an intercultural relationship? Again, it's not necessarily the way that I would [define it], it's not like a central definition to who we are, but there are things about him that if he was American maybe they wouldn't be in our relationship. Like the different languages, the different channels we watch, the little German or French cookies we eat together, the way the house is decorated (...). It's just little things that you look at and they remind you of your [heritage], magazines, books that are in different languages. It may not be an important way for us to define each other, but I think it adds something to our relationship that wouldn't be there if we were both American. I'm much more interested in world affairs, I've learned a lot more about other countries (...) But rather than necessarily defining [our relationship] it's just sort of adding more, more things.

Themes extracted from couples' reports focused on strategies of negotiation; that is, the recognizable patterns of interaction between the two partners in the couple—strategies that were repeated over and over again regardless of the specific issues being negotiated. An interesting observation is that the themes (and even some of the reported anecdotes) mentioned in the second interview, which focused on cultural negotiation, often overlapped with the themes and anecdotes discussed in the first interview, which focused on relational identity. In fact, each couple's narrative—as evidenced by their interviews and their descriptive portraits--had themes from both issues thoroughly integrated, to the point where analysis was often complicated by a lack of clear boundaries on what constituted themes related to relational identity and themes

related to cultural negotiation. These occurrences lead me to believe that a couple's cultural negotiation as exemplified and perpetuated by its negotiation strategies (or to follow the theoretical framework, their *pattern regulators*) can in actuality be interpreted as an important aspect of the couple's relationship identity as an intercultural relationship. After all, what clearer way to exemplify a couple's intercultural identity than through negotiation strategies?

Negotiation strategies may become part of a couple's relational identity simply because they are effective in bolstering the couple's relationship against external pressure to dissolve. Reiss (1981) explains that "the construct that guided the family's restoration [from crisis] is felt by all members to have been an extraordinary achievement. Thus, it serves as a model (*paradigm* in the strict sense) for guiding the elaboration of shared constructs during all stressful, problematic, or puzzling circumstances of the family's everyday life" (p. 202). The intercultural couples in this study had to learn to negotiate differences quickly and effectively from the very beginning of their relationship or they would not stand a chance as a couple for very long. Catherine (Couple 4) provides an eloquent explanation for this:

I think that for a lot of people too, being the fact that you are an intercultural couple, there are a lot of things that you had to kind of negotiate along the way to even get to the point of wanting to be a couple. And maybe by being an intercultural couple you are already kind of come up against a lot of battles and somehow been able to fight for them, and fight for your relationship, that a lot of people who have it easier would never have had to go through. And I know that's true in just getting fiancée visas together. Having been separated for six months and then again for four months—everything leading up to the point of actually taking the step down the aisle was difficult. There was *nothing* easy about it. But that was our goal and when it's your goal, it doesn't seem difficult, you

know, you just keep pushing forward to that mark and to get to that point. So, I think in some ways, maybe, people who have made that choice and taken that big step have already kind of crossed a lot of adversity and found a way to work it out, and maybe there would be less of a chance of them getting divorced just because they have to be *so much stronger* than your average couple. I really think that's true.

It is not so surprising then that the same strategies that enable these individuals to create successful intercultural relationships—such strategies as being willing to let oneself be culturally influenced and making a concerted effort to learn about the other person's culture and take aspects of it as one's own—would ultimately be subsumed in the couples' relational identity or their paradigmatic beliefs about the relationship and how it relates to the external world.

By now, it should be clear that the couples who participated in this study have developed very complex and cohesive relational identities that take into consideration their intercultural relationships, even if these are not always highlighted in the ways they portray their relationships. Up to here, I have described and theorized about the essential elements of these couples' relational identities, theorized about the development of such identities, and explained the apparent inconsistencies in them. Now, I turn to how couple therapy can help those intercultural couples who may struggle to create cohesion in their relationships.

#### Recommendations for Couple Therapy with Intercultural Couples: Learning to Straddle Differences and Similarities

From its inception, this study was meant to be a strengths-based inquiry into intercultural relationships. Much has been conjectured and concluded regarding the challenges inherent in these relationships. From the initial studies on the pathological motives for assortative mating (for a historical discussion on this issue see Pascoe, 1991) to the well-meaning but often

exaggerated concern regarding intercultural couples' tendency to disregard cultural differences (see Crohn, 1995), the literature on intercultural couples can be said to Other these couples quite frequently.

Interviewing couples for this study taught me much about what they regard as important in their own relationships and how they want those around them to view and treat their couplehood. Every one of the ten couples mentioned in their own ways, through their own words, that they want others to understand that their relationship is not somehow more fragile or risky because of their cultural differences. Perhaps the most lucid, telling moment in the interviews was when I interviewed Jina and Marcus (Couple 7) for the first time and they talked so eloquently and so persistently about Othering and how uncomfortable it makes them feel. All of a sudden, in the midst of the interview, I started self-consciously editing my questions and comments to make sure nothing I said would even hint at the inappropriate questioning this couple has encountered. After the second interview, when I had a chance to share with them some of these thoughts, I wrote the following entry in my research journal (on 9/28/08):

As I go over Jina and Marcus' first interview, I am reminded of the delicate situation I was in regarding their justifiable complaint that people only come to them to inquire about the negative aspects of their intercultural relationship and "locate them" within their assumptions about such relationships. I am trying *so hard* not to do that. And I really want them to know it—all of 'my' couples to know it—that I don't come to find fault or problems in their relationship. I want to hear about the positive aspects of their relationship—what's going right, what is unexpected, how they make it work every day, but without diminishing the reality of their different cultural backgrounds and the real task of making these come together.

It occurs to me that this is a difficult task to accomplish, and my position is a difficult one to maneuver given what “The Literature” says regarding intercultural couples’ tendency to want to draw attention (their own and others’) away from their cultural differences. If this is really how it is, how can I come to them to ask about these differences and how they [cope] with them and expect these couples to 1) be okay with me asking that, 2) be able to admit their cultural differences long enough and with enough honesty to answer my questions clearly, and 3) be able to even explain to themselves how they deal with cultural differences if they try not to think about these in the first place!

With Jina and Marcus I did what I could: I gave them a direct, official statement regarding my position, which is to come to them without prior assumption regarding their relationship and without prior assumptions regarding the potential for conflict and general negativity stemming from the fact it is intercultural. I hope that was enough to convince them and set them at ease that *I* am not one of those people that will come to them and ask the oh-so-inappropriate-question, “Oh, so how do you make it work being that you’re so different?” I want all of these couples to know that I simply want to know what is there to know. Whatever it is. They tell me.

Why does it bother me so much to be put in the same category as the nosy, inappropriate strangers and acquaintances? Because it will make them clam up to me, as Jina and Marcus [said they do] when confronted with these people’s questions. But also because I personally know how inappropriate and inconvenient these assuming questions and statements are—I haven’t encountered them as much as they have, but the few times I did, they made me uncomfortable as well. I don’t want to do that to these couples because I know better. And because it’s not good research (...). I’d be violating a cardinal rule of



belonging to this group, and [endangering] my position as a (...) participant researcher [and group member]. My acceptance within the group would be compromised.

From this incident I realized how important it is to be very careful to present oneself as interested in a couples' intercultural relationship without making it out to be somehow exotic or problematic. In their defense, there was nothing problematic about these relationships indeed—none of these couples were in crisis (one of the inclusion criteria), they were all future oriented and highly engaged with one another, they viewed their different cultures as strengthening and enriching, they were appreciative of each other's cultures, and they straddled the dialectical tension between difference and similarity expertly. I believe these healthy, successful relationships provide a good model for what intercultural couples with a clearly articulated presenting issue can strive for and actually accomplish with the help of very intentional, strengths-based interventions.

Here I turn to how a therapist can work with intercultural couples who may seek therapy for difficulties with such issues as persistent conflict, emotional distancing, adjustment issues to normative life-cycle changes, and, of course, difficulty in bridging cultural differences. The following therapeutic plan uses an empirically-informed strengths-based approach, which honors these couples' challenges yet pushes them to connect with their internal and external resources to learn to straddle differences and similarities as necessary for creating a cohesive relationship. The expert and balanced straddling of similarities and differences is perhaps the mark of a healthy-functioning intercultural relationship, as already demonstrated in this study's findings and subsequent theoretical analysis. Thus, the proposed therapeutic plan is intended for intercultural couples who are *not* as successful in balancing their differences and similarities as the couples who participated in this study. There are those therapists and researchers who may

believe intercultural couples do not need different treatment specific to their type of relationship. Based on this investigation, I believe this may be the case for those intercultural couples who do not need therapy in the first place, or simply do not need relational therapy for handling cultural conflict. When an intercultural relationship becomes saturated with unresolved conflict over cultural differences, however, the couple can be said to be failing at keeping their relationship balanced on the dialectical tension between similarity and difference. This is likely to be many intercultural couples' reason for seeking therapy and it requires that a therapist has a basic understanding of what constitutes healthy functioning in these relationships.

The proposed therapeutic plan is based on a solution-oriented model of therapy, which has as its main premise the idea that people already come to therapy with resources for understanding and resolving their problems (O'Hanlon, 1998). It is the therapist's role to get them in touch with these resources through first de-escalating conflict and re-focusing clients on their goals (this should help instill them with hope), then guiding them to clearly articulate objectives and desired outcomes (imagining the solution), and finally brainstorming what they are already doing to accomplish such goals and what else is or could be in their power to do (O'Hanlon, 1998). Getting clients to stop ineffective means of solving the problem by doing things differently is also an important part of solution-oriented therapy (O'Hanlon, 1998). Such a model is ideal for working with intercultural couples because it encourages "client self-expertise and the right to self-determination," which decreases the chances of "discounting the normative expectations and nonproblematic aspects of their particular culture, including issues of diversity related to economic status, ethnicity, gender, religion, and sexual preference" (Kuehl, 1995, pp. 240-241). The proposed therapeutic plan is structured in six clearly outlined session plans, which take into consideration the findings of the study.

I want to add a note of caution, however. This plan is not intended for intercultural couples in extreme crisis or who present with issues that do not require, at least from the start, a thorough reflection of one's cultural heritage (such as trauma, severe mental illness, grief over recent loss, etc). Couples who persistently do not think their issues relate to the partners' differences in culture, or simply do not wish to discuss their cultural backgrounds are also not good candidates for this therapeutic plan (a therapist will do better to just conduct therapy as he or she would with a non-intercultural couple). The therapist will have to evaluate the clients in the first and second sessions to determine if their presenting problem and their views on it are conducive to conversations about cultural influences.

*Session 1: Reconnecting with Hope*

Couples in the study often shared that they enjoyed the interviews and even demonstrated some surprise at how much they had to say about their relationships or how they negotiate their differences. Catherine (Couple 4) said it best when, in an e-mail to me, about scheduling the third interview, she wrote, "[Doug] and I have read your assessment and think you are 'spot on', though we think you make us sound much better than we are! (We like that!)" In fact, the insights were all their own. To confirm what therapists already know about couples in therapy, the simple process of talking about the relationship history right from its beginning, when the couple was definitely in touch with their positive feelings for each other and the relationship, gets couples to remember their strengths and reasons for being together, thus reconnecting with their commitment and renewing their sense of hope.

Thus, on the first session, probably right after the couple states what brought them to therapy, the therapist can ask them to give her a complete, detailed relationship history. Of course, left to their own devices, some couples would take about one and a half minutes to do

this. To help the couples stay on task, the therapist can use questions very similar to those used in the first interview of this study—questions that were meant to get at the essential elements of a couple’s relationship identity and can be useful for couples in therapy who may need to get in touch with the substance of their own relationships, apart from the conflict and challenges that are most likely saturating the relationship at the time of seeking therapy. Some of the probes used in the interviews were:

1. Tell me about the history of your relationship.
  - a. Probes: how did you meet?; when?; what first attracted you to each other?; how did you approach each other?; did you notice cultural differences (why or why not?); how did you view your cultural differences?; what were some obstacles and some motivations for getting involved with each other?; once you became a couple, how did others view your cultural differences?; how did you view your cultural differences then?; what was important to learn about each other’s cultures in the beginning?; how did you learn about each other’s cultures in the beginning?
2. How has your relationship changed over time? How do you view your cultural differences now? How do others view it?

Although these questions are asked in a first therapy session and they relate to culture, the therapist should make it clear to the couple that she is not implying that their differences in culture might be the cause of the issues that brought them to therapy, but that they may serve as resources for the couple in dealing with the problem.

Most of the couples in the study narrated the history of their relationships in a very detailed, eloquent way. Many of them did not need all the probes listed above. Couples presenting for therapy, however, may not be as naturally inclined to talk about the good parts of

their relationship because they simply may not feel good enough about the relationship at that moment. It is also important for the therapist to make sure both partners answer the questions—even if each question is not answered by each partner (if time permits, this would be optimal).

The homework for this session can be a challenge for the couple to notice the ways and moments in which the presenting problem has improved in the time between sessions.

### *Session 2: Bringing Culture to the Forefront*

In this session (or if the relationship history takes more than one session, the session after that) it is time to clarify whether the couple does indeed view their different cultures as a relevant topic for therapy. Although the questions recommended for the relationship history hint at the couple's culture as of relevance to their relationship's past and present, it is paramount that the couple give some thought to how their different cultures influence the issues with which they are struggling. The goal is for the couple to begin to see their differences in background as a relevant focus of relational therapy—not because these differences should be made into similarities, but because they need to be understood. One cannot understand that which one denies or does not pay attention to.

The second set of questions used on the first interview seem fitting here, although a therapist should ask more direct questions regarding the couple's views on the relationship between the issues that brought them to therapy and their different cultures (added to the interview questions below). It is helpful to start by asking the couple:

1. How do you define yourselves as a couple to yourselves? To other people?
  - a. Do you consider your relationship an intercultural relationship? What makes it so or not so? When do you notice your different cultural backgrounds the most?

- b. How is your relationship different from relationships between two people from the same cultural background? How is it different from relationships between people from other intercultural relationships you know?
- c. In what ways are you more similar than different? What do you think makes you so similar to each other? How do these similarities help you negotiate your differences?
- d. What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of your relationship? Do you view these as stemming from the fact it is intercultural? Why or why not?
- e. How do you think the challenges that brought you to therapy relate to your different cultural background? How do you think your different cultures help you in dealing with these challenges? What kind of resources do your cultures give you as individuals and as a couple in dealing with your challenges?
- f. What do you wish others would know or understand about relationships like yours? What do you want me to know about you as a couple or your relationship as its own entity?

Notice that none of the questions problematize the couple's cultural differences or even assume any differences. At least one question directly asks the couple to notice their similarities and how these strengthen their differences. Perhaps a good conclusion to this session is to get the couple to process about what it is like to be asked to think about their cultural differences, especially in therapy.

As homework, the therapist can ask each partner to notice or think of specific small details of each other's cultural manifestations they appreciate.

### *Session 3: Imagining the Possibilities*

Once the therapist has a better idea of the history of the couple, it is time for everyone to get clear on what they hope to accomplish in therapy. If blaming is still occurring even after the first two sessions, which focus on the positive aspects of the relationship, this is the session to address it in. The main goal is to get couples to view themselves as working toward a common objective and then to clearly define what this objective is. Specific questions should take into consideration the specific issues the couple is working on, but one way to keep the focus on culture while gently guiding couples to re-imagine solutions or think of new ones is to modify one of the first interview questions slightly.

In the first interview couples in this study were asked, “In your experience, what do you think is important for people to know when entering into an intercultural relationship?” Instead, a therapist may ask a couple, “Based on your experience, what kind of advice would you have for intercultural couples who may be struggling with issues related to different cultural backgrounds?” This should elicit some thoughts or ideas on effective negotiation, techniques for collaboration or accommodation, and ways to teach and learn from each other. Of course, if the couple retorts that if they knew what to do they would do it themselves, the therapist can always remind them of the effective ways they communicated and negotiated in the beginning of their relationship—and after the relationship history, the therapist should have a good idea of what the couple’s strengths were.

Asking the couple to talk about ways in which they have successfully negotiated their cultural differences in the past is also a good starting point. Once again, therapists may borrow from the questions asked in this study’s second round of interviews:

1. Tell me about how you handle your cultural differences in your everyday lives.

- a. Every couple encounters difficulties dealing with individual differences between the spouses. How do you cope with your differences in everyday life?
  - b. Where do you think your individual differences come from? Do you think these are influenced by your different cultural backgrounds?
2. Is it clear to you when your differences stem from your different cultures and when it stems from conflicting personal characteristics?

The homework for the next week can be for the couple to try “to catch” themselves negotiating a routine issue at home.

#### *Session 4: Teaching and Learning*

Although a person obviously has more to learn about a cultural background other than her own, there is plenty someone can learn about one’s own cultural background by explaining it to another person. As Macedonio (Couple 9) stated, asking someone about his culture is helpful “because that will not only give [an idea about] their culture, but it would give you their impressions about their culture. You know, in lots of ways, if you say, ‘Macedonio, tell me about American culture—what do you think about American culture here in the United States?’ I would tell you all my opinions about it—I would tell you it, and all (...) my opinions about it as well, probably subconsciously. (...) And that, I think, it can be beneficial, having people explain their culture.” So the benefit of asking such a thing of a client comes more from the clarification it affords that person about how she or he *relates* to the culture—that is, the norms, values, and scripts the individual personally accepts and personally rejects.

A good way to open up dialogue about a person’s views on her or his own culture is to talk about what the family has taught the individual about what it means to be a member of the particular cultural group. Some couples will naturally talk about family and friends in the context



of their relationship history, which is very helpful for the therapist to assess the couple's social network and the individual and relational resources (and stressors) inherent in it. If the couple does not share enough information on their social network, composing a cultural genogram (Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995) is a good way to elicit this kind of conversation. Silva and Li (2008) explained well the usefulness of the cultural genogram for intercultural couples when they explained, "The cultural genogram is useful in creating cultural awareness and sensitivity (Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995) ... Seeing that cultural values and scripts are passed down to an individual through families, a cultural genogram is a good way to help couples better understand the cultural and family heritage that influence their relationship."

