A Tourist's View of Marriage

Cross-Cultural Couples— Challenges, Choices, and Implications for Therapy

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We can no longer afford to ignore the rapidly increasing heterogeneity of the world—a potent cultural mix that is no longer limited to major cities, but wired into our lives via cable television and the Internet, faxed onto our desks in the workplace, and appearing in our homes in the increasingly frequent romantic choices people make of partners from different cultural backgrounds.

So far cross-cultural relationships haven't received adequate attention, in part because the phenomenon is so new—largely a product of the last 50 years. Increased mobility, advances in travel and education, military and political incentives, the introduction and effects of broader civil rights, and the easing of U.S. immigration restrictions during this period have all contributed to the increase of marriage between people of different faiths, cultures, nationalities, and races.

The study of mixed couples yields a number of compelling insights and helps us understand how people adapt to cultural conflict and how they react to the very contemporary phenomena of marginality and cultural change. Of particular relevance to the field of family therapy, it

sheds light on new family and personality types that reflect and are particularly suited for life in a mobile modern world.

All marriages encompass the discovery of and subsequent discussion about differences. Dealing with differences in intermarriage also requires a reconciliation of the conflicting Claims and Pulls of the two worlds.

One world is the world of "Marriage." In the West, the modern concept of marriage is based on the centrality of love. In this formulation, marriage is a result of a free choice. It is a private decision made by the couple, and it aims to promote their happiness, intimacy, and mutual self-fulfillment. In this world, each partner connecting to the other often requires a separation from or a weakening of the attachments to family or tradition.

The other world is the world of origins—race, religion, culture, and/or nationality—which brings with it assorted collective responsibilities and loyalties. Let's call this "Inter." This world strongly pulls against the individual character of the modern ideology of love. Inter is governed by the notion of a larger web of connections in which the person is part of a national and family history and tradition, and feels communal allegiance. Marriage is not simply between two individuals but two families. In this world, the needs of the community supersede the needs of the individual.

If "Marriage" describes Romeo and Juliet, "Inter" describes the Capulets and Montagues.

Consider Manuel, a Colombian man, married to Mary, who was born in New England. "For me," he says, "marriage is between two families. Who am I without my family? For Mary it's between the two of us. I guess our basic view of who is involved in our marriage is different. Our views of boundaries diverge, and you can imagine just how polar are our expectations of how much our families should be involved with us and our children." Marriage as an enterprise of free choice is rejected in Manuel's culture. Mary's American emphasis on individual choice both attracts Manuel and prompts a sense of guilt in him for violating his own entrenched cultural expectations of what a marriage is "supposed" to be. This division allows us to see, in simple fashion, some of the main causes of tension in cross-cultural marriages.

These tensions can sometimes seem overwhelming. There are usually many facts to be learned about each other, terms and assumptions to be defined, from the simplest words to the most fundamental concepts of birth, marriage, child rearing, gender roles, work, family, tradition, even death. Very little can be taken for granted.

In fact, cross-cultural partners are like immigrants or tourists. Sometimes they actually cross borders, sometimes they undergo the transition in their own living room. Plunged into an unfamiliar world, each "tourist"-partner wonders, "How can I feel comfortable here?" The "tourist" notices all kinds of things the indigenous local misses or takes for granted—"Why is this building here? What does that sign mean?"—often reawakening the local's own curiosity about his or her own surroundings, and his or her place in those surroundings, affording a fresh look at customs or landmarks or traditions that the local formerly hadn't noticed for years—if at all.

In one type of cultural adjustment, the newcomer slowly takes hold of this new world by imitating, identifying, and internalizing its key aspects and familiarizing himself or herself with its landmarks. However, the "tourist"-partner must continually adjust to this newfound home because there he or she is always confronting new or unfamiliar cultural aspects as new events, decisions, crises, and life-cycle transitions occur. In capsule, this describes the experience of a partner in a cross-cultural couple who lives in the "home" country or culture of the other.

Safia was born in Pakistan, married an American, and now lives in the northeastern United States. "In my adjusting here I go for a few years with a comfortable sense that I have found ways to maneuver through this place, but when my kids go to school I acutely feel my foreignness again. When they come home they bring the outside culture through the front door and I am confronted with the fact that I didn't grow up here. I don't know the system. I don't know the rhymes. So every time I confront a new institution, I again experience my foreignness. The transition is never-ending."

Certainly the therapist who works with "mixed" or cross-cultural couples needs to be as alive to the couple's differences and what they mean to the couple themselves, and to develop a tourist's sense of landmarks in unfamiliar territory, learning to ask the right questions about what things mean and how things work. This quality of attention is more and more urgently required.

REACTIONS TO CROSS-CULTURAL MARRIAGES IN THE UNITED STATES

Reactions to cross-cultural marriage in the United States during the past half-century or so have tended to gravitate to one of two poles: welcome and tolerance or xenophobia. At one pole is the view that these unions are a testament to the power of love to transcend traditional boundaries. On the other is an alarmist view that sees such unions as a threat to the prevailing national identity, a doomed endeavor inevitably leading to divorce. Literature written after the first wave of mixed marriages involving Asian war brides and American servicemen, tended to reflect this latter view.

Until the 1960s, the lines transcended were primarily ethnic, say, between Irish and Italians. When the religious Rubicons were crossed, they generally implied Catholic and Protestant unions. Interracial relationships remained criminal until groundbreaking federal civil rights legislation was passed in 1967.

A dramatic indication of the recent cultural change has been the rate of increase of Jews marrying non-Jews over the past 30 years—rising from 5% in 1964 to 52% in 1997.

In general the history of cross-cultural marriage in the United States indicates a mutation in two directions: on one side, a pull toward assimilation, diminishing cultural distinctions in the public and private domains founded on ideas of equality, a premise that gives primary allegiance to the national (and mythical) identity of the United States as a "melting pot." On the other side has been an increasing recognition of the enduring nature of ethnic and religious values, and identification of the role they play in family life and personal development throughout the life cycle.

