Communication in Intercultural Marriages:

Managing Cultural Differences and Conflict for Marital Satisfaction

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By

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Abstract

COMMUNICATION IN INTERCULTURAL MARRIAGES:

MANAGING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND CONFLICT FOR MARITAL SATISFACTION

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This qualitative study investigated the phenomenon of intercultural marriages, particularly the unique internal and external elements that impact communication and conflict within intercultural marriages of varying lengths and the intercultural communication competencies utilized by spouses in intercultural marriages. The research focused on three questions: (1) Which internal and external factors impact the effectiveness of communication between spouses in intercultural marriages the most? (2) Which communication competencies do spouses in intercultural marriages develop in order to address cross-cultural differences? (3) How do spouses in intercultural marriages experience and deal with conflict within their intercultural marriages? Data was obtained employing semi-structured interviews. Extensive interviews were conducted with 18 individuals who are married to and living with a spouse who is culturally different. Couples were composed of one Asian spouse and one Caucasian American spouse. Four main themes emerged from the interviews: three factors which impact communication, intercultural communication competencies, constructive and destructive conflict, and benefits of intercultural marriages. Results demonstrated the significance of effective communication to marital satisfaction in intercultural marriages. Findings also revealed that although intercultural marriages can have specific challenges to overcome, they also can have benefits that intracultural marriages cannot attain.

Dedication

The completion of this thesis is dedicated to two individuals who have significantly influenced my life. My Grandmother Renalds, born in China to missionary parents in the early 1900's, narrated fascinating stories about her childhood to her grandchildren. As she reminisced about her intriguing interactions amongst people of a diverse culture, my love for learning about other cultures was born. Later in life, as I began travelling overseas myself, her constant support and encouragement that "underneath are the everlasting arms" assured me.

This thesis is also dedicated to my dear friend, Mindy Dooley, with whom I have visited all continents except Antarctica. Her passion for missions and diversity parallels my love for travel and other cultures. Few have been blessed to share such rich memories together. The sights, experiences, and people with whom we have worked and developed close friendships overseas have deeply enriched our lives. We often discussed with wonder that in our attempt to contribute to others' lives, we were the recipients of unimaginable gifts. I acknowledge the great blessing of both my Grandmother Renalds and close friend, Mindy Dooley, by dedicating this thesis to them.

Acknowledgements

Fellow graduate students would concur that the completion of a well-written thesis transpires through the perseverance and diligence of researchers while they humbly acknowledge the contributions of those around them. First, I would like to express my appreciation to my committee, Dr. Gina Barker, Dr. Fernando Garzon, and Dr. Donald Alban Jr., who provided valuable insight and suggestions on such a multifaceted, timely topic. Their expertise and intellect greatly enhanced my research. My chair, Dr. Gina Barker, devoted numerous hours to my thesis and challenged me to pursue excellence throughout the entire process. Her incredible impact on my thesis and life as a researcher is unparalleled. I further recognize my participants who granted me additional insight and a close-up snapshot of the world of intercultural marriages.

Likewise, the support and love of my family benefitted me immensely. I want to publicly acknowledge the power of a timely conversation with my brother as I commenced this arduous task. His listening ear and strong, pure words of advice at a pivotal point in my life resounded in my head throughout graduate school. I am grateful for the wisdom he imparts and the way he embodies such character in his own life.

I am indebted to the man who will soon make a decision for a lifetime of adventure in our own intercultural marriage. His love and daily acts of kindness and graciousness inspire me to move beyond what I think possible. I anticipate an exciting journey of personal enrichment as we merge our lives into one.

Words cannot express my appreciation to the Creator of all mankind who richly blesses us all with diversity. He presented me with an incredible opportunity to grow personally as I encountered numerous challenges in this process. His daily providence enriched my relationship with Him. I thank Him for the beauty of pure love and the promise that "love never fails".

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Introduction

Most people who have ever been married would probably wholeheartedly agree that all marriages include conflict (Tallman & Hsiao, 2004). As two individuals merge their lives into one, problems erupt. Both parties carry their unique experiences, personalities, and cultures with them into the union. The existing similarities and differences can be exciting and attractive but may also create tension and even fierce contention.

In today's society, the face of intimate relationships is changing. Deep bonds between persons of diverse cultures are becoming more common and intercultural marriages are on the rise (Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005; Frame, 2004). For this study, the researcher defines intercultural marriages as marriages composed of two culturally diverse individuals who independently possess distinct national cultures that impacts their individual worldviews, values, and personal philosophies. For the purpose of this study, culture is defined as "inclusive of common ethnic, linguistic, racial, and historical backgrounds" (Kim, 2008, p. 360). Interpersonal conflict is defined as a situation wherein the two individuals are interdependent; they possess opposing objectives which have the power to negatively impact the relationship if not resolved; it is essential that the differences be settled as quickly as possible (Cahn & Abigail, 2007). Conflict has negative connotations in many contexts; however conflict can produce positive results.

In intercultural marriages, the partnership possesses its own unique dynamics and challenges (Cools, 2006). Spouses in intercultural marriages may be recognized by their distinctly different physical characteristics and may utilize diverse languages. Research has further exposed the complexity of intercultural marriages as the spouses in such marriages are each "equipped with a different set of rules; different values, habits, and viewpoints, different ways of relating to one another, and different ways of resolving their differences" (Cools, 2006,

p. 263). Effective communication in intercultural marriages does not just happen and these marriages are also uniquely exposed to conflict.

While conflict within intimate intercultural relationships may be due to personality differences or situational factors (Garcia, 2006) intercultural conflict occurs as well because the individuals hold diverse values and objectives, and utilize distinctly different conflict and communication styles (Oetzel, Dhar, & Kirschbaum, 2007). Couples are often unaware of the impact culture has on their thoughts, feelings, and actions. Spouses often feel that their own beliefs about their mates' actions are objective and accurate (Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005). These distinctive characteristics of intercultural marriages seem to advocate a warning to refrain from marrying outside one's own culture.

Nevertheless, intercultural marriages are becoming increasingly common. Why do persons embrace such a potentially complicated, conflict-filled relationship? Why are individuals entering into intimate relationships and becoming vulnerable with others who appear to be exceptionally dissimilar? Foeman and Nance (1999), S. Lee, (2006), and Frame (2004) have articulated some advantages of intercultural marriages such as strengthened bonds, unique sense of identity, a decrease of ethnocentricity, and new rituals.

While living in Japan, this researcher was intrigued by the numerous intercultural couples there, especially those dyads composed of one partner from an individualistic culture and one from a collectivistic culture. From these observations, intercultural relationships seemed to thrive as much as the intracultural relationships. However, this researcher was ever mindful of the challenges and strengths that existed in communicating effectively and living happily in the unique world of intercultural marriages.

This interest in cultures and in intimate relationships has created a desire within the researcher to know more. This researcher now lives in America, but is still cognizant of those around her who choose a spouse from a different culture and embrace a world of their own.

Significance and Purpose of the Study

A study of communication processes within intercultural marriages will benefit many individuals, particularly couples who are engaged in such relationships. When persons learn about others who encounter similar obstacles or circumstances, they can re-evaluate their own situation with a more accurate lens. Typically, this altered viewpoint produces growth in the individual who is seeking answers and often influences this person's significant other.

A study of this kind also contributes to the field of counseling. The mental health field is continually expanding and seeking additional insight and knowledge about human behavior. Humans are complex creatures, therefore, frequent observations and scholarly studies are necessary for improved comprehension. Pre-marital, marital, and family counselors profit from a study of intercultural marriages as all societies are based on marriages and familial relationships. These relationships determine the health of a society.

This type of study augments the current research in intercultural communication, including how friendships and other relationships develop and are maintained between persons with different distinct cultures. Globalization is influencing all areas of life, and recent trends demonstrate that increased numbers of intercultural marriages are occurring (Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005). Intercultural communication scholars are aware of this widely expanding field and acknowledge the gap that sometimes exists in this area (Gareis, 2000; Cools, 2006; Garcia, 2006; P-W. Lee, 2006).

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the unique internal and external elements that impact communication and conflict within intercultural marriages of varying lengths and the intercultural communication competencies utilized by spouses in intercultural marriages. Extensive interviews were conducted with 18 individuals who are married to and living with a spouse who is culturally different. For this study, constructive conflict is generally defined as the managing of conflict in such a way that both parties find fulfillment in the resolution and can continue to derive marital satisfaction from the relationship even though compromise and differences exist. Destructive conflict occurs when differences exacerbate the marriage relationship by magnifying the root issue thus enveloping other marital dynamics. Negativity pervades the marital union and prevents a mutually fulfilling resolution.

In the following chapter, a review of literature is presented. Literature about intercultural communication competencies, third culture building, conflict communication in marriages and intercultural conflict is presented to assist the reader in understanding the unique dynamics of constructive conflicts within intercultural marriages. Following the literature review, the methodology for this study is explained. The findings of the study are presented and a discussion is then put forward. The final chapter includes the conclusions and limitations of this study, and recommendations for further research.

Scholars generally agree that the paucity of research in intimate intercultural relationships provoke the necessity of additional research in this area (Gareis, 2000; Cools, 2006; Garcia, 2006; P-W. Lee, 2006). Results of previous studies also tend to disagree about the difficulty of establishing and maintaining strong, healthy intercultural marriages (Gaines & Agnew, 2003; Frame, 2004; Garcia, 2006; Foeman & Nance, 1999). The dynamic of intercultural marriages and the limited amount of empirical research to date dictate the need for a study about conflict communication in intercultural marriages.

Literature Review

A decade ago, Gareis (2000) noted that research on intercultural relationships was in its infancy. Six years later, scholars continued to indicate the necessity of researching this field. Cools (2006) highlighted the lack of extensive research in the actual communication in intercultural relationships. Garcia (2006) completed a study with married African-Spanish couples and asserted the need for such a study as intercultural relationships and their accompanying, unique dynamics are multiplying in today's society. P-W. Lee (2006) stressed that intercultural marriages and intercultural friendships are widespread. He also asserted that this particular area of relationships is often neglected. The scholars mentioned above overwhelmingly agree that research in the area of intercultural marriages is unmistakably required at this time.

Quite obviously, further study of communication within intercultural marriages is needed. In analyzing intercultural marriages, the area of conflict emerges as a central theme. Conflict evolves in interpersonal relationships and more specifically in marriages, partially due to the intimacy of these types of relationships. While some scholars argue that intercultural marriages have increased levels of conflict, others assert that the amount of conflicts is equal in intercultural marriages and intracultural marriages.

P-W. Lee (2006) claimed that little research exists to substantiate the claim that intercultural relationships fail more often than intracultural relationships. Gaines and Agnew (2004) stated that the majority of literature on intercultural relationships claims that intercultural relationships are difficult to establish and maintain. However, they noted that successful intercultural marriages are rarely recognized as often in the media or the social science literature as successful intracultural marriages. Therefore, intercultural marriages may be successful but

the amount of reporting on these successes may be almost nonexistent (Gaines & Agnew, 2004).

Hence, their conclusions demonstrate the need for additional research in this field.

Conflicts in intimate, intercultural relationships do occur, but Garcia (2006) proposed that

conflicts may be the result of personality differences or situational factors and are not exclusively

the byproduct of cultural differences. However, most individuals believe that intercultural

marriages contain more stress, are more dysfunctional, and have a greater likelihood of ending in

divorce (Frame, 2003).

Communication and conflict in intercultural marriages are both fascinating and complex.

Therefore, a broad review of literature from different fields of study is required to grasp this

multifaceted phenomenon. The ever expanding field of intercultural communication is

highlighted, specifically noting theories and research on intercultural communication

competence and third culture building. Such concepts as adaptation and acculturation are

explored. Then, research on conflict communication is defined and studies of conflict within

marriages are presented, followed by research on intercultural conflict. The literature review

culminates in a discussion about conflict and communication in intercultural marriages.

Intercultural Communication

Communication is defined as a process of sharing and creating meaning between

individuals (Gudykunst & Nishida, 2001). It is a tool used by all humans regardless of the culture

from which they come and is crucial to the survival of humans (Casmir, 1978). "Communication

is effective to the extent that the person interpreting the message attaches a meaning to the

message that is relatively similar to what was intended by the person transmitting it" (Gudykunst

& Nishida, 2001, p. 60). This message may appear simplistic until introducing concepts such as

gender and cultural differences including languages, nuances, expectations, and traditions. As

individuals from various cultures interact and speak with one another, differences and similarities surface. Dissimilarities may include philosophies, worldviews, and values.

In the early 1950s, Hall and his colleagues at the U.S. Foreign Service Institute presented a framework by which to study intercultural communication (Jiang, 2006). By the early 1980s, scholars such as William Gudykunst and Young Yun Kim were formulating intercultural communication theories. The field of intercultural communication continues to broaden and develop various theories for this intriguing phenomenon. Jiang (2006) asserted that due to the increase of communication involving individuals with diverse cultural and linguistic experiences, the field of intercultural communication is always expanding. Scholars such as Kim (2008) have theorized about the process of adaptation and acculturation for individuals residing in a different culture. Casmir (1999) put forth the concept of third-culture building. Undoubtedly, intercultural communication competence is essential for effective communication to occur between individuals of diverse cultures.

Intercultural communication competence.

Scholars such as Chen and Kim have provided valuable insight into intercultural communication competence. Chen (1989) espoused the belief that communication competence involves both effectiveness and appropriateness in interactions. Historically, three approaches to the field of intercultural communication effectiveness manifest themselves. One approach focuses on the "sojourner's personality, world view, and cultural awareness" (Chen, 1989, p. 118). Another line of research concentrates on the participant's interactions. The final approach combines both concepts as it views both the characteristics and behaviors of the individual. The appropriateness aspect relates to the person's competence in the verbal context, relational context, and the environmental context.

Chen (1989) also proposed four areas to study which he suggested encompasses the themes of effectiveness and appropriateness: personal attributes, communication skills, psychological adjustment, and cultural awareness. The personal attribute component entails people's ability to understand themselves and demonstrate optimistic interactions. This involves such concepts as self-awareness and self-disclosure. Undoubtedly, self-awareness significantly impacts interactions with those of other cultures. According to Chen, self-disclosure is one of the main factors impacting interpersonal relationships.

The element of communication skills deals with verbal and nonverbal communication. This aspect includes such things as linguistic skills, flexibility, and social skills, and demands the ability to be perceptive, responsive, and empathetic in interactions. Undoubtedly, the presence or lack of these dynamics influences intercultural communication competence.

A person's capacity to function in a foreign environment reveals information about psychological adjustment. In new situations, stress and frustration surface, perhaps due to the confusion of the newness and forced alterations in order to be successful there.