In the same way, the solution-oriented genogram is used to help clients identify resources within the family of origin that may help in dealing with the presenting problem (Kuehl, 1995). Solutions to the problem can be generated through examination of the resources that other people and places can offer the client, or they can be generated through examples from relatives and significant friends who have encountered the same problem (Kuehl, 1995). The solution-oriented genograms also open up a line of questioning that involves the legacy of solutions, resources, and agency that clients want to pass on to future generations (Kuehl, 1995).

The combination of a cultural genogram with a solution-focused one is possible mainly through conceptualization and careful wording of questions—the drawing of the genograms themselves does not change. This can be a powerful combination to help couples not only to think up but to see, touch, and experience (through the paper on which the genogram is drawn) cultural solutions—that is, solutions that focus primarily on people and settings that can be supportive and celebratory of the intercultural aspects of the couple's relationships, and solutions for cultural misunderstandings or conflicts that other people in the couple's social network have

used successfully. Below I combine some of the questions suggested by Silva and Li (2008) with questions that can be used when working with a solution-oriented genogram (Kuehl, 1995).

Once each partner's genograms are drawn, the therapist may ask the partners (once again, these questions are adapted from Silva and Li, 2008):

1. What similarities do you notice in your respective families?
2. What are the main differences you notice in your respective families and the way you were raised?
3. What people or places are supportive of your relationship? What would these people (or places) have to say or contribute to the solution to the problems you are dealing with now?
4. Did you notice any intergenerational patterns in how culture is viewed or intercultural relationships are managed?
5. What practices in your relationship and your everyday life come from what family? Which ones seem fitting to your relationship?
6. What would you like your partner to know about your family, their cultural background, and how you fit in it all?
7. What aspects of your culture are most important to you as an individual? What aspects of your culture are not very important to you or simply not very pleasing to you?
8. How might you bring the important aspects of your culture to the context of your relationship?

9. What do you want to teach your children (or have taught your children) about your culture and how one manages intercultural relationships with other people? What do you want to teach them now?

Questions from this study's second interview (see Appendix A) might also be fitting here, but I will leave any further incorporation of questions to the therapist's discretion as the ones above are enough to fill more than one session. The partners should be present for each other's elaborations on the genograms. Partners ideally will ask clarification questions of each other, but will let each other do most of the talking when presenting their respective genograms. It would be beneficial for therapists to encourage a stance of curious openness in the observant partner, and for the presenting couple to think and speak about those aspects of his or her culture he or she would like the partner to know or understand better.

The homework for this session should be for the couple to enact one small solution for dealing with the presenting problem in culturally appropriate ways, before the following session.

#### *Session 5: Show and Tell*

Hopefully, the couple will have at least tried to do the homework proposed by the therapist in the fourth session. If the couple was successful, the session should focus on the couple's success, its contributing factors, the effect on the relationship, and what this success has reminded the couple about their resources and agency. Furthermore, how might couples continue building on this success in the next session?

If the couple was not successful but did make an attempt at a solution, processing the failure might be important, and it should be done much in the same way as the therapist would process a success. The session should consistently move through the problem talk to get at ways to reframe the supposed failure, though. In what ways was the lack of success not necessarily a

failure? In what ways might this lack of success prepare them for a future success? In what ways are they dealing with this lack of success appropriately and skillfully? These are questions the couple may not be prepared to answer at once, but the therapist should keep a gently persistent attitude. The fifth session structure can be repeated as much as necessary in a couple's treatment.

*Session 6: Re-Connecting with Self-Confidence*

The last session (whenever it happens—for the purposes of this therapeutic plan it is in the sixth session, but it could be longer) should be structured as a typical last session in that the couple collaborates with the therapist in going through a retrospective journey in their lives and relationship from before therapy began until the present time. What has changed? What has remained the same? What resources did the couple have in the beginning and which resources do they have now? How has the therapeutic process strengthened the relationship? How might they deal with the problem if it comes back? How have their cultural selves changed as a result of the therapeutic experience? How do they view the intercultural aspects of their relationship now? All these questions can be asked and more can be added. The main goal is to strengthen the couple's confidence in their individual and relational resources as well as in their relationship itself. Getting the couple to think about what the therapy experience has meant for the expression and experience of the relationship can also be beneficial as it might help the couple attend to the cohesion of the relational identity.

One of the most prominent strengths of the present study is its methodology and what it allows one to learn and experience (even if vicariously) through such a thorough description of intercultural relationships. Such concrete and detailed description makes it possible for therapists, couples, and families to better understand all the aspects at play in these relationships and create a specific plan for helping those relationships that may not be faring as well as the

ones studied. Like any study, the present one has limitations, however, and now I turn to a discussion of these and how they can inform future research.

### Study Limitations and Future Research

Seeing that research on intercultural relationships has not moved much beyond theoretical (and therapeutic) hypothesizing, this study has achieved its original goal: giving intercultural couples an opportunity to explain their relationship and its essential characteristics as they see it. I made every effort to use the couples' language as much as possible—first in composing the descriptive portraits, which were taken back to the couples for their approval whenever possible, and later in formulating the thematic codes and writing the report on findings (see chapter 4). The study's methodological constraints do not allow for much more than a thorough description of intercultural relationships, however.

Reiss' (1981) model of the family's paradigm construction goes further into how the familial paradigm links the family to the external world and helps shape their experience of it. This model is called the Cycle Hypothesis. It is beyond the scope of this study to extrapolate how the intercultural couple paradigm, if there is one, could function to link the couple to the external world and shape their experience. Phenomenology as a research methodology does not allow for theoretical construction but instead enables the researcher to create a robust descriptive portrait of the phenomenon (van Manen, 2001). Any further theorization of how intercultural couples' paradigms help shape a couple's reality surely will require observational data in addition to participant reports.

One major limitation of the study was time. Community interest surpassed my expectations, and 10 couples volunteered to take part in it (as opposed to the original five to eight couples I proposed to interview) within a month of advertising the study. There was a wait list of

couples who approached me volunteering to participate after the first 10 couples had already been recruited. If time had allowed, many more couples could have been interviewed, which would have made the data set more extensive and the results even more robust. Time limitations also made it impossible for me to go back to participants for a third member check after the final descriptive portrait of the phenomenon of interest was composed (namely, the results chapter). Not only did the research timeline not allow for another meeting, but some participating couples could not, for various personal reasons, devote any more time to the study, which by the end of it all had already entailed some estimated five to six hours of active engagement on the part of each couple. Funds for additional member check incentives were also not available.

Finally, it is only through participatory observation that researchers will be able to determine whether strategies of cultural negotiation in the everyday life of the couple are indeed applied the way these couples report they are. This is meant as no insult to the participating couples' honesty but only as a reminder—coming from a person in an intercultural relationship as well as a couple therapist—that it is often the case that what we say we do and what we actually do are two distinct things. A large qualitative, observational study—perhaps one employing ethnomethodological and ethnographic methodologies—seems like the natural next step in this line of research. Although multiple observations of the couples in their natural settings (home and work, etc) would be necessary, an “intercultural lab” fashioned after Gottman’s “love lab” (Gottman, 1999), where intercultural couples are invited to spend days at a time to be recorded and observed in their normal, routine activities (including interacting with their children and in-laws perhaps) as well as in artificial activities designed to elicit couple talk about the relationship, would shed much light onto how cultural negotiation and cultural brokering actually happen—successfully and unsuccessfully. Furthermore, methodological

strategies such as conversation analysis and membership categorization analysis (Drew, Raymond, & Weinberg, 2006; Francis & Hester, 2006) would be extremely helpful in illuminating how these couples' talk about their relationships is shaped by internal and external pressures to achieve measured uniqueness.

Inclusion of a researcher or research consultant that is not in an intercultural relationship might also be helpful. At times it was difficult to know where my experiences of an intercultural relationship ended and these couples' began because I could identify with so much of their accounts. Member checking was definitely very helpful—and I included questions specifically designed to get disconfirming evidence in these checks—but objectivity was definitely unachievable. Although participants seemed always quick to correct my erroneous interpretations or suggestions, their frequent agreement with many of my conjectures must be taken cautiously. Some researchers have noted that participants may often agree with a researcher or interviewer for fear of disappointing her or seeming inappropriate for the study in question (Reinharz, 1992).

#### A Final Note of Hope

As I finish this report, I come back to a realization I have come across in the months of data collection. Somewhere, somehow, I got into a conversation about the topic of my dissertation and I explained that these relationships might as well be studied now as it will most likely soon become obsolete to talk about “intercultural relationships.” In a world that grows increasingly smaller due to the ever easier, ever more convenient, and ever ubiquitous cross-cultural connections people make, soon enough most relationships will be cross-cultural—not just in the sense in which I have already spoken about (regarding no one ever marrying someone exactly like themselves) but also in the very outward, obvious sense of the term.

In a world where cultural and national boundaries become increasingly blurry, the boundaries between people are bound to blur as well. I wonder if this is the way we will find to resolve so many sociopolitical conflicts between nations and groups. When I allow myself to wonder about this out loud I think I'm romanticizing intercultural relationships too much, or at least I'm allowing myself to see them as much more important than they are. But, at the same time, wouldn't these relationships be a convenient way for people to realize that indeed we are all more similar than different? Personal experience is often the most effective antidote to bigotry, prejudice, hatred, and divisiveness. Who knows? It seems to me that becoming personally committed to someone so different from oneself is the best way to realize that, indeed, "all we need is love." But then again, I am biased.



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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Couple Descriptive Portraits

#### *Couple 1: Ablavi and Leroy*

*On Identity.* Ablavi and Leroy met in church. She was visiting a new church and waiting for a friend of hers to arrive, when Leroy was passing by and stopped to talk to her. Ablavi looked familiar to Leroy and he asked if they had met previously. Ablavi took a good look at him and he looked familiar to her as well, but she couldn't place him. She thought that maybe she knew him from a mega-church she had been going to. The interaction did not last long, but they made an impression on each other. At the end of service, Leroy caught up to Ablavi again and asked for her e-mail. She gave it to him.

She says that two things in particular “jumped out” at her. First, “this little brother” had an accent and “a big smile.” An African accent—something that immediately piqued her interest due to her love of all things Africa and her own attraction to African men. Secondly, he asked her for her e-mail, not her phone number. He did not come off as trying to hit on her or anything like that. But he did e-mail her very soon after that interaction. His email was signed “Rev. Leroy.”

In their e-mails to each other, Ablavi found out that Leroy is a missionary from Togo. He found out that Ablavi was born and raised in the United States. They exchanged ideas and personal information. The tone of the e-mails was courteous but almost formal. That is, until he finally “dropped the ‘Rev.’”. He soon asked her out on a “conference”--something that she thought was peculiar in an interesting and not entirely unwelcome kind of way. He says now that

he had no time to waste and he had a reputation to safeguard—they were both “older” (although only in their early thirties), and he was not interested in dating aimlessly. He invited her to a conference because he wanted to see if they had things in common, if they were going the same way in life, if she had a purpose and if it matched his. He had intentions.

The couple talked for hours on that first meeting—they went out for lunch and stayed until dinner time, much to the waiter’s frustration. They had so much in common—their faith, their interest in ministry, their career goals, their interest in culture and travel. To this day they attribute the success of their relationship to these commonalities and compatibilities between them—having similar values seems to them more important than having similar cultural heritages. They met again for other conferences. It is unclear when these turned into dates, but they soon did. Neither one had been specifically looking for an intercultural relationship, but they were open to it. Eventually they came to realize that they were so right for each other—in spite of their differences—that their meeting could not have been an accident. Maybe “when they said they knew each other,” was because they “knew each other in the spirit first.” God or a greater force had to have brought them together. Especially considering that the couple met only days after Ablavi came back from a retreat where she meditated and prayed to find “her mate.”

From the beginning of their relationship, the couple noticed their cultural differences and was very aware of how these influenced their relationship, albeit not always in the ways they had first expected. Leroy says that his multicultural lifestyle (a product of all his traveling and missionary work) helps him find common ground with people from many different cultural backgrounds. He thinks this has helped their relationship immensely. It has also helped that Ablavi has always had such a genuine interest and appreciation for African culture. So much so that Leroy often says she is the true African in the relationship. She even appreciates the African

clothing styles, which he views as “too colorful,” or as having “too many patterns” (something she thinks is funny considering it’s exactly the kind of thing that Americans usually say about it). The couple has learned over the course of their relationship that they often do not fit each other’s initial images of a foreign spouse.

In spite of her love of Africa Ablavi had some misgivings, however. She remembers that when things started getting serious between her and Leroy she started having to battle her own—and others’--stereotypes of African men. Friends kept telling her to watch out because African men often want their wives “barefoot and pregnant,” and she knew she would have none of that. She talked to his best friends, she consulted the older African ladies she adopted as “Aunties,” and she did some soul searching. It also helped that his friends assured her that Leroy was not that type of man, especially given the independent and egalitarian ways he adopted through his missionary lifestyle. This helped her get to know his culture even better before they got married, something they both view as helpful in understanding each other. She also learned to cope with the Othering they encountered (mainly the negative messages of well-intentioned but mistaken friends who viewed their differences as problematic) and the interference from the academic and scholarly research and theories she was having to engage with as part of her graduate education. Coping with external influences and prejudice is something the couple identifies as vital for intercultural couples.

Eventually, it became clear that both of them rejected some values and norms from their respective cultures, which contributed to the compatibility they have always felt. He grew up in a household where he was expected to help around the house, even if the tasks were traditionally viewed as women’s work. Indeed, the couple reports they are committed to equitable division of labor and egalitarian sharing of power in their relationship. She, on the other hand, seems to try

her best to allow him to come to her aid, to be a gentleman, and to take her out of the role of the invincible, ultra-independent and strong Black Woman who does not need anyone's help, much less that of the man in her life. She remembers fondly that one of their friends complimented her for waiting patiently in the car until Leroy comes around to open the door for her—each and every time.

Both Leroy's and Ablavi's families of origin were very accepting of their relationship. Ablavi has not met his family yet because of the various difficulties inherent in traveling to Togo, but the couple is planning a trip in the near future. Ablavi is already thinking of ways to show cultural competence and respect, and Leroy has been helping her learn some traditions and customs that will help her feel connected and accepted (for example, the tradition of only using the right hand to greet people and the customary reserve—both in action and in dress--women usually demonstrate). This kind of cultural brokering is something that both of them do for each other often, alternating roles according to the context they find themselves in. Ablavi is worried about the language barrier. She does not speak Ewe and has had to “take ownership of her own limitations” in learning French even. The language barrier has contributed to her occasionally feeling left out and silenced when around his friends—an example of how their cultural differences sometimes causes misunderstandings and conflicts. Her relationship with her family-in-law is also not as direct as she would like due to this barrier.

Ablavi should not have too much trouble when visiting Leroy's family in Togo, however. As already explained, she has deep appreciation for many aspects of his culture, and because of this has had little difficulty in adopting some of his cultural norms and customs such as the celebration of certain holidays and the financial contribution they are expected to make to his family's wellbeing. She also expressed great willingness to do things in certain culturally



appropriate ways when she is over there, even if it is not how she would normally behave at home. Certain traditions are a bit more difficult for her, however. For example, she thinks that Leroy is overly conservative when it comes to what he views as appropriate dress and style for her. She has also concluded that she better leave the traditional Togolese cooking to him—in fact, the couple has learned to let each other do around the house what they are best at. She still makes an effort in both areas, however, and especially when it comes to how she dresses, they try to take things case by case. The couple makes an effort to accommodate each other's preferences because they realize how much their different cultural heritages influence who they are—and you don't leave those influences at the door of the church when you get married.

The couple describes their relationship as one based on companionship first and foremost. They view each other as individuals first, and this is most eloquently expressed when Leroy says that “when [he] looks at Ablavi [he] sees [his] wife,” not an African American. They view their efforts to blend their different cultural heritages as vital for the relationship, as well as enriching for each of them as individuals. Teaching and learning to and from each other is a major way for them to embrace each other's culture (thus becoming somewhat acculturated to each other's milieu) and show appreciation and acceptance of one another. Adopting some of each other's cultural norms is also important to move the relationship forward—it helps in showing intercultural competence and open mindedness from the very beginning. They also feel that being in an intercultural relationship often leads to greater individual insight into each of their own cultural influences.

Ablavi and Leroy report they don't “wake up thinking of their differences.” In fact, they say they largely forget their differences in culture when alone together. This is partly because they feel their cultures are similar in many ways—after all African American culture is obviously

rooted in African culture. They feel that similarity in cultural backgrounds make intercultural relationships easier in many ways. Perhaps another reason is that they don't feel so different is because they try to concentrate on their common interests such as religion, counseling, missionary work. The couple says that finding common ground is essential in any relationship, but especially in intercultural relationships. It helps in normalizing their differences.

Even though they do not concentrate on their differences most of the time, Ablavi and Leroy feel that these are enriching to their relationship. It makes them better negotiators, they say. For example, there are issues in their relationship—such as financial decision-making, the issue of appropriate dress (as already mentioned), and the care and zealousness toward one's reputation—that they feel bear the unmistakable mark of different cultural influences. Their different positions on these issues reflect different underlying values, and because of that, everyday decisions regarding these areas of difference require constant re-negotiation (as well as rationalization), which takes much time and effort, but pays off at the end. They also feel that their differences—especially these larger, value-laden ones, balance them as individuals. For example, even though they experience some conflict in this area still, Ablavi says that Leroy's frugality balances her and guarantees a better life for both of them (without debt, more savings, etc). This is one example of when she is more willing to do things his way in order to do what is best for the relationship and them as a couple, as a unit.

The couple reports having some difficulty in differentiating cultural differences from family differences and personal idiosyncrasies. They often look for patterns in each other's cultural groups to know find out what is cultural and what is not, and this helps (as when Ablavi, in conversation with a friend who is also married a West African man, realized—perhaps even jokingly—that Leroy's shier, more introverted nature must have some roots in culture).

Ultimately, however, Ablavi and Leroy say that differences are differences and must be handled in largely similar ways. Even differences that are not culturally based can cause conflict and must be negotiated. The couple says that meeting in the middle (finding ways in which they can each give in a little to the other in a conflict), for example, is a strategy that helps in bridging all types of difference.