REACTIONS TO CROSS-CULTURAL MARRIAGES IN THE LITERATURE

Most studies done in the field of cross-cultural marriages have been of limited use partly because of the narrow focus of the various sociological, anthropological, religious, national, and psychotherapeutic factions conducting them. Their researches are often constrained by whatever investment the particular faction has in the topic—an investment that typically does not invite, much less examine, the findings and approaches of any other faction. In addition, focused research presumed that deviation equals difficulty (Cotrell, 1990). As a result, research on interracial marriages doesn't look at the effects of religion or language, research on interfaith marriages doesn't address any issues but the religious ones, and so on.

However, some of the more recent literature is helpful in its ac-

knowledgment of the confluence of many factors and offers more insightful clinical information and therapeutic skills. (See the work of Ibrahim, 1984, 1990; Soncini, 1997; Perel, 1990, 1991; Romano, 1996; Tseng, McDermott, & Maretzki, 1977; Tseng & Hsu, 1991; McGoldrick & Preto, 1984; McGoldrick, Pearce, & Giordano, 1996; and Ho, 1984, 1990.) Also of particular interest are the writings of Kluckhohn (1951) and Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) and the cultural variables developed in the business anthropological literature by Hall and Hall (1980), Hall (1990), Hofstrede (1980), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998), and Stewart and Bennett (1991), and which offer generative models outlining a cultural map.

The following model is designed to clarify the underlying assumptions guiding what otherwise appear to be unrelated daily occurrences. It involves a macrolevel analysis of cultures to help illuminate the interpersonal reality of couples who come for treatment. Edward T. Hall (1990) provides the useful concepts of "high-context" and "low-context" societies. Although they were originally applied specifically to communication, I will employ them in a broader sense. Most cultures tend to gravitate toward one pole or the other in this spectrum. Another way to conceive of the spectrum is individualism versus collectivism. In low context societies such as Germany, the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, England, Australia, and the United States (often countries rooted in Protestant Calvinism; see Weber,), people compartmentalize personal relationships and work, and focus on short-term relationships. Factual information is stressed, as is explicit verbal expression. The high-context societies are more rural and less industrialized than the low-context societies. In Latin America, Africa, the Mediterranean countries, the Arab world, India, China, and Indonesia extensive information networks exist among family, friends, and colleagues. This shared experience allows for a greater degree of tacit understanding. People are often involved in close and lasting personal relationships.

These two categories can function as receptacles for a multitude of other cultural dimensions (see Table 8.1).

The situation of one couple offers a quick illustration of how these polarities influence everyday life. Indira comes from a large family who live near Bombay in India, and Peter is a white Protestant from Philadelphia. They fell in love with each other while in graduate school in Boston. Their differences since marrying had become so acute that they sought therapy, mostly at Peter's insistence. Peter first complained about Indira's family coming for a 2-month stay, and expressed puzzlement at why Indira could ever have let her family intrude upon them

TABLE 8.1. Low Context versus High Context

Low context	High context
Individualism	
Individualistic; "I" predominates over "We"; independence and self-reliance highly valued ("It's everyone for himself"); few obligations between people (except for very close family); social control based on individual guilt and fear of losing self-respect; universalistic. strive for generalizable laws, rules, widely applicable models and prescriptions.	Collectivistic, value group interest and group identity over individual needs, personal identity inscribed in a larger social network; social control is based on fear of losing face and being shamed; harmony more important than speaking one's mind; particularistic, emphasizes difference, uniqueness, and exceptions, relationships more important than rules and laws. ("For a friend, I can change all the rules if needed").
Time	
Monochronic; felt to be linear; one thing is done at a time; deadlines set and adhered to; time is to be managed; time is referred to as being "spent," "saved," "wasted," or "lost"; youth-oriented society; change is a virtue.	Polychronic: involved in many things at once; distractible, subject to interruptions; time is to be enjoyed; emphasis is on quality of life; age is respected; constancy is a virtue; people are more important that schedules.
Nature of the universe and attitude toward life	
Pragmatic, task-driven, focus is on measurable accomplishments, doing not being ("If at first you don't succeed, try, try again"); work to live; work and relationships are separate; acquiring goods; privacy is valued; emphasis on personal achievement; belief that individuals control their own destiny and environment ("Life is what you make of it"); seek to control nature to meet the needs of people.	Emphasis on affiliation, character, and personal qualities; traditional; focus on ascription not achievement ("It's who you are, not what you do"); focus on relationships, experience, and quality of life; work to live; events are determined by chance, luck, destiny, or a supernatural force; circumstances just happen ("What can you do about fate?"; "It's God's will"); fatalistic; people are subject to the forces of nature.
Family structure	
Couple is the main deciding unit; marriage is between two individuals; individual needs are separate from family needs ("You should do what's right for you"); family obligations minimized; child rearing focuses on fostering a strong sense of self, autonomy, self-reliance, independence.	Extended family are important; marriage is between two families; family needs are intertwined with individual needs; respect for ancestry ("Your grandmother would turn over in her grave . . . !"); child rearing focuses on fostering a strong sense of connection and loyalty; family cohesiveness.

(continued)

TABLE 8.1. *(continued)*

Low context	High context
Emotional expressiveness and communication	
Utilitarian, instrumental, pragmatic, impersonal, goal-oriented, direct ("Say what you mean"); informal ("Let's just be ourselves"); meets conflict head-on; explicit communication; seeks high degree of objectivity; goal is to exchange information, facts and opinions; what is said is more important than how ("Get to the point"); emotionalism is irrational and embarrassing.	Communication is more than words; meaning implicitly derives from group understanding, voice, tone, body language, use of silence; indirect, face-saving ("I don't know"; "If you say so"); avoiding conflict takes precedence over open confrontation; formal and respectful; expressive, strong display of emotions; high degree of subjectivity; those who hide their feelings may be perceived as "cold fish" or even deceitful.
Thinking	
Inductive thinking, derives principles and theories from empirical observation and experimentation; linear orientation, break problems apart to reach manageable, precise, pragmatic results.	Deductive reasoning, priority is given to the reality of ideas, moral values, theories, emphasis on the conceptual world, on abstract and symbolic thinking; why rather than what and how; systematic orientation, stress integrated, "holistic" approach to problem solving; use of analogy, metaphor, simile for explanation.
Power and gender roles	
Man and woman experience greater role flexibility and the concomitant confusions; emphasis on equality and more even power; women more economically independent, more openly critical, more sure of their rights.	Fixed roles, high degree of differentiation between the sexes and a clear demarcation of power distribution; women more defined by their alliance to a man than by any independent accomplishments.

