

Challenges of language and communication for intercultural couples living in Finland

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine how language and communication influence intercultural couples' relationships. The present qualitative study involved 18 heterosexual Finnish / non-Finnish couples living in Finland: five couples in theme interviews, six couples in concept-map interviews, and seven couples in email interviews. The enquiry attempted to identify how language and communication influence the intercultural couples' relationship. The study shows that the intercultural couples gave voice to the following factors relating to language and communication: doubt of host-language proficiency, deterioration of native language proficiency, speaking the non-Finnish partner's native language, dependency on the Finnish partner: support, and nonverbal communication. Within the category of communication the intercultural partners articulated negotiation topics, and conversational styles. The couples also expressed spouses' adaptation, and they articulated the presence of communication issues in encouraging accounts. Specifics of this study regarding the methods used are discussed.

Keywords

adaptation, dependency, language, language deterioration, language proficiency, intercultural couples, intercultural adaptation, communication, support.

Introduction

This study focuses on intercultural couples' relationships in Finland. When Finland joined the European Union (EU) in 1995, the immigrant population has increased by almost 100 percent. At present 10 percent of the registered married couples in Finland live in an intercultural relationship. Considerable theory and empirical research has been devoted to intercultural relationships to identifying couples' motivation, relationship maintenance, and

relationship communication (Imamura, 1990; Ting-Toomey, 1994a; Romano, 1997; Chen, 2002; Molina et al., 2004). However, research on intercultural couples' relationships is often based on prior ideas that viewed relationships in terms of stages with distinct beginnings and endings (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Levinger, 1983). In addition, there is a lack of information about the influence of language and communication on the intercultural partners' well-being in those relationships. Besides the obvious challenges that occur when partners come from cultures where different languages are spoken, more subtle communication problems may be related to couples' ongoing interaction, for instance nonverbal communication, and conversational styles (Tannen, 1986; Romano, 1997). In addition, research on intercultural couples' relationship communication in a Finnish context is practically unexplored.

My intention is to investigate these matters by studying intercultural couples' perceptions of the impact of language and communication on their relationship through the relational dialectics perspective. Themed interviews, concept map interviews and e-mail interviews were carried out with 18 intercultural couples (N = 36) living in Finland.

Review of the literature

The "free" partner choice practiced in our Western society is not the only way in which people find a partner. The method for selecting a partner is a culturally based phenomenon. Worldwide, the most common method of mate selection is by arrangement, usually by parents, with the aid of relatives or matchmakers. Dion and Dion (1988) argue that romantic love is more likely to be important in individualistic societies, where everyone is expected to look after him/herself and his/her immediate family and where love is seen as an opportunity for exploring the real and rather individualistic self. However, in collectivistic societies - where people are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups and often extended families which continue to protect each other in exchange for unquestioning loyalty - love is downplayed as the basis for marriage.

Ting-Toomey's (1994a) findings from several major cross-cultural personal relationship studies indicate that both significant differences and commonalities exist in individuals' attitudes toward various romantic relationship constructs. In individualistic cultures, most people typically "fall in love" first, (which sometimes involves intensive dating procedures) and then get married. However, for members of many collectivistic cultures (e.g., in India, Iran, and Northern Nigeria, in which arranged marriages are still the norm), partners get married and carry out basic marital responsibilities and obligations, and then later may fall in love. This means, according to Ting-Toomey, that the attitudes of people from individualistic

cultures toward romantic love are high and intense, and they expect passion from the feelings of being in love. It also means that the attitudes of people from collectivistic cultures toward romantic love are pragmatic, caring, and responsibility-based, and mates expect a sense of harmonized companionship from the feelings of being in love (1994a: 59).

Rohrlich (1988) has investigated an area of intercultural marriage previously overlooked by researchers. He proposed self-disclosure and decision-making power as fundamental concepts in communicative understanding in intercultural relationships (p. 40). Self-disclosure patterns, or the process of making the self known to others, are said to vary from culture to culture; it is, for instance, generally agreed that northern Europeans use less self-disclosure than Mediterranean people. In the discipline of communication and counseling intercultural couples, much research has demonstrated that communication and counseling are linked. One of the recurring issues in such counseling is the role of self-disclosure in communication (Bhugra & De Silva, 2000; Molina et al., 2004).