But most important of all is to keep a sense of humor about the relationship and their differences. This is evident in the light, playfully teasing tone of the couple's interviews. Ablavi and Leroy also talk about feeling proud of their intercultural relationship—especially because they feel intercultural relationships keep people constantly learning and are, therefore, more interesting. Their genuine appreciation for each other's culture is indeed something to be proud of, as they feel it makes them less ethnocentric as a result (even though one must be less ethnocentric to begin with to seek and enter an intercultural relationship). As Ablavi says, "It's important to have an appreciation for the differences, because what happens if we don't is that we're always trying to change one or the other towards that particular person's culture." And being able to put such urge aside is indeed a feat many cannot achieve, which is not to say that imposing one's own cultural values on the other does not ever happen.

*On Negotiation.* Perhaps the best way to sum up Ablavi and Leroy's efforts to negotiate cultural differences is by describing their efforts to live a truly multicultural lifestyle. Between their interest in other cultures in general, Ablavi's love and respect for African cultures, and Leroy's experience and ongoing work as a missionary, the couple seems to be always exposed to people (in their social circles) and norms from various countries. Leroy, especially, tries to stay connected to his culture as much as possible (this is easier for Ablavi as the couple lives in the US), through friendships, ongoing contact with family members that are far away, speaking the

language, etc). They also blend norms from their American and Togolese cultures whenever possible—for example, they have learned to visit foreign friends for Thanksgiving and eat untraditional meals on the day, as long as Ablavi can also have her traditional, beloved turkey, gravy, and other such holiday treats (and leftovers, which Leroy has come to learn are a necessary part of the Thanksgiving festivities). They view their present and future efforts to blend traditions (for example, they want to raise their kids bicultural and send them to Africa often to learn about Leroy's culture by experiencing it—something that will help them as parents connect to that culture even more) as creating a new and unique culture of their own that is not all American or all Togolese. This cultural blend is highly selective however—the couple reports conscientiously choosing the norms and values they want to carry on with them from each tradition.

On a smaller scale, there are certain things that they do at home, in the course of their everyday life that seems to help in negotiating issues. One thing is for them to learn to trust each other's judgment. For example, even when Ablavi would rather spend money when Leroy would rather save, she has learned that often it is the case that he has good reason to insist on being frugal. And for his part, he has learned to trust (and abide by) Ablavi's sense of style. However, many times it is necessary for them to just accept each other's way of doing certain things, even if it is different from how one would do it. For example, she has grown accustomed to his cooking and is grateful for it, even when it seemed a bit repetitive at first.

Their negotiation often takes into account the mainstream culture they live in, which is American culture. The couple can readily think of many ways in which their lives would be different if they were living in Togo (e.g. their relationship would be much more influenced by his family members). Sometimes certain aspects of each other's cultures are still foreign to one

another, though. Negotiation around the issues arising from these areas of little understanding is often difficult, as with Leroy's frequent worry about their reputation, which keeps them from doing many things that Ablavi would otherwise be interested in and, from her cultural vantage point, would not be a threat or in any way tarnishing of their reputation. The couple says that at some point they just have to learn to live with some ideological differences and "agree to disagree," knowing full well that some issues will never get resolved once and for all.

*Couple 2: Patricia and Ron*

*On Identity.* Patricia and Ron met while they were studying and traveling through Argentina. She is from Peru and was studying photography there, and he is from the United States and was on his way to an internship on a farm in the south of the country. They met at a party, introduced by a mutual acquaintance. Although they both report being physically attracted to each other, he reports being drawn to the way she carried herself—confidently yet reserved. She didn't seem to be a "busy body" like some other girls at the party and he appreciated that about her. She appreciated that he didn't "pounce" on her like so many men in her cultural milieu do. Patricia actually jokes that he liked that she pounced on him instead, indicating a gender role reversal, perhaps, in how they met. He was also quiet and respectful, but friendly at the same time. In this way they both saw each other as out of the ordinary in some ways and were attracted to each other's personality.

Patricia and Ron exchanged phone numbers at the party and went out afterwards. From then on out they were inseparable. They report being thrilled at having so much in common with each other and so much to talk about. They say they were attracted to each other as individuals and they cherish the fact that they have many common values, goals, and worldviews despite their cultural differences (their commitment to the environment and their quiet, reserved ways of

being with each other and having fun are just some examples). They spent the next two weeks going out with each other every night but soon after that Ron had to leave for the farm where he would do his internship. Although they visited each other sometimes, they spent about two years in a long-distance relationship. Patricia went back to Peru after her year in Argentina and after his internship was over Ron went to Peru to see her and then back to the United States. They report the geographical distance was possibly the most difficult challenge of their relationship.

Since then the couple has got engaged and she has moved to the United States to be with him. They report not feeling many cultural differences when it's just the two of them alone. Every so often they will notice some cultural differences as they go about their routine, but usually it is much easier to notice large cultural differences as they relate to others. The couple views their acculturation to each other's cultural norms (specifically Ron's acculturation to Latin American culture even if not specifically the Peruvian culture) as being one of the reasons why they do not feel their differences more deeply. Patricia also says that she rejects some aspects of her own culture in how she views and conducts herself and how she chooses to live her life, which means that she often does not fit in with her own cultural group but is somewhat more malleable to adopting values and norms of another culture. One example of this is her rejection of some of her culture's gender role scripts. The couple is committed to gender equality and flexibility of gender roles in their relationship, which she appreciates and reports looking for in a relationship even before she met him.

It is much easier for Patricia and Ron to talk about the differences they have found between their respective families of origin. They often find cultural influences in how they each relate to their families and the family dynamics of each clan. These differences often cause some discomfort in them. They deal with this discomfort by acting as each other's cultural liaisons as

much as they can. For example, Ron reports that when he is over at Patricia's home in Peru he often defers to her guidance in how things are done and she teaches him certain things about the culture and the people and daily life over there that he wouldn't necessarily know without her explaining it to him. The couple also talks about striving to always demonstrate cross-cultural competence when around each other's family and friends. This often involves doing things as culturally prescribed, or "doing as the Romans do," *per se*. For example, even though it was uncomfortable, Ron gives the example of joining with Patricia's uncle and brother in one occasion and drinking with them, separately from the women in the house (Patricia included) just for the sake of going along with their norms. The couple often has difficulty differentiating group culture from family culture from individual idiosyncrasies, however, and it seems to be partly because they only seem to notice cultural differences when around each other's families. Still, they report that their families are quite accommodating of them and try to learn about their different cultures as best they can. Most Othering comes from strangers who readily pick up on their differences just from looking at them and immediately deems Ron "a tourist."

The couple has just started living together after a relationship that up until now has mainly been long-distance. They are still getting acquainted with each other's ways and their cultural differences are only gradually coming out and being noticed as such. They often have misunderstandings that at first do not seem to have a cultural dimension to them. It is only in the course of discussing their different perspectives that it becomes clear that they are often talking about two different things or two different (both culturally appropriate) ways of doing the same thing (for example, their negotiation around the wedding and the invitations in particular-see interview 2 transcript). Patricia and Ron view themselves as an inexperienced young couple in many ways, and they admit they are still getting used to their relationship.

Patricia and Ron view their relationship as a mixed-culture relationship and they strive to have others view it as such. They prefer this term because it nods to the fact that they blend aspects of many different cultures (at least three) in their daily lives and how they interact with each other. They view themselves as multicultural individuals, having lived abroad and acculturated to other places and people other than where they grew up. The couple even thinks that perhaps they were drawn to an intercultural relationship because of that. The advantage of this multicultural identity is that it helps them bridge cultural differences now they are sharing their lives with each other—it is easier for them to understand each other's perspectives and cultural influences in some ways. Still, learning and teaching is a big part of their relationship, and they enjoy this because it is through learning about each other's cultures that they get to know each other even better. It is because culture makes you who you are that it is so important to understand each other's culture. This understanding also helps in relating to each other's family of origin.

Still there are challenges unique to an intercultural relationship. The language barrier is one of them—he has to do a lot of translation for her still although her English is becoming better and better. The couple also talks about the importance of staying open-minded, that is, unassuming and flexible in dealing with each other. They find that although this is often difficult, it makes their communication better, which may be an advantage of being in an intercultural relationship. The couple views the dynamics in intercultural relationships as often different than the dynamics in non-intercultural relationships—the issues around language and teaching and learning being one example. But the couple also finds it important for people to keep in mind that people like themselves enter intercultural relationships because of the other person as individuals and not because of each other's cultures. It is because of that person in particular,



after all, that one decides that it's worthwhile to put so much time, effort, and commitment into a relationship that can be quite challenging.

*On Negotiation.* Patricia and Ron find that clear communication about how they view their cultures and what is important to them is the first and most important step toward negotiation. To do this, each person must have patience in explaining his or her point of view to each other. They must also be willing to try to understand each other's point of view from each other's cultural perspective (that is, genuinely trying to understand the other person during conflict). Although they don't notice cultural differences between themselves all the time, these can gradually come up and pose conflict and stress. A good sign that they have stumbled on a cultural difference is when they have a hard time getting the other person to understand what they are trying to say or when the issue of conflict keeps coming up. It is often the case that differences they originally attributed to personality differences end up having a cultural dimension to them that the couple only realizes later. This is why they know that getting to know the other's culture makes a big difference in the relationship. But learning about each other's culture is not always enough—it's important to take on values and norms of the partner's culture as one's own, especially when certain norms or values are really important for that person. It is also essential to be very conscious about which norms and values to adopt, as these will shape their life and relationship together. They have learned not to assume things about each other—for example, that they would do things or think the same way their respective families do.

The couple views cultural differences as worthy of attention because it makes you who you are. That is why it is important to keep connected to one's culture in daily life. For example, when they have kids, the couple plans on raising them bicultural as way to keep themselves connected to their respective cultures and help the children learn about the family and the

traditions they come from. Patricia and Ron have found that intercultural relationships often affords people insight into their own cultural norms and preferences—insights that are realized in the course of interacting with someone from a different cultural background. Many times people realize that they are much more adamant about certain cultural norms than they even realized. When this is the case, it's important for the other person to just accept these values or norms and “let it be,” without trying to change the other person. Besides these strategies, the couple had difficulty in directly speaking about other negotiation strategies, as most negotiation seems to just happen without much thought or direct talk. The couple thinks that all intercultural couples need to develop their own ways of negotiating even if this negotiation is done more “organically.”

*Couple 3: Lily and Alex*

*On Identity.* Lily and Alex met in college. She comes from a traditional Indian family and Alex, although born in Germany to American parents, was raised in the United States. They were introduced by a mutual acquaintance. Lily remembers instantly feeling like Alex was different from other guys she had met—he seemed sincere, kind, “a genuinely nice guy.” Alex remembers also being attracted to Lily and even thinking that he might like to have a relationship with her some day. Lily and Alex got their start hanging out as friends, and they actually lost contact with each other for a while because of various study-abroad trips that took place between the two of them. They somehow managed to reconnect—almost by accident—and picked up where they had left off. Although Lily was attracted to Alex, and in fact they found ways to “accidentally bump into each other,” she did not at first feel like a long-term relationship with him was realistic. At first, Lily had wanted to be a nun, something her parents could never understand.

With time, however, she gave up on that idea, and decided that she might like to date (although she was still definitively against marriage because of the kind of marriage her parents had).

Slowly, the couple spent more and more time together until it was clear to both of them they had feelings for each other. Once they made these feelings known, they started dating seriously and it was a short time before they were engaged. The couple faced disapproval from Lily's family. She explains that her parents are really conservative and traditional and they had always envisioned an arranged marriage for her—the kind of marriage they have. Being raised primarily in the United States, however, Lily feels acculturated, and she rejects many aspects and norms of her family's culture. Her relationship to Alex, a White American, who is agnostic and does not hold the kinds of degrees or jobs her parents consider appropriate for a potential son-in-law, is just another example of her penchant to go against cultural norms. Lily and Alex were also emotionally and physically intimate before marriage—something that Lily shudders to think her parents might find out about even today. Through their time together, Lily started realizing how influential what she deems as “her parents' culture” really was and still is on her. Although she rejected many of their cultural norms, her parents had always put a lot of pressure on her to conform to certain cultural dictates and the result was that she often felt guilty or confused about the meaning of her actions and how they compared to what was expected of her. For example, she realized that her initial shyness about dating stemmed from the belief her parents instilled in her that she wasn't supposed to like boys. And in fact, Lily was so unprepared for the possibility (and reality) of dating and falling in love that she had to be very conscious about the whole thing—she made a list of what she wanted in a guy (which Alex matched very well), what she did not want in a relationship, etc. Even Alex himself slowly became aware of his own cultural influences during their engagement. For example, when the wedding ceremony and festivities

became a bit one-sided, he suddenly got in touch with his own needs regarding how the wedding was going to go (and even said on a few occasions, “I have a culture too!”).

Being with each other required the couple to do everything in culturally-sensitive ways (to both families’ cultures, but especially hers) in order to gain parental approval for their relationship. At times they had to follow certain cultural norms at the expense of their own preferences (as when they wanted to travel together but couldn’t because her parents would not allow her to go out of town with him by herself). This leads them to feel like they always have something to prove to others (especially Alex). His family was much more open-minded about the intercultural relationship, and in fact they brought him up to appreciate and be interested in other cultures. But even open-minded families make certain demands of the couple that are often uncomfortable. Lily and Alex started noticing cultural differences between themselves when they introduced each other to their respective families and started spending time around them. They noticed the two of them had very different ways of relating to their families of origin, which was something they had to discuss and learn to deal with. Their parents also had different expectations of certain things like their wedding, which was often difficult for the couple to deal with. They report often feeling frustrated at having to straddle different cultural norms under pressure from their respective families. Lily feels that her parents especially put a lot of pressure on her because they are in the difficult position of trying to keep their Indian culture alive while raising children in a very different country and mainstream culture (and she feels like this conundrum has made her parents become even more conservative and traditional in some ways than they ever were back in their homeland, and even more conservative than the people there today are).

The wedding turned out to be a traditional Syrian Orthodox wedding (“with North Indian clothing”), mainly as a way to appease her family. Since then the couple has learned and felt freer to be firm and assertive about how to manage their relationship and how to live their married life (in fact, Alex had a head start on this when he had to have serious, long, planned out conversations with Lily’s mom regarding their relationship and their decisions). The couple believes they are in the process of creating their own culture by taking values from both cultures, altering them as they see fit for their relationship, and blending these. They are very conscientious regarding the norms and customs they adopt—they always try to think about these and whether they are fitting with the kind of life and marriage they have envisioned for themselves. This vision includes a commitment to gender equality and autonomy (which caused a certain conflict between them when Alex shared he was more sexually experienced than Lily was—after she had expected to hold him to the same “standards” as she was held to by her parents), flexibility of roles in regards to household division of labor and gender roles, and an expressed encouragement and freedom to be oneself (something that Lily did not have growing up in her parents’ home). Of course, these values and untraditional combinations of cultural norms, result in their feeling like most people don’t really understand them (“get them”) as a couple. In fact, the way others perceive their relationship and them as a couple is significant because it often reminds them of their cultural differences and even of their own race and culture. Normally, they don’t really pay attention to their cultural differences or even feel like they are in an intercultural relationship when it’s just the two of them. In fact, they often have difficulty deciding which differences are cultural as they are generally reluctant to generalize from their experience to their cultural groups. When they are around others they often encounter Othering which is often hurtful—as when Lily feels like Alex’s mom treats her as “a token

Indian person,” in the family only to validate how open-minded and committed to multiculturalism Alex’s family is. The couple does admit to feeling like their relationship is in some ways more interesting for being an intercultural relationship—they feel as though many of the diverse experiences they have had would not have been possible if they shared a common cultural background. They also admit being attracted to each other’s exotic nature (at least as they perceive them), and in fact seeking out someone very different from themselves to build a relationship with. But all in all, they view the different as being normal now and really only being highlighted through the eyes of others.

Lily and Alex base a large part of their couple identity on the fact that they complement each other, they share an interest in other cultures and a thirst for traveling and experiencing the world from different vantage points. They share many interests and support each other in the pursuit of these interests. They teach and learn from each other (which is something very important to and cherished by Lily) and they try to keep a sense of humor about their relationship, joking about even the most difficult things.

*On Negotiation.* The couple realizes that their relationship does not exist in a vacuum—that is, they have to deal with the cultural differences between the two of them and with the cultural differences between each of them and each other’s family of origin, which can often create conflict, misunderstanding, and stress. That is why they view flexibility in adapting to the families’ requests and demands as vital for their relationship, after all, support from family and friends is important in any relationship. Lily and Alex talk about “doing as the Romans do”—that is, they shift certain aspects of their behavior and preferences according to their surroundings and the people they are around.

The couple says they don't really notice cultural differences in their daily lives, when they are alone with each other (as stated earlier, they are reminded of these when they are around family and friends). If they notice differences at all, the couple usually does not try to decide whether these are cultural or personal. They often have difficulty differentiating group culture from family habits anyway. For example, they know they have very different conflict resolution styles, and they try to blend these to create a unique style that leaves both of them feeling satisfied, but they are really not sure if their differences in this area are due to how they were raised or due to their different cultural backgrounds. Lily and Alex try to adapt to each other's preferences as best they can—whether these preferences are influenced by their different cultural backgrounds or not. Lily and Alex do realize that culture is important, however, and they say they take on norms and values from both cultures and pick and choose which ones to adhere to in their daily lives. They often do their best to create their own customs that often blend aspects of customs from both cultural traditions to create a new custom in and of itself. Adapting to certain cultural norms that are not your own can often be frustrating, however. For example, Alex often feels frustration with adapting to the collectivistic aspects of Lily's cultural background (something that often results in her family trying to be much more involved in their lives than the couple would like for them to be). Of course, each one of them rejects certain norms of their own culture. For example, Lily is very committed to flexible gender roles in her marital life—something that was not modeled for her in her family of origin (or larger cultural tradition).

Despite her rejection of some aspects of her cultural background (and this largely comes from growing up in the United States and feeling more American than Indian in many ways), Lily still finds it important to keep aspects of Indian culture in her everyday life. She can already tell that it will be important for her to raise their future kids multicultural—that is, raising them

to be appreciative and respectful of cultural differences. Some ways in which Lily keeps connected with her culture now, is through connecting to her parents, speaking Malayalam whenever possible with them, eating the Indian dishes she grew up with and has come to love, and visiting India whenever possible—at least every two or three years. Alex, on the other hand, does his best to support Lily in these endeavors. Although it is often difficult to learn about the other's culture, Alex tries to make an effort. The language barrier is a challenge, however, because it is difficult for Lily to teach Alex and difficult for him to stay committed to it. When they are in settings where her language is being spoken he often feels left out and tries to get her to translate, but that is usually difficult for her.