The last dimension is related to culture awareness. In this area, individuals demonstrate how knowledgeable they are about the other culture's values, customs, norms, and systems. This expertise quite naturally can augment the process of intercultural communication competence. Chen's four dimensions and components of intercultural communication competence are seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *The Dimensions and Components of Intercultural Communication Competence*

Intercultural Communication Competence	Personal Attributes	Self-Disclosure Self-Awareness Self-Concept Social Relaxation
	Communication Skills	Message Skills Social Skills Flexibility Interaction Management
	Psychological Adaptation	Frustration Stress Alienation Ambiguity
	Cultural Awareness	Social Values Social Customs Social Norms Social Systems
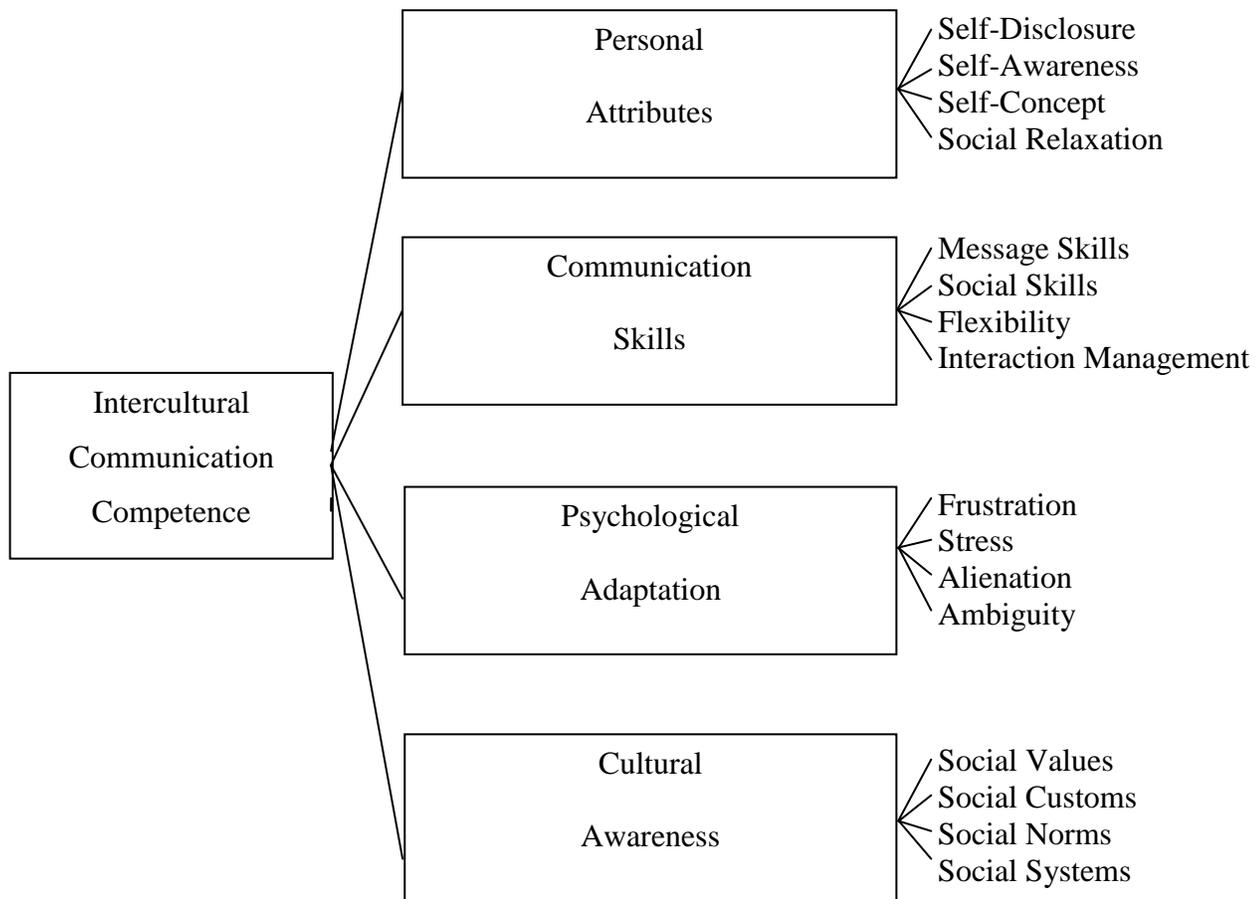
Intercultural adaptation.

Kim (2008) asserted that the development of one's identity is both complex and continuous. She described the stress-adaptation-growth dynamic in her integrative theory of cross-cultural adaptation (1988, 2001) and promoted her belief that "through prolonged and cumulative intercultural communication experiences, individuals around the world can, and do, undergo a gradual process of intercultural evolution" (2008, p. 359). The result of this process is a greater self-other orientation due to exposure to these experiences; Kim identified this as individuation and universalization.

In Kim's theory of acculturation and deculturation, the focus is on individuals who leave their home environment and relocate to a totally different place for a significant period of time. However, Kim (2008) recognized that as the world is changing, individuals may not have to move from their own country to experience acculturation. Acculturation attempts to cover the main themes of intercultural communication and new learning which occurs in the context of a different culture. This may include but is not limited to the learning of different cultural "practices" as well as a new language. While this occurs, the individual begins to think differently as the new culture promotes different processing.

Another part of acculturation involves developing new "cultural aesthetic and emotional sensibilities, from a new way of appreciating beauty, fun, joy, as well as despair, anger, and the like" (p. 363). Just because an individual is in a new culture, they may or may not utilize acculturation learning. Acculturation happens as the person decides whether to let it occur. This may be based on the person's "predispositions, pre-existing needs and interests" (p. 363).

As the individual begins learning new things, a letting go of some of the previous culture's elements happens. This is labeled deculturation as individuals begin to react to situations in a new manner. The loss of old responses may be temporary or situation specific. As acculturation and deculturation occur, changes may be evident because they are physical manifestations. However, alterations may also occur internally. For example, transformations in music, food, and clothing are noticeable to the casual observer; however the more complex changes may be less apparent as they stem from social role-related behaviors or core values.

As the tension between acculturation and deculturation continues, stress arises. This naturally occurs as individuals are dealing with the call to change and the struggle to give up the old. It is an internal conflict which sometimes is evidenced by "uncertainty, confusion, and

anxiety" (p. 363). Kim elaborates, "Stress, indeed, is an expression of the instinctive human desire to restore homeostasis, that is, to hold constant a variety of variables in internal structure to achieve an integrated whole" (p. 363). Stress can produce positive changes in persons as they learn to grow and adapt. The process of stress followed by adaptation is sustained as individuals attempt to re-establish a sense of normalcy in their lives. They move from "integration and disintegration, progression and regression, and novelty and confirmation" (p. 364).

As the individual continues to reside in a foreign culture, the stress-adaptation-growth dynamic persists but with minimal challenges and alterations. Indeed, an intercultural identity materializes—"an open-ended, adaptive, and transformative self-other orientation" (p. 364). This identity produces persons who clearly understand who they are while also focusing on others and their needs, thoughts, and feelings.

Third culture building.

When persons relocate to a new environment, they must adapt and re-negotiate meaning. Adaptation to a new culture occurs as individuals are trying to live and meet their physical, emotional, and intellectual needs.

Casmir (1999) put forth a third-culture building model in order to explain more accurately the adaptation of persons in new cultural environments. Arguing that many theories of intercultural communication views cultures as static, he points out its difference from other models in that the observer and observed are not separated. This perspective is embraced as great value is placed on the individuals who are experiencing new sights, thoughts, and reactions. Casmir (1999) outlined his third-culture building as "a third-culture, or new interactive relationship, which thus *evolves*, would represent an expression of mutuality, one which can be

understood, supported and defended by all who shared in its development" (p. 108). He stressed how the evolution that occurs tends to not be temporary or short-term.

Rather, the process that transpires "include[s] natural, or common processes of communicating and relating" (1999, p. 109). The phases in this model include contact, need, interaction, dependence to third culture interdependence. Some descriptors of this model include concepts such as "co-operative, communication, community building process" (p. 111). The concept of adapting and negotiating values and goals through communication found in this model are beneficial to understand in light of the interactions and communication which naturally occurs in intercultural marriages.

Conflict Communication

Understanding the concepts of intercultural communication competence, cultural adaptation and third culture building is critical in a study of intercultural marriages. However, conflict communication is another building block in the process of understanding this phenomenon. Conflict must be defined for this particular study. Cahn and Abigail (2007) defined interpersonal conflict as:

A problematic situation with the following four unique characteristics: the conflicting parties are interdependent; perceive that they seek incompatible goals or outcomes or they favor incompatible means to the same ends; the perceived incompatibility has the potential to adversely affect the relationship if not addressed; there is a sense of urgency about the need to resolve the difference (p. 290-291).

Breaking this definition down into the four characteristics gives a more comprehensive explanation of the conflict that occurs in spousal communication. This study will utilize this definition in its discussion of conflict within intercultural marriages.

In interpersonal relationships, Rahim (1983) conceptualized two areas of conflict that assist in describing four potential styles of handling conflict. The first domain involves the concern one has for self that is defined as high or low. The second sphere derives its categorization related to the concern one has for others, be it high or low. Combining these two fields, five specific conflict styles related to interpersonal conflict emerge: integrating, dominating, obliging, avoiding, and compromising (See Figure 2).

The integrating style implies high concern for self and others. The dominating style indicates high concern for self and low concern for others. The obliging style results in low concern for self and high concern for others. The avoiding style predicts low concern for self and others. The compromising style is positioned in the middle of high-low concern for self and others, seemingly being the perfect blend of concern for self and others when engaged in conflict (Rahim, 1983). As couples engage in conflict with one another, they have a tendency to utilize one of these styles. Many individuals model styles which they have seen implemented within their own family and culture as a child. These styles are employed habitually by all humans.

Figure 2. *The Styles of Handling Interpersonal Conflict*
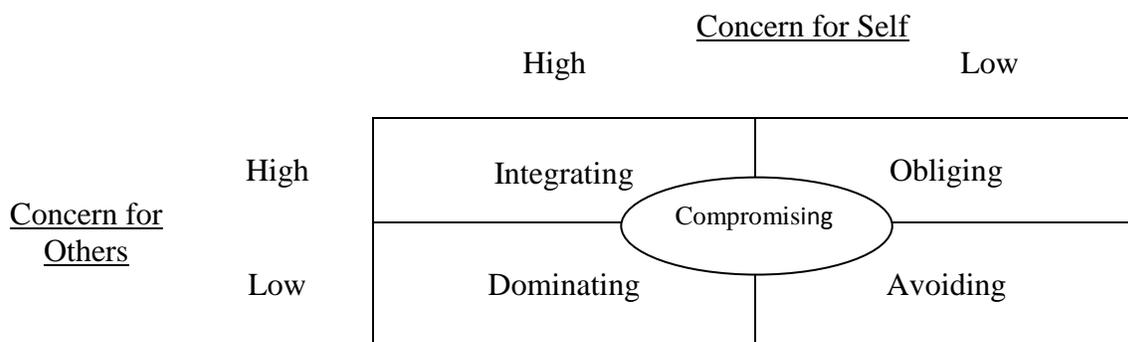
Conflict in marriage.

Marriage involves a union of two individuals who are embarking on the sometimes arduous, novel endeavor of becoming one. Thus, conflict emerges. The differences in opinions, beliefs, and actions may begin surfacing at an increased rate even during the honeymoon or the weeks after returning home. Newlyweds must individually and jointly construct a solution for significant differences as these conflicts possess the power to jeopardize the permanence and marital satisfaction within this union (Tallman & Hsiao, 2004).

Oduro-Frimpong (2007) found in his study that all of his married participants exhibited some type of conflict within their marriage. In intimate relationships, conflict is an ordinary part, and does not have to drive spouses apart. The sources or reasons for conflict are diverse. Tallman and Hsiao (2004) maintained that conflict develops partially due to individuals' expectations that their partners will fulfill their emotional, social, and material needs throughout their married life. Allender and Longman (2009) reported that since men and women are both similar and dissimilar, the differences inherent in gender may be "a huge potential for conflict and contempt" (p. 34).

In a marriage, individuals are intimate with one another and thus become vulnerable. Therefore, a spouse's words, actions, beliefs carry greater weight with his or her partner. A spouse has the capability to provoke increased feelings or passion from his or her spouse. At times, the vulnerability and closeness within this relationship create a potential for increased conflict.

All marriages involve a fusion of two distinct lives with a history, a personality, values, and expectations. It is the "active creation of a new culture that has never existed before" (Gottman, Driver, & Tabares, 2002, p. 387). However, the conflict communication that may

ensue based on this fusion may be constructive and productive. Rosen-Grandon, Myers, and

Hattie (2004) found that when married couples were able to manage conflict along with various

marital roles, they were able to arrive at marital satisfaction through shared values. Marital

satisfaction develops due to love, loyalty, and shared values. For married couples to arrive at

marital satisfaction through love, communication and expression of affection is critical (Rosen-

Grandon et al., 2004).

Respected marriage counselor and scholar, John Gottman, claims that happy, stable

marriages that possess an overall positive affect are better equipped to engage in conflict

constructively (1999). A marriage built on a foundation of friendship and positive experiences

can be significant for a couple's success during conflict. Gottman's (1999) Sound Marital House

Theory of Marriage described how spontaneous demonstrations of fondness and admiration

along with an appropriately filled emotional "bank account" influences marital conflict.

Intercultural conflict.

Kim (2008) noted "some of the most passionate domestic and international conflicts

headlining the daily media involve differing identities, particularly along tribal, racial, and

religious lines" (p. 360). Intercultural conflict thrives at all levels of a global society.

Intercultural conflict communication is complex and occurs due to numerous causes.

Intercultural conflict erupts because individuals hold diverse values and objectives, and utilize

distinctly different processes or face orientations (Oetzel et al., 2007). Oetzel, Ting-Toomey,

Yokochi, Masumoto, and Takai (2000) stated that "face represents an individual's claimed sense

of positive image in the context of social interaction. Facework refers to the communicative

strategies one uses to enact self-face and to uphold, support, or challenge another person's face"

(p. 398). In the field of intercultural conflict, scholars put forth various concepts to assist in a

more thorough understanding. In attempting to understand intercultural conflict, Ting-Toomey's

(1988) face-negotiation theory has merit. Ting-Toomey's face negotiation theory is based on the

following assumptions:

1. "People in all cultures try to maintain and negotiate face in all communication

situations,

2. The concept of face becomes especially problematic in uncertainty situations (such as

embarrassment and conflict situations) when the situated identities of the communicators

are called into question,

3. The variability dimension of individualism-collectivism, in conjunction with other

individual, relational (e.g. ingroup-outgroup), and situational variables, influence the use

of various facework and conflict strategies in intergroup and interpersonal encounters"

(Oetzel et al., 2000, p. 399).