While earlier studies of marriage between immigrants and native-born residents assume that it leads to the migrants' assimilation, this may not always happen. In the case studies of intermarried couples in Australia (Penny & Khoo, 1996), the Australian partner sometimes adopts the migrant partner's language and customs or the couple adopts elements of both cultures. Moreover, sociologists have long regarded intermarriage as a key indicator of ethnic integration. Khoo (2004) found that many ethnic groups in Australia show low levels of intermarriage in the first generation but that, by the third generation, rates of intermarriage are high. However, Khoo specified, most migrants from South and East Asia, the Middle East, and Africa have not been in Australia long enough to know whether the relationship between length of time in Australia and integration will hold for them as it has for the earlier cohorts of European migrants. Research findings in relation to the children of intermarriages provide stronger evidence of an integration of cultures and the linguistic assimilation that can result. (Jupp et al., 2007:127).

Focusing primarily on the immigrant spouse has been the major concern for many researchers (Tseng et al., 1977; Tuomi-Nikula, 1989; Imamura, 1990; Varro, 1995; Chen 2002). Falicov (1995) suggested that intercultural couples enter a form of cultural transition in which initially there could be a conflict with the intercultural partners struggling with the norms, values, meanings, and rituals of the other in a manner similar to the struggles that accompany migration and cultural change. Molina et al. (2004) revealed that challenges and opportunities in intercultural couples' creation of "happily ever after" stories of their intercultural couplehood have presented an integrated approach to couples counselling

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through illustrations of intercultural stories. This means that, through telling their stories (verbalizing), intercultural couples often can find relief and a listening ear in discussion groups.

The theoretical perspective through which I approach the lives and experiences of intercultural couples' relationships is that of Baxter & Montgomery's (1996) relational dialectics, a concept of traditional intracultural couple interaction that is now being extended into the context of intercultural romantic relationships. This approach is quite different from some earlier relationship perspectives that viewed relationships in terms of stages with discernible beginnings and endings. Relational dialectics supports the idea, that tensions (relational contradictions) are a fundamental feature of a relationship, and thus are distinct from conflict or problems. For example, a familiar tension most couples experience is the friction between wanting to spend time with your partner while also needing time with friends. These kinds of tensions exist between the partners (internal), as well as between the partners and their social network comprising friends and family (external). These tensions define a relationship and also keep it alive. According to relational dialectics, then, couples in a relationship face a common set of contradictions, the internal dialectics and the external dialectics, that must be negotiated. Internal contradictions are constituted *within* the relationship of the partners, whereas external contradictions involve dialectical tensions between the couple and the community (Baxter, 1993; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Table 1 summarizes the dialectics that are internal and external to a relationship.

TABLE 1. Typology of internal and external dialectical contradictions (Baxter, 1993; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996)

INTERNAL	Connection - Autonomy	Predictability - Novelty	Openness- Closedness
EXTERNAL	Inclusion - Seclusion	Conventionality - Uniqueness	Revelation - Concealment

Currently, intercultural relationships are being studied from within the existing relational dialectics perspective of Baxter & Montgomery (Table 1), as well as examined more broadly to determine whether additional relational dialectics can be identified, regarding the specific context of intercultural relationships. Findings of this study indicate two intercultural dialectics: a) the dialectic of privilege-disadvantage, and b) the dialectic of belonging-exclusion. (Cools, 2009.) These intercultural dialectics comprise the salient topics of language and communication that challenge and enrich the couples' lives.

The purpose of the current study is to examine how language and communication affect the intercultural couples' relationships and to gain a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to the specific dynamics involved in intercultural relationships. The research questions for this study are

1. How do the intercultural couples encounter the intercultural dialectics of privilege-disadvantage, and belonging-exclusion in their relationship?
2. How do intercultural couples see their different cultural background affecting their relationship in terms of language and communication?

Method

This qualitative study consists of data from 18 intercultural couples (N = 36), obtained via three methods: themed interviews (five couples), concept map interviews (six couples), and e-mail interviews (seven couples). These three different methods were used to a) effectively capture information from the couples on potentially sensitive topics, b) obtain the most complex picture of the phenomenon of interest, and c) increase the validity. For instance, "rich data" and "triangulation" increase the validity of qualitative research. Rich data are thorough, complete and provide a full and revealing picture of the phenomenon being studied.