A large part of negotiating around cultural differences for the couple is to adapt to each other's ways of doing certain things. For example, Lily has become much more lenient of Alex's disorganization than she used to be, having been accustomed to a lot of organization. They try to share their interests with each other and expand their own preferences to include things that are important to the other person. She listens to NPR now and tries to show interest in scientific things. But they also see the importance of remaining autonomous and independent and whenever they cannot accompany each other in certain events, tastes, or ways of doing things, they try to do them by themselves. Around the house, each person does what he or she is best at, and they pay attention to each other to see what's really important to the other person and make concessions that way. The couple has learned how important it is for them to be flexible with each other and let themselves be culturally influenced. It is by doing this that they always try to make decisions together and be on board with each other's decisions.

Lily and Alex also say that some negotiation just kinds of happens, without much direct conversation (like with food, music, etc). This is probably facilitated by the fact that they hold



many of the same values and goals despite their cultural differences. Whenever possible, they also try to do things both ways. They find this to be a central part of who they are as a couple: much like other people in intercultural relationships, they tend to be adventurous and have broad comfort zones.

*Couple 4: Catherine and Doug*

*On Identity.* Catherine and Doug met each other when Doug was working and traveling through the United States. He had moved to the US from South Africa to have a change of scenery and to pursue work opportunities through some contacts he had. He was working at a farm at the time he met Catherine, who was a college student. They were introduced by a mutual acquaintance who thought they had interests in common. Neither of them was looking for a relationship and they report not being each other's type. They became quick friends once they met and for several months they were just friends. Looking back on the way they met the couple now views fate as having a hand in their meeting—their common interests (in horses, nature, culture) and overlapping experiences were too many for them to have been put in each other's path by chance. They were inseparable from the very beginning because they were intellectually attracted to each other as well as attracted to each other as people, as friends. It was this attraction that made their friendship become a romantic relationship all of a sudden when Doug got a call from his parents asking him to go back to South Africa and Catherine realized how much she did not want to be away from him. They viewed the threat of losing each other as the push they needed to become a couple. And from the very beginning, they have been in a very committed relationship—they had to be in order to stay together through all the obstacles they faced, geographical distance being one of them. They say their relationship took a lot of planning which only reinforced their uncommon commitment.

The couple seems to have been aware of their cultural differences from the very beginning. They both viewed each other as out of the ordinary—she was attracted to the mystique he had as a foreigner (foreigners were always very interesting to Catherine) and he viewed her as very different from other young American women he had come in contact with. She seemed sure of herself and where she wanted to go in life, something he admired. Although Doug has always been interested in other cultures and never closed himself off to intercultural relationships, he never actively sought them either. Catherine on the other hand reports growing up feeling like she wanted to marry someone very different from herself; someone who would allow her to reject aspects of her own culture and its relationship prescriptions that she does not care for. In fact, Catherine always thought there was someone out there for her that was very distant, very different from herself. This is perhaps due to her deep interest in cultures other than her own. Today, they both feel like intercultural relationships are more interesting and exciting than relationships between people from the same cultural background. An interesting paradox of these relationships is that it takes open-minded people to make an intercultural relationship work well, although the relationship itself makes people more open-minded. This is due to the fact that this type of relationship exposes people to different worldviews, making them aware of different possibilities for themselves and for others. Both Doug and Catherine agree that one is constantly learning something new in an intercultural relationship.

But their cultural differences also caused some misunderstandings in the beginning of their relationship (for example, the fact he did not make his feelings for her known until much later in their friendship). At times, even today, the couple has trouble telling which are cultural differences and which are differences in personality, but Catherine says that the time she lived in South Africa helped her make some of those distinctions. Catherine views this experience as

having been extremely helpful in learning about Doug's culture, his family, and their way of life, which in turn helped her understand him better. One example of such insight is when Catherine realized that Doug was not as used to participating in housekeeping because he grew up in a culture where hired help for the home is much more common than in the United States. Once she realized this, the couple was able to work through their differences when it came to division of labor at home without Catherine having to be too explicit about expectations (through to-do lists, etc)—something that did not seem to work in the first place.

Catherine's time in South Africa came to an end when the couple decided to move back to the United States to start their new life as a married couple. Their decision took into consideration work opportunities for both of them as well as the geographical distance from families of origin, which seemed at the time to be more difficult for Catherine and her family than for Doug and his family. The couple admits that being distant from home and those you love is one of the disadvantages of some intercultural relationships like theirs—whether it was Doug or Catherine, one of them had to sacrifice geographical and often emotional proximity to family in order for them to be together. As Doug knows well, this can often lead to a feeling of homelessness and loneliness even years after moving and starting over in a new place. As the couple explains, Doug still feels like he doesn't completely belong to the group of people around him and still finds it difficult to make close, intimate friendships here. Another disadvantage of living away from home is "starting at zero", with a restricted or non-existent social network and the opportunities that come from knowing many people. This often restricts career options and advancements even if certain opportunities in the new country would not have been possible in the home country. Certain relational dynamics are also shaped by the fact that one partner is not in his home country (for example, Catherine and Doug did not "date" in the traditional American

sense of the word in the beginning of their relationship because he often did not know where to take her or did not have the connections necessary to plan the elaborate dates he would have planned in South Africa).

Catherine admits that she would have had to make sacrifices similar to those Doug has made if their situation had somehow been different and life in South Africa had afforded them with more opportunities. The trials the couple has been through and the sacrifices they have had to make to be together makes them view intercultural relationships as being more challenging than relationships that do not involve a difference in culture. Catherine and Doug say that there is more at stake in intercultural relationships—these challenges make the relationship mean more to them at times. The extra sacrifices involved in intercultural relationships are some of the main reasons for her parents' concern for her when she decided to follow Doug to South Africa and embark on this relationship with him. Indeed, the couple soon discovered that intercultural relationships take extra commitment to each other. Without it they say they would not have been able to overcome so many obstacles to being together. Concrete obstacles, such as legal issues involving getting a fiancé visa for him, which took a lot of time and effort, would have been potentially fatal for their relationship if they were not wholly committed to being together. Catherine and Doug also point out that because one or both of the people in relationships like theirs are usually away from home and loved ones, the partners must rely on each other for more than just their roles as husband and wife, which brings them closer while making the relationship at once much more significant and more challenging in some ways. The couple definitely views a deep, intimate friendship as the basis for their marriage.

Over the years, the couple has come to notice more and more cultural differences between themselves. The cultural aspect of these differences is probably more apparent now that

the couple is more knowledgeable about each other's cultures. For example, they find that they view and deal with conflict and adversity very differently, which influences how they relate to each other in their everyday life. Nowadays, they can tell how their different views are influenced by their different cultural norms. In either case, although they prize themselves in appreciating differences (and in fact, this is central to who they are as a couple), sometimes these differences lead to conflict, although they have gotten really good at managing the conflict so that it doesn't overwhelm their positive feelings for each other. The couple has realized that looking at particular issues only through one's own cultural lenses often leads to conflict. For example, their political leanings are very different and very much based on their different cultural backgrounds and the divergent situated knowledge these afford them. Because of this realization, they try to respect each other's opinions and agree to disagree.

The different ways they view gender roles has also caused some conflict in their relationship in the past. This is one example of a difference that is very much rooted in their different cultural backgrounds. As the couple explains, in South Africa women are much more submissive and less assertive. Although both Catherine and Doug are committed to balance of power and gender equality,--for example, the gender roles they ascribe to are very flexible--they have had their fair share of conflict because of Catherine's more assertive and passionate personality. Much of the conflict stems from how Doug's family views and treats Catherine at times—she still does not feel fully accepted by them and Doug is often put in the position of mediator between his family and Catherine. The couple admits that his family holds many stereotypes of American women, something that has resulted in his family focusing much more on their differences instead of their similarities and how well they get along together. This treatment also involves certain political or philosophical differences his family has with the

United States as a world political power, and these larger issues end up creating certain relational dynamics between Catherine and Doug's family that have often put her on the defensive. It is in these moments that they are "reminded," per se, of their cultural differences. In times like these, Catherine and Doug find comfort in their friends who are intercultural couples like themselves.

All in all, however, Catherine and Doug view their relationship as healthy and successful, and they say it is mainly due to the fact that they get along so well. They say the basis for their relationship is friendship and balance. They view balance as key in intercultural relationships, as all decisions and negotiations need to take account two people who come from very different places and both need to be treated fairly. Catherine and Doug are good at devoting time to each other, and they view this as very important to the relationship as well. They have many individual as well as common interests and they try to always support each other in pursuing their individual interests. Humor and fun is an essential element of their relationship, which can be seen in all the joking that takes place during the couple's interviews. Although they view their intercultural relationship as inherently untraditional (or "not normal") due to encountering obstacles uncommon to most other relationships, they hold common values despite their different cultures, which helps them feel close to each other. They also realize that their commonalities in language, socioeconomic status, religion, and race help their relationship's stability, since these commonalities insulate them against social prejudice and further misunderstandings between the two of them.

*On Negotiation.* The way Catherine and Doug negotiate cultural differences can perhaps be described as paradoxical. Although they have very similar tastes, the couple admits that a basic difference between them is the way they view personal differences in ideology and preferences. Catherine welcomes differences and thrives on them because she feels like they give

her an opportunity to learn new ways of living and being in the world. Doug, on the other hand, is less comfortable with differences because they view them as divisive. Their different ways of viewing conflict reflect their different preferred conflict resolution styles (discussing differences vs. not discussing them), which they view as being partially based on their different cultural backgrounds (South Africans, perhaps due to a long history of conflict and hardship try to trouble the waters less than Americans, the couple says). Despite their different views of difference, they find themselves in an intercultural relationship, which is fraught with differences, good or bad. This means that the couple often finds it necessary to discuss their differences even though this is ultimately uncomfortable for Doug. Somehow, they have found ways to have calm, collected discussions regarding ideological differences as they come, and they have also learned ways to live with these differences and have a fulfilling relationship without changing each other's point of view. They have no set strategy for deciding which differences to discuss—if it is an issue of ideology that has a direct bearing on their life together they try to find the right time for it. They feel that “if they can't get along, they shouldn't discuss” a particular difference in perspective, which means that they always try to discuss things calmly (their preferred conflict resolution style). This is perhaps what they mean when they say that they both have learned the value of being tolerant. Tolerance comes from having a basic sense of respect for each other's cultural customs and heritage.

Catherine and Doug say that direct exposure to each other's cultures was the best way for them to learn about each other and their differences. Keen observation of patterns has helped them understand which aspects of their differences are cultural and which are not, which in turn has helped them to use each other's cultural perspectives in trying to understand their different points of view in disagreements (although this is not always an easy or smooth process). They

admit this process took time, and they also agree that it took a great deal of personal effort and genuine interest on the part of both to learn about each other's cultures. Doug says that the best way to go about really learning about the culture one immerses him or herself in is to "do as the Romans do," which he has tried to do ever since he moved to the US, and which Catherine did when she lived in South Africa. As a result, they have been able to adopt some of the values and ways of each other's cultures, which has helped them in creating a bicultural or multicultural reality for their everyday lives and relationship. This "biculturalism" has at times made it difficult to tell what differences are cultural, but it also made the active cultural negotiation between them decrease with time.

Personal responsibility is also a large part of creating effective negotiation strategies. Both people say that holding on to one's personal cultural heritage and identity is important, and the way to do so is by doing small things to feel personally connected to their cultures, such as surrounding themselves with cultural artifacts, listening to music from their home countries when away from home, eating the foods they grew up with and have come to enjoy, connecting with family of origin in order to feel connected with the culture, and sharing aspects of their cultures with each other. Examples of this include teaching and learning about each other's customs and cultural preferences. Catherine and Doug say that it is important for them to keep aspects of both cultures in their everyday lives because it helps them remember where they are from, which is especially important considering a home-away-from-home will never feel exactly like home. They report doing these things independently at times when one or the other does not share the same taste for certain things like food or music for example. This holds true to dealing with in-laws and the differences between their respective families. Both Doug and Catherine seem to do their best to try to understand their in-law's perspectives and be a good son- and



daughter-in-law respectively, although this is difficult at times because they feel so different from (and in many ways not totally accepted by) each other's family of origin. Many times it's necessary for them to spend time with their own families independently of the other, for example, and they have come to accept this. Just as they do with music and food, this strategy of doing things independently is really all about keeping one's preferences but not imposing them on the other person.

Catherine and Doug try to use discernment on choosing which issues to be confrontational about (in other words, they try to "pick their battles") and they have also learned to be mindful of their language when discussing differences—for example, they find it helpful to make suggestions instead of demands to each other and language that is not too blunt. Additionally, keeping a sense of humor regarding the times when they were not as good at keeping their cool also seems to be a strategy to feel close, in and of itself. They also try to make decisions according to what's best for the relationship and not only each other. For example, the choice of living in the United States was a decision that took into consideration Catherine's being close to her family of origin, but it also took into consideration her safety (they made the decision of where to live taking into consideration the fact she would be a foreigner in South Africa and therefore more vulnerable). They also went where there were career opportunities for both of them and all of these factors together obviously make a big impact on the quality of their relationship. The couple really strives to get along well with each other because they realize they rely more on each other than intra-cultural couples do. Geographical distance from family of origin, a more restricted social network, and difficulty in establishing intimate friendships inter-culturally all contribute to Catherine and Doug having to fulfill many of each other's needs

themselves in ways that other couples do not. The couple feels like this brings them closer together and makes their relationship stronger.

*Couple 5: Kathy and Lukaš*

*On Identity.* Kathy and Lukaš met in college, in a Czech literature class where Lukaš was the only “authentically Czech guy” and somewhat out of the ordinary. Kathy was among a group of American students interested in Czech culture and literature, and although she has some Czech heritage in her family, she had never really personally identified with the culture or immersed herself in it prior to the class. Throughout the course they developed a friendship. They were both interested in the same things and attracted to each other’s intellect and sense of humor. In the back of her mind, Kathy kept thinking that her family would really approve of this intercultural relationship as one of her aunts had always said that it would be great if she could find a “nice Czech boy.” In this sense, Kathy was already primed for an intercultural relationship. Lukaš felt that Kathy was responsive and approving of who he was—his sense of humor, his goals and interests, etc. He was not specifically seeking an intercultural relationship, however. In fact, he always thought he might marry a woman from the Czech Republic, as he has always made a significant effort to be personally connected to the culture and has always felt very comfortable in the culture when he visited.

The couple says their cultural differences were immediately noticeable because they met in a setting that highlighted their different cultures. Lukaš admits playing up his own cultural heritage as he knew that Kathy was attracted to that part of him, among other things. But what really got their relationship started on a good footing was that they both held common views and values despite their different cultures. For them this is a necessary part of any successful intercultural relationship, because these commonalities help minimize conflict over cultural

differences that do exist. Lukaš had been living in the United States for most of his life, so he was obviously acculturated. However, holding on to his Czech heritage was always very important to him and he did that by keeping up with the language, visiting the Czech Republic frequently (in the summers), reading in Czech and participating in certain simple customs or traditions. He still does these things today with Kathy in his life. The few cultural differences they felt were never really a problem to them—much to the contrary it was something they enjoyed about their relationship. They do report finding some cultural differences in small interactions between the two of them, however. For example, the couple says that the way they manage conflict seems to be culturally based (for example, arguing very passionately about small disagreements that do not matter much in the big scheme of their lives).

The differences the couple noticed only led to conflict when they came into contact with each other's families. Kathy and Lukaš feel in some ways that younger generations have less difficulty bridging cultural differences because they have come up in a more globalized world than older generations did. Older adults may have more difficulty understanding and accepting cultural differences (they are more ethnocentric in some ways) which creates many cultural misunderstandings or conflicts (such as when Kathy met Lukaš' family and they thought she was depressed by the way she was interacting with them). Both Kathy and Lukaš are familiar with being judged or being held to the values of the other's culture. This judgment usually comes from their families of origin. Throughout their relationship the couple has had to make concerted efforts to try to understand and accept the perspectives of their families of origin who might view the couple as being more different than they feel they are. Their families do not always approve of certain things the couple does (such as Kathy's father not approving of the couple living together), and the couple spends much time trying to understand the cultural reasons for such

values or judgments. The couple also has had to learn to resist doing certain things the way their families would have them do because of cultural traditions that do not fit how they want to live. When the couple is faced with Othering—when one or the other partner encounters judgment from the other’s family of origin over certain aspects of their lives and cultural values—Kathy and Lukaš must act as a kind of cultural mediator, each explaining their own families to the other and explaining each other to their own families.

Resisting generalizations regarding each other’s cultures is a big part of how Kathy and Lukaš relate to one another. From the beginning of their relationship they have always tried to use quiet observation as a tool to learn about each other’s customs and habits and how these relate to their group culture, although this is not always readily apparent. At times it is difficult to tell which differences stem from culture, which stem from family customs, and which come from personal idiosyncrasies. When asked how they can tell what differences are cultural and what differences are not cultural, the couple says they look for patterns and exceptions, and they certainly try to immerse themselves in each other’s cultures in order to experience for themselves the many forces and influences at play. It was by doing so that Kathy and Lukaš realized that certain conflicts between the two of them had at least a basis in cultural differences—for example, Lukaš’ frequent criticism and pragmatism as well as his more demanding nature had always been a stark contrast with Kathy’s more optimistic and relaxed nature, and over the years the couple has realized that their different ways of relating to people and the world around them are very telling of their different cultures and national histories. These were cultural differences that became more noticeable later on in the relationship and it took much observation and time around each other’s families and friends to understand the cultural basis of how they relate to each other.