for so long. He was also upset about Indira's passive reaction to a recent miscarriage. To her it had been "fate," something over which she had no control, but he believed that if she'd taken better care of herself, she might have avoided the miscarriage. Moreover, he was annoyed at her family's offer to take care of the child Indira was now expecting (she had recently become pregnant again) for several months or even a year in India. Peter saw this as completely inappropriate—akin to wanting to kidnap the child. This wariness was connected to his feeling that he had no privacy when Indira's family visited. His decision

to seek therapeutic help grew out of his conviction that "these things need to be talked about," a conviction at odds with Indira's view that they were best left unsaid and that they would eventually sort themselves out.

Clearly, numerous culturally determined assumptions are at war here: Indira's (collectivist, constrained-orientation) sense of fatalism versus Peter's (individualistic, control-orientation) instinct to act and his belief that circumstances are the result of personal choice; Indira's sense of family identity versus Peter's sense of autonomy; her feeling that her family is as important as her connection to Peter versus Peter's craving for privacy and belief that they (as a couple) are the most powerful family unit; Indira's fear that "spelling things out" leads to conflict (not to solutions) versus Peter's belief that it is only by talking about conflict head-on that it can be resolved. While not all people fall so neatly into these cultural categories, most people do feel consistently drawn to one pole or the other.

Cultural maps exist to serve as frameworks. In our work with cross-cultural couples, we will often be able to ascribe the experience of partners at various points on the continuum between the high- and low-context poles. As demonstrated through Indira and Peter, each of their cultural orientations function as a cluster of interrelated values. Knowing these categories will help the therapist understand individuals in cross-cultural relationships. Even though no single individual (or culture) will completely embody every aspect of any one model, doing so can clarify the underlying assumptions guiding what otherwise appear to be unrelated daily occurrences.

THE MANY FACETS OF COMPLEMENTARITY

Why do some people cross cultures to marry, while others stay with partners in their own culture?

A significant dividend of embarking on and sustaining a cross-cultural relationship is the widening of experience and perspective it provides the couple. Such a relationship offers new options for thought and behavior, as well as holds up a mirror each partner would not have had the opportunity to look into otherwise: in the Other, we discover ourselves. As John Locke said, "The self, once expanded, cannot contract to its former dimensions."

Many cross-cultural couples possess a general longing for this broadening change in outlook. Those who enter into an intercultural

relationship are referred to alternately as escapists, rebellious, detached, adventurous, and embracers (Tseng et al., 1977; Romano, 1996; Soncini, 1998).

Man Keung Ho (1990), for example, says that a common motive is to escape one's background. This desire to escape may be induced by political, religious, familial, or other conditions the partner finds repressive, but the yearning often has other personal components as well. Edwin Friedman (1982) points out that most partners who marry outside their culture are firstborns. The irony is that firstborn children typically display the greatest loyalty to family and are most involved in their parents' relationship. In families where there is a high degree of emotional intensity, a person is likely to confuse feelings about his family with feelings about his culture; he attributes the undesirable traits in his family to the culture. Thus, a person may seek to distance himself from his relatives by distancing himself from his culture. Yet if intermarriage disrupts a family, it can also enrich it: new doors are opened for diversity, behavior, and connections.

For some, intermarriage presents an opportunity to readjust the undesirable characteristics that they attribute to their background (McGoldrick & Preto, 1984). In this way, intermarriage may be seen as an attempt to establish complementarity through culture. For example, one partner is often attracted to cultural traits from which the other partner is trying to distance himself or herself. When a person from a culture that tolerates higher emotional expressiveness is attracted to someone from, say, a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) background, with its emphasis on self-contained autonomy and respect for boundaries and privacy, the WASP partner often simultaneously wants to move away from those qualities and toward more emotional expressiveness.

No matter what motives someone may have for a cross-cultural relationship, the initial complementarity sought by one partner in the other often turns out to be at the root of later problems: what one is attracted to initially because of its foreignness often becomes the source of conflict later. For example, the initial attraction of a WASP to a Mediterranean spouse's family cohesiveness and expressivity can later be felt as overwhelming and intrusive; the Mediterranean's attraction to the WASP's attitudes toward privacy and independence can be felt as disengagement or distance—a lack of caring and involvement. Crisis exacerbates those differences. And during crises couples often lack shared rituals and assumptions that could help them manage these events.

Another challenge is the fact that traits perceived to be positive or attractive in the partner are always attached to a whole network of other habits, characteristics, and behaviors that are not as pleasing as the "attractive" traits; indeed, some of them may turn out to be decidedly unattractive or even intolerable. Studies of marriages between American servicemen and Japanese women, for example, have found that many husbands were initially attracted by their wives' submissiveness. However, that submissiveness often carried with it a passivity and a lack of initiative that later clashed with the husband's desire for assertiveness, action, and hard work—known as effort optimism—that Americans in particular tend to value.

By the same token, the Japanese wife idealized her husband's take-charge attitude and his ability to free her from the restrictions imposed on her by her native Japanese culture. Yet these positive traits were often attacked to characteristics that were far less appealing: materialism, self-absorption, lack of concern with tradition, and little sense of responsibility to the family.

What needs to be done when a couple reaches this impasse is to remind them why they were attracted to each other in the first place—to move from polarity back to complementarity. You remind the Mediterranean woman that she once loved her American WASP husband for his cool-headedness and the WASP that he loved his Mediterranean spouse for her passion; you remind the American husband that he once treasured his Japanese wife's supportiveness and his wife that she cherished her husband's assertiveness. This can help them reclaim their choice.