Triangulation refers to the use of a variety of methods to collect information from different sources (i.e., different kinds of interviews). It reduces the risk of systematic bias and an overreliance on any one data collection method and data source. (Suzuki et al., 2005: 212.)

The reason for interviewing the couples is the understanding of specific circumstances: surfacing how and why things actually happen in a complex world. Knowledge in qualitative interviewing is situational and conditional. When opting for qualitative interviews I sought to sort out what is unique and what may be common in the experiences of the informants.

In the themed and concept map interviews, each couple was interviewed together. As this study is about relationships, and as the theoretical basis of relational dialectics stresses *the both / and view*, I interviewed the couples together. In addition, when two relationship partners are present, interdependencies between the partners may become more visible, which adds up to the quality and information of the interviews. I deemed it necessary for both partners to be present as this might bring about possible confrontation, which can draw the attention communication necessitates. Another advantage of interviewing the couples together, which adds to the relational dialectical perspective, lies in the multiple exchanges between and among varied positions or points of view. According to Holstein & Gubrium

(1995) more than one respondent and one interviewer make the interview a multivocal occasion, which extends the interview to other actual voices that contribute to the meaning-making process. This means that participation of more than one person introduces new elements of communicative participation and can be considered as dialogical features of the interview.

The e-mail interviews required the partners to answer separately. In aiming to obtain the Finnish as well as the non-Finnish partner's viewpoints, I was interested in understanding the way each partner experienced the relationship and her or his view of it. Hence, the answers to the e-mail questions were solicited separately. In such data collection, the perceptions of the spouses may not necessarily be congruent, but both perspectives are necessary for understanding the reality of intercultural couplehood. Moreover, some people may be freer to answer without the presence of their partner.

Participants

The method chosen to contact the participants was a variant of purposive sampling, often called snowball sampling (see Frey et al., 2000:274-276). The 18 intercultural couples were selected on the following criteria: a) they had to consist of a Finnish and a non-Finnish partner (this being the inherent nature of the study), and b) the couples needed to have been in the relationship for at least 4 years. This latter criterion was used because partners in different relational developmental stages (e.g., dating, married) have different relationship experiences (Canary & Stafford, 1993). The youngest person was 26 years old, and the oldest 61. The 18 non-Finnish partners were from Belgium (2), Canada (1), the Netherlands (3), Japan (1), USA (2), Germany (2), Italy (1), Nigeria (1), Slovakia (1), Greece (1), Hungary (1), Switzerland (1), and Venezuela (1).

Interviews

The themed interviews (semi-structured questions) were conducted with five intercultural couples. The language of the interviews was English in three of the five interviews. The two other interviews were carried out in Dutch, with sometimes a Dutch/English code switching. All the interviews were audio-taped.

The concept map interviews (based on Novak, 1998) were carried out with six intercultural couples. The languages of interviewing were English (three couples), Dutch (two couples), and German (one couple). Dutch/English and English/Finnish code switching appeared in

some of the interviews. The duration of the audio-taped interviews of both the themed and concept map interviews varied between 50 and 120 minutes.

E-mail interviews were conducted with seven intercultural couples. The e-mail questions were sent both in English and in Finnish. However, I emphasized that, in addition to these languages, people could respond in Dutch or in German, if that would be more convenient.

All the 18 couples signed a letter of consent in which confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed for their participation. Hence, each respondent was coded with a pseudonym.

As for the analysis process the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed in the original language of the respondents, and then translated into English by the researcher. The qualitative data were analyzed utilizing inductive data analysis, i.e., identifying emergent patterns in the data. The interview data were coded into categories, from which I distinguished themes, an integral part of the analysis process (Kvale, 1996: 94-105).

Results

This section reports the findings arising from the examined data that related to the intercultural couples' perceptions of language and communication and the impact of these on their relationships.

Language: More than words

In all of the intercultural couples, the partners used a language that was not the native tongue of at least one of the partners; sometimes a third shared language was used by both. The couples brought up the following issues they deemed important regarding language in their intercultural relationship: doubting one's proficiency in the host-language (Finnish), speaking the non-Finnish partner's native language, deterioration of one's native language proficiency, and need of support resulting in dependency on the Finnish partner.

