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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, CO

The Graduate School

COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONSHIPS OF INTERCULTURAL/  
MULTILINGUAL COUPLES: CULTURAL AND  
LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements of the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

NAI CHIEH TIEN

College of Education and Behavioral Sciences  
School of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education  
Counseling Psychology

August 2013

This Dissertation by: Nai Chieh Tine

Entitled: *Communication and Relationships of Intercultural/Multilingual Couples:  
Cultural and Language Differences*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in  
College of Education and Behavioral Sciences in School of Applied Psychology and  
Counselor Education, Program of Counselor Psychology

Accepted by the Doctoral Committee

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Accepted by the Graduate School

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## ABSTRACT

Tien, Nai Chieh. *Communication and Relationships of Intercultural/Multilingual Couples: Cultural and Language Differences*. Published Doctor of Philosophy dissertation, University of Northern Colorado, 2013.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and describe the cultural and language differences that intercultural/multilingual couples experience in their relationships and how these differences affect their relationships. Since the United States is more diverse than ever in terms of culture, race, and ethnicity, relationships between people of different races, ethnicities, and nationalities have become more and more common place. This study answered the questions: How do cultural and language differences impact intercultural/multilingual couples' relationships and communication? Do they find their relationship unique compared to others? How can mental health professional provide effective treatment for them in the process of couple's counseling? Using in-depth interviews, the study explored different themes and specific examples of couples' stories and experiences to better understand how exactly the cultural and language differences affect their relationships. The study employed phenomenology as the theoretical framework for the research method and eight couples were interviewed throughout the process and reached saturation. Eight common themes were found related to cultural differences and four others were found related to language differences that are factors influencing the couples' relationship and communication: Religion, extended family, gender roles, food, affection expression, residency, child rearing, and finances;

communicating with extended family, expressing self and communicating in second language, learning a different language and lost in translation. Additionally, all eight couples agreed that their relationship is unique and provided examples to describe the elements of the uniqueness. Last, participants provided suggestions for mental health professionals on how they can be more effective in the process of counseling:

Understanding and learning both cultures, be aware of language barriers, remind the couple the purpose of the relationship is “love” and acknowledge the impact of living in a third country. Implications for future research, existing theory and clinical practice for counseling psychologists are discussed.

Keywords: qualitative study, phenomenology study, intercultural/multilingual couples, cultural difference, language difference, uniqueness, couple’s counseling

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*“We all need someone who gives us the courage to be who we were meant to be.”*

I remember the first day I arrived in this country to chase after my dream of getting an advanced degree. I traveled more than 7,000 miles with two 40-pound suitcases, a laptop and a rice cooker, and started a new life journey in Colorado. Now after 6 years, I am not only getting the degree I dreamt of, I am becoming a different person who owns this unique experience and phenomenon of living in a foreign country and creating a new life. There were too many stories to tell for this last six years, and I am using this study to present the hard work, the time, the tears, and joy of this special journey to everyone who loves and support me.

During the past 6 years, there are many precious people who supported me in many different ways to complete this journey. My parents, Shaoping Chiang and Howling Tien, provided everything I could ever ask for to survive, and to face the challenges of being in graduate school, and to be strong enough to live thousands of miles away from my dearest family and friends. I would not have had the courage to chase after my dream for even one day if they had not been there for me. All of my family and friends in Taiwan and the US have been a source of my courage, with every email and letter they sent to me, every post on my Facebook page, and every gift given to me back in Taiwan. I would not have had the ability to finish this most challenging task

throughout graduate school without eating the snacks they bought me during many sleepless nights.

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Intercultural/multilingual couples face challenges and demonstrate strengths in communication and their relationships that are different from the experiences of monocultural/monolingual couples (Molina, Estrada, & Burnett, 2004). As the United States becomes more and more diverse, and the number of couples with partners from different background increases, the unique experience of these couples deserves more attention. Counseling psychologists and other mental health professionals who work with this population need to understand these unique experiences in order to provide effective services (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992; Sue & Sue, 2008).

This country is more diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, and culture than it has ever been, and relationships between people of different races, ethnicities, and nationalities have become more and more commonplace (Bystydzienski, 2011). About 50 years ago, interracial marriages were illegal in several states in this country, and the prejudice against marrying a partner of a different race and culture probably still exists today (Botham, 2009; Toporek, Gerstein, Fouad, Roysircar, & Israel, 2006). Intercultural relationships and interracial relationships are defined more broadly nowadays, due to the fact that the variety of races, ethnicities, and backgrounds of people in this country has dramatically increased. Furthermore, technology has developed rapidly and has become an essential part of people's daily life. All the new technology and the emergence of the internet have created more ways to communicate with people on the other side of the

world; the physical distance between people is not as important anymore, which makes it easier to start and maintain international and long distance relationships (Bystydzienski, 2011; Romano, 2008). The increasing number of immigrants and the development of technology are nourishing the globalizing effect and increasing the probability of people developing intercultural/multilingual romantic relationships (Bustamante, Nelson, Henrikson, & Monakes, 2011). While there are no official statistics that have been released by the United States government regarding such relationships, such as the number who are married or living together, existing data suggest that there are approximately 10 million intercultural couples in the United States (Bystydzienski, 2011; Clemetson, 2000; U.S. Census Bureau 2008). While prejudice against them may still exist, interracial marriages are not unusual anymore; intercultural and multilingual couples are more and more common.