Cross-cultural couples come up with their own strategies to ward off conflicts. But the drawbacks of these makeshift tactics may not be apparent for quite some time, particularly if (like most couples) one partner or both have an investment in denying difference or blocking out awareness of it. With premarital couples, in particular, one can see such concealment at work. Often they feel caught between remaining silent to ensure togetherness, yet at the same time desiring greater self-revelation, which will inevitably lead to the uncovering of tribal affinities or spiritual feelings. This results in a paradox: the very efforts to maintain the relationship could in the long run injure it. The couple creates a conspiracy of silence in order to keep out those issues and beliefs that could topple their relationship. It may only be when a major life event, experience, or rite of passage (like death, birth, or marriage) occurs that these denied or buried differences reappear—usually with unanticipated intensity. Consider Ethan, a Jew, and Linda, a Catholic.

They initially vowed to bring up their child with elements of both religious traditions, but without ever spelling out precisely what they meant by this compromise. When she gave birth to their first child, a boy, Ethan assumed the boy would have a ritual circumcision while Linda assumed the baby would be baptized.

Thus, intermarriage is the crossroads of the wish to assimilate and the wish to retain one's cultural, racial, or religious identity. Now let's look at three particular flashpoints: religion, child rearing, and gender.

INTERMARRIAGE FLASHPOINTS

Religion

With interfaith marriages, it is often more difficult to navigate differences because it is harder to accept religious certainties as "relative."

Because religious beliefs are inculcated in childhood, the strength of these traditions may be felt but still be hard to articulate, as hard to describe as they would have been at the time they were first acquired. This explains why people who are otherwise capable of sophisticated abstract thinking, open-minded listening, and compromising in other areas of life, revert to simple, concrete childlike language when they try to speak about religion. Freud concurred in his assertion (about himself) that the more powerful the religious feeling or identification, the harder it was to articulate it.

Let's examine another Jewish and Christian intermarriage.

Sam, who comes from an assimilated American Jewish family but who identifies himself strongly as Jewish, and his partner, Grace, who comes from a Roman Catholic family, are similar to Linda and Ethan in that they suddenly experienced their religious beliefs and traditions more powerfully when they decided to get married. Sam and Grace stayed together in relative harmony for 4 years before these issues became urgent.

"For four years this has never been an issue," Grace said, "but now, when marriage comes up, we suddenly become fierce representatives of our religions, which we both thought we'd long abandoned."

It turns out that Sam hadn't "abandoned" his Jewishness as Grace thought he had: "I feel very strongly about being Jewish. I can't explain it. I am not religious but I do want to raise my children Jewish."

Grace expressed her resentments about this: "Why should I give up my beliefs and practices when you don't follow your religion? I have a feeling that Judaism is being forced upon me with no respect for my

own cultural beliefs and how important my own heritage is to me. In your desire to have a Jewish home, you are not ready to accept any other influence. Why is the non-Jewish partner supposed to bend completely?"

Sam acknowledged that he knew it didn't make sense to Grace, and that he didn't understand why his own reaction was so strong. "I don't even believe in God, but I feel very strongly about the history of my people and there is a part of me that feels that I would be abandoning the dead."

When Grace asked him if he were simply parroting his parents' beliefs, Sam replied, "The fact that my parents think like me doesn't make what we agree on any less my thoughts. Actually I disagree with them that you should have to convert, but I do want a commitment on having a Jewish family."

Grace countered: "How much Jewish commitment will ever be enough for them? They will never accept me as one of them. You, on the other hand, are totally welcome in my family." Sam replied that his parents liked her very much. Grace responded, "Yes, but they would like me *more* if I came in a *Jewish* form."

In these situations, partners are likely to return to the familiar territory of their culture or religion as frames of reference to guide them through the changes. Long-dormant ethnic and religious feelings may explode at these critical moments when one or both partners experience a reawakening of their cultural allegiances.

Sam and Grace provide a good example of how religion can be powerfully felt but only dimly understood. Sam is a Jew for whom Jewishness involves a powerful sentimental attachment to the past. He has a strong but unintegrated feeling of being a Jew, and often feels that his Jewishness, precisely because it is so unintegrated, could easily be taken away from him. It lacks any active expression in his life, and thus tends to express itself as a deep sense of vulnerability. His Jewish identity is a strong but passive and mostly unarticulated group loyalty that Grace's mere presence threatens. Her "otherness" stirs the specter of betrayal in Sam, a betrayal of group and history, which provokes a fear of loss.

Not yet known is whether his reaction stems more from his fear of being overwhelmed by Grace's foreignness or from his attachment to Judaism and the role Judaism plays in his life. This must become clear if Sam is to broach any of the critical topics of religious and marital pursuits. Right now his participation in Judaism is not expressed in any activity; he says he's waiting to have children to become proactive again.

Sam finished his Jewish education at 13, on the day of his bar mitzvah. Grace attended parochial school for some time in her girlhood and was confirmed at age 11. Neither demonstrates a vocabulary adequate to translate their childhood religious feelings and identities into adult terms. Sam tends to revert to a limited leitmotif ("I'm not religious . . . but I want my children to be raised as Jews") when he speaks of his commitment to Judaism, but this leaves little entry for Grace, or much inducement for her even to try to enter. All he offers her of Judaism now is a simplistic historical legacy of persecution, stripped of most of the content and meaning of living Judaism.

In my experience, generally Jews and Christians use a different language when they talk about their cultural and religious ties. When asked what is essential about his Jewish identity, a secular cultural Jew will usually stress the feeling of belonging to a community, a historical consciousness, an attachment to a collective past. He may say that he feels guilty for having betrayed his people by marrying out of the religion. But the important point here is that a "peoplehood" notion of Jewishness supersedes the religious one. God, belief, spirituality, and faith are underrepresented in this Jewish discourse, of which Sam's words to Grace are clearly a part.

Grace, like many Christians, talks about individual faith, a personal relation to God, the soothing comfort of church, and the spiritual and family feelings of Christmas. She may disagree with the values of the Roman Catholic Church pertaining to sex, abortion rights, and women's rights, but not about Jesus, whom she thinks about much as she did at age 11. When feelings of betraying the Catholic Church arise for someone like Grace, they are usually connected to very personal experiences: not being completely honest at confession, failing to baptize a child, and other sins that jeopardize her individual soul. This is a far cry from threatening the collective Jewish soul that Sam thinks of when he hears that word.