Doubt of host-language proficiency (Finnish)

Often partners have to choose which language to communicate in, whether to use one of the partners' languages, a third one, or a mixture of languages. Since one's mother tongue assumes a powerful, emotional resonance and defines characteristics of identity, being unable

to use that language may create situations in which issues of incorrect speech pragmatics, having to cope with corrective feedback, embarrassment, and power, play an important role.

All the college-educated non-Finnish spouses spoke at least one other foreign language fluently in addition to their mother tongue. For some of these non-Finnish spouses the Finnish language has been experienced as more than just a contemporary stumbling block. Although the non-Finnish spouses have lived in Finland for at least four years, and a maximum of 20 years, many situations were seen as giving hardships to the non-Finnish partners, such as not being able to follow the conversations in Finnish, losing information, and misunderstanding. The two following excerpts indicate these issues:

I am handicapped because I don't understand well the language, and I can't follow everything, and I can't even understand the papers, so, information that is coming to me loses a lot because I can't know all the facets. (Theo, BEL¹, TI²)

Heikki's English language skills are much much stronger than my Finnish skills. This has been a struggle continually. It has not been an easy situation trying to learn Finnish as a second language. It has been very difficult and unfortunately will always be a difficulty no matter what level I get to ...³ how we function as a couple, I know there has probably been more misunderstanding because of having two languages. (Fay, USA, EI)

The contradiction between self-identification and the way a person is identified by others is one of the major reasons for acculturation stress. The origin of acculturation stress is directly related to communication problems. Ineffective communication can cause pain.

Non-Finnish partners describe the use of a second, third, or shared foreign language in their relationship, and their different cultural background as the biggest difference and challenge their in life. These differences and challenges deal with language and communication, about blending in, about adapting, about feeling excluded, and at times feeling displaced, and about belonging and having a place in society. It is about negotiating, which always means having to give up while gaining something. These are relevant everyday matters for people living in

¹ Belgium = BEL, Finland = FIN, Germany = GER, Italy = ITA, Netherlands = NET, Nigeria = NIG, Switzerland = SWI, United States of America = USA, Venezuela = VEN

² The respective excerpt comes from the theme interviews [TI], concept map interviews [CI], or from the e-mail interviews [EI]

³ ... omitted from the original source, as irrelevant to the subject studied

these multicultural realities. A Belgian spouse reported having difficulties to express himself in Finnish, and feared that this “handicap” of not being able to speak the language will never disappear, and always will cause confusion.

Deterioration of native language proficiency

This category obviously concerns the topic of language loss. Language loss or language deterioration wherein the lack of or interruption in instruction in the native language impedes its development, leads to loss through lack of use (Rhodes et al., 2005:194). Having lived 4 years in Finland in Finnish speaking surroundings Bea says: “I am becoming less fluent and sure about my own mother tongue” (Bea, NET, EI). Several non-Finnish spouses voiced this concern. This distress also belongs to the field of adaptation, and raises the problem of deculturation, e.g., what a person actually unlearns (Kim, 2001). In fact, when an individual adapts to a new culture at the expense of his or her primary culture, this is called the process of deculturation, which is associated with psychological distress. Hamers and Blanc (2000) argue that extreme deculturation can lead to assimilation, and may be accompanied by first-language loss. If no assimilation into the host culture occurs, they argue, deculturation can lead to a complex psychosocial state involving feelings of alienation and isolation vis-à-vis the society of residence. Deculturation conveys a loss of the original culture without replacement, whereas integration adds a second culture to the first one without a loss.

Drawing on Taylor and Moghaddam’s (1987) suggestion that an individual may adapt to the dominant group while, at the same time, retaining a number of features of his or her own identity, van Oudenhoven et al. (1998) suggest that a strong ethnic self-concept is related to integration, while a weak one is related to assimilation, and that ethnic identity is evaluated more positively in integration than in assimilation. At the same time, majority members feel more sympathy for assimilating than for integrating immigrants and express more prejudices against those who are integrating. (Hamers & Blanc, 2000.)

