

Cross-National Marriages: Challenges and Enrichment

by Simona Cirio, MSMFT

Today's world is characterized by increasing mobility, as more people migrate to new countries and adapt to new situations for professional, educational, political, or familial reasons. Marriage between people of different nationalities is a growing phenomenon. In 2005, over 600,000 naturalized citizens and 1,120,000 legal permanent residents lived in the U.S., of which 23% gained residency as the spouse of an American citizen (Jefferys & Rytina, 2006)

Although any marriage can be considered as “intermarriage” to the extent that the partners come from different social groups (or at least from different family cultures), cross-national marriages present some specific challenges. A cross-national couple may or may not show differences in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, or socioeconomic status. However, the couple faces an additional challenge: because one spouse (or both if they reside in a third country) was socialized in another country, he or she may feel isolated or marginalized in the new country of residence.

Since he or she did not grow up in the same place or culture, a foreigner may feel out of sync with other people, lack common social or cultural references with his or her spouse or friends, feel like an outsider, hold different values or norms, or feel homesick and conflicted about self-identity. A

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Qualities of a good cross-national marriage:

- Curiosity and openness
- Mutual understanding and respect
- Willingness to compromise
- Awareness of the complexities of cultural differences
- Enjoy wider range of values and world views
- Awareness of possible feelings of marginality
- Culturally sensitive communication
- Dynamic understanding of how differences and their significance can evolve over time
- Appreciation of multiculturalism
- Recognition of possible ambivalence about differences
- Flexibility
- Understanding cultural assumptions

foreign spouse may feel competent, and may have adapted well to the new society, but at the same time may feel subtly different from others. He or she may enjoy the benefit of being able to draw on behaviors and strategies from two different cultures. At the same time, however, that person may also feel that he or she does not fully belong in either the new or old country, and may miss feeling connected to the home culture. Finally, it is very important to understand how the host society views immigrants and cross-national couples (such as the impact of immigration laws, attitudes toward foreigners, etc.).

How does this impact the marriage?

It has been suggested that cross-national marriages may tend to end in divorce more frequently than other marriages, but there is a lack of research in this area. Clinically, however, these marriages usually bring a more complex awareness of differences and a need for negotiation on several issues, including choice of residence, management of multiculturalism, parenting practices, relationships with extended family, financial planning, and the use of non-verbal behaviors. The understanding of these dynamics can change and evolve, depending on a couple's place in the life cycle.

It is useful to recognize that assimilation or acculturation into the host culture is not necessarily the only desirable or healthier outcome. Additionally, cross-national couples may retain and successfully raise their children with modest to high levels of biculturalism.

What are the strengths of a cross-national marriage?

The particular richness of these marriages can offer valuable insights about the emotional

complexities at the heart of every human relationship – of feeling near and far, similar and different at the same time. These marriages can also foster a deeper understanding of more flexible family relationships and personal traits that are particularly important in a mobile, postmodern world. Learning to explore and negotiate differences can foster increased intimacy, a better understanding of one’s cultural assumptions, and increased acceptance of mutual influence. Finally, a cross-national marriage can challenge the partners to expand their flexibility, both in terms of attitudes and behavior.

How can therapy help?

Therapy can help a couple gain a better understanding of how their individual and cultural differences influence their lives, particularly around times of transition or in cumulative fashion across the years. Sometimes seemingly minor differences can assume a symbolic meaning. Even when cultural differences are few, a cross-national couple may benefit from understanding the relevance of the cultural variations between them. Most cross-national couples maintain a bicultural lifestyle to some extent, and it can be helpful to talk about the choices involved, big or small.

The same factors that help a foreigner integrate in a new society can, at the same time, pose some challenges. For example, working in a foreign country may require more flexibility about career plans, parenting may raise one’s awareness of different societal norms, and maintaining relationships with friends and extended family can raise issues of communication differences and opinions from third parties.

Therapy can be an opportunity to refine spouses’ understanding of each other’s culture, and can help

foster an attitude of mutual curiosity and respect. By guiding cross-national spouses to confront questions of worldview, therapists can help couples better understand values that are critically important to each person.

Therapists can also help cross-national couples identify their strengths and acknowledge their resilience, especially regarding the impact of external factors such as discrimination. Therapists can also assist spouses in negotiating change, identifying strategies to cope with stressors, or creating a “shared culture” within the marriage.

Reference

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For further reading

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