Both individuals admit that Kathy had much more cultural learning to do than Lukaš did and that is due to the fact that Lukaš had been living in the United States most of his life when he met Kathy. Lukaš was basically acculturated enough to have a basic and ready understanding of American life, which helped him understand its influences on Kathy's customs and worldview. Kathy, on the other hand, was less acculturated to Czech culture but because of her commitment to the relationship she made even more of an effort to spend time in the country (the couple lived there for a year and a half), immerse herself in the culture, get to know his family, and take on many of traditionally European values and habits, including, for example, how to run a household (e.g. resisting clutter and materialism, adhering to more strict cleaning routines, using inside and outside clothes and shoes, etc). Kathy admits that learning about Czech culture often left her feeling alienated to some extent, and this is partly due to the language barrier that caused some distance and isolation from Lukaš' family. Embracing the culture itself often took her out of her comfort zone—Kathy has many stories of how people in the Czech Republic interacted differently with her than the people in the United States, and how some of their customs (in schools for example) could be considered shocking to American sensibilities. Nevertheless, she views the time she spent in his country as important and helpful in understanding certain dynamics in Lukaš' life and family of origin.

Additionally, the time Kathy spent in the Czech Republic helped her learn his culture well so that she can present herself as culturally competent when around his family of origin. The everyday cultural misunderstandings between her and Lukaš decreased with time to the point where they don't really notice their cultural differences from inside their relationship any longer. Additionally, the amount of negotiation they do now is much less than they did in the beginning of the relationship as they have had to find ways of compromising on most of their

differences already so that they could stay together as long as they did (if their cultural differences had posed insurmountable obstacles in the beginning, they probably would not have lasted together very long). The couple agrees that having a genuine interest in other cultures in general has helped, and that honesty and directness has been their best strategy for coping with cultural differences. According to Kathy and Lukaš, it also takes a less ethnocentric person to make an intercultural relationship work as partners need to be willing to be culturally influenced. Intercultural relationships take adaptability and flexibility and a certain willingness to claim aspects of one's partner's culture as one's own as Kathy did. In doing so, after a while, the different becomes normal and many cultural differences are no longer felt.

*On Negotiation.* Kathy and Lukaš both agree that Kathy is much more “laid back” than Lukaš is. He often thinks his way of doing things should preside, and he is grateful for Kathy's patience and willingness to go along with his preferences. They have found that much conflict in their relationship can be avoided by communicating their preferences clearly and being willing to be influenced in how they do things (from a cultural standpoint). The couple seems to think that if something is really important, one or the other just needs to let it be and go along with it. Trying to understand the cultural reasons for the other person's perspective also seems to make it easier for them to let themselves be culturally influenced.

Whenever possible, Kathy and Lukaš tend to incorporate customs and common practices from both cultures in their everyday lives—often having aspects of Czech culture side-by-side with American culture. For example, they have a neatly kept, organized home that is less cluttered than the customary American home, yet they have many technological gadgets that Lukaš admits being an American habit that he has cultivated over the years. Often this mingling of different cultural traditions helps the couple create new traditions—an example of this is their

habit of eating in and cooking most of their meals, something that is very common in the Czech Republic, although they tend to cook foods more common in the United States, in ways that are much more common in the U.S. as well.

Meeting in the middle is also a part of what the couple reports doing to bring their customary practices together. For example, their rituals around cleaning the house take into consideration that he grew up with a very specific idea of what house cleaning should be like while she grew up with more flexible practices in this area. Now, although she has taken on some of his practices and they share the cleaning, he also admits that there are certain things he does himself because he understands he has very specific ideas about how he wants them done. Alternating ways to do things is also something they have come to do. For example, they try to alternate visits to the two sides of the families during the holidays, Christmas in particular. The geographical distance between the couple and Lukaš' family also has a great bearing on certain decisions the couple face. Holidays, family visits--even plans for their wedding--are all areas of their lives that are greatly affected by the fact that one side of the family lives so far away and such distance must be taken into account. Much planning goes into their wedding, for example, which shows how negotiation between them has to take into account more than just their personal preferences if they want to remain connected to family far away—they must think about family dynamics as well as practical considerations such as financial and time resources available for doing certain things in certain ways (such as having a wedding in the Czech Republic, for example).

The wedding has brought to the surface a great many issues around cultural negotiation. Both Kathy and Lukaš find it important to have friends and family with them for their wedding, and they both strive to infuse cultural meaning into such rituals. Because of this, Lukaš would

like to get married in the Czech Republic, which Kathy does not have much of a problem with except for the fact that many members of her family and social network would not be able to attend the event if it were too far away. Finding a way to do things that is consonant with both cultures (doing things “both ways”) is something they often try to do, but in this instance they fear that having two weddings might be difficult and it might take away from the central idea of coming together in matrimony. Making decisions on a case-by-case basis is also something the couple often does (once again, around the holidays), but they are still not sure of what to do in the case of their wedding which is an occasion that obviously only presents itself once. Kathy and Lukaš continue to talk about the wedding and trying to find ways to resolve the dilemma.

Another area of culturally-based conflict for the couple is the way in which each person prefers to resolve conflict itself. They view their different conflict styles as at least partially based on their different cultures. Lukaš prefers to deal with conflict directly and passionately, by taking on the issues directly and talking them out until they are resolved. Kathy is much less comfortable with conflict and tries to avoid it as much as possible. In an argument she seeks and often finds ways to take herself out of the situation. She often becomes silent and sullen. This obviously does not go over well with Lukaš, who at first could not understand that this was a choice Kathy was making and not just the outcome of feeling “speechless” or hurt. The way they handled conflict started becoming a source of conflict in and of itself. Now that the couple is more aware of this basic difference between the two of them, they try to use aspects of both strategies to manage conflict—she will initially retreat in silence, and he has learned to give her some time before starting to pursue her to try to resolve the problem by talking it out. They view this as a preferred conflict resolution style they have agreed upon and adopted.



The idea of holding on to one's own cultural identity and heritage is a prominent theme in Kathy's and Lukaš' relationship. They view this as important for maintaining their individualities and their sense of connection with family and their groups of origin. Lukaš is very intentional in doing certain things that help him feel more connected to Czech culture—he reads books in the language, visits the country regularly, strives to be around family or speaking on the phone with his family in the Czech Republic regularly, and he keeps up with news from the country. When Kathy lived in the Czech Republic for a year and a half she too felt that it was important to keep up with American culture by reading and keeping in touch with her family.

The couple plans on having children some day. When they do, they want to raise their children biculturally and they realize they will probably be faced with certain issues regarding how to negotiate cultural differences that they have not thought about yet. Their intention to raise their children biculturally is one of the reasons why they find it so important to incorporate aspects of both cultures (especially Czech culture) in their everyday lives and keeping themselves connected with their different cultural heritages.

*Couple 6: Jasmine and Cody*

*On Identity.* Jasmine and Cody met in college, more specifically in a Math class. He describes her as being “exotically beautiful,” and he instantly was attracted to that exotic part of her. Although they had a long period of friendship and mild flirting, she remembers being attracted to him (she says that she has always been attracted to White guys) and flattered by his attention. They formed a friendship over a number of months, and that's all there was between them—a friendship. But as they started getting to know each other they realized they had many things in common, and that they were each “out of the ordinary” in some way. She was classy and beautiful, not to mention interesting, and he was attentive, respectful, and kind to her. She

reports feeling cared for around him. He provided her with the kind of emotional support that she doesn't remember ever having before. They each had little interest on potential partners from their respective cultures, and it was how different the other one was that attracted them to each other. Although she was not looking for or considering a relationship with him in the beginning—after all he was too different from her culturally and religiously for them to ever stand a chance as a couple—he persisted until she was left with no choice to but to gain her parent's approval for him to court her. Their relationship has had to overcome so many obstacles, and they feel so right for each other in spite of their very different cultural backgrounds, that they have come to view their relationship as meant to be in some ways.

Obviously the differences between her Pakistani culture and his “all-American” one were readily noticeable to the two of them. In fact, these differences made it challenging for the young couple to pursue a relationship in the beginning, especially considering the differences in how the Pakistani and American cultures prescribe courting relationships. The more conservative Pakistani culture would not allow her to “date” him in the American sense of the word, and the couple remembers not even being able to leave their college campus together in the beginning, in fear that she would be seen with him and demoralized to her family and social circle. In that sense, the couple was not a couple according to American standards until they were engaged, and much had to be said and done before that could happen. They were genuinely interested in and appreciative of each other's culture, which made it easier for them to take on values of each other's cultures and do things according to what was culturally prescribed from the very beginning. She had been living in the United States with her family for quite a few years so she had already acculturated in some ways, and he got more and more interested in her culture and her religion as he spent time with her as a friend. He learned about Islam—and she taught him

about it per his request—and decided to convert. He says that his decision to do so was very personal and somewhat independent of his intentions toward her. Either way, this is an example of how they had to take on values of each other's cultures (religion being one of them) from the very beginning, in order to make the relationship go forward. This, of course, took much negotiation between them on how to go about things as introducing each other to family, getting engaged, etc. It took willingness on both of their parts to do certain things against each of their cultural norms, which often caused internal conflict (i.e. guilt, stress, doubt, etc). But it was by adopting aspects of each other's culture that Jasmine and Cody were able to present themselves as competent in both cultures, to both families, and thus disprove stereotypes (e.g. American men are not serious about marriage or converting to Islam) and gradually gain family approval when at first there was none (especially on the side of Jasmine's family).

Now that they are married and their relationship is official and legitimate in the eyes of both cultures and both families, Jasmine and Cody couldn't be happier. They report having an excellent relationship with both families, who support them and are always willing to accommodate the couple along with their differences in tastes, preferences, etc. Being devoted and close to family is a value that both Jasmine and Cody hold dearly, and part of the reason why they feel like they were meant for each other: despite their different cultural backgrounds they hold many of the same values. Besides, they view familial support as essential for an intercultural relationship like theirs, and they strive to be as close and loyal to their families as possible. They try to find ways of connecting to the families even in spite of language barriers (she is teaching him to speak her language so that he can feel more like a part of her family). The couple still reports encountering instances of Othering, however, when people around them treat their differences as irreconcilable or try to find something wrong with their relationship in some

way. They do not mind that people notice their differences—they live with these differences everyday and know they are there. It is only when people problematize their relationship because of their cultural differences that they get upset. The couple appreciates their differences and feels like these “make them who they are.” Teaching and learning about their respective cultures is important to them, as is continued questioning of each other’s culturally influenced worldviews. This is how they learn about each other’s values and why they do things a certain way. It is how they deal with their differences—by trying to understand why they are different by taking the perspective of the culture the other person comes from. They do not view their differences as a handicap, but as something that makes their relationship more interesting and even more challenging (in a good way). They also know they are more similar than different where it counts—in their core values. They also view themselves as highly compatible in terms of tastes, worldviews, values, and goals. They only wish people would not be too quick to judge what to outsiders might appear to be a couple who is too different to remain together. Although they come from very different cultural backgrounds, Jasmine and Cody report that they have a high degree of harmony, unity, and appreciation for each other.

Jasmine and Cody view their relationship as an intercultural relationship for sure, and an interracial one at that. This central characteristic of their relationship shapes much of their life together and makes their relationship “uncommon” in many ways—all the way from how it got started and progressed to how they live their conjugal life today. Besides being an intercultural relationship, Jasmine and Cody’s marriage is a love marriage, which is uncommon in her culture. The couple feels like this sets their relationship apart even more from the relationships she grew up around, and is certainly one of the biggest strengths of the relationship itself. The genuine love and care they feel for each other is what keeps them so committed and willing to learn and

adopt aspects of each others cultures and negotiate differences. In their everyday life, the couple tries to blend norms and customs of both of their backgrounds as much as they can. For example, they celebrate Muslim holidays but they also celebrate traditionally Christian holidays that have come to be closely associated with and symbolic of American culture (Christmas, for example). Whenever they have a difference in taste, they keep their own preference for the particular thing or issue in question but try not to impose the preference on the other person. For example, she loves and misses the Pakistani cuisine that she grew up with, but he finds it too spicy, so she tries to cook with less spices at home, and he goes with her to frequent visits to her family's home where she eats the dishes she enjoys most. They also try to do things both ways whenever they can. For example, they stay up late at her family gatherings and wake up early whenever they visit his family. They also have adopted certain values of both cultures, according to what they respect and appreciate and what they reject in their own cultural norms. For example, even though Jasmine comes from a culture where women are taught to always yield and serve the men, she knew once she met Cody that she wanted more shared power and division of labor in their home and now they model the values he grew up with. They are still trying to find ways to deal with some differences which they have not negotiated on yet—for example, certain attitudes and thoughts on raising children. On the other hand, they have come to certain agreements around their differences because they know how important it will be for them to have negotiated certain issues when they have children (for example, the issue around how they each view and treat time). They realize that living with so many differences takes more negotiation, which makes an intercultural relationship like theirs more challenging.

It is exactly because their relationship is challenging that they are all the more proud of it. Jasmine and Cody say that they always had something to prove when it came to their

relationship. There were many people who thought it would never work out because of their differences. It took a great deal of independent thinking and differentiation to pursue the relationship and make it work in spite of what other's say (which is something they think anyone pursuing an intercultural relationship must have). Because divorce and separation is so taboo in Pakistani culture, there is much more pressure for their relationship to succeed. Taking on values of each other's cultures and learning to live a truly bicultural lifestyle also makes it so there is more at stake in the relationship. He has converted (albeit not only because of her), she is now viewed as his wife, and any marital dissolution at this point would mean that to her culture she would be viewed as somehow "damaged." Knowing this motivates the couple to work much harder and put much more commitment into the marriage. They are committed to resolving any conflict they may have and they view this as a strength in their relationship. Their common faith is another huge strength of the relationship (and in fact, they say they would not have had a relationship if Cody had not converted to Islam). They also feel very compatible in the things that matter in a relationship, which keeps them from wanting to change the other person when conflict arises--something they know is not a healthy way to interact in any marriage. Instead, they try to embrace their differences as much as possible, even when there is conflict; after all, they were attracted and chose to be with each other specifically because they were so different.

The couple also recognizes certain weaknesses in their relationship. Their different conflict resolution styles in one of them. They believe that their different ways of viewing conflict and dealing with it is partially culturally based. This is one area of their lives in which it was necessary for them to adopt the preference of one person alone. Cody has a much more direct way of resolving conflict—by talking things out and being very overt about needs, hurts, etc. Jasmine reports being extremely non-confrontational, choosing to sweep problems under the

rug in order to move on and keep the peace. This was something that Cody could not accept, and he insisted on his preference (probably something akin to a cultural value, according to him) because he viewed it as important for him and their relationship. Jasmine is gradually adopting more of a direct conflict resolution style with him as a result, and is starting to see how it has been helpful in their relationship. This phenomenon of learning to interact differently to the other person in a close, meaningful relationship—differently from what one has learned and got used to his or her whole life—is something that Cody and Jasmine say they have found to be a central part of their relationship because it is an intercultural relationship. This is often challenging, but it is also very rewarding to the couple. In fact, the couple has very positive views of intercultural relationships and even some advice to give those who may be considering one. First of all, they feel like the decision to enter an intercultural relationship must be a personal choice that a person must be committed to, even in spite of what others may say, the difficulties they may encounter when dealing with cultural differences, and other obstacles. Jasmine and Cody say that ultimately a person must do what makes the person happy. Although support from the important people in your life is important and should be sought out seriously and with commitment, ultimately a person should follow his or her own heart in deciding whether this type of relationship, with all its challenges, negotiations, and higher stakes, is the right thing for the person. Advice is always good, but ultimately one can only follow one's own lead.

*On Negotiation.* Jasmine and Cody know that cultural differences often cause conflict in a relationship. They are especially susceptible to conflict when they use their own cultural lens to try to understand the other's behavior, each other's family's behavior, or how the other person deals with his or her respective family of origin. So, they find it helpful to learn as much as they can about the other's cultural background and heritage, so that they can use that cultural

framework to make sense of each other's viewpoints and behavior. This is not to say they have overcome all the challenges in their relationship that stem from their cultural differences. Much to the contrary, they often take on the role of each other's "cultural brokers," that is, each other's guide and liaison in trying to adjust to often very different cultural norms. This is a difficult yet necessary and often rewarding role that comes with the territory of sharing their lives with each other. The ways in which they do this cultural brokering work are obvious even in the couple's interviews as they try to explain to each other certain aspects of their cultures or particular behaviors on the part of their respective families of origin.

Jasmine and Cody say they can differentiate cultural differences from personality or family differences pretty easily. They look for patterns in each other's families and their own cultural social circles to tell whether certain norms or practices are common. Besides, ask questions of each other and explain aspects of their own culture as they understand it to each other. They find that it is important to keep on doing this teaching and learning, even as they get more and more adjusted to their relationship with each other, because that is the best way they have not only to learn about each other but also to get educated about each other's cultural values and norms. This is the first step in talking decisions through, which is probably the main strategy the couple has to negotiate around their cultural differences. Jasmine and Cody have come to appreciate many aspects of the other's culture, and in fact, they have taken on many values and norms of each other's cultures as their own. For example, Jasmine appreciates the more egalitarian gender relations and division of labor in Cody's family, and she has rejected some of the sexist cultural norms she grew up with in order to adopt a better balance of power at home with Cody. Sometimes it is easier to adapt to each other's cultural norms than other times—at times it is easier to see where they can give in a little, as with the couple's arrangements around



cooking and preparing food that is pleasing to both palates. Sometimes the differences can be admittedly irritating, especially when there is pressure on one or the other spouse to put that person's own preferences and ways of doing things aside without questioning or compromise (as when Cody feels pressure from her family to wear the traditional dress in her family's social functions).

Many times negotiation occurs naturally, without much direct conversation or strategizing on how to go about certain things. Whenever possible, the couple negotiates differences by blending customs and doing things “both ways”—that is, not trying to pick one cultural norm or custom over the other, but simply integrating both into their schedules and lives. This is true of holiday celebrations. Although Christmas is a traditionally Christian holiday and the couple is Muslim they still do celebrate Christmas because they view it as a cultural custom as well as a religious one. In this sense, they find ways to infuse old cultural customs with new meaning that is personally relevant to them. Adopting a “both/and” perspective in their everyday lives, in terms of blending norms and doing things both ways, requires flexibility and willingness to pay attention to their surroundings and adapt to them. For example, the couple shows much more affection toward each other when around Cody's family of origin than when the couple is around Jasmine's, simply because her family's culture is more conservative when it comes to public displays of affection. It would be fitting to say that Jasmine and Cody have in some ways learned to “do as the Romans do,” as they learn to follow the rules and common practices of their different groups according to what is required from them. They find ways to help each other do this, through some “benign manipulation” (e.g. when he tells her they need to leave at 6 so she will be ready at 7 when they actually need to leave). This is part of their continued efforts to present themselves as culturally competent in both cultural circles.

