

Working With Binational Couples

My therapeutic work in Germany both at a Catholic counseling service and in private practice is composed almost exclusively of immigrants and about 50% binational couples. Most couples who come to therapy have similar difficulties - communication problems and coping with their differences, their in-laws, children, stresses of two working parents and career and financial difficulties. When problems come together and interact with life cycle transitions and illness -the marriage partnership- the family unit becomes vulnerable to separation or divorce. The number of marriages which fail is somewhere between 40 and 50% in the developed countries. Although bi national/ bi cultural marriages are more challenging they are also richer and more interesting,

There are various motives for bicultural attraction. Dugan romano in *Inter-Cultural marriage Promises and Pitfalls* talks about the outcasts from their own cultures, the adventurer, the rebels, the escapists and the unstabiles.

Inter-cultural marriages –as a whole –have often more areas of difference and therefore to deal with more basic and simple issues like what kind of food you eat, when is the main meal of the day, where do you spend vacations, which language or culture dominate and where should be the place of residence. All of these topics become issues, whereas they would not be problem areas in a mono-cultural marriages. Other points of divergence are organizing time, friends, possible religious or political differences, ways of dealing with stress, illness and suffering, personal identity and ethnocentrism.

There is less likely to be a self understood common ground than in couples with more similar backgrounds. Generally, the greater the difference between spouses in culture, social class, religion, racial background, the more difficulty they will have in adjustment to marriage.

Since one partner usually migrates there creates a greater issue of dependency. This is repeatedly a problem in clinical practice. The newly arrived immigrants do not speak the language, cannot work, and have neither family or other social support systems. They are completely dependent on their spouses and then often their children to culturally mediate for them. The dependent spouse suffers from lowered self esteem and isolation and discrimination. It takes years to learn German as an adult, develop a support system and become financially independent, difficulties to find jobs and have their foreign studies recognized. They suffer from the loss of their cultural roots, loss of family and friends left

behind and cultural and identity boundary conflicts. They need to adapt, at the same time maintain their personal and cultural identities. Their children become German and often do not even speak their native language or know very well their foreign parents culture. This dependency is often experienced as stress by the German spouse, who is responsible for financial maintenance of the family and all of the other tasks related to everyday life, such as school, bureaucratic paper work and most outer oriented responsibilities. This can be taken advantage of to keep the immigrated spouse dependent. This can occur to the extreme of inhibiting that the spouse learns the language or has any activities outside of the domestic sphere.

Although the host country partner is definitely in a position of greater power, it is his or her culture, language and has often a family which strengthens his or her position. In my eight year clinical experience in southern Germany I have observed some interesting patterns. Usually it is women who migrate and follow their men - with the exception of African males who mainly are married to white German women.. African men-who find themselves unable to fill their male roles as bread winners, are viewed as sex objects and highly discriminated against in the work market. I was told by one client that Africans are seen alike monkeys, wild animals hanging from trees.

The English speakers from the developed countries are also the best off financially, have a higher educational level and are generally married to men of high social status. It's interesting how the world order reflects itself in the couple relationship.

Amongst the Heiratsmigrantinnen from Latin America, the overwhelming majority are women. There is a lot of variety.

It is impossible to differentiate at first glance unless you are familiar with the subtle cultural cues which are social class related. The best advice is to ask what their life was like in the own country, when and how they came. It is taking a migration narrative - an intervention detailed later in this article.

There are spouses who in their own countries have a much more privileged position than the middle class German with household. There they had servants, chauffeurs, beach and country vacation houses and family names. Some came here as students, others met husbands who were vacationing or working in L.A.

Those of lower social classes, who might have worked informally in the Sexarbeitsbereich were looking for a salvation for their very difficult economic reality. They also have the fantasy of having a family, being happy and marrying a blond blue eyed German prince charming. They hope to work here and have the possibility to send home money to family and

often children left behind. Some women actually come through Frauenhandel, sextourism or as so called catalogue brides. Currently many Eastern European women come in this way. Some find themselves practically in bondage to someone who forces them to work as a sexarbeiter or tries them out for three months and sends them back. I have seen cases of women who arrived and had their passports and tickets taken from them, did not speak the language and were essentially hostages. There are number of NGO's both here and in the third world who are working in a preventive way by informing women of what they may encounter when they arrive in the "promised land" and offering them support in Europe if they find themselves in exploitive relationships. Before the fall of the wall the traditional exotic Thai and especially valued Philipinas (because of their higher educational level and English competency and catholic backgrounds) comprised the larger group of HeiratsmigrantInnen. Germany has a limited experience in the intercultural area - and they were marked -possibility (????) by the working class guest workers into assuming that all immigrants of darker skin are the same -Schwartz. This mentality will have to change given the realities of the European Community and the extensive traveling done by a large number of Germans who have developed an appreciation for cultural differences-like spaghetti and Asian food.