Hofstede (1984) further explains how face and individualism/collectivism are linked

together by providing an example. "In the collectivistic Chinese society (and in other Asiatic

societies, such as Japan, as well), the individual is not 'inner-directed' at all but controlled by a

need for not losing face" (p. 151). This concept is in direct contrast to an individualistic society.

In intercultural, interpersonal conflict, one must evaluate the role culture plays in the

conflict. Oetzel, Dhar, and Kirschbaum (2007) put forth a critique of Rahim's (1983) model of

interpersonal conflict discussed earlier. In light of intercultural conflict, they evaluated the basic

assumption inherent in this model; in the avoiding style, one has supposedly low concern for self

and others. They assert that this assumption has its origin in a Western perspective as most

Eastern views laud avoiding as the best style in certain situations (Oetzel et al., 2007, p.184).

These views are derived from individualism and collectivism, respectively. Individualism is

described as a value system that makes individuals responsible for their own behavior and corresponding results. Individualists typically focus on their own needs, interests, and goals. On the other hand, collectivists tend to look at their own behavior and how it impacts others in their in-group. If needed, they are more likely than individualists to give of themselves in order that the group can prosper (Smith, Dugan, Peterson, & Leung, 1998). Hofstede (1984) explains, "The relationship between the individual and the collectivity in human society is not only a matter of ways of living together, but it is intimately linked with societal norms in the sense of value systems of major groups of the populations" (p. 149).

The majority of collectivistic cultures utilize high-context communication, whereas individualistic cultures rely on low-context communication. Hall (1981) defined high-context communication as "transactions [which] feature preprogrammed information that is in the receiver and in the setting, with only minimal information in the transmitted message" (p. 101). In contrast, low-context communication is "the reverse. Most of the information must be in the transmitted message in order to make up for what is missing in the context (both internal and external)" (p. 101).

Included in Hofstede's (2001) five dimensions of cultural variability are: individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/femininity, and short/long-term orientation. By identifying and understanding these particular broad tendencies within cultures, persons have a better opportunity to engage in intercultural communication leading to conflict resolution. Oetzel et al. (2007) noted that the aspects of individualism and collectivism and power distance are most commonly credited in comprehending intercultural conflict. They submit that conflict styles can be managed and constructed in such a way that culture is integrated within the explanation and understanding of these styles.

Foeman and Nance (1999) verbalized another challenge for couples from two distinct cultures. Such couples represent their own culture within their marriage; however, because of their intercultural marriage, they are not a true part of either their culture or their spouses' culture. These obstacles must be overcome through living above this paradox or accepting such uncertainty (Foeman & Nance, 1999). Because of the complexity of cultural diversity in intimate relationships, these authors strongly suggest the implementation of diverse theories in researching this multifaceted field.

Conflict communication in intercultural marriages.

Conflict occurs in all intimate relationships, and intercultural marriages are no exception. Individuals manage conflict with positive or negative outcomes. People's behaviors and communication styles are heavily influenced by values stemming from their culture and ethnicity. Culture also shapes one cognitively and emotionally. Ting-Toomey, Yee-Jung, Shapiro, Garcia, Wright, and Oetzel (2000) stressed that intercultural spouses must modify their interactions accordingly.

P-W. Lee (2008) analyzed the development of close friendships between persons of different cultures. He found that cultural differences in friendships were not viewed negatively; rather the participants' similarities became the focus. Relationships deepened through some type of turning point, guaranteeing the continual growth and commitment to one another. In the last stage, the view of "cultural violations" altered drastically as individuals then viewed these breaches within the framework of an intimate, committed relationship. This study sheds light onto the formation of intimate relationships which may develop into intercultural marriages.

Foeman and Nance (1999) related that couples from diverse cultures move through normal stages of building intimate relationships. In addition to the normal challenges of

developing intimate relationships, individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds progress through their own unique stages of racial awareness, coping, identity, emergence, and maintenance. This process is complex and specific to each couple.

Intercultural couples have the unique challenge of describing their feelings and thoughts to their spouse who has a distinctly different background. Due to the intimacy of their relationship, partners hold strong feelings of affection for their spouses which can complicate their interactions and communication (Foeman & Nance, 1999).

Another reason for conflict in intercultural marriages is articulated by the intersubjectivity theory (Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005). This theory states that individuals interpret experiences based on their personal interactions and subjective interpretations. Couples are often unaware of the impact culture has on their thoughts, feelings, and actions. Culture influences individuals in such a way that persons believe that their own particular culture is correct and operates in the best manner. Likewise, spouses feel that their own beliefs about their mates' actions are objective and accurate (Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005). Both perceptions can lead to intense conflict and difficulty in resolving conflicts constructively.

Researchers must also note the contribution of individualism and collectivism discussed earlier. Individualism and collectivism are significant factors in one's cultural make-up and therefore impact intimate relationships. Dion and Dion (1993) discovered that individualistic cultures place a stronger emphasis on romantic love as a basis for marriage. Using examples from China, India, and Japan, they described how most collectivistic couples from these countries do not equate the same amount of importance to psychological intimacy for marital satisfaction and overall well-being as couples in North America. Most North American couples who embrace individualism expect psychological intimacy with their spouses. Asian countries

represented in Dions' study promoted psychological intimacy but looked for this intimacy within

their family network.

Researchers have identified additional areas that can be potentially troublesome in

intercultural marriages. Cools' (2006) study found eight significant areas wherein intercultural

marriages have particular challenges: language, communication, adapting spouse, friends, raising

children, gender roles, visibility, and traditions. Gender roles and visibility were mentioned most

frequently. Frame's (2004) study found similar results in the areas of gender, language, and

raising children. Values, money, sexuality, religion, and social class were also potential areas of

increased conflict within intercultural marriages. Garcia (2006) suggested that raising children

can be more difficult for intercultural couples. There are numerous issues that come into play

within intercultural marriages. These issues can easily be misunderstood and lead to

misunderstandings and intense conflict. Differences between spouses, if viewed negatively and

not addressed, produce a negative impact on the relationship (Mackey, Diemer, & O'Brien,

2000).

For couples in intercultural marriages, challenges to reach workable solutions may arise

due to the couples' inability to fully grasp an understanding of the conflict as well as put into

concise words what they desire to communicate (Frame, 2004). Within these unique dyads,

distinctive and complex issues may evolve. Values are intangible yet are communicated and

evidenced in quite tangible ways. Value is a derivative of the Latin word, *valere*, which means to

be of worth (Frame, 2004, p. 221). Because intercultural couples have been raised in diverse

environments, value systems may be quite opposite, promoting potential disagreement and

conflict. Values shape belief systems and worldviews which determine thoughts and behaviors.

Frame (2004) claims that values are "culturally derived, so cultural difference brings with it

value differences that shape and impact intercultural marital relationships" (p. 221). A wide

spectrum of values exists between what Hall (1981) defined as high-context and low-context

cultures.

Frame (2004) noted the spectrum of cultural values constructed by Tataki (1993). For

example, the cultural values of control, equality, competition, future, and doing are on the left

side. On the other side are values such as fate, hierarchy, cooperation, past, and being. By

examining these dichotomies, the reader can begin to understand some reasons for conflict in

communication in intercultural marriages. If one spouse values an element on the left and the

other spouse values an element on the right, conflict will ensue (Frame, 2004). Neither individual

within the marriage may be wrong from their perspective as the values that they hold, that

developed from their birth, in a sense defines who they are as a person. Because values are held

dear to one's identity, when those values are questioned or communicated as being wrong or

weak, the individual who holds those values will more than likely feel threatened. Their very

identity is being questioned and perhaps a deviation from these values ushers in inner tension

and turmoil and even some insecurity. With these tumultuous feelings, defensive mechanisms

strike the individual who is doing the questioning. Defensive mechanisms tend to be laced with

anger, confusion, sarcasm, or deathly silence, thus impeding effective communication.

Internal and external factors influence intercultural marriages and can contribute to

increased conflict. Within the marriage unit, spouses of different cultures benefit from knowing

about their partner's culture. Understanding and knowledge can prevent some conflict.

Individuals in committed relationships benefit from having knowledge about one another. If

needed, they can modify their interactions to avoid or manage conflict constructively (Ting-

Toomey et al., 2000).

Abela, Frosh and Dowling (2005) conducted a study of Maltese married couples due to their minimal marriage dissolution. Faithfulness, respect, open communication about problems, patience, and sharing time together as a couple were important components embedded within this culture. Out of the 337 couples who completed a questionnaire only 15.9% expressed some dissatisfaction in their marriage. Loyalty to spouse, deep bonds with children, and a strong aversion to sexual promiscuity appeared to be factors in the marital satisfaction within a relationship (Abela et al., 2005). This particular culture demonstrates important components in a mutually satisfying marriage. This researcher proposes that these elements can be emulated in an intercultural marriage with potentially similar results.

Rosen-Grandon, Myers, and Hattie (2004) conducted a study of married couples and discovered that respect, forgiveness, romance, support, and sensitivity are key components to a loving marriage. They also identified seven of the most important characteristics for marital satisfaction: lifetime commitment, loyalty to spouse, strong moral values, desire to be a good parent, faith in God, religious/spiritual commitment, and the presence of forgiveness (Rosen-Grandon et al., 2004). Again, this researcher puts forward the possibility of these elements being present and beneficial for intercultural marriages.

Mackey, Diemer, and O'Brien (2000) cited the importance of not just listening to one another but also understanding one another's needs and how they are met in the relationship. It is also imperative to identify the roles and expectations in an effort to have a better understanding of the individual, be more empathetic, and exhibit greater respect. In this way, spouses can increase their respect for one another while also building on their mate's strengths.

Spouses need to understand their own conflict management style (Mackey et al., 2000).Tallman and Hsiao (2004) disseminated valuable information for couples who are

attempting to resolve conflict. They stated that both spouses must be satisfied with the resolution and neither spouse should forfeit their feelings and desires on a consistent basis in order to maintain and achieve marital satisfaction (Tallman & Hsiao, 2004).

Persons who have a strong cultural identity are more likely to employ integrating, compromising, and emotionally expressive conflict styles. They are less likely to utilize neglecting conflict styles (Ting-Toomey et al., 2000). Gareis (2000) noted that possessing a strong identity can contribute to a successful close intercultural relationship. Cools (2006) pointed out, however, that the development of an intercultural identity is complex. One study found that couples who possessed a common vision and purpose avoided much marital conflict (Lambert & Dollahite, 2006).

Garcia (2006) emphatically maintained that conflicts in intimate, intercultural relationships are not due solely to cultural differences, but may also be the result of personality differences or particular aspects of a situation. This concept was reiterated by P-W. Lee's (2006) study wherein his participants disclosed that similarities such as personalities, hobbies, or values contributed to the depth of their relationship. Empathy, patience, flexibility, and openness can be factors in a successful close intercultural relationship (Gareis, 2000). This researcher proposes that intercultural marriages may be as mutually satisfying as intracultural marriages.

Intercultural marriages encounter obstacles to building and maintaining healthy, intimate relationships. At times, societal pressures may embrace feelings of aversion to intercultural relationships (Foeman & Nance, 1999). Because of these pressures and the potential barriers in intercultural relationships, communication is vital (Foeman & Nance, 1999). As dyads form a relational identity, third parties play a vital role (P-W. Lee, 2006). Oetzel et al. (2007) reiterated that third party factors are a major contributor to conflict. Approval of an intimate relationship by

friends assists in marital satisfaction while disapproval of a relationship by parents promotes

marital dissatisfaction (Rosen-Grandon et al., 2004).

Communication is a significant factor in intercultural marriages. Gareis (2000) noted that

one's ability to effectively communicate is a significant addition to the development of a positive

relationship with one from another culture. Communication includes one's competence in

nonverbal behaviors, self-disclosure, and other key elements in intercultural communication

competence (Gareis, 2000). In his study, S. Lee (2006) maintained that interpersonal

communication is a stronger influence than environmental factors in intercultural relationships.

When spouses communicate openly, loving relationships will be fostered (Rosen-Grandon,

Myers, & Hattie, 2004).

Sias et al. (2004) carried out a study involving close intercultural friendships and found

that language did pose a problem in communicating but not in the development of the

relationship. However, this obstacle spurred some individuals on to communicate more in order

to understand one another. Interestingly enough, some intimate dyads developed their own type

of language. Language and communication can be hindrances for some members of intercultural

relationships (Cools, 2006).

Conflict in intercultural marriages will arise just as in intracultural marriages. This

researcher suggests that positive outcomes and marital satisfaction may be produced through

these challenges. Without a doubt, religion can negatively impact one's relationship if spouses

hold diverse beliefs (Lambert & Dollahite, 2006). However, the aforementioned researchers

found strengths in couples who were religious. Religion typically fosters selflessness and the

idea of unconditional love amongst spouses. During conflict, the use of scriptural teachings,

religious attendance, and couple prayer assisted in successful conflict resolution. Religious

institutions promote a commitment to relationship permanence and a willingness to forgive.

These two components assist dramatically during the reconciliation phase. Overall, religious

beliefs assist in problem prevention, conflict resolution, and relational reconciliation (Lambert &

Dollahite, 2006).

Intercultural couples have the ability to possess strengths that intracultural marriages are

unable to achieve. An intercultural couple who withstands and overcomes negative outside

pressure forms strong ties (Foeman & Nance, 1999). They also create their own sense of identity

and own a unique viewpoint evolved from their very existence as an entity. Third culture

building (Casmir, 1993) plays a factor in some intercultural marriages. At times, individuals in

the marriage unit may form a new, unique hybrid culture, a third culture. By forming a third

culture, one partner's culture does not govern over the other and the existence of a third culture

can eliminate one's tendency to be ethnocentric. Ethnocentrism refers to a belief system of

individuals wherein they feel their culture is superior to other cultural groups. Over time,

individuals' level of third culture expands as they invest in the marriage (S. Lee, 2006).

Frame (2004) mentioned the possibility of couples reframing their differences by

celebrating them and incorporating some of their spouses' cultural aspects into the marriage to

add excitement. By taking this approach, couples can potentially "carve out a new way of

relating that honors the 'both/and' of their relationship" (Frame, 2004, p. 226). She also

suggested couples making an identity of their own, a 'third reality' and establishing new rituals

as a couple (Frame, 2004). Intercultural marriages have specific challenges due to their very

essence, but success in their own right can be accomplished.