Speaking the non-Finnish partner’s native language

Second language learning is different for everyone; it is a very personal experience, and it depends on many factors. The partner who is speaking a foreign (non-native) language may be put in a weaker position, especially when arguing, as one of the couples mentioned. Several spouses speaking in a foreign (non-native) language with their partner, and non-Finnish partners with members of the host culture (Finland) reported perceiving inequality

and lack of power, which were associated with disadvantages. Some people get frustrated, or feel helpless and embarrassed, as one Finnish spouse tells in the following excerpt:

I get very angry and frustrated, then I am trying to explain something and he doesn't understand me, or misunderstands me. Then I feel "how can you be so stupid!"
However, I know very well that the fault is in me, because I just can't say it so well, but still it makes me so furious that he doesn't understand me. (Helena, FIN, CI)

Helplessness, frustrations, silence are some of the consequences of having to speak a language which is not one's own. Sometimes people feel loss and betrayal when speaking another language, which points to issues of identity (Granger, 2004).

As Lightbown and Spada (1993) point out, children are praised for their efforts in speaking a language, regardless of accuracy, and have ample time and opportunity to listen and learn before producing. In contrast, adults are exposed to a much more complex language from the onset, and are expected to figure out (and produce) accordingly. They are often embarrassed by their lack of mastery of the language and they may develop a sense of inadequacy after experiences of frustration in trying to say exactly what they mean. Such frustration affects self-evaluation, possibly increasing anxiety, and negatively impacting on motivation and perseverance. (Moyer, 2004:38.)

Dependency on the Finnish partner: support

The fact that their level of Finnish was inadequate, and that the non-Finnish partners therefore had to depend heavily on their Finnish spouses, was perceived as challenging. This was, first of all, a problem for the non-Finnish partners to cope with, since it created a feeling of helplessness. However, this dependence on the Finnish partners was felt to be difficult at times for both spouses. The Finnish partners liked to help as much as they could, and also felt obliged to support their non-Finnish spouses in performing daily tasks, such as shopping and telephone calls. These basic inabilities and feelings of helplessness were perceived as humiliating for some of the non-Finnish spouses, and even made them realize the prejudice that some Finnish people still feel toward non-Finnish citizens. The need for support creates dependency. But even giving support can be an emotional burden. This is exemplified below:

Before she came to Finland my wife told me that in Finland she is going to be dependent on me for language reasons.... my wife's Finnish is only passable. I take

care of the important calls in her behalf. Of course, I have suffered that she can't take care of many things herself. (Ari, FIN, EM)

Whereas the non-Finnish partners needed support as exemplified above, one should not overlook the commitment of the support providers. All of the Finnish spouses showed a remarkable sense of responsibility in supporting their partners from the very beginning on and demonstrated obligation and dedication. However, providing such support was sometimes seen as inconvenient and challenging too. A Finnish spouse reports about the negotiations between her non-Finnish partner and a Finnish handy man, where she had to be present too:

I don't know what is my role in the discussion when I am the interpreter: Am I allowed to think myself or not, etc., or am I merely a conduit? (Marika FIN, CI)

In this case Marika's support can be considered as informational support, which provides educational and helpful specifics, especially in the sense of adequate help with the language. It also points to instrumental support which indicates the very practical issues such as shopping, transportation, and phone calls. (Israel & Schurman, 1990.) Entering into and living in an intercultural relationship requires a period of transition for both partners, and they may experience this time as difficult to cope with: both needing social support.

Nonverbal communication

Some Finnish partners reported having problems with the non-Finnish partner's nonverbal communication, such as the intonation, which they perceived as rude, quarrelsome, or sounding like a command, or the partner's voice perceived as too loud. Petri, one Finnish partner mentioned experiencing his Dutch wife too direct at times, sounding rude and quarrelsome. This is an example of how partners not only see their spouse's nonverbal expression, but may begin to notice their own as well: Petri recognized his own style as being indirect and non-confrontational.

Nonverbal communication includes voice qualifiers such as pitch range and intensity, volume, and tempo. Cultural group members often tend to use their own vocalic qualifiers and rules to evaluate others' vocalic signals (Ting-Toomey, 1999.) According to the accommodation theory we tend to view people who sound like us as more friendly and attractive and people who sound different from us as strange and distant (Gallois et al., 1995). Nonverbal signals are more subtle than verbal communication.