Intercultural/multilingual couples are couples in which each partner was born and raised in a different country, and has a different first language (Ho, 1990). For two individuals that are from different cultural backgrounds forming a romantic relationship, anything in daily life can be a new adjustment. For example, eating meals together may be simple for most couples, but for a couple in which each partner grew up in a different country, was brought up in a different culture, and may even speak a different first language, what to eat for dinner every night can become a serious discussion. These couples face unique challenges, and their numbers are growing. Although there has been an increase in the publication of resources for intercultural/multilingual couples, considering the number of individuals in the United States who are in an intercultural/multilingual romantic relationship, there is still limited information

regarding the details of how intercultural/multilingual couples handle the challenges of their relationship due to cultural and language differences (Bystydzienski, 2011). In the next section, I will discuss the rationale of this study in more detail.

### **Rationale**

It is estimated that 13% of the U. S. population is composed of immigrants and that 1 out of 5 households includes a person who speaks a language other than English (DeAngelis, 2010; Shin & Bruno, 2003). These immigrants not only face the stresses of adapting to a new culture and language, but may also be attempting to overcome traumatic experiences such as war, poverty, and natural disasters (DeAngelis, 2010). A challenge that therapists face with these immigrants is that many of them have difficulties speaking English and they have different cultural backgrounds. Cultural differences are an impactful factor in interpersonal and marital relationships (Negy & Snyder, 2000). Furthermore, research has shown that experiencing an event in one language and then discussing the experience in counseling/therapy in another language can sometimes prevent the process of healing, because the second language may serve as a defense mechanism and can distance the person from the event (Foster, 1998). Language differences and the impact on couples' communication and couples' counseling/therapy are an area that needs to be studied more thoroughly.

Research on intercultural/multilingual couples has been limited. Not much existing literature has investigated and provided understanding of the communication process and relationship adjustment of intercultural couples, especially the role of language differences (Bustamante et al., 2011). The existing research also has not explored the influence of nationality of origin (where the individual was born and/or

raised) or the impact of first language on the couple's relationship and communication (Romano, 2008). Most of the available research focuses on couples who are interracial but both partners grew up in the same country. Intercultural marriages are usually more stressful and difficult for the couple because of the different first languages, cultural backgrounds, religious views, and even immigration regulations (Nabeshima, 2005). In addition different attitudes toward family values, social prejudices (Lewandowski & Jackson, 2001), and social supports and relationships with extended family can also be challenging (Yalom & Carstensen, 2002). All the differences listed above led to my interest in investigating what other challenges and stressors couples overcome when they are not just interracial, but also international, intercultural, and inter-lingual.

Language difference could be a challenge which intercultural/multilingual couples run into when starting their relationship. Due to the fact that each partner speaks a different first language, at least one of the partners has to be bilingual so the couple can communicate with each other. Individuals who are bilingual or multilingual learn the second or third language at different times in their lives, and develop a variety of attachments and relationships when using different languages. Individuals relate to their native language and acquired languages in different ways as a result of learning languages under different circumstances and in different developmental stages (Foster, 1998). When partners in a multilingual couple communicate with each other, depending on which language they choose to use, each partner might respond differently depending on how they are emotionally related to the language they communicate with. This is another challenge of multilingual relationships

For intercultural couples, culture difference is the most salient aspect of their relationships, it is often what other people notice first about them. They know that because each partner was born and raised in a different country, they were also brought up by different cultures. For a couple in which both partners are from the United States, they most likely identify with the U.S. culture; for a couple in which each partner has a different country-of-origin, they most likely identify with the culture of their country-of-origin. But what is culture? Culture can be defined by a variety of different concepts, such as gender, class, ethnicity, social difference, and background. In this study, culture is specifically defined as the social heritage of a person and includes social norms (such as rules of conduct), social values (beliefs and common understandings), and social practices (what people say and do), which are assumed to be shared by a group of individuals (Bystydzienski, 2011). In an intercultural relationship, social norms, social values, and social practices can create both conflict and cohesion; differences between each partner's culture can be both challenging and fascinating at the same time. Indeed, some intercultural couples actually consider these differences to be the most attractive element of their relationships (Romano, 2008).

The concept of an intimate relationship has changed from one of a partnership concerned with financial security and raising a family to one founded on romantic reasons, with the aim of forming a deep friendship and sharing one's free time together (Piller, 2002). For this reason, being a good communicator is vital for romantic relationships considering all of the stages of life which partners will experience together. Fitzpatrick (1990) found that it is due to communication difficulties that there is so much marital unhappiness and marital failure in contemporary America. Good communication

is more than just about language, it is about understanding each other's cultures, perspectives, and communicating in a way that both partners can comprehend (Piller, 2009).