Some differences are a bit more difficult to negotiate and there are many things which the couple is still trying to work out and find a way to compromise on. They understand that sometimes negotiation takes time and whenever possible they try to take their time with certain issues that do not need to be worked out right away (for example, certain aspects of raising children, such as when and how to put them to bed). Meeting in the middle—which involves each person letting go of some preferences in order to have the other person accept some of their demands—is their preferred way of negotiating on these difficult issues, however, they do admit that there are certain things they cannot compromise on. Whenever they feel like something is really important for the other person to compromise in, they try to just accept and adapt to that way of doing things. They pick their battles as best they can. For example, Cody feels he cannot compromise on the more strict way of viewing and handling time, certainly an American value he grew up with. But the couple has found ways to compromise on how to resolve conflict. Cody finds it absolutely necessary for them to adopt open and direct communication around conflict, so Jasmine is gradually learning to deal with conflict in a way that is very different than how she was brought up. He tries to give her sometime alone to reflect before pursuing a discussion about issues that come up, and in this way they are creating a new conflict resolution style that involves some sacrifices on both of their parts. The couple says that making sacrifices is sometimes necessary, but that they do it because they genuinely care about each other and part of that is looking out for each other's needs (such as Jasmine's need to be with her family due to feeling homesick for her family and her culture at times, as she is still adjusting to living separately from them).

The couple reports that it is extremely important for them to keep aspects of both cultures in their everyday lives. The fact that Jasmine is acculturated to the U.S. and the couple lives here

makes it easier for them to keep many aspects of American culture in their everyday lives. But one way to keep connected to her culture is by connecting with her family of origin. Learning each other's languages is essential in this respect. Jasmine and Cody have found that the language barrier between Cody and her family of origin poses some challenges in how he relates to the family. She is gradually teaching him the language and he puts forth a lot of effort to try to learn it although it is a struggle at times. He often finds himself gravitating toward the people in her family he can communicate with in English, and she often finds it very difficult to translate for him during their visits to her family or other more official social functions. The couple hopes to raise their children bicultural and teach them Urdu from young. This is also perhaps a way for them to keep connected to both cultures and become bicultural themselves. They like the idea of being bicultural because they view this as making them more well-rounded individuals.

Becoming bicultural is perhaps a byproduct of an intercultural relationship such as theirs.

All in all, the couple views intercultural relationships in many aspects as better than relationships between people from the same cultural background. He even jokes with his friends that all they need is go find themselves "some nice foreign girls" to marry. They view intercultural relationships as more interesting and more fun because of all the learning and teaching one must do as part of it. Having to learn about your spouse's culture in order to better understand your spouse makes your relationship unique and keeps you "on your toes." The couple does agree that in order for the relationship to work, however, the partners must have a lot of respect for each other's cultural backgrounds, and they must be willing to stretch their comfort levels to experiment new things.

*Couple 7: Jina and Marcus*

*On identity.* The couple met in graduate school. Jina is from Korea and Marcus was born and raised in the United States. Marcus is Jewish and identifies with the Jewish culture very strongly although he is not orthodox. In fact, the couple views their relationship as perhaps a Korean-Jewish bicultural relationship. They prefer the term bicultural because it has the connotation of two different parts mixing with each other until they become a new form made up of both parts equally. They shy away from the term intercultural to define their relationship because it seems to draw attention to the gap or distance between their two cultures, which they find innocuous if not altogether irrelevant.

Jina and Marcus describe feeling most attracted to each other's intellect upon meeting, although they were also physically attracted to each other. Perhaps one of the main attractions for Jina was that Marcus seemed very worldly and knowledgeable about different cultures. They seemed to immediately connect on their love for foreign cuisine, good wine, films, and political science. All in all, Jina soon noticed that Marcus was different from all the other guys she had come in contact with—he was friendly and open (to connection, to different experiences, etc), and did not seem to be a “Macho Guy” like so many of her Korean counterparts that she had come in contact with, especially here in the United States. Marcus also did not seem to fit into the irresponsible “playboy” image that Koreans (such as her parents) have of American men. That was a stereotype the couple was soon able to dissipate once Marcus met Jina's family later in the relationship.

At first the couple noticed their cultural differences in the way that people notice interesting facts around them—they never thought their different cultures were a problem or something to be overcome. Even today they notice differences in how they go about certain

things in their daily lives, but they mainly appreciate these differences and the cultural exchange between them. Part of not feeling like they are very different from each other comes from each individual feeling like they are in many ways different from their cultural group. For example, Jina talked about her experiences in dating Korean men and her dissatisfaction with their adherence to rigid and often sexist gender roles and their dissatisfaction with her tall figure and her often stubborn, outspoken and independent spirit. Jina has always prized independence, her career and education, and being able to think for herself—attributes that certain Korean men are not necessarily fond of in a wife. In many ways she felt an intercultural relationship would suit her better simply because men from other cultural backgrounds may adhere to less rigid gender scripts. Indeed, in their marriage, Marcus and Jina work very hard to strive for gender equality which starts with equitable shares of household labor. Furthermore, Marcus clearly states that he came to love Jina for all of her characteristics that do not fit within the Korean stereotype of how a woman should be and behave. Throughout the relationship, Marcus also came to appreciate that Jina was very different from the high-maintenance, often suffocating Jewish women he dated and was in contact with. Whether these are cultural stereotypes the couple has internalized matters less than the fact the couple uses these cultural images to define themselves in relation to each other.

Over the course of their relationship they have come to realize that they do not actually feel they are very different from each other (from their vantage point inside the relationship) but those on the outside really do view them as different and tend to highlight the cultural differences between them through Othering, a term they use to point out this phenomenon. Othering refers to the ways people who hardly know them personally and as a couple tend to make rash assumptions about their relationship, making comments and questions that are often insensitive

or even insulting and of too personal a nature to be asked of people one has just met. They have encountered comments such as these from Marcus' family of origin (mostly in the very beginning of the relationship when they were still trying to understand how Jina measured up to their expectations and stereotypes of Korean women), some Korean acquaintances, and strangers they encounter in their everyday lives. The comments are often shocking and insensitive, spanning between inappropriate questions all the way to bigoted comments regarding ethnicity and cultural customs. Some people ask them about their different cultural backgrounds because they want to learn something new, and the couple does not mind these questions. These sound and feel very different from Othering which tries to "locate" the couple in a map of healthy or unhealthy, better or worse relationships. In order to cope with Othering the couple really tries to avoid people who make these inappropriate comments, although that is not always possible. They often have to bite their tongue or simply try to politely explain that just because they were born and raised in different countries, it does not mean they are incapable of a healthy marriage.

Jina and Marcus strongly resist the idea that cultural differences cause problems in their relationship. One way they do this is by taking a broader view of what culture is. The couple states they share common worldviews and values despite their different nationalities, and this to them makes them more alike than different. They share political views, the values of generosity and hospitality, similar views on family and friendship, and a common interest in culture. These shared values help them minimize their cultural differences and individualize their relationship—that is, look at their lives and relationship as a unique, individual phenomenon and not as an example of an intimate cross-cultural encounter. They view their relationship as unique on its own, and not simply because it is an intercultural relationship. They also strive to individualize each other as much as possible in an attempt to not lose the person by focusing the culture per se.

Finally, throughout the interviews the couple demonstrates a certain reluctance to take inappropriate comments and questions on the part of family and acquaintances personally. Although they are aware of the problematic nature of these comments, and can even explain why certain people cling to these (e.g. fear and wariness of difference, ignorance of other cultures, less education, etc), the couple's reluctance to take them to heart serves as a kind of radical acceptance of cultural differences and values and a radical resistance to even consider the idea that their intercultural relationship is somehow exotic and therefore more difficult.

This effort to individualize their relationship is not a denial of cultural differences, however. Much to the contrary, the couple continues to notice and embrace both cultures and whatever differences they encounter. For example, they talk and joke to their friends (many of which are in intercultural relationships themselves) about the Othering they encounter as well as the funny and noteworthy aspects of being in an intercultural relationship. They also radically embrace each other's culture by taking on both individuals' cultural values and symbols into their everyday lives. For example, they eat Korean food, watch Korean films, enjoy Jewish comedy and humor, celebrate Jewish holidays with friends, and try to learn and use Yiddish words and phrases in everyday life. This embracing of cultural symbols also involves particular symbolic acts that help the couple connect with each other by demonstrating interest and enjoyment of the other's culture (for example, she bakes certain delicacies he grew up with and closely associates with his cultural background). Embracing each other's cultures also results in a presentation of a self that is cross-culturally competent. Intercultural competence to the couple seems to be a form of image management meant to bridge gaps—both concrete and those imagined by outsiders looking in. By embracing each other's cultures and showing intercultural

competence, each individual also debunks cultural stereotypes that outsiders looking into the relationship may judge them by.

Nowadays the couple talks eloquently about how they view their relationship and how they mix their two cultural backgrounds to create a bicultural or multicultural reality for themselves. They view intercultural relationships as having an added dimension to them. Intercultural relationships, according to the couple, are inherently enriching because they give the people involved in them a chance to teach and learn about cultures, a task they view as extremely fun and interesting. This process ends in making each person in the relationship a bit bicultural themselves, something Jina and Marcus really prize. In order to create this bicultural or multicultural reality Jina and Marcus say they had to be inherently *interested in* each other's cultures and they had to get to know these extremely well—by visiting each other's countries, mixing and mingling with each other's families, and generally learning everything there is to know about each other's backgrounds, even the language. They also had to let themselves be culturally influenced in the sense that they had to embrace some of each other's cultural values and symbols as their own. Jina and Marcus were also always attentive to each other's worldviews and ways to be in the world, which taught them much regarding each other's cultural backgrounds, although they still have difficulty differentiating what's cultural and what's family culture, and what's individual characteristics. The couple thinks that making an intercultural relationship work requires making a mental shift from fearing difference to embracing it. The couple certainly has rituals around bringing the two cultures together, signifying their own union as people from different backgrounds. But all in all, Jina and Marcus say that the intercultural aspects of their relationship has fallen to the background now—it is not something they think about every instant or even every day. They see how their different cultures shape who they are



and how they come together in creating a common reality, but ultimately, they have come to see their differences as common and in many ways as minute. These are highlighted only by the occasional miscommunication around language or comments by each other's families of origin that show them they are being judged through each partner's cultural standards (something that often works in their favor).

*On negotiation.* It is often difficult for the couple to tell which differences between them are due to each other's personal idiosyncrasies and which differences are accounted for by their different cultural backgrounds. Whenever possible, they tell each other which practices they view as culturally based and important to them as individuals. It is also important for each person to pay attention to patterns in their partner's actions and take an interest in what the partner does. It may be, however, that what is cultural is in the eye of the beholder, and it really does not matter whether certain characteristics of each person are cultural or not, as long as they are respected and differences—whatever their source—are dealt with through negotiation and acceptance. Jina and Marcus almost seem to prefer to err on the side of individualizing—that is, thinking that their differences stem from their different personalities as opposed to their differences in culture. This may be a negotiation strategy in and of itself—a strategy that perhaps serves to minimize cultural stereotypes and the offensive nature of viewing a person solely as a representative of one's group.

In negotiating everyday life in light of their differences, Jina and Marcus seem to take the approach best described as “live and let live” in which each person accepts and respects (and does not try to change) the other person's views and preferences. For example, she takes “Korean naps” which basically means that she takes naps pretty much whenever she has a few minutes to spare, no matter where she is. He has come to understand the cultural and personal

significance of this practice to her, and he leaves it alone even if he does not always think it's a good idea. Jina, on the other hand, has learned to accept that Marcus likes some TV shows that she doesn't, and when he wants to watch those, she will entertain herself with something else. This practice seems to take a good deal of personal independence and differentiation in the sense that each person needs to be comfortable with holding on to their own heritage or personal preferences without forcing the other to go along with them. This practice also seems to translate into the couple's stance of figuring out what is really important for the other person (from a cultural standpoint) and accepting it without reservations. This strategy helps each person feel his or her cultural identity is being respected and not controlled. Conflict arises when one of the two feels their cultural practices are not being respected (and, indirectly, they themselves are not being respected).

The couple also renegotiates certain tasks in every instance. This is a strategy that seems to fit well for coming to agreements on issues that are not easily resolved or that the couple has difficulty using only one partner's principles on. For example, Jina is much more reserved, especially with the house, than Marcus is. This means she does not like to show the house to many guests and Marcus does. They renegotiate this issue every time someone comes over—whether they will show the house to those guests or not, which parts they will show, etc. Another strategy the couple uses is that of alternating. They alternate on doing things according to each other's preferences. For example, they alternate the movies they rent. Jina and Marcus also have fallen into culturally-consonant ways of doing certain things, such as cleaning, cooking, and taking care of the house. For example, Marcus is better at cleaning than Jina is, partially because he is accustomed to all the cleaning products found in the United States. Each one respects the

way the other does things, and if it is important for one of them to have certain things (like laundry) done in very specific ways, then that person takes on that task, doing it how they see fit.

Jina and Marcus have noticed they have different conflict resolution styles, and they admit these may be influenced by cultural characteristics. Marcus talks about growing up in a family where everyone yelled and in contact with other families that yelled, which seems to be characteristic of Jewish families. Marcus confesses being much more comfortable with Jina's "yelling" than he is with her silence. Jina on the other hand is comfortable with Marcus' use of a code word to signify that Jina needs to respect a particular boundary of his ("don't start"), and this seems to be consonant with her family of origin's way of talking about conflict in less volatile ways. The couple has, as a result, fallen into an agreed upon (even if indirectly) preferred conflict resolution style that involves some of each of the characteristic practices mentioned above (e.g. stating the complaint or anger or frustration directly and without much reservation, and using a code phrase to signify when the other is dangerously close to stepping on one's boundaries).

The couple also talks about the importance of letting yourself be influenced in how you do things. This takes not only a great deal of willingness to teach and to learn according to what the occasion requires, but also to involve your partner in your decisions and "meet in the middle". This term refers to the idea that one must give in on certain things in order to get what they want in other things. It also refers to the flexibility necessary in their relationship—each one must be at least partially flexible in how to go about accomplishing certain tasks. And the couple also talks about how important it is not to let faux pas and other cultural miscommunications permeate the relationship with tension, anxiety, and rancor. Joking and having fun in these

moments is perhaps the best way to process and deal with such incidents (something the couple does even in the interview, without any direct talk about it as a negotiation strategy).

Overall, Jina and Marcus find it important to note that the active negotiation in their relationship has in many ways decreased with time. Over the years they have come across differences and found ways to resolve them or negotiate around them, and nowadays it is just a matter of keeping up with those prior arrangements in a type of “maintenance negotiation” which is so subtle it becomes difficult to realize it is taking place. Time has in many ways pushed the cultural aspects of the relationship to the background—that is, it influences what is going on in the couple’s everyday lives but in subtle ways that are often imperceptible to the couple, like white noise that becomes imperceptible after a while. From embracing each other’s cultures Jina and Marcus also must have become more alike over time, thus minimizing whatever differences were there to begin with. Or, if nothing else, the different has become normal.

*Couple 8: Isabella and Gus*

*On Identity.* Gus was Isabella’s instructor in a college course when they met. They went out as friends a few times after the course was over and became attracted to each other. They did not pay much attention to their cultural differences when they first started dating. Although Isabella admits being attracted to certain things about Gus that made him more exotic (his accent, his worldly knowledge and interest, the way he talks, etc) the couple was mainly attracted to each other as individuals. They each thought the other out of the ordinary in some ways. In fact, even today, although they are aware of the intercultural aspect of their relationship the couple does not view it as central to the identity of their relationship. As Isabella puts it, she’s “just never met anyone like him.

Isabella and Gus do not really feel their cultural differences when it is just the two of them going about their everyday routine. This is perhaps due to Gus having lived in the United States for many years, having brought up his daughter in this country, and being acculturated to American culture in many ways. Gus views himself as more tolerant of certain ways and idiosyncrasies of US society because of his long experience in this country, and this tolerance obviously makes it easier to have a long-term, committed relationship with an American. The couple also reports having very similar, compatible tastes, preferences, and values despite their different cultural backgrounds. Isabella rejects many aspects of her own culture, especially the unpredictability and narrow-mindedness she associates with the Southern culture in which she grew up. Her feeling like she doesn't entirely fit into her cultural milieu actually makes her feel more at home in her relationship with Gus and the values he espouses, because these seem more fitting to her as a person. She contrasts the easy compatibility she feels to Gus, someone seemingly so different, with the difficult and unfulfilling relationship she was in before meeting him, with someone from her same cultural background, but with whom she felt she had little in common.

The few cultural differences the couple notices in their everyday life together are small and seemingly insignificant—like the way the house is decorated or certain food items they prefer and consume. They insist whatever differences there are between the two of them are not problematic at all, and instead, are enriching of their relationship and of themselves as individuals. Isabella says she has learned much from Gus and continues doing so, and Gus also views the blending of certain cultural characteristics in their relationship as interesting and enriching. The couple embraces and appreciates their differences because they view some of these as making each other who they are (for example, Isabella believes Gus is more sensitive to

her needs as a woman than American men she has dated, and she believes this has to do in part with his cultural background). The flexibility in gender roles in their shared life is also something Isabella attributes to their different cultures. At times the couple has difficulty differentiating group culture from family culture and individual idiosyncrasies, but either way they accept each other as they are without trying to change or criticizing one another for their unique ways.

Isabella and Gus are also reluctant to generalize about aspects of each other's cultures given their individual experiences with each other. They try to pay attention to patterns to understand what's cultural and what is not. Their relationship is still very new and in its beginning, which means that they still have not had much time or opportunity to go through events and experiences that really helps couples learn about each other's cultural backgrounds. For example, at the first interview they were still planning her first trip to Germany, accompanying him.