Communication

The intercultural couples reported various issues regarding communication in general. These are a) topics of negotiation, and b) conversational styles.

a) Topics of negotiation

Negotiating seems to be a regular activity or ongoing process for the couples involved. They justify this by claiming that discussing and debating make up an obvious and important part of their life. They also report they feel they make more compromises to manage their life than “ordinary” couples. “Ordinary” is how two couples described “intracultural” couples. Moreover, it appears to these couples that in one way or another all their moves are negotiated. Finally, so they report, far more than mere basic aspects of life need to be negotiated. Often what seems to be a quite normal, every day topic to them as individuals, or to other people (not belonging to their intercultural environment), this may provoke a question, or even conflict, or can begin a long negotiation within their intercultural families.

The topics the couples in this study considered important were the raising of children, and choice of religion. Gabina explains:

One of the most sensitive areas that required the most negotiation has been religion. I am a Roman Catholic, whereas he belongs to the Pentecostal church, so we had to compromise and find a common ground as to how to raise our daughter: in the Catholic or the protestant faith. (Gabina, VEN, EI)

Your friends, my friends or foreign friends? Spending time with a friend or staying at home? Holidays in your country, my country, or in a third country, and what is a real holiday? Shall we live in his country, her country or in a third country? According to Crippen & Brew (2007), one of the first important decisions for an intercultural couple from different countries of origin is to determine their place of residence. While most studies of migration view the household as an impenetrable unit pertaining to decisions about where to live, partners hold a variety of emotions and desires prior to entering a decision-making process that is characterized by negotiation and tension and is affected by differential levels of power (Crippen & Brew, 2007: 108), especially when considering partners come from different cultural backgrounds.

b) Conversational styles

Non-Finnish partners related their communication patterns to Finnish conversational styles. They said that communication is often about the cultural codes one needs to know, about

being so much integrated into the Finnish society that one can correctly interpret certain communication situations. Other features regarding Finnish conversation styles were indirectness, silence, disclosure (openness) and appropriate closeness (physical distance). The following excerpt touches the issue of silence:

Yes, I have been raised that being silent is wrong: If there is silence, it means trouble. I learned in Finland there is a certain value in being silent. I try to practice that but I still have these moments when at lunch, sitting together with seven people and nothing is being said, I am getting nervous and start perspiring and try to find something to say at any cost, which then usually turns out to be something very silly. (Herman, BEL, CI)

Having a different temperament (shouting a lot), standing very close to people, and not wanting to disclose problems were also experiences of the non-Finnish spouses. Studies indicate that significant differences exist both cross-culturally and intraculturally with regard to communication approach and avoidance. Issues such as openness, according to Stafford (2003), may be reported in US research more frequently because of the widespread and deeply rooted cultural belief in that culture, that self-disclosure represents a guarantee of a good and successful relationship. The actual expression of intimacy also appears to be more common in individualistic than in collectivistic cultures (Yum & Canary, 2003), although even individualistic cultures may differ in the communicative enactment of intimacy expression. An illustration of this stems from a Finnish spouse married to a US-American man. She relates,

In Finnish, the “I love you” is so much bigger and stronger than it is in America. In America, people say it so much: They say it to their mums and dads and brothers and sisters and, but for me it was like so overwhelmingly big somehow that uhm, yeah, when (husband’s name) first said it, I thought: “Oh my God, I’m not ready to say that” (laughs). (Anita, FIN, TI)

The challenge of understanding communicative behaviours across cultures should include questions concerning individuals’ predispositions towards talking and the reactions of others to the manifestations of such predispositions. (Kim et al., 2001: 404).

The adapting spouse(s)

Obviously language is one of the main issues of adaptation for the Finnish and non-Finnish partner; this can be the language spoken in the relationship but also the language of the

country, Finnish in this case. Whether the non-Finnish partner was employed or unemployed - often linked to the host-society's language competence - was seen as a determining factor for the non-Finnish spouse's integration and level of social contact. On the emotional level, most often the non-Finnish spouse confront feelings of homesickness, with relatives being so far away that it is a significant financial burden to even visit them once a year. A Finnish spouse married with a Nigerian man pointed out a few times how she lives her husband's hardships:

I suffer with you, I'm part of it sometimes because I'm going through the same things, I suffer too, I worry about you. (Annaliisa, FIN, CI)

Adaptation can also be linked to identity concepts. Here on the very topic of adaptation, one partner links adaptation to identity.