This literature review presented theories and research on intercultural communication,

specifically intercultural communication competence, cultural adaptation, and third culture

building. Next, the field of conflict communication was explored, specifically conflict in marriage, intercultural conflict, and conflict communication in intercultural marriages. Conflict occurs in all intimate relationships. Typically, conflict has negative connotations, but conflict and differences can generate positive results. This researcher reviewed literature that highlights the unique facets of an intercultural marriage. Each intercultural dyad has its own particular dynamics which define and illustrate the characteristics of its marriage. The present literature along with the need for additional research caused this researcher to delve into the study of communication and conflict in intercultural marriages, having concluded that extensive interviews with individuals in intercultural marriages would be highly beneficial to learn more about this field of communication.

Methodology

The review of the literature demonstrates the need for additional research of conflict and communication in intimate, intercultural relationships. As intercultural marriages are increasing in numbers (Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005; Frame, 2004), the need for research is imperative as little empirical research exists in this field (Cools, 2006). In addition, opposing viewpoints exist regarding the difficulty of establishment and maintenance of satisfying, successful intercultural marriages (P-W. Lee, 2006; Gaines & Agnew, 2003; Frame, 2004; Garcia, 2006; Foeman & Nance, 1999).

This phenomenological study attempts to contribute to previous studies by bringing greater clarity in understanding the complex factors influencing individuals in intercultural marriages. Using in-depth interviews, this study explored the unique internal and external elements present and dynamics manifested in diverse ways through communication and conflict. Intercultural communication and conflict are complex due to the diverse aspects of this phenomenon (Oetzel, Dhar, & Kirschbaum, 2007). Three primary research questions are addressed in this study:

RQ1: Which internal and external factors impact the effectiveness of communication between spouses in intercultural marriages the most?

RQ2: Which communication competencies do spouses in intercultural marriages develop in order to address cross-cultural differences?

RQ3: How do spouses in intercultural marriages experience and deal with conflict within their intercultural marriages?

Based on Cahn and Abigail's (2007) definition, interpersonal conflict is defined for this study as a situation wherein the two individuals are interdependent; they possess opposing

objectives which have the power to negatively impact the relationship if not resolved; it is

essential that the differences be settled as quickly as possible. Constructive conflict is the

managing of conflict in such a way that both parties find fulfillment in the resolution and can

continue to derive marital satisfaction from the relationship even though compromise and

differences exist. Destructive conflict occurs when differences exacerbate the marriage

relationship by magnifying the root issue thus enveloping other marital dynamics. Negativity

pervades the marital union and prevents a mutually fulfilling resolution.

Research Design

Qualitative research allows phenomena to be studied and analyzed in detail (Silverman,

2006). The goal of qualitative researchers is "to preserve and analyze the situated form, content,

and experience of social action" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 18). Sias et al. (2008) asserted the

benefit of employing qualitative methods when studying intercultural relationships, as a

qualitative study allows individuals to communicate their particular experience effectively. By

sharing their thoughts and stories, persons in an intercultural relationship divulge the personal

and cultural elements evident in their specific, intercultural relationship (Sias et al., 2008).

Qualitative methods are also beneficial to complement existing studies in an emerging

field, as they assist in providing a detailed picture of the phenomena involved in the topic of

study. Many factors impact the communication in intercultural marriages and a qualitative

approach is needed to provide a holistic view (Cools, 2006). In-depth interviews were employed

to investigate how spouses in an intercultural dyad co-create meaning as well as how these

couples handle and resolve conflict. Intercultural marriages are described through the eyes of

intercultural spouses as it is their lived experience.

In qualitative research, the primary data collector is the researcher. All persons have biases, and qualitative researchers must be aware of how their biases could potentially influence the data collection process and the interpretations of the findings. This researcher has a wealth of intercultural experience and consequently is interested in intercultural relationships at all levels. During undergraduate studies, this researcher had a Korean roommate and consequently visited Korea. She lived with a Korean family two different summers for approximately one month each time. For eight summers, this researcher worked with an exchange program in America which hosted female teenagers from a private Japanese school. This researcher also lived and taught at this private, all-girls Japanese secondary school for two years. Following this intercultural experience, the researcher lived with a Japanese teacher from the aforementioned school for two years in America. These experiences allowed this researcher to observe individuals from Asian cultures interact and communicate as well as develop her own close relationships with people who are culturally different. This researcher has intercultural friendships in America that assisted her in networking and identifying potential participants for this study.

The researcher's interactions with those of diverse cultures assisted her in interviewing. This researcher has learned about many cultures, particularly Asian cultures, and therefore possesses a great deal of intercultural communication competence. This researcher's counseling background also proved beneficial in establishing rapport, eliciting personal stories and feelings, and maintaining confidentiality within the interview process.

In studying intercultural relationships and interviewing spouses from intercultural marriages, the researcher was aware that her past experiences could inhibit objective interpretation of data. Her proclivity and preference of a particular culture could have also

inhibited neutrality. This researcher commenced this study aware of some potential biases and focused on being objective throughout the interview process, analysis, and interpretation of data.

Participants

Intercultural couples were sampled for this study since they have experienced the phenomenon of intercultural marriages, and therefore, are rich sources of information and experience. Prior to conducting the interviews, the researcher contacted numerous friends, asking them if they knew intercultural, married couples who met the requirements of the study. Several friends contacted their friends as well as the researcher about individuals they knew who qualified for the study. The researcher then contacted one of the spouses via phone, e-mail, or face-to-face and discussed the specifics of the study and answered any questions. Then, the researcher and spouse decided on a date and location for the interview, thus employing a combination of convenience and snowball sampling techniques.

Interviews were conducted in central Virginia with six couples who are married to and living with a spouse who is culturally different. Due to convenience and time limitations, phone interviews were conducted with two couples from Georgia and one couple from Virginia. Study participants were composed of one Asian spouse and one Caucasian American spouse. This researcher limited this study to the Asian and Caucasian American population in order to limit the number of variables considered. Asian participants were chosen due to the researcher's experiences in Asia. Her intercultural friendships with Asians thus assisted in locating participants and building rapport during the interview process. Spouse A was identified as living predominantly in America. Spouse B either spent their childhood primarily in a country different from the United States or lived in the United States in a home where his or her minority culture was embraced wholeheartedly and cultural traditions and philosophies were taught. Participants

were married for varying lengths from 6 years to 35 years, and ages ranged from 29 to 57 years old.

The sample is homogeneous in that all participants are spouses currently in an intercultural marriage. This researcher chose interviews with individuals who are married to one another so that a more comprehensive picture of intercultural couples could be drawn (Cools, 2006). Heterogeneity was achieved as the persons differ in age, gender, length of marriage, and geographical location. Nine Caucasian Americans, three Filipinos, three Koreans, two Japanese, and one Chinese participated in this study. Five couples were composed of Asian wives and Caucasian American husbands; four couples were composed of Caucasian American wives and Asian husbands. In order to achieve the best results, participants did not have a close relationship with the researcher (Sias et al., 2008).

Gender influences perceptions, strategies, and communication styles (Frame, 2004; Mackey et al., 2000). Thus, this researcher attempted to acknowledge gender differences which may have impacted the interviewees' articulation and perception of the subject matter.

Interview Procedure

Due to the sensitivity of the topic and the sample, this researcher obtained permission from the Institutional Review Board prior to conducting interviews. This researcher explained to participants the purpose of this study and obtained signed consent forms from participants which detailed how participants could withdraw from the study at any time. All participants were also given a copy of the consent form for their own records. This researcher advised participants as to how the information from interviews would be utilized and used pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

This researcher conducted in-person interviews on a university campus, at local cafes, and in participants' homes. Locations were based on the participants' preference as interviews are more suitable in a natural setting (Cools, 2006; Sias et al., 2008). Environment impacts how much or how little one communicates both verbally and nonverbally. In an attempt to diminish any external, negative variables, the interviewer endeavored to locate suitable settings for the interviews. Because of cultural differences and comfort level, some interviews were conducted in the home of intercultural couples. All male participants were interviewed in a public location or in homes wherein the wife was also present.

For phone interviews, the researcher arranged a specific time for the interview. Prior to recording the interview, the interviewer obtained permission from the interviewee. This researcher conducted interviews in private locations to ensure confidentiality. Because the researcher did not have the opportunity to build rapport face to face, she attempted to gain their trust by acknowledging their comments and inserting relevant statements to increase their comfort level.

Because these interviews addressed delicate issues, they were conducted individually (Mackey, Diemer, & O'Brien, 2000). This interviewer sought to gain understanding about the dynamics of intercultural marriage and believes this is better achieved through individual interviews. Confidentiality between interviewer and each spouse was maintained. As each spouse was interviewed individually, the confidentiality of the interview session was upheld regardless of any overlapping themes or concepts that may have been expressed by the first spouse who was interviewed. Responses were not divulged by the interviewer between married spouses. According to various scholars, when spouses are interviewed separately, there is a greater probability that the majority of individuals will be more candid in their answers

(Seymour & Eardley, 1995; Lambert & Dollahite, 2006). This type of interviewing was also

employed to prevent conflict from occurring due to the nature of the interview.

      This interviewer used open-ended questions and a semi-structured interview process

utilizing the same guide throughout every interview. The interview commenced by employing

background questions that were non-threatening such as stories of how the couple met,

explanation of their particular cultural background, and identification of countries of residence.

Beginning with these fundamental questions provided the interviewer the opportunity to develop

rapport with the interviewee as he or she divulged significant yet conflict free information. Then,

the interview progressed to questions about previous intercultural interactions, similarities and

differences, communication, integration of the two cultures in their marriage, and conflicts

within the marriage. Within the process of interviewing, this researcher noticed that at times

there was a need to ask additional questions or vary the questions in order to obtain more

accurate, comprehensive information (Lambert & Dollahite, 2006). Interviews lasted from 24

minutes to 1 hour and 15 minutes. The average interview lasted approximately 45 minutes.

      Throughout the interview process, this researcher utilized active listening skills and

verbal prompts to encourage the interviewee. The researcher noted particular nonverbal

communication patterns as well as verbal techniques employed by the interviewee. During face-

to-face interviews, the researcher wrote some notes depending on the reaction of the interviewees

to the researcher's note taking. However, for phone interviews, the researcher wrote copious

notes.

Data Analysis

      All interviews were audio-recorded with permission from the interviewees. The

interviews were transcribed for analysis. First, transcriptions and interview notations were read

for a comprehensive overview. Then, they were re-read and marked for common themes as well as unique viewpoints from diverse spouses. Portions which seemed significant at this point were highlighted. While compiling data, this researcher began the process of analysis, looking for themes evident amongst intercultural couples (Sias et al., 2008). Emerging themes and recurring patterns from the interviews were noted as well as how they were interrelated. Brief notes were written on the margins of the transcriptions. After the completion of all the interviews, data was again reviewed and analyzed to achieve a comprehensive view of the information in its entirety.

After careful analysis, major themes were divided into subthemes. The researcher then gathered significant quotes and specific examples from spouses which corresponded with the specific themes. Some significant excerpts from the interviews were extracted and utilized for analysis and illustration of the various findings. The prevalent themes were grouped together in an attempt to answer the research questions guiding the study. However, when other themes seemingly unrelated to the research questions emerged, the researcher noted their significance to this study and the field of intercultural communication.

The collected data was rich in detail and examples as eighteen spouses who were in intercultural marriages were interviewed. Because of the amount of data that was collected, the researcher read the transcripts and notes multiple times. The researcher was benefitted as she was also the interviewer, thus able to observe nonverbal patterns, environmental settings, and utilize reflective analysis.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore how intercultural couples achieve marital satisfaction and communication competence. Communication and language can assist or impede the success of intercultural marriages (Cools, 2006). A qualitative method was employed;

eighteen participants who are in intercultural marriages were interviewed. Factors and themes

emerged through data collection and analysis; light was shed on an expanding way of life for

many individuals in America.

Results

The data utilized in this study was gathered by conducting interviews with spouses in intercultural marriages. Nine intercultural couples participated in semi-structured interviews; each spouse was interviewed separately articulating his or her own perspective. The interview transcripts were analyzed in reference to the three research questions guiding this phenomenological study. In this chapter, the findings are presented.

Background Information

Prior to reporting the findings of this study, basic demographic information is necessary for a comprehensive understanding. The sample included five couples composed of Asian wives and Caucasian American husbands and four couples composed of Caucasian American wives and Asian husbands. The majority of participants were in their thirties; seven of the couples had children and one couple is in the process of an overseas adoption. Six of the couples had children who were elementary aged, and only one couple had grown, married children.

Five of the couples have been married from six to eight years, three couples have been married for eleven to twelve years, and one couple has been married for thirty-five years. Most of the couples lived in the United States when they met; however, two of the couples met, married, and lived in Asia for two years prior to residing in the U.S. Three of the couples have returned to the Asian spouse's home country for a brief visit, and two of the Caucasian American husbands expressed their desire to relocate to Asia at some point in the near future.

Religion was not a specific focus of the study; however, during the interview, five of the couples expressed some facet of their Christian faith as they interacted with the researcher. Three of the five couples seem to possess an integrated faith which impacts their actions and leisure

time. The other two couples spoke minimally about Christianity. Four couples' religious

preference is unknown.

Most interviewees had some intercultural interaction prior to meeting their spouses.

Several mentioned being raised in a culturally diverse environment, while many dated outside of

their race prior to dating their spouse. A few of the spouses lacked a culturally diverse

environment while growing up and interacted only within their own race prior to meeting their

spouse. This minimal exposure to other cultures seemed to impact those individuals' worldview

and consequently marital satisfaction as they appeared to have less intercultural communication

competence.

Factors Impacting Communication

The first research question asked: Which internal and external factors impact the

effectiveness of communication between spouses in intercultural marriages the most?

Intercultural marriages are influenced by distinctive dynamics. Such factors are present within

the marriage dyad as well as outside the union. In this study, language fluency, high-context and

low-context communication, and family materialized as considerable factors as they impacted

the effectiveness of communication between spouses.

Language fluency.

Language fluency influences the efficacy of communication within intimate relationships.

As mentioned previously, the majority of these couples always lived in America; only two

couples lived in Asia for a brief time. As Owen so eloquently observed, "One side usually has to

give in more than the other. There can only be one culture that you're going to live in, and you're

going to adapt to one or the other. You have to go one in direction." This sacrifice or giving in

has multiple implications, but one compromise regards the use of one spouse's native language.

Intercultural married couples who live in the United States typically speak English in their spousal interactions. A few couples elaborated that they employed a combination of English and Asian words at times, but all agreed that the dominant language between one another was English.

A few of the Asian stay-at-home moms spoke both their own language and English to their children, thus assisting their bicultural children in becoming bilingual. Two Asian mothers do not speak their mother tongue to their children. As the mothers in this study were the primary caregivers, the teaching of the Asian language occurred through Asian mothers. Interestingly enough, most of the children, whose parents do not use their native tongue when communicating with their children, have frequent interactions with their Asian grandparents who do interact with them using their mother tongue. Out of the seven couples in this study who have children, only one couple has grown children. Thus, the language competence of the elementary aged children of the intercultural couples in this study is yet to be determined.