These differences lead both partners to examine themselves more intensely. In the presence of the Other, we are forced to define ourselves. This is why Sam and Grace need to understand the meaning and importance of their respective traditions. At stake in any discussion of their cultural and religious differences is a meaningful resolution that will affect their marital life, their ethnic and religious identity as a family and as individuals, and the future identity of their child.

Clearly, mixed marriages require greater than normal adjustments. If Grace chooses to accommodate Sam, they both need to recognize that she was able to make that accommodation because she has more latitude—that is, she is less connected to her religion or to her family's wishes, she has a more flexible personality, she sees it as the woman's role. In such couples, one partner ends up compromising because the other was unable to.

Note that by accommodating, the compromiser is invested with enormous power since she (or he) is the one who sustained the relationship. The person whose religion (or country or culture) is observed must acknowledge and appreciate the loss and the adjustment that the partner is experiencing throughout their entire union.

The "Time Bomb" Issue of Children

The dilemma of children for the cross-cultural couple is usually complicated and emotionally volatile. The couple wonders how they can synthesize two backgrounds into one that their child will grow up in. Children symbolize the continuity of family, values, and traditions. They bring to focus the differences in partners' backgrounds in dramatic ways. As we saw with Sam and Grace, the prospect of having children and the decisions a cross-cultural couple faces about their upbringing can constitute a time bomb. Accommodations made or promised at the beginning of the relationship—for example, one partner's agreement that the children will be brought up in the other partner's faith or country—may suddenly feel impossible to carry out when the baby is actually conceived or born.

For mixed couples especially, a child is sometimes seen as a blank screen onto which the parents can project feelings they may be loath to confront within themselves. A constellation of concerns often includes the fear of alienation from the child if he is raised in a different religion or culture from the parent's own. A parent must figure out how to transmit an alien heritage, for example. The intent may be to divide the influence equally, but carrying out a 50–50 split poses more questions than it answers. How do you do it? The idea that "the child will choose" is impossible: a child of 3 or 6 isn't equipped to choose something as complex and overwhelming as religious faith and tradition. Nor does exposure to both parents' traditions and faiths foster an "equal identity." Children need consistent socialization in which religion and culture are incorporated into the building of self. From the place of the child within the family to attitudes about parental authority, couples must grapple with a wide range of issues dealing with child rearing.

One couple, Sally and Nigel, illustrate the problem. Nigel, from England, and Sally, an American, are married with two children, ages 3

and 5. Their conflicts typically arise around the issue of discipline. On a recent Sunday morning, when they had planned a family outing to the zoo, the kids woke up and decided they didn't want to go. Sally's instinct was to say "OK, we don't have to go through with this if the kids don't want to go. After all, we're doing it for them." But Nigel would have none of that. "They're going to go because we decided on it!" As far as he was concerned, the children were too young to enforce their wishes on the family. Where Nigel believes that what Mom and Dad say goes, Sally subscribes to a more collateral model, whereby you listen to your children's wishes and, to the extent possible, try to fulfill them.

When Nigel got his way and they began to drive to the zoo, the children asked to hear "Hercules" on the audiotape deck. Nigel said it was fine to listen to music, but that they should pick something everyone wanted to listen to (and he'd had it up to here with "Hercules," which his kids played at home nonstop–at least until Nigel made them turn it off). Again Sally's instinct was to grant the kids their wish. Back home after the zoo, at the dinner table, their children wanted to leave the table when they were done eating, and once again Nigel wouldn't hear of it: "Kids should stay at the table until they're finished, just like I had to!" Once again, this caused friction with Sally, who didn't see why it was such a big deal to allow the children to leave.

Nigel's assumption that children should adapt to the world of adults, versus Sally's assumption that the child's individuality should be fostered whenever possible, did not at first strike either of them as culturally determined. Because language was not an obstacle, and because they shared many other approaches to life, this realm of dissension had always struck them as far more personality-based than a product of cultural indoctrination. However, when each was asked to talk about his or her own experience of growing up, the cultural divisions became clear: Nigel grew up in a lower income family in northern England where children were to be "seen and not heard." Neither he nor his siblings would ever have dreamed of rebelling against their father and mother's wishes. Sally was allowed, from about age 2, to express herself and to choose what she wanted to do far more freely. She was asked what she wanted, and generally permitted to have or to do whatever that was. The underlying cultural notion in Sally's case is that by knowing what you want, you cultivate a sense of self (even at the age of 2). The underlying cultural notion in Nigel's case is that small children aren't equipped to make reasonable choices by themselves and need firm guidance until they are older. Think back to the cultural map described earlier: In a society where individual independence is central, one is likely to encounter an approach to child rearing that encourages self-expression. In a society where the family takes precedence over the individual, a parent is more likely to enforce communal values.

Once Sally and Nigel could acknowledge the assumptions that their respective cultures had transmitted, they entertained the possibility that they might not have to choose one style of parenting over the other, but could decide whose style to follow on a case-by-case basis. The question they began to ask themselves before making a decision about their children began to shift from choosing between "the right way" and "the wrong way" to choosing between "your style" or "my style." Now they can use humor to arrive at a flexible approach that balances their respective values and enables them to negotiate conflict (Falicov, 1986). This can ultimately create a new code that integrates parts of both cultures.

Gender

Expectations about gender roles are another potential flashpoint, although these conflicts may be masked as personality differences or communication problems.

Consider the case of Ahmed and Irene. Ahmed, who escaped Yemen, his country of birth, for political reasons as a young man in his 20s and his wife, Irene, who had a fairly typical U.S. middle-class family background (she grew up in a suburb of Philadelphia), came to therapy to talk about their frequent fighting, not their cultural conflict. They just said that they frequently couldn't "get along" and that their differences led to terrible, sometimes even physically violent, fights. To them, the fights seemed to be based on warring personalities. When Ahmed did bring up cultural reasons for his behavior, Irene felt that it was a cop-out. "I'm not here to talk about your culture," she once said when he offered a cultural rationale for why he sometimes ignored her when they visited his Yemeni friends in Queens. (He said that it was inappropriate for a Yemeni man in male company to be openly demonstrative to or to pay too much attention to his wife.) "We're here to talk about why you won't listen to me!" she said.