My problem or my situation is, that I'm not a pure Finn and I'm not anymore a pure Swiss either and I will never be. I'm kind of a rootless person. (Éric, SWI/FIN, EI)

Experiencing intercultural change, in this case intercultural marriage, also means negotiating or experiencing the vulnerability of identity on the one hand, and the security of one's identity on the other hand (Ting-Toomey, 1999). Only when finding oneself in another culture or in interaction with people from another culture, one becomes aware of the influence of one's cultural identity (Romano, 1997). This came also to the surface in one Belgian-Finnish couple's account:

I have my frustrations and sometimes strong frustrations to find my identity here I experience myself as an international person, as a citizen of the world. I don't really belong here, if I go back I don't belong there, but I belong enough here and enough there to be actually happy. (Herman, BEL, CI)

Helena, Herman's wife, describes her feelings of belonging or not-belonging:

Sometimes I can comfort myself that when I have difficulties with some Finnish people and I curse them, I tend to forget I am myself Finnish. Sometimes I joke that I am 1/3 Belgian, and sometimes it is less than that. When we are again in Belgium for a longer period, I feel it so strong that a part of me belongs there. However, I feel like a stranger there too. But I can have the same feelings of belonging and being a stranger also here. (Helena, FIN, CI)

The need to belong is a fundamental human motivation. A lack of belongingness constitutes severe deprivation and causes a variety of ill effects. (Baumeister & Leary, 1995.)

While the language, communication and adaptation topics represent challenges for the intercultural couples, it is encouraging to see couples' accounts showing the positive aspects of intercultural marriage as well. Many couples related the use of a foreign language at home as a richness. Some couples explicitly told how they learned from each other and how they enjoy their partner's companionship. Anna and Ari recount:

He takes me as I am, he accepts my cultural background just as I appreciate his and the way we learn from each other. We complete each other in many ways. (Anna, GER, EI)

My partner brought with her also another culture, which to these days has enriched my life. In the good ten years we have lived together fit a lot of small wonderful moments. (Ari, FIN; EI)

Bea and Petri said,

At our wedding both cultures were integrated by looking at personal wishes instead of culturally bound 'demands' that are so clearly related to weddings. (Bea, NET, EI)

Thanks to the relationship with her, new things have opened up, which we share With the language comes something particular, which makes this sharing immensely great. When she's going to the Finnish course and says: "Of course I want to learn to speak your language" I am so touched, and when I hear her speaking Finnish so well again, I'm so moved. (Petri, FIN, EI)

The intercultural couples' positive accounts deal with culture, language, adaptation, negotiation, learning from each other, differences that can be discussed, acceptance and appreciation, and enrichment of life.

Discussion

Language is a salient component in intercultural couples' relationship. For the Finnish partner as well as for the non-Finnish partner the choice and use of a common language is not self-evident. Non-Finnish partners may have to struggle with their own language disappearing

(language loss), and they have to learn Finnish in one way or another. The Finnish spouses may have to learn a second language as well. Compromises are needed regularly and negotiation is an every day issue.

The fact that Finnish is the host language for the non-Finnish partners and that Finnish was perceived to be a difficult language has led to stress for the non-Finnish as well as for the Finnish partner, in terms of dependency, and support-giving.

Some individual partners, and also some couples, found they needed support in coping with changes related to adapting to a new intercultural home environment. Such a need is not always foreseen, because one tends to think it involves only the one coming “here”. Particularly in times of uncertainty in life, e.g., in transition periods, one needs the support of the other to enhance one’s temporary weakness, for instance, if one has insufficient communication skills. The non-Finnish partners’ lack of Finnish proficiency necessitates the help of their Finnish spouse. Then again, this leads to the spouses’ dependency on their Finnish partners and their need of support. This can be perceived, however, as a disgrace, for some.

All intercultural couples face the dilemma of resolving cultural differences, because the process of *negotiating* couplehood represents a transition from dual individuality to a partnership within the relationship (Horowitz, 1999). Decision-making primarily deals with residence and the search for employment (Adams, 2004, Crippen & Brew, 2007), and friends (Adams, 2004). It also concerns the constant need for choices: not just any choices but quite important choices. Whereas one couple in this study noted that the differences were very obvious and therefore very easy to deal with, Mackey et al., (1998) claim that a confrontational style is more beneficial than avoidance in managing conflict, because the latter leads to unresolved tension and additional conflict.