All couples employ English as their dominant language in their marriage; however, the language fluency of the spouses has fluctuated for many. Four of the five Caucasian American husbands discussed their wives' improved language skill. Some husbands viewed this deficiency positively as it created a unique dynamic in their communication. While dating, this lack of English proficiency encouraged couples to spend more time together as one spouse taught the other English or as they attempted to understand one another using broken English and dictionaries. This element seemed appealing in a new relationship for the spouse who spoke English well.

However, for those struggling to grasp a second language, their need for fluency impacted their self-sufficiency and autonomy. For example, in Jerry's eyes when his wife first

came to America, "She didn't speak well. She didn't drive for several years. She was not

independent." He goes on to say that, "She's very independent now. She speaks really well and

is self-sufficient." From Haruko's perspective, her poor English inhibited her. She exemplified

her lack of confidence by describing her interactions when she was at her husband's workplace.

"I was always there, kind of like a little dog, always with the owner, always just following him

around. I hated to talk to people and tried not to make eye contact. Now, I'm the one who goes

and says, 'Hi!' "

Although all the couples sampled in this study have been married at least six years, some

of the Asian spouses and their use of a second language in an intimate relationship remains a

negative at times. This dynamic can contribute to or even create a conflict. Although Hannah's

husband speaks English fluently, she noted, "He doesn't always communicate his thoughts

specifically. Sometimes he says something and he gets frustrated because I do not comprehend

exactly what he is saying." Another couple both mentioned in separate interviews that when they

are tired, their ability to communicate, to understand one another, and to try to figure out what's

being communicated diminishes significantly. Conflict also ensues for another couple due to

language issues. Yukana stated, "Sometimes we have problems communicating. He understands

what I'm saying, but the way I try to explain it, he doesn't understand. I cannot explain it the

way I want to. I speak English, but some hard words I need to look in a dictionary to understand

the meaning." Undoubtedly, spouses who communicate in their mother tongue seem to have an

advantage. Those non-native English speakers who must employ English, struggle at times.

Findings demonstrated that language is significant to effective communication in

intercultural marriages. Perhaps this is true because of the complex relationship between

language and culture. Owen asserted, "Language cannot be separated from culture." He uttered

this axiom when adamantly affirming that his wife's Asian language was markedly different than English and substantiating his claim with explanation and illustrations. Language is crucial to communication as it is the vehicle to developing intimacy and trust in close relationships.

High-context and low-context communication.

Cultures tend to communicate using a high-context or low-context dimension. As the terms imply, some communication relies more on the context to communicate meaning. Typically, Asian cultures employ high-context communication. This entails a reliance on one's ability to read nonverbal cues and thoroughly understand the context and environment to grasp communication accurately. On the other end of the spectrum is low-context communication wherein communication is direct and unambiguous. Specifics are delineated, and little guesswork is utilized. Most individualistic cultures such as the United States tend to use low-context communication more regularly.

An important dimension of this study came to light through the participants' continual reference to their spouses' communication. As all dyads were composed of an Asian and an American, one assumes that one spouse used high-context communication whereas the other spouse employed low-context communication. Multiple spouses recognized these differences in communication, although the root of these differences is perhaps less easy to identify and accept. These dissimilarities occurred in marriages of six years to marriages of thirty-five years.

An American husband verbalized his frustration with his wife's indirectness. His tone and facial expression reflected his annoyance as he exemplified her indirect communication. He recounted a particular incident wherein he said, "Forget the freaking hint. What do you want? What do you want for dinner, [wife's name]? What do you want for dinner?" His exasperation

was evident and he added this explanation: "Subtle communication is more the norm in Japanese, and it doesn't fit my personality."

Chris noted that he wished his wife, Haruko, would express her opinion more. "Sometimes I don't hear her ideas because of the traditional Japanese perspective. I've struggled with that. I want us to share everything, but sometimes it's hard for me to get her to do that. . . We don't argue that much, but I think we would more if she always told me how she felt."

Maklig explained the Asian male perspective: "I think culture wise, as an Asian male, there are times I expect her to understand without me having to be specific in what I'm saying. There is also this expectation of catering to or knowing what I'm saying. You should know my expectations. She'll always say, 'You've got to tell me specifically what you want.' It's expected [in the Asian culture] that you should have figured this out by now versus her culture; she wants me to tell her specifically what I want, each time, everyday."

Indisputably, the manner in which one communicates is crucial. Spouses in intercultural marriages attempt to communicate effectively by potentially employing dissimilar styles. Individuals communicate in intimate relationships and may or may not be aware of the essence of such uncomplimentary modes of communication: high-context and low-context.

Family.

Intercultural marriages are the union of not only two individuals with distinct cultures, but also the merger of mothers, fathers, siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, and other relatives from diverse cultures. Such a coalition has the potential for harmonious gatherings and blossoming relationships as well as tumultuous encounters and hurtful exchanges. The results overwhelmingly converged in one voice as spouses spoke of the significance of family to their marriage. Hannah seemed to speak for many in intercultural marriages when she expressed, "I

think the main issues in intercultural marriages isn't so much dealing with the intercultural

relationships. It isn't so much between the two spouses as it is when you bring the family into the

picture."

For some, this factor emerged as potentially significant when couples were assessing the

advantages and disadvantages of dating prior to making this commitment. Others encountered

negativity when they first dated. Both male and female spouses, Asians and Americans, shared

how family played a pivotal role in marriage. For some, experience has produced wisdom which

is now utilized in fostering healthier relationships. Acceptance of a culturally diverse spouse was

finally granted for some spouses, while one mother died, still not accepting her culturally

different daughter-in-law. Truly, a heartfelt burden for intercultural married couples involves the

potential acceptance or rejection by their family for the one they love.

One couple, Jayne and Sung-joo were casual friends for years before they became better

friends. Jayne recounted how her husband talked with her about the possibility that his father

would cease relations with his son, Sung-joo, if he decided to date her, a Caucasian American

lady. Individually, and as a couple, they had to assess the risks. While they were dating, Sung-

joo's mother attempted to thwart their relationship by arranging dates for her son with different

Korean ladies. Months after they dated, Jayne and Sung-joo prepared for Jayne's first

meeting/intense interview with Sung-joo's parents. At this time, Jayne was finally accepted as

evidenced by Sung-joo's mother's prayer. Both Jayne and Sung-joo maintained the significance

family plays by narrating this story; however, Jayne provided the details.

For some, they continue to encounter frustration, hurt, and some conflict due to family.

Hannah described how family impacts her marriage:

"I think family is where you start running into more of your conflict, on how you deal with each other's family dynamics. You are accustomed to something totally different. I think for two people to work through challenges isn't too bad, if you have love and understanding. But factor in everybody else [family], and it gets a little bit crazy. Those family ties are really strong in most other cultures. Even though it's certainly not my husband's intent for his family to have that pull, it's still there. That influence is still there. It's probably something that you can't avoid, and eventually you're going to have to work through it."

Makisig elaborated on his internal conflict as he is sometimes caught between his Asian family and his American wife:

"She [his wife] just has a difficult time understanding why my folks think the way they think. I just try to juggle that, just try to keep the peace and order. I'm sometimes caught in between. My side of the family tries to be understandable, but they're so comfortable in their culture that sometimes it's hard for them to switch. I have to remind them. They're willing to reach her, but I have to remind them. Sometimes they don't think about just stopping, putting away their culture and trying to reach their American culture."

For some families that were represented in this study, there were ill feelings toward the culturally different spouse. One spouse, Jerry, received a "scathing letter" from his sister based on information from their mother about the upcoming marriage. Neither his sister nor mother had met his fiancé as this couple was living in Asia at the time. Although his sister is reportedly now "best friends" with Yukana, his mother passed away last year, and in his own words, "I don't think my mom ever really embraced [my wife]."

Once when he was speaking to his maternal grandmother about staying with her during a family visit, she inquired, "Where are you going to stay?" This surprised him because he had stayed there many times before he went to Japan; however, he acknowledged that his grandmother disagreed with his marriage. Thankfully, his grandmother's aversion to his wife altered prior to her death.

Family and their acceptance of the culturally diverse spouse are critical components to marital satisfaction. This study revealed that family members may gradually acquiesce or may tenaciously refuse to embrace the marital union. Intercultural couples must recognize they are powerless to amend the hearts of their loved ones and may have to be "strong enough and confident to step out and have them [their families] follow." (quoted by Mindy)

Communication Competencies

The second research question guiding this study was: Which communication competencies do spouses in intercultural marriages develop in order to address cross-cultural differences? The findings of this study stress the significance of intercultural communication competence within intercultural marriages. Communication competencies have compelling implications for both conflict resolution and marital satisfaction. In this sample, spouses' knowledge and skills surfaced as essential factors contributing to intercultural communication competence the most within these dyads.

 Knowledge.

Knowledge is essential for successful intercultural unions as evidenced by an acquisition of information and understanding that is revealed through communication and interactions. Acquisition of knowledge refers to the basic information that is needed to be interculturally competent. The results indicated that self-awareness, open-mindedness, and language fluency

were necessary. The observable self-awareness was illuminated through spouses' words and portrayal of their everyday lives. Most spouses were able to delineate the existing differences and similarities between themselves and their spouses as well as identify their effects. They exhibited the ability to specify how some challenges were linked to the different cultures. Most of the Asian spouses recognized distinctions between themselves and their spouses regarding verbal and nonverbal communication. This self-awareness assisted them in becoming competent in intercultural communication.

Spouses of both gender often described themselves and their spouses as open-minded. This disposition seems to be essential for handling cultural differences in intimate relationships. One of the male interviewees, Makisig, expressed his openness to change as needed for his marriage. "The bottom line is to reach out in a cross-cultural marriage. That's what my wife is used to and what she knows. I also see the positive way of doing that too. If it's something that is good for me and my marriage, why not try it? Is it easy? No, not for me, but it's helpful for the marriage."

Flexibility also seemed to correlate with certain personalities and was clearly present in spouses who had much exposure to intercultural interaction prior to meeting their spouses. Experiences such as friendships, dating relationships, and particularly personal encounters with narrow-mindedness because of race seemed to endow persons with heightened open-mindedness.

Knowledge of language is also vital to effective communication in marriages. Spouses spoke about how fluency impacted their marriages previously as well as currently. Those spouses who have difficulty articulating thoughts and opinions after several years of marriage continue to struggle with effective communication. For example, Hongmei expressed, "Being able to speak English has opened another whole world."

Skills.

Skills essential for intercultural communication competence include such dynamics as being mindful and sensitive of cultural differences, supporting one's face, showing respect, and self-disclosing. Behaviors replete with these characteristics were evident in the interactions of many couples. Interactions in dyads reflected mindfulness. Spouses discuss personal needs and wants, so that their partner can be mindful. As spouses communicate effectively, they can identify what is most important to each of them respectively. Once their partner realizes this, they can make allowances and helpful adjustments. Numerous individuals shared how they communicated often, and together made decisions trying to be aware and sensitive to one another's position. Owen illuminated the need for spouses to be mindful of their responsibility for causing conflicts. He suggested that when problems erupt, individuals should identify the problem and say, "We have a problem; however, it's not because the culture made me do it. It's because I personally would not become understanding of my spouse and make it work."

Face support was disclosed as being significant for all parties but especially for Asian spouses. Face refers to "an individual's claimed sense of positive image in the context of social interaction" (Oetzel et al., 2000, p. 398). This concept was discussed by Asian and Caucasian American spouses. Some American spouses shared how they integrated Asian customs in their household because of its significance to their husband or wife. For example, Jayne reiterated that she learned over time the value Sung-joo placed on her walking him to the door when he leaves and greeting him with the children when he comes home. Of course, she acknowledges that when circumstances prevent her from doing so it is inconsequential. However, she respects his face by integrating this Korean custom into their household. Other Americans also remarked about saving face for their Asian spouse.

Respect is evidenced in intercultural marriages particularly when American spouses integrate Asian customs and traditions. All participants value their own culture, and a few expressed regret that they had somewhat "lost" their culture over the years. The integration of culture whether through food, holiday celebrations, language, or philosophies communicates respect, for as Hongmei wisely said, "Culture defines who you are." Therefore, when spouses willingly choose to incorporate their spouses' culture, they communicate their acceptance and love for their spouse.

Respect, especially during conflict, is critical. Hannah said, "We work really hard when discussing not to blame the culture. It's one thing to contribute it to the culture, but to blame or cut down and say something negative is something you have to work at not doing." This concept was mentioned by other couples as they focused on root issues as opposed to casting blame on the irrespective cultures. Typically, respect fosters love and strengthens bonds between spouses. As husbands and wives are mindful within their marriages and show supporting face, they communicate respect to their spouses.

The last skill observed in participants' marriages was self-disclosure or their willingness to divulge personal feelings and information. Individuals spoke about how learning this skill was challenging, especially for the Asian spouse. Asians seemed to lack the need to verbalize; instead, they wanted their spouse to pick up on needs and desires expressed non-verbally. Bae adamantly stated that it is "not necessary to verbalize" and explained that this was reflected in both his business and personal life. However, he also noted that he tried to amend this tendency as his wife expressed her need for self-disclosure. Makisig reflected on his communication over the years in comparison with now and acknowledged the change was due to his wife's need. "I

think I have improved. If I look back at what I used to be and what I am now, I've improved over the years. I express more."

Conflict

The third research question stated: How do spouses in intercultural marriages experience and deal with conflict within their intercultural marriages? This study demonstrates that intercultural marriages like all intracultural marriages include conflict. Because marriages entail intimate relationships and frequent interactions, the likelihood of conflict mushrooms. The spouses in this study described how the conflict process had evolved over time, and findings also illuminated the diversity of these processes. Although new issues surface and some differences remain complex and unresolved, the majority currently manage their conflict constructively.

Constructive conflict is the managing of conflict in such a way that both parties find fulfillment in the resolution and can continue to derive marital satisfaction from the relationship even though compromise and differences exist. Destructive conflict occurs when differences exacerbate the marriage relationship by magnifying the root issue thus enveloping other marital dynamics. Negativity pervades the marital union and prevents a mutually fulfilling resolution. Two couples differed from the others in that one couple is still engaged in figuring out how to manage cultural differences and the other couple has assented to destructive conflict. Findings also suggest that constructive and destructive conflict may be directly linked to individuals' level of intercultural communication competence.

Constructive conflict.

Results suggest that a change in perspective, honest and open communication, and a foundation of love are critical for constructive conflict. A recurring theme in this study involved spouses' current approach to conflict compared to their initial approach when newly married.