Irene was also not aware of the assumptions on which her own distress was based (i.e., a belief in sexual parity, the idea that men and women are "equal"): Ahmed's behavior simply seemed wrong to her. Whether received from culture or family, values perceived to be "basic" are always characterized by their feeling of rightness (much like religious values, which may carry an even stronger sense of immutable

truth). Such values appear to their adherents as self-evident and inarguable. It is therefore difficult to communicate them to a partner who not only does not share them, but who may dismiss them, or even be appalled by them.

Part of what enabled Irene and Ahmed to understand why it feels so threatening when one challenges the basic values of the other was to use the metaphor of the immigrant or tourist when they visited certain of each other's friends and family. Although they were still physically in New York City when they took the subway to visit Ahmed's friends in Queens, it nonetheless felt as if they had crossed the actual geographical border into Yemen when they got there. Ahmed had lived with Irene in the United States for years, and he liked many of the liberating aspects of U.S. culture. He liked the fact that she held a job, that they could be openly affectionate on the street, that she was outspoken and independent. But visiting his Yemeni friends was like visiting his homeland, with its own culture and codes of behavior. There, he felt her demands were inappropriate and out of context, that she was failing to acclimate, even briefly, to his culture. Similarly, Ahmed told Irene that when they fought and he yelled at her, she should "make yourself not hear," be silent. He wanted her to respond as a Yemeni woman would in this particular instance, despite his appreciation for her outspokenness in other contexts.

At one point in couple therapy when the therapist said of Irene (who had just berated Ahmed for not treating her as an equal in their social life) that "she is angry," Ahmed stopped for a moment, looked at her, and replied, "Yes. You can see it in her eyes." In that moment the therapist realized that Ahmed was, as a consequence of growing up in a Muslim culture where women covered the bottom halves of their faces with veils, extraordinarily sensitive to the messages in eyes: while growing up, when interacting with women, they were the only facial characteristics he could see.

Each partner has fleeting moments when he or she feels like a "tourist" in another culture. Learning to be sensitive to those moments not only reinforces just how ever-present cultural influences are, but can enrich the observing partner's appreciation of just how one spouse perceives a world in many ways essentially alien to the way of the other. However, as we'll see in the next section, on therapy, partners can create what I call a "third reality," a place where they can meet as fellow travelers. For example, now when Ahmed and Irene go to visit Ahmed's friends in Queens, Ahmed asks her: "Have you got your passport?" and Irene winks back, "Yes, and my veil too." They acknowledge—importantly, with humor—that they are going on a "trip" to another culture, preparing themselves for it by giving a quick nod to their differences, thereby to some degree integrating their two cultures.

Cross-cultural partners are sometimes tourists even when they haven't left their living rooms. Evoking what it means to be a tourist or an immigrant reminds them of the natural awkwardness and confusion felt by anyone visiting an unfamiliar culture or country ("I'm a tourist here—how could I be expected to know what to say, eat, wear?").

It's harder to play tourist at some times than at others, of course, especially when the issue of appropriate gender behavior and identity arises. A trip Ahmed and Irene took on the subway together from Queens to Manhattan provided the frame for another recent argument. It was late and they were in a subway car with a gang of teenagers who looked dangerous. Adding to their insecurity was the fact that they were lost: they'd gotten on the wrong train and didn't know how to connect back to the right one. Irene finally sought and found a police officer and asked him for directions, a decision and an action she felt was appropriate and effective, and also one that provided them with some measure of protection. However, Ahmed felt dismissed and emasculated by her taking charge; he felt it was his responsibility as "the man" to take care of her, not the other way round, and that she ought to have waited for him to do so.

Ahmed felt emasculated by his wife taking control, particularly at a time of danger when it especially appeared to him that it was his responsibility to protect his wife. Irene, meanwhile, felt that by taking charge she was not threatening his role as a man. Understanding those positions is an especially difficult challenge for both of them. Cultural influences intensify feelings about gender roles. In the "Therapy" section we'll see how various couples, including Ahmed and Irene, managed to look at those assumptions more dispassionately and work out "asymmetrical compromises," the very notion of which first struck Irene a priori as wrong, but which she's come to accept as she understands more about what they mean and how they can work.

An essential in working with cross-cultural couples that is often overlooked is language. In a session with a visiting therapist from Israel, Ahmed had difficulty understanding certain words. The therapist used the word "authoritative," for example. "Physical force—pushing?" Ahmed asked. "No, a different kind of power—taking charge," the therapist answered. Ahmed now understood: he demonstrated his understanding of the word by saying, "In my house, I am the king, and Irene is the queen." At another point, the Israeli therapist apologized for his

funny Israeli accent. "I like it!" Ahmed quickly announced, forming an instant bond with someone who, like himself, faced the challenge of using a foreign language.

An interesting paradox occurs when a person breaks one of the strongest intimacies anyone can know, that of one's mother tongue, to establish closeness with someone in a secondary or foreign language. How do we express intimacy in a language we're not intimate with, when so much is "lost in translation"? Culture shapes language and language shapes culture. In this symbiotic relationship the way people use language speaks volumes about the effects on them of their environment. (One of the oldest recorded European aphorisms relates to language: Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, is supposed to have said: "I speak Spanish to God, Italian to women, French to men, and German to my horse!")

THERAPY

The reasons cross-cultural couples come to therapy include those explicitly connected to cultural difference: conflicts about religion, child rearing, marriage, and the comparative priorities of career and personal/family relationships. They may also complain about lack of family support and/or other external social pressures that can be seen to be "cultural." But many couples' complaints aren't manifestly the product of culture at all—they may be expressed simply as not being able to "get along," frictions that may strike the couple as having more to do with personality than cultural influences. These conflicts often turn out to be more connected to culture than couples realize—although naturally intrapsychic sources of conflict are generally simultaneously at work. Other couples, on the other hand, often err by focusing exclusively on their cultural differences as the source of all pain, thereby eschewing taking responsibility for their actions.