When asked what they wish others would know or understand about their relationship the couple says that people need to understand that intercultural relationships are really not very different from intracultural ones. The challenges and dynamics are very similar. The couple actually pays much more attention to their differences when around other people who tend to hold them to particular standards (an example of this is the different reactions they get from Americans and Germans regarding the age discrepancy in their relationship). Gus comments that the more sociocultural differences between two partners, the more challenging an intercultural relationship can be. Isabella and Gus also state that they were not necessarily looking for an intercultural relationship (or an intracultural one for that matter), but they embarked on such enterprise because of their compatibility and admiration for each other as individuals, not as representatives of their cultures.

*On Negotiation.* Isabella and Gus notice their cultural differences the most as they relate to their different tastes and preferences on such things as food, routines around the house, and preferences for everyday activities such as watching TV. Perhaps their main strategy for negotiating around their different culturally influenced ways is to respect each other's space and preferences and not imposing on each other. They also try to do things both ways as much as possible—for example, they blend certain aspects of both cultures and do a little bit of both when it comes to cooking and sharing meals, choosing TV programs, etc.

Isabella tries to show interest in Gus' cultural heritage in small ways such as making an effort to share in his interests and learn German. Learning a language goes a long way toward learning about one's culture, the couple thinks. They view this willingness to let oneself be culturally influenced as important in their relationship because it is a show of appreciation and care from one person to another. They do understand, however, that it is impossible for anyone to love and embrace every aspect of someone else's culture, so they try to keep a sense of humor about the things they do not like about each other's cultural heritage (such as political decisions in each other's countries, different ways of relating to people and families, etc). Gus also says that he needs to watch his language around these controversial issues more, in order to avoid hurting or offending Isabella.

Although Gus has lived in the US for many years he still feels like he is not completely a part of this culture. In some ways, his home away from home is not entirely a home. This is perhaps why he reports it is so important for him to keep aspects of his cultural heritage in his everyday life. He does this, for example, by surrounding himself with cultural symbols and mementos of Germany, by eating and preparing the German foods he enjoys, by listening to music from his country, in his native language, and by reading the literature and keeping up with

the news from his home country. He does admit, however, that he is very acculturated to the United States in some ways. Because of this he feels like it is easier for him (and them as a couple) to forget or put aside cultural differences, since “the different becomes normal” in a way.

*Couple 9: Eva and Macedonio*

*On Identity.* From its very beginning, Eva and Macedonio's relationship pointed to its intercultural aspect: they met in a culturally diverse place, an English-as-Second- Language-School, where Macedonio was teaching English and Eva was learning it (although she was not his student). They both report being almost immediately physically attracted to each other, even in spite of themselves. Both were starting new lives--Macedonio had just moved to the Southeast (from California) after divorcing his first wife, and Eva had just moved to the United States from Colombia, in search of a new life with more opportunities and a way out of certain cultural norms that she did not like in her home country. Macedonio's first wife was Filipino and as a consequence of the hardships he went through in that marriage and its subsequent failure, he held very negative views of intercultural relationships. He felt, as he still does, that intercultural relationships can be more challenging than non-intercultural ones because they involve more negotiation and more learning. He remembers feeling attracted to Eva but at the same time being very wary of being with someone so culturally different from himself. Eva, on the other hand, was ready and searching for “someone different,” as she had already decided she did not want a relationship with the stereotypical machista and "cheating" men of her culture. Nowadays, as they look back, they are still not sure what pulled them in each other's direction, but they can see hints of fate or a bigger plan through their history together, especially considering all the obstacles they had to overcome.



Macedonio can now safely say that his experience with intercultural relationships was better the second time around. He found in Eva someone who was actively interested in his culture as much as he was interested in hers. She also found in him a guy who was different from the rest--respectful, patient, kind, and interested in learning about other ways of life. This is not to say that their relationship did not have its fair share of obstacles, but they gave themselves time. The first challenge they faced that was unique to their relationship was the language barrier. When they met, Macedonio did not speak very much Spanish at all, and Eva was still learning English. Communicating was difficult and required much patience as he attempted to speak Spanish to her and she attempted to speak English to him. Gradually they immersed themselves in each other's languages as well as in each other's cultures, and this is what made all the difference in making their relationship work. Macedonio's experience in his first marriage taught him that being insulated in one's own culture is harmful to an intercultural relationship. Partners in these relationships need to be willing to embrace each other's cultures (as symbolized in language, customs, values, and cultural symbols such as music and food) and to let themselves be culturally influenced, knowing and accepting that this process will fundamentally change who they are. This required a lot of hard work--a lot of time, stumbling, learning, and teaching, but they did it because somewhere along the way they got committed to making it work with each other and the commitment itself made them work harder. All this hard work was also fun to do--they genuinely enjoyed learning about each other's cultural worlds through visiting each other's home places, joining with their families, learning the language, becoming familiar with the food, music, customs, and other symbols, and actively seeking people that share the same cultural heritage as themselves. Sharing these experiences meant being closer to each other.

In the beginning of their relationship, Eva and Macedonio noticed many cultural differences between themselves. Some they learned to overcome, some they learned to accept because they were not things they could change. Another challenge unique to their intercultural relationship was learning about everyday concepts related to each other's cultures. For example, Macedonio had to learn that the Colombian concepts of time that Eva adhered to were very different from his American view of time. Until he realized this difference, there was conflict marked by misunderstandings and hurt feelings between them. They learned to overcome this particular difference by adhering to his concept of time when dealing with the mainstream culture they live in and adhering to her more lenient time schedules when surrounded by her friends and family from Colombia. Another difference they noticed is that his concept of partying and "having a good time" was different from hers, and it required some modeling on her part. One difference they had to just accept and work around surrounds their different ideas regarding saving and spending money (she feels the need to save money for emergencies and such, and he is much less frugal than she is).

As much as the couple reports appreciating the differences and cultural exchange between them, they also report that it is very important for each of them to hold on to his or her own cultural values and symbols by eating the food that is typical to their respective countries, by listening to music they each grew up with, using their languages in everyday life, keeping in touch with family and friends (even when geographically distant as in Eva's case), and by watching certain programming on TV that is culturally relevant. Sometimes the couple has difficulty differentiating group culture from family culture and individual idiosyncrasies. Through their time together, they came to appreciate each other's cultures and even take on some of each other's values, to the point where they have created a multicultural reality for themselves

and became a bit bicultural themselves (for example, they decided to consciously resist the materialistic lifestyle so common in the United States and less common in Colombia). In this sense, the different became normal to them. This merging, in turn, made it so they don't really notice their cultural differences anymore—at least not as much as they once did. It is as if the role of culture in their relationship has fallen to the background. They view this as a result of each of them becoming less ethnocentric, which they think is one of the most important benefits of being in an intercultural relationship. Additionally, time has also shown that they share many values and worldviews despite their different cultures.

Eva and Macedonio say that intercultural relationships are more enriching and complex because they require more negotiation, but they know that not everything about these relationships is fun and games. The couple has encountered many instances of ethnocentrism, especially by their families of origin. They often find themselves being pressured to adhere to certain cultural scripts that do not seem suitable for them. For example, Eva's family insists that the couple take on certain gender role scripts the couple finds too strict. The couple finds different ways to resist this pressure and, instead, strive for gender equality in their marriage. Some ways the couple has learned to cope with these pressures is through joking, refusing to take potentially offensive incidents personally, and much philosophical debating amongst themselves. Through this process they came to realize they don't really fit in (or want to fit in) with their respective cultural groups. This often creates certain discomforts with each other's families of origin, but the couple is slowly learning to accept each other's families and their different ways. They are also gradually learning to debunk certain stereotypes each of their families believes of the other's culture. For example, the idea that Americans expect all expenses to be split in exact halves, and that Colombians party too much. It is through contact with

relatives and friends that the couple is reminded of their different backgrounds, which speaks to the idea that they really view others as highlighting their cultural differences.

Nowadays the couple hardly ever thinks of their relationship as intercultural, and in many ways it stopped being so once both of them took on values from the other's culture. The amount of negotiation has also significantly decreased as the couple has gradually worked through many disagreements. Now it's just a matter of maintaining arrangements they have made in the beginning, as a sort of "negotiation maintenance." Presently, they choose to view their relationship as like any other and themselves as individuals instead of as members of another culture. They consider the openness and honesty in their relationship as perhaps its most unique strength—which has helped them negotiate through their cultural differences in many ways. As they look to the future and think about having children, they realize certain cultural negotiations might come up again when they do have kids. They have already agreed that they want to raise their children bicultural.

*On Negotiation.* Eva and Macedonio can speak very eloquently about their difficulties in bridging their cultural differences in the beginning of the relationship. It is no wonder, then, that the couple can also point out very concrete ways they found to work through these differences. Perhaps the most important thing they did in the beginning of the relationship was to make a concerted effort to get to know each other's cultures well. At first they just noticed differences, not trying to change anything about the other person. Once it became clear to them they were seeing cultural differences instead of just personal idiosyncrasies (by getting to know the cultures well, by looking for patterns and exceptions among the other person's cultural counterparts, and by telling each other what was culturally relevant and important to them as individuals), they started trying to put aside their own assumptions and views about the world to try to fully

understand the other person's perspective as an equally valid and rational view of the world. They also made an effort to understand how the other's culture influenced that person's reasons for thinking, feeling, or behaving a certain way. From then on, it became easier to let themselves be influenced by the other person's culture, which is not to say this process did not often take them out of their individual comfort zones.

Over the years the couple has learned to let go of certain cultural scripts they adhered to for the sake of harmony and equitability. This is done especially when one or the other person does not necessarily view his or her own way of doing things as especially important to who they are and who they want to be in the relationship. This is also done when it is obvious that certain cultural scripts are very important to the other person (such as her urge to save money and be more frugal than he is used to being). This willingness to "let go" for the sake of peace points out a commitment to accepting the other person as he or she is—something they only gradually learned to do. Of course, certain negotiations take into account the dominant culture in which they live (such as how to conceptualize time). If they were to suddenly move to another country or when they find themselves within a social milieu that abides by different standards, they also change the ways they behave to become consonant with the expectations of that particular social group. This flexibility in terms of negotiating according to priorities only shows the couple's efforts to demonstrate their cross cultural competence.

Another important strategy for cultural negotiation within their relationship is what they term "meeting in the middle." This involves giving up some preferences (perhaps those that are not too important to one's sense of self and fulfillment) in order to get the other person to accept and go along with the cultural scripts or preferences that one considers more important. Eva and Macedonio agree that meeting in the cultural middle creates balance in their relationship and is

largely responsible for the eradication of large conflict areas such as what kind of foods to consume. When meeting in the middle is not possible, the couple finds it that it is important for each person to be comfortable holding on to their cultural values without trying to make the other person go along with it.

Another aspect of their relationship that requires some negotiation is how to manage other people's expectations of their relationship and their own expectations of their families of origin and their behavior. This is perhaps the most important way in which they cope with the Othering they encounter in their everyday lives. In terms of managing their own expectations of their families of origin, Eva and Macedonio have each learned to serve as cultural mediators to each other, by explaining differences, making plans on how to cope with certain difficulties ahead of time (such as how to handle their families different expectations of how to celebrate the holidays), and simply learning what is important and what is not important to share with their families. These management techniques are only possible because the couple has really made an effort to accept both of their families of origin as they are. Management of other people's expectations of their relationship is more problematic, however, because they often resist the pressure to abide by certain cultural scripts simply because they are expected to. For example, the couple strives for gender equality in their relationship by refusing to have Eva be subservient to Macedonio by serving him his food at the dinner table and as he comes home from work as a traditional Colombian wife would. In fact, when it comes to gender, they really have made an effort to be very open in discussing how they prefer to view gender roles and treat the issue of gender scripts—and this was done because they know differences in this area can cause much conflict in a relationship. And finally, another way the couple has found to negotiate these difficulties is to joke about and keep a sense of humor about their relationship and their cultural

differences, which has really helped them deconstruct certain cultural scripts they grew up with and become willing to talk about and negotiate around even difficult and taboo issues.

When asked if it is always clear to them if their differences stem from culture or from individual personality characteristics, the couple stated that cultural patterns are often clear to them, which makes it easier to determine that some of each other's behaviors are culturally based. Often, however, they find it difficult to know for sure. Macedonio doesn't think there is much point in trying to figure out what's cultural and what's personal simply because he thinks he deals with personal and cultural differences the same way (stated above). Eva, however, thinks that personal differences are more difficult to negotiate around than cultural differences, because one can learn about the other's culture and try to take on some of those values, which is not always possible with personal differences.

*Couple 10: Melanie and Hugo*

*On Identity.* Melanie and Hugo met when they were working at Disney World. Melanie was a college student at the time, and Hugo had come from Italy to the US to work, through an international exchange program. Melanie describes herself as being fairly culturally isolated (and insulated) at the time—she grew up in a fairly heterogeneous neighborhood and always thought that was how things were supposed to be. In fact, when she was given a choice on whether to room with an American or a foreigner in the apartments that Disney provided the employees, Melanie opted for the first option because at the time she thought that was what she “should” do. Soon, however, she came into contact with the large foreign community employed at Disney, and became interested in Hugo and his culture as well as other cultures in general. At first, they were just friends. Hugo approached Melanie on the bus, going to work, and invited her to a party in his apartment. She decided to go and soon realized that there were only women at the party,

when she arrived, which was okay with her since she was not attracted to him at first. They became friends, and he says that he appreciated her patience in explaining certain things about life in the United States to him. She helped him choose and buy a used car. In a way, she acted as his cultural broker, teaching him language, culture, etc. Melanie says that Hugo was always really interested and curious about American culture—from the very beginning he wanted to learn about the people, the customs, and the language, and become a part of it all. They still remember fondly the cultural misunderstandings and faux-pas on his part, such as when he started opening jars of spaghetti sauce in the grocery store, amazed at how many varieties of ready-made sauce there were or when he bought and tried root beer thinking it was real beer. He also slowly started introducing her to his culture. At first, it was mainly through his cooking dishes from Italian cuisine for her. Gradually, their friendship progressed to dating. She became attracted to his “foreignness” and viewed him as somehow out of the ordinary or exotic. He viewed her the same way, and still describes her as different from any other person he ever had a relationship with. He says that she looked, thought and acted differently from Italian women or any other person he had been in contact with and that was fascinating to him. He also enjoyed the idea of saying to his friends and family he was dating an American. They noticed many cultural differences between the two of them and embraced these as interesting and desirable. In either case, in the beginning she really didn’t think their relationship was serious or long-lasting.

Looking back on their relationship, Melanie and Hugo realize that perhaps the shock of getting along so well with each other was too much to take at first, especially for Hugo. He broke up with her after a month of dating. He says that he knew that she was the one and that scared him. At the same time, however, he also wanted more time to enjoy the partying and non-commitment of his new life in the United States—something that young people like him in Italy



were not accustomed to. She reports being heart-broken. About a month later, she wrote him a letter to say goodbye, as she knew he would be leaving the country soon (in about another month, when his exchange program ended). The letter somehow made Hugo realize he wanted to be with Melanie, and the couple got back together, this time dating more seriously, especially because they knew he would be going away soon. At the end of that one month, Hugo indeed had to leave, and he went to London to work. This is when they say their relationship got serious and they got highly committed to each other fairly fast. They had to be—after all, he was out of the country and they had to find some way for him to come back into the US for them to be together. He searched and searched for a few months, and finally was able to get a work visa to work in a large hotel in Atlanta (he did not want to rush into marrying her just so they could be together). She moved from her parents' home up North to be with him, but he visited her parents and declared his commitment to her first.

The story of their engagement is a story that highlights their cultural differences in a singular way. That was perhaps one of the first times they had to bridge certain cultural differences. Coming from a culture in which diamond engagement rings are not the norm, he ended up getting a ring that didn't look like an engagement ring, which was confusing to her at first. He also had to speak to her parents and declare his intentions, and being that he was their house guest at the time, this posed certain challenges for him. He also did not want to make it seem like he was marrying her just to stay in the country, so he had to make a commitment without necessarily proposing marriage at first. All ended well, and her parents were satisfied with the arrangement and Hugo's intentions toward Melanie (which was one of the pre-requisites for her to move to Atlanta to live with him before being married) but they still describe their

engagement as non-traditional. Once they moved in together the cultural differences started becoming more noticeable, and the couple reports having a lot of conflict at the time.

Although they were (and still are) committed to gender equity and power sharing, and although Hugo grew up in a home where he was expected to contribute to household chores and activities even when they did not fit into the traditional male gender role, Melanie and Hugo still experienced some conflict over the household division of labor. They had different ways of doing things—such as laundry, ironing, cooking, etc—and it was difficult for them to get used to each other's expectations of how things should be done. They think much of their differences on these seemingly small, everyday preferences are culturally based, which made it even the more difficult for them to understand why each other was so adamant about having things done a certain way. The line between cultural differences and differences that stem from different family cultures is often blurry, however, and the couple admits that they may differ in expectations due to how they were raised. The couple reports that negotiation was very difficult at first and they really did not have a good strategy for compromising around such differences. Both spouses agree, however, that Hugo does not fit the stereotype of the macho Italian man who insists on a subjugated wife—something she appreciates in him--and they try to fight this stereotype in the way they conduct their household and their family even today. He actively rejects this aspect of his culture and feels like he doesn't fit into the norm in that sense. Over time, the couple has learned to overcome certain areas of conflict by trying to be less reactive and trying to do things as the other prefers—this strategy is especially useful when it comes to household chores. Some idiosyncratic differences between the two of them still exist of course, and are still a source of conflict.