The majority of the participants expressed their growth as individuals when comparing their current perspective with the past. Undeniably, this adjustment influenced thoughts, behavior, and interaction, thus impacting the quality of their marriage.

Perspectives changed for numerous reasons. Some stated that they became more comfortable in their new role as a husband or wife which stimulated new viewpoints. Daily interactions became normal, and couples acquired useful knowledge about themselves and their spouses. Tala and Clayton both recognized that even if Tala wanted to engage Clayton in an argument, he would refuse to engage. This realization diffused the emotions at that particular time while also allowing them to communicate their perspectives later when both were calm. Now, Clayton maintains that they typically manage conflict by addressing it directly and working through it, and not becoming disconnected due to differences or intense emotions.

The act of engaging in conflict allowed wise spouses to recognize which issues were significant and those that were trivial. Amanda admits that she and Bae have softened more and realized that their own viewpoint is not necessarily right. They have made allowances for differences. Marriage, Amanda claims, has "smoothed out the rough edges." It seems this modification that enhances the marital relationship as well as the individual happens when both persons accept the culturally diverse spouse, even with their unique differences.

Spouses' perspectives changed through encountering conflict and having to face differences head on. These differences provoked individual thought as well as meaningful conversations with their spouses to determine the root of these problems. Both Owen and Hongmei shared in separate interviews about the same intense conflict early in their marriage. One evening as Hongmei cooked in the kitchen, she looked at her husband and stated, "Give me

the bowl." Owen replied, "Please," thus exemplifying how his wife should politely ask. The

situation exacerbated as both spouses reiterated their statements, refusing to acquiesce.

From Hongmei's perspective, her husband was dealing with her similarly to a small

child; in China, family members' close relationships justify directives without the inclusion of

extraneous polite terms. Owen interpreted her demanding statements as rude. This conflict

materialized chiefly because of their diverse cultural backgrounds which impacted the way they

communicated. Through this conflict, they both have learned from each other how to

communicate more effectively. Owen reflected on how he and his wife have adjusted their

communication, and how they are less serious nowadays. He noted that because they want to

avoid arguments, they both try to understand one another better, thus communicating

successfully. They both attempt to identify and discuss their viewpoints and reasoning in a

respectful manner.

Meaningful thought and learning was also reiterated by Sung-joo who admits that he has

"become more savvy in the art of communication." Years of marriage and flexibility have

nurtured wisdom in appreciating the importance of timing and the manner in which one

communicates. These factors are of great magnitude to married couples who represent both high-

context and low-context dimensions of communication.

Both male and female participants asserted the necessity of open communication,

although defined differently by spouses. As early as the dating process, patterns of handling

conflict develop. One couple became aware of their cultural difference regarding openness while

dating. Hannah relayed that in her husband's Asian upbringing, "They don't communicate

feelings. They just let it go." This was in direct contrast to her cultural background. She

immediately addressed communication patterns that needed readjustment such as her husband's

tendency to avoid conflict and shut down. In their two separate interviews, both spouses

remarked how this factor had altered and aided their marriage. Makisig commented that this

change was not easy for him, but he was willing to change for the benefit of his marriage.

Openness was also crucial for Mindy and Amado. Time has played a role in their lives as

their way of dealing with differences has evolved. They "hash it out" and express their opinions

without being demeaning and hateful. They both attempt to listen to each other's viewpoint. At

times, they walk away if emotions are unrestrained. They achieve resolution by a change in

belief or an acceptance to agree to disagree. Although only two couples served as illustrations

regarding honesty and openness, they speak for most participants in this study.

A change in perspective and a willingness to be open and honest has roots in a foundation

of love. Love was evidenced by beaming faces as spouses recollected first dates and wedding

days. Love was observed as interviewees recounted personal sacrifices they chose so that their

love flourished. Selfishness and self-centeredness was squashed for the good of the dyad.

During the interview, individuals recounted how they met their spouse. For many, their

excitement spread across their face and through their lips as they shared their stories. They

detailed what attracted them to their spouse and the list for many seemed endless. At least six

years has elapsed for all married couples in this study but the pleasure of talking about their

spouse was palpable. Owen exclaimed, "We're madly in love!"

Couples' willingness to put away selfish desires and fulfill their spouses' needs occurred.

For Amanda, this came in the form of saving face for her husband which equates with respect.

She attempts to express her disagreement with her husband when they are not in front of others,

thus respecting his face. When they have a difference, she now recognizes that "compromise is

not what she used to think it was." She concedes that when she learned "to let go of everything

and how I thought it should be, things seemed to work much better. I found that everything was still okay." Her willingness to let go of her own biases and expectations, allowed her to accept differences that initially produced conflict and tension, internally and externally. Overall, the married couples in this study manage conflict constructively.

Destructive conflict.

Destructive conflict occurs when differences exacerbate the marriage relationship by magnifying the root issue thus enveloping other marital dynamics. Negativity pervades the marital union and prevents a mutually fulfilling resolution. Destructive conflict was manifested in this study through word choice, inappropriate interactions, and a lack of kindness and understanding. This was exemplified by an Asian wife who quietly relayed how her husband would use derogatory terms at times when referencing her culture. She expressed how this hurt her feelings. Characteristic of her culture, she avoided direct confrontation with her husband. When describing their communication, she maintained, "Now, we don't have much communication, and we fight all the time. However, we need the communication to end our fight." This interviewer inquired about dealing with differences in marriage, and she responded, "We don't talk about them because we would get in a fight." She pointed to her body, describing the internal tension that was inside was preferred to fighting all the time. Then, she explained that for Asians, peace and harmony are essential for life.

In her husband's interview, he described how he perceived they dealt with differences. "She expresses hers. I express mine. We argue, and then we don't talk for a day." Throughout the interview, he referenced two issues that he had discussed and she continued to ignore. His description of a time when they disagreed and he was right, and a time when they disagreed and she was right seemed to uncover an underlying spirit of competition and need for control.

Another couple's way of handling conflict was also destructive. Words such as "pretty passionate people, maybe our voices get raised, most of the time we battle it out" were used to describe the management of differences as well as "Whenever we have a disagreement, it generally turns into an argument." Unfortunately for this couple, they both wholeheartedly agree that they are completely different, culturally and personality wise. Thus, one concludes that numerous arguments break out regularly. The wife lamented marrying someone from a different culture, emphatically asserting that she would never encourage her children to make that decision. For this couple, they continue to engage in destructive conflict.

Intercultural communication competence levels appear to be low for both spouses; according to the Asian wife's demeanor and verbalizations during the interview, she seems to have chosen not to acculturate into the United States. Ineffective communication and an inability to recognize the roots of their conflicts appear to foster misunderstandings and hurt for this dyad. Their differences are immense, and conflict occurs for a multitude of reasons.

Benefits of Intercultural Marriages

Numerous readers may at this point be questioning why individuals would willingly choose to unite with someone culturally different. As mentioned previously, intercultural dyads need intercultural communication competencies to better equip them to manage conflict constructively. Their language fluency, style of communication, and family dynamics may magnify the challenges encountered in intimate relationships. So, what drove the participants in this study to engage in such a phenomenon? Why do some intercultural married couples embody marital happiness as they reminisce about their first date and their development as a unified couple? Answers from participants about the best thing about intercultural marriages were different, but one main concept seemed to resound from interview to interview.

Person after person disclosed how their growth as an individual in an intercultural marriage was invaluable. Intercultural marriages fostered a global awareness and acceptance of other cultures as well as a diminished ethnocentrism. Bae shared that in intercultural marriages one has the ability to pick and choose what is best from each represented culture. This concept was further revealed by another husband, Chris, who described his intercultural marriage in this manner, "We have created our own culture together." Owen revealed, "Every time I look into her [Hongmei's] eyes, she reminds me of just being so far from who I am. It makes me want to be a better person. Intercultural marriages open you up to a whole new culture, a whole new outlook on life. They say if you learn an instrument or learn another language that boosts your IQ. I feel as a couple we are growing in acceptance, in intelligence, in many different ways as we learn something totally new. It is more than just culturally understanding something."

Two Asian parents expressed how their children will positively benefit from the blend of two cultures with their unique backgrounds and heritage. Makisig stated, "To not be trapped in one culture and do it that way and have to live that way, I think that is the one blessing. As I understand and learn about a different culture and use the good of that culture and the good of my culture, my wife and I can basically create our own package of culture as we raise our children."

The excitement and thrill of diversity is also appealing to this sample. They raved about the adventure in intercultural relationships. They love the exposure to new ideas, experiences, and foods. Hannah proclaimed, "Life is never boring." Perhaps, Haruko sums up her intercultural experience the best when she declared, "I feel like a princess in my dream."

Intercultural marriages are multi-faceted, but this study suggests that intercultural marriages can be mutually satisfying. Hongmei's closing comments seemed to embody many of the findings that surfaced in this study. She gushed:

"Intercultural marriage is so exciting. My husband is amazing. He's fun. In my culture we say, 'The gun shoots the bird that jumps up,' so we stay low and try not to stand out. We are boring. I'm so glad. Owen is a lot of fun; he's exciting. If you are an open person willing to change, willing to grow up, willing for excitement and the new adventure, it's just a whole new world. I never knew it could be that. It's very exciting, but you have to be an open person. You can't be too selfish, or your marriage is going to fail. Your marriage is never just going to happen. Never. You have to work every day. It's like your bedding. If you don't make it, it's going to be left there."

Summary

Results of this study revealed four major themes with subthemes. Demographic information was presented particularly noting spouses' intercultural interaction prior to meeting their spouse. Language fluency, high-context versus low-context communication, and family were identified as three major factors impacting communication within intercultural marriages. Communication competencies relating to knowledge and skill were put forward. Components of constructive and destructive conflict that emerged in the interviews were discussed. This chapter concluded with a discussion of the benefits of intercultural marriages.

Discussion

The fundamental aim of this phenomenological study was to investigate communication and conflict within intercultural marriages. Eighteen extensive interviews were conducted with spouses in intercultural marriages, in order to answer three research questions. This chapter will present a more exhaustive analysis of the results in reference to cited literature vis-à-vis intercultural communication and conflict communication.

Results highlighted the existence of cultural differences and conflict within intercultural marriages. The results also demonstrated that intercultural marriages can thrive in the realm of marital satisfaction. This was evidenced by the words, narratives, and nonverbal communication shared by the participants in this study.

Intercultural Communication

Communication is defined as a process of sharing and creating meaning between individuals. "Communication is effective to the extent that the person interpreting the message attaches a meaning to the message that is relatively similar to what was intended by the person transmitting it" (Gudykunst & Nishida, 2001, p. 60). It is a tool used by all humans regardless of the culture from which they come and is crucial to the survival of humans (Casmir, 1978). In this study, the communication within intercultural marriages and its effectiveness were investigated. Results demonstrated how vital communication is to the health and survival of each dyad.

Spouses revealed that intercultural communication competence is of great consequence to their union. Results uncovered such competencies as knowledge and skills. Knowledge acquired included self-awareness, open-mindedness, and language fluency. Skills included being mindful, supporting one's face, showing respect, and self-disclosing.

These abilities reiterated Chen's (1989) assertions that communication competence involves both effectiveness and appropriateness in interactions. Specifically, Chen noted four areas which encompass the themes of effectiveness and appropriateness: personal attributes, communication skills, psychological adjustment, and cultural awareness (1989). In this study, personal attributes such as open-mindedness, mindfulness, and self-awareness were identified as being of utmost importance. Spouses verbalized the significance of these qualities as well as the process of developing them. They also referenced conflicts that indicated their need to cultivate and possess these traits. Accounts were shared of previous times when minimal utilization of such qualities had negative consequences.

In contrast, some individuals hinted at their ignorance and neglect of these necessary components. Spouses who lacked mindfulness, cultural sensitivity, and flexibility encountered day to day challenges especially in the area of conflict. This absence of self-awareness seemed to foster misunderstanding of a partner's heart and mind. This finding is significant to the study of intercultural marriages as it can be utilized to assist intercultural couples, broaden the field of intercultural communication, and enrich the counseling discipline. As intercultural spouses discover the need for development of certain personal attributes, they can devote time and effort to increasing their flexibility, mindfulness, and self-awareness. Counselors whose clients are composed of intercultural dyads can integrate this new information into counseling sessions. This finding was manifested through comparison of spouse's separate interviews resulting in dissimilar perceptions, of similar scenarios and different viewpoints of their marriage. Undoubtedly, Chen's notion of the necessity of specific attributes aligns with the results of this study.

Another favorable quality within a dyad involves self-disclosure. According to Chen (1989), self-disclosure is one of the main factors in interpersonal relationships. Spouses confirmed how necessary self-disclosure is to the vitality of their relationship. Numerous American females described times when they verbalized to their husbands this glaring need in their marriages; thus, adjustments were made. Some Asian males disclosed how this was foreign and somewhat uncomfortable for them, but their attempt to improve in this area benefitted their marriage. A few American males seemed to recognize that their Asian wives did not naturally disclose highly personal information and communicated their desire to hear more of their spouses' opinion. No Asian wives mentioned a lack of or need for self-disclosure; however, this fact may be due to cultural or personality variables. A conclusion about Asian females regarding self-disclosure is inconclusive, as this concept was not specifically addressed in this study, although this may be an interesting item for future investigation.

Respect for one another is related to personal attributes as this component entails people's ability to understand themselves and demonstrate optimistic interactions. Different spouses gave examples of how they integrated both cultures into their marriage. This inclusion validated the worth of the culture and the individual by communicating respect and acceptance. Husbands and wives also described conflict and the choices they made during and after conflict. As they established and adhered to guidelines and boundaries especially during arguments and times of tension, respect was conveyed and reinforced as an inherent component within their intimate relationship.

Chen's (1989) second element related to communication competence deals with verbal and nonverbal communication. Language fluency in this study surfaced as a major theme as it is multi-faceted. Spouses who struggled with English had similar challenges in their marriage such

as a sense of dependence and a lack of autonomy. Language fluency also impacted conflicts and at times magnified conflicts due to misunderstandings and one spouse's need to exert more effort as he or she communicated in their second language. When an individual is unable to effectively communicate his or her opinions or beliefs, he or she is at a disadvantage. Conversely, those spouses who now speak English fluently and are bilingual have the opportunity to speak with multiple others and experience more. They can interact with those from their own culture as well as individuals from multiple cultures who speak English. This skill affords them the chance to develop meaningful relationships and engage in additional activities because of their verbal fluency. They are able to not only establish relationships at a greater depth and breadth, they can also teach their children to be bilingual. Children of three of the five Asian mothers are benefitting at an early age as they converse in two languages.

