

How do cross-cultural couples differ from couples who come from the same culture?

Cross-cultural couples have many of the same problems as couples coming from the same culture, but they have more challenges. There are more differences to contend with. When one marries, one is not marrying just an individual, but his or her family and cultural background. Therefore, dealing with difference becomes a central theme in marriages between people of two cultures. This requires more understanding, better communication and conflict resolution skills.

Some differences in cross-cultural couples are relatively simple like: what time and what one eats, how one receives guests, where vacations are spent and what time children should go to sleep while others are more complex and difficult to deal with. An appreciation and respect for the culture of the partner, as well as, acceptance of the families of both partners is an important resource for a mutually satisfying partnership.

Bi-national marriages generally imply that one or both spouses immigrate. Immigration is a “life-stresser”. It implies leaving behind normal support networks, being confronted by a new culture and language and often isolation and power differences, along with other imbalances in the relationship. Learning the language, and rebuilding support systems are essential to a good integration experience. In this way women’s groups and organizations are extremely helpful.

The similarities between the cross-cultural couples and couples coming from the same country are that human beings, in general, are poorly prepared for marriage. People lack the communication and conflict resolution skills which are necessary for maintaining a long-term relationship. These can be learned. Naturally, all people have issues they bring into a marriage from their families of origin and it plays a role in their choice of partners and impacts the patterns they tend to live out with their partner. One very experienced therapist has said that maintaining a long-term partnership is one of the principal challenges contributing to our personal development.

As Margaret Mead said: “If you don’t marry the boy next door then you can be sure not to die of boredom, but you have to plan to work harder”, therefore the challenges and lack of boredom inherent in living in a bi-national relationship and the creative demands which are part of a cross-cultural family widen horizons and makes life more colorful.

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