Hugo's adaptation to American life and culture was also another source of conflict and stress for the couple. He had a really hard time getting used to the more structured, rule-governed ways of life in the US. Melanie was often frustrated and stressed over trying to get Hugo to understand that it was important for him to follow certain seemingly basic rules in American society, such as traffic laws, laws regarding alcohol consumption (specific to the south of the US), etc. All these rules caused a certain extent of culture shock for Hugo, who became very homesick for a while, and still is at times. In some ways, the couple has come to realize that a home away from home will never feel completely like home, but that is okay for them since they realize that living in the United States is the best option when it comes to work and career opportunities for both of them. The issue of living far from home is only one example of how intercultural relationships can require more sacrifices on the part of the couple. It does help, however, when the foreign spouse comes to the new country with the intention and willingness to learn about the culture, embrace it, and take on some of its values as his or her own, as Hugo did. He says that having a genuine interest in American culture and all cultures in general, as well as trying to do things in ways that are consonant with the mainstream culture in the US, really helped him acculturate and start seeing the benefits of life in the US. This is not to say that he became completely Americanized or that Melanie did not take on some Italian values as well, because she did—for example, the way she runs the home now is much more consonant with how things are done in Italy. Even her cooking has changed because of the influence she's received from his cultural heritage. They also really appreciate certain cultural values in each other. For example, she appreciates his taking on the role of the "strong Italian family man" who provides for his family in creative, hard-working, dependable ways. Their acculturation to each other's cultures has changed the way they relate to each other—negotiation seems more organic

and gradual now, and much of the conflict has been worked out to some degree (although some things still come up, like his difficulty in following some rules and regulations such as driving laws, for example).

When it comes to fitting into each other's families, Hugo does not seem to have any complaints, but Melanie feels some disappointment in the way some people in his family treat her. She does not feel fully accepted, partly because she's American and was never able to learn Italian. She is also disappointed in his family's reluctance to visit them more often, especially now they have kids. Although some cultural factors go into these tensions between the couple and his family of origin, Melanie still takes some of their actions personally and is hurt by them. Hugo also struggles with not being able to be around his family as much as he would like. The financial and time resources that it takes to get their whole family to Italy for a visit make these trips quite prohibitive and thus infrequent. It also puts great stress on the two of them, who feel like many times they have to choose between spending time with family and having family vacations of their own where they can spend time with each other as a separate family unit. This is perhaps one way in which Melanie and Hugo feel like they are treated differently because of their intercultural relationship (or, in other words, they are "Othered" by his family and people in their lives). Another example of this Othering is Melanie's family's and friends' initial disbelief in their relationship and its potential for longevity—something that could have been potentially corrosive to the stability of their relationship as it made her question his commitment to her and the relationship at first. Because of these experiences the couple says that they wish others would not be so quick to judge or discriminate against intercultural relationships (although romanticizing them is not a good thing either, according to them).

The issue of visiting (and in Hugo's case, living in) each other's countries is of great importance to the couple. This is the main way in which Melanie feels like she was able to learn about Hugo's culture, which in turn helped her understand him better. Spending time in each other's countries is also extremely important in their goal and continued effort to keep aspects of both cultures alive in their everyday lives and the lives of their children. The fact that they live in the United States has made it so Melanie has less acculturation or adaptation to do (in regards to Italian culture as compared to Hugo's acculturation to American culture), but she still makes an effort to understand and take on values associated with Italian culture. The couple views intercultural relationships as more challenging but also more exciting than non-intercultural relationships. This is probably because intercultural relationships leave more room for misunderstandings, (due to cultural differences and language barriers) and they keep you on your toes, constantly learning new things about your partner and his or her culture. To make these relationships work, however, it is important for both people to stay open to change, and to be willing to follow the partner back to their home and make sacrifices, generally speaking. It is also important for people to view these relationships realistically and not think that they are always romantic and exotic and fun—after all, intercultural relationships are susceptible to the same challenges as non-intercultural relationships and then some. It is perhaps because intercultural relationships are more challenging that they mean more to the people involved in them when they do work out.

*On Negotiation.* When first asked how they negotiate everyday decisions around their cultural differences, Melanie and Hugo had a difficult time thinking of overt negotiation strategies they use. Over the course of the interview, they shared that they feel like most of the negotiation they did in their relationship took place in the beginning of their relationship, and

since then active negotiation has decreased significantly. Even in the beginning of the relationship, their negotiation was never very overt, they say--they sort of fell into certain patterns and ways of doing things, and some of these patterns have persisted to today. They also think that Hugo's acculturation over the years has changed some of their relational dynamics (as well as himself), possibly for the better, as some of their differences have fallen by the wayside. This is not to say that the couple does not have to deal with certain cultural differences any more--much to the contrary, Melanie still feels like she is often put in the position of cultural broker to Hugo, in a sense, because she is the one constantly reminding him to follow certain rules, laws, and guidelines that Hugo doesn't feel are important, but that American society expects everyone to follow (small yet important things such as wearing seatbelts, thinking about how much you've had to drink before getting in the car to drive, etc--laws and regulations that are not followed as strictly in Italy). These are issues in which Melanie gets the last word on because they cannot be negotiated for obvious reasons.

Despite whatever cultural differences they might have, the couple reports having similar tastes in such things as music, food, views on family, etc. They also seem to have similar values (e.g. work ethic) despite their different cultural backgrounds. They still notice many cultural differences between themselves, though. They feel their differences ever more deeply when they are around each other's families of origin--he says that her family seems a bit cold, and she views his family as too distant and uninvolved. They notice many things their families do differently, and they see the cultural influences in these small little details. In fact, they have become very insightful in investigating the cultural basis for certain patterns in their own and each other's behavior. For example, Melanie and Hugo seem to have very different parenting styles, and they are often frustrated by each other's ways of disciplining the children. The interesting (and

perhaps good) part about it is that they seem to be pretty clear on what factors of their cultural and family backgrounds have come to influence their different views on the subject. For example, Melanie knows that her obsessive worries come from her parents and what they had to live through and Hugo thinks that Italians seem to all have a soft spot for their children, which keeps them from being too strict with them. The couple generally can distinguish what behaviors have a cultural basis and which do not, although they often disagree on their views and interpretations. They are able to do this because they look for behavioral patterns in each other's countries and group. From hearing the couple talk about the subject it is clear that they have spent much time thinking and talking to each other about this topic. They also keep talking about their differences, especially the unresolved ones that seem beyond any possible negotiation, and this strategy, if nothing else, keeps them connected with each other and re-evaluating their own and each other's viewpoints.

Some negotiation strategies surfaced during the interviews, however. One main thing they do is to respect each other's right to enjoy something they don't personally enjoy. Although they tease each other over favorite TV shows, for example, when it comes down to it, they leave each other be to enjoy their preferences as long as they don't impose it on the other. They also try to respect and accept certain issues that seem really important and close to each other's hearts. For example, when Hugo gets really homesick he feels the need to go to Italy for a short visit, often by himself. Melanie understands this and does not try to change it--if she cannot go, he goes without her and that is okay with both of them. He, on the other hand, respects her need and insistence on traditions, even when her way of doing things might go against what he would do if he were making the decisions by himself (for example, he would invite many people over for a slightly untraditional Thanksgiving but since she insists on the traditional way of doing things,

he goes along with it because he knows it's important to her). When it comes to everyday tasks, they seem to split the work according to what each one does best --for example, he has always cooked, from the beginning of the relationship (although this has changed a bit more recently because of his work schedule). When one of the other is very specific about how they want something done, that person takes care of things--for example, she has very specific ideas about how the clothes should be done and put away, so she takes care of that. And, in general, they try to give in at least a little to each other's viewpoints and preferences, and they also tend to give up on ideas or suggestions that seem utterly impossible for the other person to accept and willingly go along with.

The couple reports that it is very important for them to keep connected to the Italian culture in their everyday life (obviously, living in the US makes it a lot easier to stay connected with American culture without really thinking about it). They mainly cook Italian cuisine at home, and try to do things such as having people over to their home for small, impromptu gatherings whenever they can (although this is often difficult because of Hugo's strenuous work schedule). Both Melanie and Hugo do admit, however, that it is somewhat difficult to keep many aspects of Italian culture in their routine. Melanie has had much difficulty in learning to speak Italian, and Hugo finds it difficult to teach her and the kids the language and keep himself to it in his everyday life here in the states. Much to Melanie's chagrin their oldest boy (who's four years old) hasn't forgotten much of the Italian he had picked up when he first went to Italy, and does not seem interested in speaking Italian at all (although, this is very likely just a phase). Thus, the language barrier makes it harder for them to embrace certain aspects of the culture nowadays. Still, Melanie tries to fit into the Italian ways of life as best she can, especially when she is abroad. They try to take the kids to Italy as frequently as possible, although that is becoming



more and more difficult because of how expensive it is to get over there. Still, traveling is the way they have to re-connect with the culture and immerse the children in it, to try to get them to identify themselves with the country and that way of life. In fact, teaching the children about home is something Hugo is very conscious about, and he tries to tell them frequently about his life over there and how things are like there even today. They named all their children Italian names.

## Appendix B: Interview Guide for Semi-Structured Interviews with Intercultural Couples

These questions are main questions led to subsequent, more specific questions as participants deliberated. Each of the first two interview lasted about two hours. During Interview 1, couples were asked questions regarding their perceptions of their relationship (questions designed to elicit their accounts of relationship identity). During Interview 2, couples were asked questions regarding cultural negotiation in their everyday lives.

### **Interview 1:**

1. Tell me about the history of your relationship.
  - a. Probes: how did you meet; when; what first attracted you to each other; did you notice cultural differences (why or why not?); how did you view your cultural differences; what were some obstacles and some motivations for getting involved with each other; how did others view your cultural differences; how did you view your cultural differences then; what was important to learn about each other's cultures in the beginning?
  - b. How has your relationship changed over time? How do you view your cultural differences now? How do others view it?
2. How do you define yourselves as a couple to yourselves? To other people?
  - c. How do you describe your relationship identity? Do you consider your relationship an intercultural relationship? What makes it so or not so?
  - d. How is your relationship different from relationships between two people from the same cultural background?
  - e. What are some of the strengths/weaknesses of your relationship? Do you view these as stemming from the fact it is intercultural?

- f. In your experience, what do you think it's important for people to know when entering into an intercultural relationship?
- g. What do you wish others would know or understand about relationships like yours?

**Interview 2:**

1. Tell me about how you handle your cultural differences in your everyday lives.
  - a. Every couple encounters difficulties dealing with individual differences between the spouses. How do you cope with your differences in everyday life?
  - b. Where do you think your individual differences come from? Do you think these are influenced by your different cultural backgrounds?
  - c. Is it clear to you when your differences stem from your different cultures and when it stems from conflicting personal characteristics?
2. Do you think it is important for you to keep aspects of both of your cultures in your everyday life? Why or why not? How do you do that?
3. How do you think you're different from other intercultural couples?
4. Is there anything that is important for me to know about your relationship or about how you negotiate your cultural differences that I am not asking?
5. Have you ever considered couple therapy? Do you think it would help negotiating differences?
6. If you were ever to seek therapy (or if you have already in the past), what would be useful to you as an intercultural couple? What would you like your therapist to know or to understand about you two and your relationship? What would not be helpful?

**Interview 3:**

A third interview was not necessary for all couples. This interview was used to clarify or add to anything the couple shared in past interviews and in one case it was used to “catch up” when a couple needed extra time to answer all questions from previous interviews. This interview was generally shorter in duration than previous interviews.

## Appendix C: Participant Invitation Letter

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I write you today to tell you about my dissertation study called “A Phenomenological Investigation of the Lived Experience of Intercultural Couples,” and to invite you to participate in it. I believe you can make a unique contribution to my study and I would be delighted to work with you.

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of intimate intercultural relationships and how intercultural couples negotiate their different cultures in everyday life. The primary focus of this study is on intercultural couples’ lived experience of intercultural relationships and their views regarding these. The research model I am using is a qualitative one through which I am seeking comprehensive descriptions of your experience. Through your descriptions and others like yours I hope to ultimately answer the question, “What is the lived experience of being in an intimate intercultural relationship?”

If you choose to participate in this study, you will agree to be interviewed two or three times about your intercultural relationship. In these interviews I will ask you and your partner to recall specific events, episodes, situations, behaviors, opinions, experiences, feelings, and thoughts that you have had and continue to have in regards to your intimate relationship with someone from a cultural background other than your own. I am seeking vivid, rich, detailed descriptions of your experiences as an intercultural couple. I understand that it might be difficult to remember all these different details at times, and I also understand that it may be awkward or uncomfortable to talk about your intimate relationship. I hope that you will consider participating in this study anyway, and I can guarantee you that the information you entrust to me will be kept in strictest confidence. As a person in an intercultural relationship myself, I also hope to offer you some comfort in knowing that I will most likely empathize with most of what you say because some of our personal experiences might be very similar.

I value your consideration to participate in my study. As a token of my utmost appreciation to the people who choose to participate in my study, I will offer each couple \$20 dollars in cash for each interview (up to \$60 dollars). This humble token of appreciation does not begin to repay you for the time, commitment, and effort involved in participating in this study, but it is offered with deep appreciation on my part. If you have any questions about the study, or if you are interested in participating, please contact me at (678) 778-0886 or at [LSilva@uga.edu](mailto:LSilva@uga.edu).

With warm regards,

Luciana C. Silva  
Graduate Student  
Department of Child and Family Development  
Program of Marriage and Family Therapy - University of Georgia

# Are you involved in an intercultural relationship?



If interested, please  
contact:

Luciana Silva at  
lsilva@uga.edu  
or at (678) 778-0886

## If so, we would love to talk with you!

We are conducting a research study to find out more about intercultural couples and the way in which they deal with various cultural issues.

If you are involved with someone from a **different nationality**, and you are in a long-term relationship, you and your partner are eligible to receive up to \$60 for participation in this study.

## Appendix E: Announcement to Listservs

Hello!

My name is Luciana Silva, I am a graduate student in the Child and Family Development Department at the University of Georgia, and I am contacting you to tell you about a research study I am conducting. My dissertation research study is entitled “A Phenomenological Investigation of the Lived Experience of Intercultural Couples.” The focus of this study is on intercultural couples’ thoughts, experiences, views, feelings, and opinions regarding intercultural relationships. I am looking for couples in which each person is from a different nationality from the other. If you or someone you know are in a committed relationship with someone from a different country of origin, and both partners would like to participate in my study, please contact me at [LSilva@uga.edu](mailto:LSilva@uga.edu).

If you choose to participate in this study, I will ask to interview you two or three times about your intercultural relationship. Through your descriptions and others like yours I hope to ultimately answer the question, “What is the lived experience of being in an intimate intercultural relationship?” Participating *couples* will receive \$20 dollars *per interview*, up to \$60 total for participation in this study.

Thank you in advance for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

Luciana C. Silva  
Ph.D. Student  
Department of Child and Family Development  
Marriage and Family Therapy Program  
[LSilva@uga.edu](mailto:LSilva@uga.edu)  
(678) 778-0886

## Appendix F: Consent Form

***I agree to take part in a research study titled “A Phenomenological Investigation of the Lived Experience of Intercultural Couples” which is being conducted by Ms. Luciana C. Silva, from the Department of Child and Family Development at The University of Georgia (Ms. Silva can be contacted at 678-778-0886), under the direction of Dr. David Wright also from the Department of Child and Family Development at The University of Georgia (Dr. Wright can be contacted at 706-542-4825). My participation is voluntary; I can refuse to participate or stop taking part at any time without giving any reason, and without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I can ask to have information related to me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.***

***The purpose of the study is to gain an understanding of intimate intercultural relationships and how intercultural couples negotiate their different cultures in everyday life. The primary focus of this study is on intercultural couples’ lived experience of intercultural relationships and their views regarding these.***

***I will not benefit directly from this research. I understand that the findings of this study will be used to improve researchers’, therapists’, and other professionals’ knowledge about intercultural relationships.***

***If I volunteer to take part in this study, I will be asked to do the following things:***

- 1. Be interviewed two or three times on the subject of my intimate intercultural relationship and my thoughts, feelings, and opinions about my relationship and other relationships like my own. Interviews will occur over the course of approximately two months and all interviews will be audio taped. Interviews will last between one hour and one and a half hours. It might not be necessary for me to be interviewed three times. The decision regarding a third interview will be made between myself and the researcher, after the second interview.***
- 2. To read over the researcher’s thoughts and interpretations of what I told her during my interviews and discuss with the researcher any disagreements I may have with her interpretations or any thoughts and comments regarding how to improve her work.***

***I understand I will receive \$20 dollars in cash per interview I complete (up to \$60 dollars for three interviews). I will receive this monetary incentive at the end of each interview I complete.***

***The researchers do not foresee any risks to me for participating in this study, but I may experience some discomfort over the course of this study. I may face discomfort or stress regarding talking and thinking extensively about my relationship to my partner, what I think of it and how I feel about it. There are no expected risks from participation in this study. Should I experience any discomfort or stress and would like to talk to a professional, I may call McPhaul Family Therapy Clinic at (706) 542-4486 or Samaritan Counseling at (706) 369-7911. I understand these agencies provide individual and family therapy for the community. If I need immediate attention I can call Advantage Behavioral Health at 1-800-715-4225. Should I have any questions or concerns regarding this study or any part of it, or should I need any other referrals to community service agencies, I may contact Ms. Silva at (678) 778-0886. I may also contact Dr. David Wright, Ms. Silva’s advisor, at (706) 542-4825.***

***Any individually-identifiable information about me and/or my spouse and our relationship will be kept confidential. An exception to confidentiality involves information revealed concerning suicide, homicide, or child abuse which must be reported as required by law or if the researchers are required to provide information by a judge. While interviews will be audiotaped, these tapes will remain locked away and the researchers named above and their research assistants will be the only ones who will have access to these tapes. All identifying information will be removed***



*from the transcript of these tapes. The tapes and a master list with all participants' names and contact information will be kept indefinitely. No identifying information will be used in the publishable manuscripts of this research project. I also understand I can request to work in conjunction with the researchers to remove any identifying information about me and my relationship from the manuscripts of this research project.*

*Audio files and transcriptions of my interviews will be kept indefinitely by the researchers. Should my interviews or other information related to me be useful to another, separate research project that might arise in the future, I will be contacted by the researchers to give my additional, voluntary authorization and consent to have the information related to me used in the new study. My participation and consent for the present study does not automatically consist of consent for use of information related to me used in a future study or project.*

*The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the project, and she can be reached by telephone at (678) 778-0886 or by e-mail at lsilva@uga.edu.*

*My signature below indicates that the researchers have answered all of my questions to my satisfaction and that I consent to volunteer for this study. I have been given a copy of this form.*

**Name of Researcher: Luciana C. Silva**

**Telephone: (678) 778-0886**

**Email: lsilva@uga.edu**

Luciana Silva  
Researcher Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

*Additional questions regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to The IRB Chairperson, University of Georgia, 612 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address: IRB@uga.edu*