Chen's (1989) third factor revolves around one's ability to function in a foreign environment and their subsequent psychological adjustment. All Asian participants have lived in America for at least four years, and most have resided in America more than ten years. Living in a foreign environment for multiple years, one typically learns how to adjust healthily and enjoys a new life. Out of the nine Asian spouses who participated, only one expressed her marked displeasure of living in a foreign land. This Asian wife is part of a dyad which engages in destructive conflict, thus the aversion she has toward the United States may be a reaction to or promoter of her conflictive marriage. This is not to say that the aforementioned Asian spouses do not miss certain aspects of their home country or think that Asia does some things better than America, but it signifies that they have psychologically adjusted to life in the United States with insignificant amounts of stress and frustration resulting from living here.

The final dimension deals with culture awareness or knowledge about the other culture's values, customs, norms, and systems. Overall, the results suggested that most participants initially had a basic knowledge about their spouse's culture; however, specifics may not have emerged until their relationship developed into an intimate one. Awareness of some aspects arose as they encountered novel situations in their married life. Several spouses had additional experience and subsequent understanding regarding their Asian spouse's view of face support after marriage.

After several years of marriage, participants are familiar with their culturally diverse spouse's values, customs, and norms. However, as spouses are raising young children now, issues surrounding parenting are arising. Undoubtedly, some of these challenges or different viewpoints are directly related to culture. In this respect, spouses have the opportunity to continue developing intercultural communication competence as new experiences surface. The issues encompassing raising children did not emerge as substantial for the majority of the interviewees.

Kim (2008) asserted that the development of one's identity is both complex and continuous. This was observable in the intercultural couples as they described themselves as well as their intercultural experiences and their specific marriages. Kim (1988, 2001) promoted the stress-adaptation-growth dynamic in her integrative theory of cross-cultural adaptation and recognized how acculturation and deculturation play a role in adaptation. She promoted her belief that "through prolonged and cumulative intercultural communication experiences, individuals around the world can, and do, undergo a gradual process of intercultural evolution" (2008, p. 359). The result of this process is a greater self-other orientation due to exposure to these experiences. This greater self-other orientation was a common theme amongst spouses.

Spouses reiterated how their own particular intercultural marriage had fostered personal growth

and a diminished sense of ethnocentrism. They not only had the experience of another culture

through their spouse's eyes, but they also viewed other cultures with more open minds. They

were able to identify the strengths of another culture and augment such assets to their

personhood.

  The change in previously held beliefs about particular cultures that were represented in

this study aligns with Allport's (1954) Contact Hypothesis Theory. This theory states that

meaningful, sustained, in-depth interactions with one who is culturally different has the potential

to alter previously held beliefs about the individual and his or her represented culture supports

the findings in this study. Significant communication must occur between people who feel that

they are equal and possess a common purpose. These beliefs promote amendments to earlier,

inaccurate perceptions.

  In Kim's (1988, 2001) theory of acculturation and deculturation, the focus is on

individuals who leave their home environment and relocate to a totally different place for a

significant period of time. However, Kim (2008) recognized that as the world is changing,

individuals may not have to move from their own country to experience acculturation. Such is

the case in this study. For some spouses, they grew up in a minority household in America and

became acculturated through their marriage to someone culturally different. Americans in this

study married an Asian and experienced acculturation as they learned new traditions and

philosophies. Undoubtedly, the Asians who grew up in Asia and moved to America because of

their American spouse have had the opportunity for acculturation. As Kim described this

process, they have learned different cultural practices as well as a new language. Besides new

behaviors and language, the new culture promotes different processing. This was exemplified in

the study as Asians identified and explained a new way of doing things after they married. Most

were able to label what was present due to their own culture and what transpired because of a

merger of two cultures.

Another part of acculturation involves developing new "cultural aesthetic and emotional

sensibilities, from a new way of appreciating beauty, fun, joy, as well as despair, anger, and the

like" (Kim, 2008, p. 363). However, just because an individual is in a new culture, they may or

may not utilize acculturation learning. This was evidenced in this study by one participant who

refuses to accept American culture. Her aversion to this new way of life was verbalized and

observable throughout the interview process. Acculturation happens as the person decides

whether to let it occur which may be based on the person's "predispositions, pre-existing needs

and interests" (p. 363).

As the individual begins learning new things, deculturation, a letting go of some of the

previous culture's elements, happens. Deculturation shows up in tangible and intangible ways.

Results revealed multiple spouses' transformation in food preferences, clothing, and primary

language as well as alterations in behaviors and basic values. In order for spouses to establish

healthy communication, some Asian spouses changed the way they communicated, from a

reliance on nonverbal communication to the use of primarily verbal communication with their

spouse. American spouses had to embrace their Asian spouses' value of face as this is a core

value in Asian society. Individually, spouses learned specific heartfelt principles of their

respective spouse's culture and integrated some of these into their daily lives.

Some hinted at previous tension in their marriages, ascribing it to their differences.

However, this pressure may have bubbled up due to the tension between acculturation and

deculturation. Individuals are contending with required changes and desires for the familiar and

comfortable. Kim (2008) elaborates, "Stress, indeed, is an expression of the instinctive human desire to restore homeostasis, that is, to hold constant a variety of variables in internal structure to achieve an integrated whole" (p. 363). Stress can produce positive changes in persons as they learn to grow and adapt. The willingness of participants to develop and adjust benefitted them personally and as a couple. Cohesive bonds were strengthened, and marital contentment intensified.

Occasionally, the stress-adaptation-growth dynamic materializes but with fewer difficulties and modifications. For most of the couples in this study, they have forged through the stress and adaptation dimension in their relationship and enjoy the growth they have experienced. However, for those less willing to change and adapt, this process seems to be ever looming. Indeed, an intercultural identity materializes for those who have experienced acculturation and deculturation—"an open-ended, adaptive, and transformative self-other orientation" (Kim, 2008, p. 364). This identity produces persons who clearly understand who they are while also focusing on others and their needs, thoughts, and feelings. Because intercultural spouses have to define who they are and their unswerving principles, they know who they are. Likewise, the spouses in this study embrace others and their differences with an open heart. Although Kim does not address how certain situations cause greater trials and amendments perhaps due to their innate nature, the results of this study suggest that this may occur. A couple of the spouses mentioned issues such as death of a loved one and the caring for children which surprisingly emitted new courses, and concepts not yet chartered resulting in intense, temporary stress in their marriages.

All marriages involve a fusion of two distinct lives with a history, a personality, values, and expectations. It is the "active creation of a new culture that has never existed before" (Gottman, Driver, & Tabares, 2002, p. 387). Casmir (1999) introduced the concept of third-

culture building defined as "a third-culture, or new interactive relationship, which thus *evolves*, would represent an expression of mutuality, one which can be understood, supported and defended by all who shared in its development" (p. 108). The process that transpires "include[s] natural, or common processes of communicating and relating" (p. 109).

As couples in this study described their interactions and current philosophies within marriage, the merger of values, behaviors, and norms could be conceptualized as a third culture. Most couples explained how they integrated both cultures within their marriage and referenced which customs or traditions came from which culture. For some, they created their own specific customs. By forming a third culture, one partner's culture does not govern over the other and the existence of a third culture can eliminate one's tendency to be ethnocentric. This idea was discussed by husbands and wives as they articulated the greatest benefit of being in an intercultural marriage.

Spouses indicated that the personal growth which transpired because they were in an intimate, intercultural relationship was significant. They reiterated their expanded world view which resulted in a decrease of ethnocentrism. The creation of something new as one culture interacted intimately with another culture was identified, verbalized, and hailed as being highly advantageous for intercultural spouses. Undoubtedly, the phenomenon of intercultural marriage evolves over time and through shared experiences and communication. Although previous research has not explored intercultural marriage through this theoretical lens, this model seems to articulate and explain the interaction, communication, and evolution which naturally transpire in intercultural marriages.

Conflict Communication

As mentioned previously, conflict happens in intimate relationships like marriages (Cahn & Abigail, 2007). Couples are interdependent and during conflict, they each sought different paths to the same goal. These distinctions could harm the relationship if spouses did not deal with them. The last characteristic involves timing as spouses need to manage their differences in a timely manner as the lack of resolution or accompanying tension may harm their relationship.

A great deal of research exists regarding conflict in intracultural marriages. For example, Oduro-Frimpong (2007) found in his study that all of his married participants exhibited some type of conflict within their marriage. The findings of the present study are consistent. All participants referenced or detailed conflict at some point in their relationship, even if they did not utilize terms such as conflict or problems. Initially, some individuals were reluctant to identify differences or the presence of conflict to the interviewer. This may have been due to a lack of rapport with the interviewer or even their culture's negative view of conflict. However, in intimate relationships, conflict is an ordinary part. Regardless of negative connotations associated with conflict, it does not have to drive spouses apart.

The sources or reasons for conflict are diverse. Tallman and Hsiao (2004) maintained that conflict develops partially due to individuals' expectations that their partners will fulfill their emotional, social, and material needs throughout their married life. Allender and Longman (2009) reported that since men and women are both similar and dissimilar, the differences inherent in gender may be "a huge potential for conflict and contempt" (p. 34). Undoubtedly, the findings suggest that causes for conflict are multiple. As mentioned above, problems develop due to expectations as well as gender differences. For those of a different cultural background, they

tend to possess expectations reflective of their culture, not necessarily of the culture in which they currently live.

In a marriage, individuals are intimate with one another and thus become vulnerable. Therefore, a spouse's words, actions, beliefs carry greater weight with his or her partner. A spouse has the capability to provoke increased feelings or passion from his or her spouse. At times, the vulnerability and closeness within this relationship create a potential for increased conflict.

Conflict has the potential to be constructive and productive. Rosen-Grandon, Myers, and Hattie (2004) found that when married couples were able to manage conflict along with various marital roles, they were able to arrive at marital satisfaction through shared values. Marital satisfaction develops based on love, loyalty, and shared values. For married couples to arrive at marital satisfaction through love, communication and expression of affection is critical (Rosen-Grandon et al., 2004). Findings of this study support the necessity of love and shared values are to a healthy relationship. As mentioned previously, many spouses' marital satisfaction was observable through their words and nonverbal communication as they talked about meeting their spouse, their wedding day, and attractive traits of their spouse. Love for mates was also recognized as individuals discussed personal sacrifice and compromise. Many put aside their own desires to be right or do things their way in order to show honor and respect for their mate.

Gottman (1999) argued that secure and content marriages that possess an overall positive affect are better equipped to engage in conflict constructively. A marriage built on a foundation of friendship and positive experiences can be significant for a couple's success during conflict. Due to the nature of time limitations, this study was unable to uncover specifics about

foundations of friendship and their link to successful conflict. However, results did seem to suggest that the majority of couples were mutually satisfied and engaged in constructive conflict.

Intercultural marriages share characteristics with other intercultural relationship including how conflict is handled. Intercultural conflict communication is complex and occurs due to numerous causes. Intercultural conflict erupts because individuals hold diverse values and objectives, and utilize distinctly different processes or face orientations (Oetzel et al., 2007). The results of this study noted the necessity of respecting face within a dyad of an Asian and an American. Participants from both cultures discussed the value of face in their interactions and communication. Some individuals verbalized the word *face* when noting its value and imperative presence. For one couple, they reminisced about a conflict that occurred in marriage and situations which involve *face*. Prior to this conflict, they seemed to have minimal understanding of face's worth. After this conflict and through open and honest communication and love, they were both able to recognize *face* and its impact in their relationship. They achieved a deeper comprehension about each other's perception of *face* in their relationship and in their interactions with others. By this realization, they were able to engage in face support and a greater appreciation for their spouse. Although the husband and wife acknowledge that their spouse's viewpoint was totally opposite from the one they held, they respected and loved their mate enough to honor their respective mate's philosophy.

As Asian spouses understand and explain the value of *face* to their American spouse, they can have effective communication. Likewise, as American spouses listen and comprehend *face* through the eyes of their spouse, they can demonstrate love and respect in a deeper manner. According to Ting-Toomey's face-negotiation theory, "The concept of face becomes especially problematic in uncertainty situations (such as embarrassment and conflict situations) when the

situated identities of the communicators are called into question" (Oetzel et al., 2000, p. 399).

Perhaps, this sheds light onto the path of conflict for couples in this study who seem to encounter

destructive conflict and lack marital satisfaction. For those spouses, derogatory words and

intense arguments destroy the face of their partner. This disrespect of face seems to have strong

repercussions especially for Asian spouses.

Conflict occurs in all intimate relationships, and intercultural marriages are no exception.

People's behaviors and communication styles are heavily influenced by values stemming from

their culture and ethnicity. Culture also shapes one cognitively and emotionally. Ting-Toomey et

al. (2000) stressed that intercultural spouses must modify their interactions accordingly. These

changes were evident in the interviews as spouses told how they have altered since their

newlywed phase.

Intersubjectivity theory (Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005) suggests that individuals interpret

experiences based on their personal interactions and subjective interpretations. Couples are often

unaware of the impact culture has on their thoughts, feelings, and actions; conflict and living

with one's spouse bring this awareness. Culture influences individuals in such a way that persons

believe that their own particular culture is correct and operates in the best manner. Likewise,

spouses feel that their own beliefs about their mates' actions are objective and accurate

(Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005). This notion was confirmed in this study. Recognizing that there

are alternate ways to make decisions or address issues can be difficult to accept at times. Many

of the interviewees shared that compromise and communication led them to change for the sake

of their marriage.

Individualism and collectivism are other significant factors in one's cultural make-up and

therefore impact intimate relationships. It was evidenced in this study that individualism and

collectivism influence communication and family philosophy. Collectivists tend to utilize high-context communication replete with nonverbal communication. The Americans in this study employed low-context communication which means that they rely on verbal communication and possess fewer skills in interpreting nonverbal cues.

As time passed, spouses learned more about one another and communicated their feelings and thoughts more. This gave American spouses the opportunity to increase their comprehension of high-context communication as they had a richer understanding of the receiver and the setting. While this transpired, Asian spouses attempted to enhance their verbalization skills. In this way, both represented cultures altered their communication to allow for differences, thus demonstrating previously untapped skills. This modification also communicated respect and love, fostering increased positive affect.

Scholars have pinpointed specific areas that seem to be the most challenging in intercultural marriages. Cools' (2006) study found eight significant areas wherein intercultural marriages have particular challenges: language, communication, adapting spouse, friends, raising children, gender roles, visibility, and traditions. Frame's (2004) study found similar results in the areas of gender, language, and raising children. Values, money, sexuality, religion, and social class were also potential areas of increased conflict within intercultural marriages (Frame, 2004). Garcia (2006) suggested that raising children can be more difficult for intercultural couples. The current study correlated with some of Cools' and Frame's findings; only two couples reported additional issues relating to children, perhaps due to children's ages at the time of this study and the sample size. Undoubtedly, adolescence presents complex concerns for both intracultural and intercultural dyads. The interviewed couples noted that language and communication were significant. For couples in intercultural marriages, challenges to reach workable solutions to

conflicts may arise due to the couples' inability to fully grasp an understanding of the conflict as well as put into concise words what they desire to communicate (Frame, 2004).