As I've suggested, the metaphor of immigration isn't only a generative one for the cross-cultural couple: it's equally helpful for the therapist to whom they go for counsel. Just as each partner in the couple needs to examine his or her own assumptions and expectations, so does the therapist need to examine his or hers. One couple—the man came from Mexico, the woman grew up in the midwestern United States—illustrates the importance of this. My name had been recommended to the woman by a mutual acquaintance. A cursory rundown of my qualifications was all she needed to hear to trust my expertise.

However, the man had no interest in my curriculum vitae. He wanted to know: Was I married? Did I have children? Had I encountered problems like the ones they were facing myself? He had completely different criteria he wanted me to meet—none of which had to do with academic training at all.

In addition to developing a sensitivity to the couple's expectations not only concerning each other but concerning therapy and their therapist, the therapist's task is furthermore to see, and help the couple to see, how much of the problem the couple brings to therapy is its "content"—misunderstandings about cultural meanings, a product of their manifest differences—and how much is the product of "process," underlying interpersonal and family dynamics that "content" (especially when it is as packed as it can be in cross-cultural couples) often quite effectively screens.

Luckily, partners in cross-cultural couples tend to begin the relationship at a higher developmental state than many others. In fact, Gabrielle Varro, in *The Transplanted Woman* (1988), has identified a series of traits common to women who marry outside their cultural and/or national boundaries that bear this out. Such women, Varro says, tend to be better prepared for the demands of marriage, and evince a higher degree of commitment, self/other differentiation, tolerance and respect. The children they raise tend to be more "cultured"—more flexible, more able to deal with different cultural claims and demands. In all, their commitment and flexibility seems to add significantly to the vitality of their families' lives.

The main point is that cross-cultural couples often have to confront hard questions involving what religious traditions to follow, how to raise the children, and the like. much sooner than couples who share the same background. This means that they often come to therapy more capable of acknowledging and addressing questions about their assumptions than other couples who haven't been similarly forced to confront them on a regular basis. The tourist/immigrant metaphor works so well for cross-cultural couples because it is so recognizably apt and ubiquitous: "That's exactly how I feel when I go to 'Yemen' in Queens!" Irene said when she was introduced to the idea.

The basic goals of therapy for the cross-cultural couple are these:

1. To help them acknowledge their differences, their complementarity
2. To validate the choices they made based on that complementarity, and to normalize each other's approaches and beliefs

3. To create a "third reality"—a transcultural reality—that connects them even at moments of crisis or transition, and even if it involves implementing asymmetric compromises (i.e., compromises that are not based on a strict 50–50 split of responsibility or reward). This presents the couple with the challenge of establishing in each situation who is more able to make the sacrifice that will lead to a compromise and acknowledging that the partner who made the accommodation is the only one who could have made it.

First Step: Acknowledging Complementarity

Identifying the source of the partners' differences can be accomplished by asking questions designed to clarify the different family (and cultural) styles they learned. Table 8.2 presents two series of statements it can be helpful to ask the partners to examine, checking each statement that applies to him or her. At the end, partners will have much clearer ideas about their own and each other's assumptions.

Second Step: Validating and Normalizing Choices

Malika, who comes from Morocco, is married to Giancarlo, who comes from Italy. Each departed in significant ways from their families' expectations in choosing the other: Giancarlo because he married out of the Roman Catholic faith; Malika not only because she married outside the Muslim faith but because she was highly educated, with degrees both from European and American universities, which is highly unusual for a woman of her background.

Malika is aware that some of her motives are contradictory: "Giancarlo wants me to be Moroccan, but I wanted to get away from Morocco. And yet every time he encourages me to learn Italian so that I can speak to his family and feel more at home when we go to Italy, I resist. Learning Italian feels like it would be giving up my identity."

Giancarlo was exasperated by something he regarded as far more urgent. Malika was pregnant by the time they decided to marry, and he couldn't understand why she wouldn't pick up the phone and tell her family, and introduce her family to him. "I knew she wanted them at the wedding, and the wedding obviously had to be soon. Why was she waiting, and what was she afraid of?"

Malika did not like confrontations, and she was afraid her family would turn against her both for marrying a non-Muslim and for being

TABLE 8.2. Exercise to Identify and Clarify Family Styles

Number a piece of paper from 1 to 22. Respond to each number by recording which column (A or B) best describes the message you received from your family. In your discussion with your partner, you will contrast these statements with your current beliefs.

Column A	Column B
1. Money is to be spent only when necessary.	1. Money is to be enjoyed.
2. Success is to be pursued by all legitimate means.	2. Success should not be pursued at the expense of family ties.
3. Women have a right to achieve as much as men.	3. Women's primary role is in the home.
4. Modesty is noble; being boastful is crude.	4. A person has a right to be openly proud of his/her achievements.
5. Problems can only be solved through action.	5. Problems are best solved by talking them through.
6. Words can be used for effect. Exaggeration is a way to make a point.	6. Words are to be used carefully, not wasted.
7. Marriage is between two families.	7. Marriage is between two individuals.
8. Anger is expressed by fighting and debate.	8. Anger is shown by distancing and silencing.
9. The authority of the parent is nondebatable.	9. Family rules can be negotiated by everyone.
10. Your problem is my problem.	10. Don't interfere in others' affairs unless solicited.
11. Food is an expression of giving and love.	11. Food is sustenance. Eat in moderation.
12. A little clutter makes the house look lived in.	12. Cleanliness is next to godliness.
13. Care for the elderly is the primary responsibility of the family and takes place at home.	13. Care for the elderly is the primary responsibility of professional health care providers.
14. Relatives play a central role in child rearing.	14. Child rearing is the exclusive province of parents.
15. It is important to sacrifice today for a better tomorrow.	15. It is important to live for today and to appreciate every moment.
16. Children have as much say as adults.	16. Children should be seen and not heard.
17. Showing feelings and vulnerability is a sign of maturity.	17. Being strong and showing self-control is highly valued.
18. The world outside the family is dangerous and not to be trusted.	18. The world outside the family is safe and hospitable.
19. Suffering is to be borne silently.	19. Everyone feels everyone's pain.
20. Feelings should be contained.	20. Feelings should be expressed.
21. People are basically selfish and can't be trusted.	21. People are inherently good; if you treat them well, they will treat you well.
22. Men are impulsive creatures. You can't expect them to be totally monogamous.	22. If either partner has sex outside the relationship, it seriously jeopardizes its survival.

pregnant before marriage. When she finally spoke to them, they were more supportive than she had dared to hope, although her mother did urge her not to tell any relatives that she was pregnant when she got married—a difficult secret to keep since she was 5 months into her term when she walked down the aisle. Giancarlo thought this was hypocritical; he had wanted Malika to be upfront about him and about her pregnancy. At the wedding, when Malika's relatives greeted her, they tactfully let on that they knew: "Please come to visit us with your family," they said. Malika understood this as a gracious indirect communication, but Giancarlo heard it as a kind of underhanded jab or insult.