Adapting to a new culture, living with feelings of belonging and not belonging, looking for the balance within yourself, within your marriage and within your family are considerable challenges. Feeling rootless was a way of describing the person’s feeling of not belonging. Belongingness, as seen from the non-Finnish partners’ experiences, tackles the issue of intercultural identity, where the psychological movement of strangers into new dimensions of perception and experience produces “boundary-ambiguity syndromes” (Hall, 1976), in which the original cultural identity begins to lose its distinctiveness and rigidity, and the emergent identity shows an increasing interculturalness (Cools, 2006: 271). Australian survey data have shown that better educated immigrants are more likely to engage socially with their host

community. This engagement is important for their social integration and for social cohesion, since it helps to create a sense of belonging. (Jupp et al., 2007:126.) Belonging, adapting and integrating also depend on the host culture and how they receive the newcomer (Kim 2001), and the whole process obviously reflects on the relationship of both native and immigrant partners.

The road to the richness of intercultural relationships may be plagued at times by challenges that can occur at numerous systemic levels. Intercultural couples are left to create stories that revisit and renegotiate their expectations, boundaries, and cultural lenses. (Molina et al., 2004.) This was shown by some of the couples' illustrative comments that their intercultural marriage was not only a challenge but also a great opportunity.

Conclusion

The findings shed light on the complex adaptation processes intercultural spouses experience when crossing cultures, i.e. taking the specific Finnish cultural environment into account. These processes may be unique to the various intercultural couples, as compared to intracultural couples, because of the dissimilar cultural backgrounds of the partners, as well as the specific Finnish environment where they reside. The intercultural couples experienced the dialectics of privilege-disadvantage, and belonging-exclusion in their relationship. This was conveyed through the challenges of using various languages in their communication with each other and with their social networks. All partners brought some level of their native tongue to their relationship. This language issue, and its consequences for communication was said to need constant negotiation.

The adaptation process of both partners includes new language learning and the acquisition of conversational characteristics of the partners and the host culture. It also includes, at times, the challenges of living in a new cultural environment, where non-native spouses may feel at times displaced, and can experience temporary loss of language.

The findings of this study demonstrate that intercultural couples do have several additional layers of complexity as compared with intracultural couples. These include the learning of one or more languages, and/or the loss thereof; having continuous negotiations and additional topics to negotiate; varying levels of dependency on the host partner; and adaptation issues regarding the host culture's conversational style, and one's cultural identity, which relates to belonging. The Finnish environment creates particular challenges for the non-Finnish spouses

when they need to learn the Finnish language. This presents a linguistic barrier that has proved to be one of the world's most formidable ones (Lewis, 2009).

The topic of spousal support and social support is new here, although, retrospectively, they can also be found in my two earlier studies (Cools, 2004; Cools, 2006) as well. Answering the question of how couples see their different cultural backgrounds as affecting their relationship is not at all straightforward. The answer has very much to do, however, with integration through communication by the non-Finnish partners, and the Finnish partners supporting their spouses in their learning and their every day life. It also concerns the constant making of important choices. Finally the nature of one's cultural background also seems to be reflected at times in the changeable identity transformations that bicultural people tend to experience after living abroad for some time.

On the one hand, the potential for misunderstanding and conflict in intercultural relationships is said to be large; not surprisingly, intercultural marriages are at greater risk of divorce than intracultural marriages (Gaines & Agnew, 2003). On the other hand, despite the odds that they face, many intercultural couples successfully maintain stable, satisfying relationships over time. One can assume that those intercultural couples who survive and thrive over time have implicitly taken to heart commitment-enhancing factors:

I think, especially because of the fact that we come from different cultural backgrounds, you are also more aware that you have to communicate more than you usually would, than when you would be for instance with someone from your own culture. (Kornelis, NET, TI)

Limitations and implications

The variety of data collection languages can be considered as a limitation. However, in the USA and in Australia, research is being conducted with people speaking a language different than their mother tongue, and the findings are considered valid and reliable.

Implications for further research regard the concept of belonging, which comprises theoretical-philosophical themes such as identity, visibility, difference, rootedness, multi-local terrains of belonging, and transnational connection (Fortier, 1999). Language and communication as essential in relationships in general, and for intercultural couples in particular, tend to govern the well-being of relational partners. Research on intercultural

couples may generate innovative knowledge and may offer alternative perspectives on these relationships.

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