Internal and external factors influence intercultural marriages and can contribute to increased conflict. Within the marriage unit, spouses of different cultures benefit from knowing about their partner's culture. Understanding and knowledge can prevent some conflicts. Individuals in committed relationships benefit from having knowledge about one another. If needed, they can modify their interactions to avoid or manage conflict constructively (Ting-Toomey et al., 2000). Spouses described their growth in knowledge about their spouse and their respective culture; those who managed conflict constructively also explained that the way they handled conflict had improved since they were first married. One concludes that the acquisition of knowledge and enhancement of skills not only promotes intercultural communication competence but also more positive results from conflict.

In this study, spouses discussed the instrumental role effective communication plays in their marriage. Males and females mentioned the importance of communicating and sharing opinions and thoughts with each other. This corresponds to Mackey, Diemer, and O'Brien's (2000) study. They cited the importance of not just listening to one another but also understanding one another's needs and how they are met in the relationship. It is also imperative to identify expectations in an effort to have a better understanding of the individual, be more empathetic, and exhibit greater respect. Empathy and respect promote healthy unions.

Garcia (2006) emphatically maintained that conflicts in intimate, intercultural relationships are not due solely to cultural differences, but may also be the result of personality differences or particular aspects of a situation. As spouses described their own and their spouse's similarities and differences, it was obvious that some combinations of personalities within

marriages fostered increased conflict. This concept was reiterated by P-W. Lee's (2006) study

wherein his participants disclosed that similarities such as personalities, hobbies, or values

contributed to the depth of their relationship. Personality traits such as empathy, patience,

flexibility, and openness were seen as a benefit in the persons sampled; this axiom is also put

forth by Gareis (2000).

Intercultural marriages encounter obstacles to building and maintaining healthy, intimate

relationships. At times, societal pressures may embrace feelings of aversion to intercultural

relationships (Foeman & Nance, 1999). However, in the representative sample only two spouses

remarked that they had experienced negativity in a community setting because of their

intercultural dyad. Most of the participants interact in an intercultural enclave or reside in a

diversified area of America. This dynamic may impact society's reaction to intercultural

marriages; however, for Asian spouses, the admission of prejudice to the researcher may have

been perceived as a loss of face. The significance of face to Asians may have influenced

divulgence of this type of information.

Another external dimension involves family's response to marriage to a culturally diverse

individual. In this study, multiple persons mentioned familial challenges. This dilemma was

shared as individuals discussed their own families' reaction to their spouse as well as their in-

laws' reaction to themselves. Rosen-Grandon et al. (2004) asserted that disapproval of a

relationship by parents promotes marital dissatisfaction. Results in this study suggested that

parents' negativity influenced spouses, but to what extent this dynamic affected marital

satisfaction is inconclusive. Researchers (P-W. Lee, 2006; Oetzel et al. 2007) conclude that third

parties such as families and friends are significant factors and have the potential to impact

marital conflict.

Conflict in intercultural marriages will arise just as in intracultural marriages. The results of this study suggest that positive outcomes and marital satisfaction may be produced through these challenges. Intercultural couples have the ability to possess strengths that intracultural marriages are unable to achieve. In this study, strengths surfaced that previously were nonexistent in the participants' lives when they were single. Individuals developed intercultural communication competence as well as stronger marital ties through experiences, communication, and interactions with their culturally diverse spouse. Their own unique viewpoint evolved from their very existence as an entity.

Limitations of the Study

Certain limitations for this study exist. While the researcher attempted to narrow the possible variables that could inhibit distinct findings, certain variables were present that could have potentially altered the data. The researcher narrowed the focus to intercultural marriages composed of one Asian spouse and one Caucasian American spouse; however, the researcher's own culture could have possibly influenced interviewees. Americans' comfort level of disclosing private information about their intimate relationship with a stranger varies from person to person. Although every effort was made by the researcher to establish rapport with Asian interviewees by utilizing her background and past experiences, her own culture may have influenced the interviewees. Typically, Asians divulge minimal personal information that would seem negative to them or others unless they have a close relationship with the individual. Usually, Asians possess a collectivistic mindset; thus, they would not make known certain types of personal information to someone considered to be in the out-group.

Another variable which may have influenced the data involves perceptions and connotations related to conflict. Individuals desire to make favorable first impressions, thus

presenting positive information and interaction to strangers. Therefore, prior to each interview the researcher attempted to build rapport as she interacted with potential interviewees. Although interviewees disclosed highly personal information with the interviewer after answering non-threatening questions, the likelihood that all spouses communicated their main beliefs about and experiences relating to conflict and communication within their marriage cannot be guaranteed.

The sample size was appropriate for the current study; however, a larger sample size would have produced additional information that could have enhanced a needed field of study. As the sample was achieved through a convenience and snowball sampling technique, the researcher acknowledges that employing another technique would have generated a diverse sample group. Spouses were married from six to thirty-five years. Five couples were married from six to eight years, three couples were married from eleven to twelve years, and one couple was married for thirty-five years. Interviewing intercultural spouses in a specific developmental life stage may have produced varying results.

Individual interviews resulted in rich information as each spouse in the dyads had the opportunity to articulate their opinion in a confidential setting. Beliefs and feelings of husbands and wives were represented. Throughout the individual interviews, information surfaced that perhaps would have been beneficial to revisit with both spouses in a couple interview. If couples would have agreed to contribute more time, the interviewer could have interviewed each couple separately and then together. This procedure could have potentially provided richer results.

Further Research

This study has shed light onto areas of potential future research. A researcher could replicate this study, altering one variable in an attempt to determine its significance on intercultural marriages. Intercultural couples composed of one Asian and one Caucasian

American could be interviewed who reside in Asia. It would be interesting to examine any

differences that may emerge based on where the couple lives as residency and environment are

significant factors to one's lifestyle and worldview. One would surmise that language fluency,

intercultural communication competency, and family dynamics would produce different results

in another country.

Additionally, researchers could conduct a quantitative study exploring conflict and

communication dynamics. This type of study would survey a greater number of participants and

perhaps add additional information necessary to understanding intercultural marriages. As

previously noted, intercultural marriages are an increasing phenomenon and, therefore, obtaining

a large enough sample for an online survey is not impossible.

The final recommendation for future research involves replicating this study with a

different composition. Cultural groups have specific characteristics, and it would be enlightening

to examine similarities and differences among culturally diverse dyads. One would hypothesize

that a cultural group different than Asians and Caucasian Americans would have both similarities

as well as differences. Such a study would also be beneficial for the intercultural communication

field.

Conclusions

The findings of this study have benefitted the field of intercultural communication,

participants, and the counseling field. As mentioned previously, research regarding intercultural

marriages is lacking. This study confirmed that all types of marriages include conflict.

Intercultural spouses have the opportunity to deal with conflict constructively or destructively.

Because of the complex phenomenon of intercultural marriages, culturally diverse spouses may

have additional challenges as they encounter conflict. These challenges are primarily due to language fluency, high-context versus low-context communication, and family opposition.

This study is advantageous to the counseling field especially for clients who are in intercultural dyads. Counselors could employ preventive techniques in pre-marital sessions with culturally diverse couples. Individuals relying on low-context communication could be encouraged to hone their investigative skills as they intentionally observe nonverbal communication and educate themselves about their culturally diverse spouses' culture and communicative practices. Those who naturally utilize high-context communication could practice increased self-disclosure and verbalization of their beliefs and feelings. Counselors who assist intercultural couples with their communication and managing of cultural differences could empower such dyads to achieve marital satisfaction.

Communication is vital to the life of the marital union. Effective communication is multi-faceted and develops through time and experiences. Spouses agreed that their communication with one another had altered over the years based on their acquired knowledge about themselves as well as their spouse. Having an understanding of the primary language and communication styles of one another is crucial to intercultural marriages.

Results shed light on diverse variables which impact marital satisfaction. Spouses' level of intercultural communication competence greatly influences the communication in intimate dyads. Those who have had significant exposure to other cultures in their environment at home, school, or neighborhood seem to have increased communication competence which fosters marital satisfaction. Others represented in this study revealed that a paucity of intercultural communication competence is a catalyst for tension and conflict within intercultural marriages.

Without fundamental knowledge and skills, the merging of two individuals from diverse cultures is precarious. This new finding augments previous research about intercultural marriages.

Overwhelmingly, spouses acknowledged the challenges in their marriage as well as how it was personally advantageous. The current study uncovered additional knowledge about how intercultural couples create a new culture. This third culture allows dyads the opportunity to co-construct a unique culture, composed of the best qualities of two distinct cultures. The phenomenon they produce together is invaluable and inimitable.

Intercultural marriages are exciting phenomena in today's world. The face of intimate relationships is transforming. As individuals choose to marry one who is culturally diverse, they understand that they will encounter new challenges, growing pains, and adventures. Conflict will erupt. Resolution and marital satisfaction can be attained. Regardless of diversity of values, norms, goals, and communication styles, a foundation of love is essential to the development of marital satisfaction in intercultural marriages. This study, among others, suggests it is feasible and provides valuable insight into how individuals from diverse cultures who marry one another with the hope of enduring love can possess marital satisfaction for a lifetime.

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LIST OF APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A: Informed Consent Form for Participation in a Research Study

APPENDIX B: Interview Guide

APPENDIX C: Categories of Themes

Appendix A

Communication in Intercultural Marriages

By

Tiffany G. Renalds

Liberty University

Informed Consent for Participation in a Research Study

You are invited to be a part of a research study about the unique elements in intercultural

marriages. You were selected as a possible participant because one of your friends identified you

as a spouse in an intercultural marriage. Please read this form and ask any questions you may

have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Tiffany Renalds, Department of Communication, Liberty

University.

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to explore factors which affect how married couples in intercultural

marriages communicate. Another purpose is to discuss how intercultural couples deal with cross-

cultural differences. The final purpose involves describing how spouses in intercultural

marriages experience and handle conflict in their marriage.

Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, you will need to:

- Agree to be audio-taped during the interview process.
- Participate in an interview with the researcher, lasting approximately 1-2 hours, talking about your intercultural marriage.
- Be available for contact if any additional questions arise after the interview.
- Agree to have your data included in a potential published journal article.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study

This study has minimal risk and is no more than you would encounter in everyday life. If at any point during the interview, information is given which triggers mandatory reporting requirements for child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse or intent to harm self or others, this information will be reported to relevant authorities. If issues arise which would be helpful to discuss in a counseling situation, we will provide possible referral options for counseling services.

Injury or Illness

Liberty University will not provide medical treatment or financial compensation if you are injured or become ill as a result of participating in this research project. This does not waive any of your legal rights nor release any claim you might have based on negligence.

The benefit to participation includes the potential to have a better understanding of factors which influence your intercultural marriage, specifically in the areas of communication and conflict.

Confidentiality

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, pseudonyms will be utilized to protect your privacy. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records.

All information will be kept confidential including information you share during your interview about your spouse who will also be interviewed. However, when interviews are conducted in a public setting, the interviewee cannot assure confidentiality due to the nature of the setting.

Audio-recordings and transcripts will be kept in a secure, locked location and will be used as needed for the study. After five years, audio-recordings will be erased.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions

The researcher conducting this study is Tiffany Renalds. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact Liberty University, Dr. Gina Barker, 434-582-2111, gbarker@liberty.edu

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, Dr. Fernando Garzon, Chair, CN Suite 1582, 1971 University Blvd, Lynchburg, VA 24502 or email at fgarzon@liberty.edu.

If you have concerns and are interested in marriage counseling, you may want to contact Light Counseling, 2811 Linkhorne Dr Ste B, Lynchburg, VA at 434-384-1594 or Wyndhurst Counseling Center, 100 Archway Ct, Lynchburg, VA 24502 at (434) 237-2655.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature:_____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher:_____ Date: _____

APPENDIX B: Interview Guide

Interview Questions for Intercultural Marriages

Preliminary Questions:

- ❖ Please begin by telling me about yourself, your cultural background and how you met your spouse.

    - What is your age?

    - What is your ethnicity? Your spouse's ethnicity?

    - Where (city, state, country) did you get married?

    - How long have you been married to your current spouse?

    - In what countries have you and your spouse resided? For how long?

Interview Questions:

1. Prior to meeting your spouse, how much intercultural interaction did you have?

    Use the following prompts as needed:

    - Did you travel to foreign countries? Which ones?

    - Did you have other relationships with those of a different culture?

    - If so, what type of relationships did you have? What culture were they from?

    - Did you grow up in a culturally diverse environment?

2. What was it that attracted you to your spouse?

    - Was it their personality or cultural background?

3. How are you and your spouse similar? How are you different?

    - Which of your differences do you think are because of your different cultural backgrounds?

- How do these impact your marriage?

- Has the way you viewed the similarities and differences changed throughout the course of your marriage?

- How do you resolve or deal with differences?

4. Considering your cultural differences, describe how you and your spouse communicate.

- Do you have trouble making yourself understood?

- Do you have trouble understanding your spouse?

- What language do you use?

- What are the differences in your languages?

- Have you and your spouse created your own language? What is the result of your own personal language?

- Are there any topics that are taboo?

- Are your communication styles similar or different? How?

- In which ways have your ways of communicating with each other changed over the years? What prompted these changes?

5. How do you and your spouse integrate your two cultures?

- Do you have any customs or traditions that you and your spouse celebrate?

- Which ones are from which culture?

- How did you decide on using these particular customs?

- Do you have any of your own customs/traditions? How did this come about?

6. What do you like the most about being married to someone from a different culture?

- Why is this element(s) attractive to you?

7. What do you find to be most difficult about being married to someone from a different

culture?

- Do you feel free to be yourself when w/ your spouse? OR Is it difficult for you to

    think about or talk about conflicts in your marriage?

Closing Questions:

❖ Do you have any final thoughts about your intercultural marriage that perhaps came up

    during the interview but that we did not discuss today?

❖ Can I contact you again if I think of another question?

APPENDIX C

Categories and Subcategories of Themes

Theme One: Demographic Descriptions

Age/Ethnicity

Marital Status

Dyad Compositions

Previous Intercultural Interaction

Theme Two: Communication Competencies

Knowledge

Skills

Theme Three: Conflict

Constructive Conflict

Destructive Conflict

Theme Three: Factors Impacting Communication

Language Fluency

High-Context and Low-Context Communication

Family

Theme Four: Benefits of Intercultural Marriages