Giancarlo's more Western "bring it all out in the open" style was part of what attracted Malika to him; Malika's greater reticence was part of what attracted him to her. However, the larger assumptions to which each style was attached were very foreign and a good deal less appealing to both of them. Once they identified their family/cultural styles, and were encouraged to see that each approach had its merit, they began to accept that they could coexist as a couple despite their differences. More comfortable now that she had attained some degree of acceptance both from her family in Morocco and from Giancarlo, Malika even signed up to take lessons in Italian. Giancarlo is able to see Malika's family's "nonconfrontational" tactics not as hypocrisy or passive aggression but as evidence of subtlety and graciousness: each's view of the world and each other has widened, first by recognizing and validating each other's approach, then by normalizing it—that is, conceding its logic and effectiveness. This has freed them to remember and revel in what they first found attractive in each other, to reclaim the romantic feelings that first brought them together. They exist now in a "third reality" which is not so much a mixture of their styles as it is a kind of alternating current between their two styles: like Nigel and Sally, they ask, "Whose style do we follow today?"

Third Step: Creating a Third Reality

Philippe, originally from Lyons, France, and Margaret, a third-generation Polish American, have similarly created a "third reality" that can encompass their considerable differences. Philippe's father and grandfather ran an inn in Lyons and he grew up with family, friends, and crowds of guests of the inn at the dinner table—every night was a party. Margaret's grandparents, who grew up in Soviet-dominated Poland, had, predictably, a much harder existence, and passed on, through Margaret's mother, a stern sense of thrift and wariness: food was not something you indulged in to excess; physical pleasure was something

you were well advised to be wary of. When Philippe began inviting friends over for Sunday dinner—Margaret complained that they came at 11:00 in the morning and rarely left until after 11:00 at night—Margaret was appalled at the expense and the mess of preparing the "feasts" Philippe felt he had to prepare to entertain them. "Why can't we have a weekend alone once in a while? And why do you have to spend so much on food?" Philippe, originally attracted to Margaret's good sense and clear sense of purpose in life, now began to see her as a killjoy; Margaret had long since forgotten that it was precisely Phillipe's joie de vivre that had first attracted her to him.

In therapy, however, when Phillipe began to paint a picture of his childhood and how much the family business meant to him, Margaret was able slowly to reconnect to her earlier feelings of love for Phillipe—and to understand that Phillipe was as much a product of French culture, which revered the arts of eating, drinking, and taking pleasure in other people's company, as she, in a slightly more removed way, was a product of her own family's tradition of austerity. Further, when Margaret consented to allow Phillipe to continue his Sunday parties, Phillipe understood the nature of the "assymetric" compromise she had agreed to, and he was genuinely grateful to her for what he knew was the significant concession she was making. He now was more disposed to carve out time at other times during the week when he could be alone with her as she had wished.

Margaret understood something Irene also appreciated about Ahmed—the nature of what Man Keung Ho (1990) refers to as "healing webs," the networks of friendships that "displaced" partners—partners not living in their home countries—benefit from seeking out. "I need one time during the week," Phillipe said, "where I can speak my language and not worry about whether I am doing the appropriate 'American' thing. I need some place to relax completely and be myself."

The "third reality" that Phillipe and Margaret have created is not some undifferentiated "mix" of their styles and personalities, but rather a stage upon which they can each be their separate and idiosyncratic selves—while still maintaining sensitivity to each other's reactions. They now have a 4-year-old boy, Alain, who has been back and forth between Europe and America three times already and is fluent in both French and English. "He astonishes our friends," Margaret says. "He's the quintessential American kid with me—and a born Lyonnais with his papa. It doesn't seem to confuse him at all. Which makes me think that Alain could teach us all a bit about what living cross-culturally really means."

CONCLUSION

The "third reality," the world of the tourist, is to me the best kind of compromise to diffuse conflict and polarization. It is a respectful stance that incorporates elements of both partners, transcending the limits of each's ethnocentrism. In this realm the couple can now tolerate confusion and exercise flexibility to alter their views or opinions: "Maybe my way *isn't* the only way." They often feel an enhanced curiosity about and interest in each other's points of view. In the "third reality," each partner can achieve a balance between loyalty to his or her background and differentiation from it, a balance between sameness and difference.

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CHAPTER 9

Therapy with African American Couples

Lascelles W. Black

Being a marital and family therapist is a lot like beir gler: you often have a lot of balls in the air and need to concer more than one simultaneously. A couple comes to the therapi: sistance in dealing with a specific problem, but while workin; identified problem the therapist also discovers the many concr life issues that contribute to the difficulties surrounding the p African American individuals and couples face the acute pres coping with racism in addition to the many other difficulties t viduals and couples face in modern life. People of African de: perience a form of discrimination quite unlike that encoun other immigrants to our country (Hacker, 1992). Therefore, tl working with them should have some knowledge of their h: America, their culture, and the conditions they encounter in o try today. As therapists we are not only working with the coupl also working with the culture from which they came, because ture contributes to the couple's strengths and shapes their valu beliefs, their views of marriage and the family.

But how many "isms" can we therapists work on and hc layers of complexity can we uncover without our work overw us? As a therapist of color, it has become abundantly clear to all therapists need to assist their clients in dealing with racism.