Compared to monocultural/monolingual couples, intercultural/multilingual couples not only have to communicate in one partner's second language, they also have to translate each other's culture in a meaningful way that their partner can understand (Piller, 2009). Since intercultural/multilingual couples are dealing with not only language differences but also cultural differences, the issue of how being a multilingual/multicultural couple affects the partners' relationship needs to be investigated more closely (Bystydzienski, 2011). As the researcher, the hope was to investigate the cultural and language differences that happen in intercultural/ multilingual romantic relationships, as well as some of the most influential differences they experience and how these affect the relationship and communication. As a result, counseling psychologists and other mental health professionals might have a better understanding of these couples' narratives and relationships, and may be able to provide effective and helpful services for these couples

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore and describe the cultural and language differences that intercultural/multilingual couples experience in their relationships and how these differences affect their relationships. Also, as this study has implications for the field of counseling psychology, it aims to discover how psychologists/therapists can be the most helpful throughout the therapeutic process with couples who are in intercultural/multilingual relationships.



According to Romano (2008) and Henrikson, Watts, and Bustamante (2007), specific cultural differences that are influential to intercultural/multilingual couples' relationships and communication are food and drink, intimacy, gender roles, place of residence, in-laws, and religion. These characteristics can be categorized into the three aspects outlined by Bystydzienski (2011) and mentioned above: social norms, values, and practices. For example, differences in food and drink can be categorized as differences in social practice while different gender roles can be categorized as difference in social norms. For language differences, Foster (1998) believes that people process their thoughts in a way that has the same structure as their first language, which means that each partner processes differently in their head if they have a different first language. As we know, communication is an essential part of any kind of interpersonal relationship, especially romantic relationships (Gottman, 1999). When we communicate with people, the first thing we need to consider is, "Do we speak the same language?" For couples in which each partner is from a different country and has a different native language, finding a common language is necessary to be able to communicate with each other.

In this study, a few dimensions of language differences were investigated; the language the couple chooses to use to communicate with each other and the language the couple chooses to use to communicate with each other's extended family members. Also, the couples have created a new culture of their own which is a product of the different cultures and the different aspects of culture they belong to, a possibility which was hoped to be explored more in the study. As a researcher and partner in an intercultural/multilingual relationship myself, I was very interested in and passionate about discovering how these couples overcome difficulties that monolingual couples do

not have, and in exploring the strengths of their relationships. While research (Bystydzienski, 2011; Henrikson et al., 2007; Ho, 1990; Romano, 2008) exists which explores the effect of cultural differences on intercultural/multilingual couples' relationships, little research focuses on the effect of language difference. Exploring the effect of language difference on multilingual couples' relationships and communication is a unique focus of this study. In the future, intercultural/multilingual couples and psychologists who work with such couples will be the populations who most benefit from the results of this study.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to identify some cultural and language differences that intercultural/multilingual couples experience and to explore how these differences affect couples' relationships. Last, as a counseling psychologist who would like to provide counseling for couples in this kind of relationship, I wanted like to explore what these couples think might be the most helpful things that a counseling psychologist or therapist could do for them if they were to start couples therapy in the future.

The following questions were addressed in this study:

- Q1     How do cultural differences affect intercultural/multilingual couples' relationships and communication?
- Q2     How do language differences affect intercultural/multilingual couples' relationships and communication?
- Q3     How do intercultural/multilingual couples integrate their differences and create a unique relationship of their own?
- Q4     If the participants were to participate in couples counseling in the future, how can counseling psychologists/therapists be the most helpful in the process of counseling?

### **Delimitation**

In the research, different delimitations were established as listed:

#### **Intercultural/multilingual Couples**

Only intercultural/multilingual couples were being included in this study. The couples must be involved in an intercultural/multilingual relationship for at least two years and must have lived together for at least six months. Intercultural/multilingual couples are couples in which each partner was raised in a different country-of-origin and speaks a different first language. In this study, both partners must currently live in the United States. The participants had to be at least 18 years old. Both partners in the couple and the interviewer must feel comfortable in couples' ability to express themselves and answer the interview questions in English.

#### **In-depth Interview**

A way of collecting data in qualitative research which involves an intensive interview with the respondents in order to explore their perspectives and experiences which are relevant to the purpose of this study. In-depth interviews were utilized in this research, and they were all conducted face-to-face.

### **Definitions**

*Couples counseling/therapy.* Therapy/counseling that is conducted by qualified mental health professionals to help couples better understand their relationships and make positive changes.

*Cultural difference.* Differences between partners which stem from growing up in different cultures and which are derived from their respective cultures of origin ; specifically, each partner's unique habits of choosing food and drink, their expectations

surrounding intimacy, gender roles, place of residence, in-laws, social class, religion, illness, and suffering.

*Intercultural/multilingual couples.* Couples in which each partner is from a different country-of-origin and speaks a different first language.

*Language difference.* Differences in partners' mother tongues which influence each partner's thought process as well as the language the couple chooses to use to communicate with each other and each other's extended family.

*Mental health professional.* Professionals who have the appropriate license or qualification (which can be different state by state) to conduct couples counseling/therapy. This type of professional may be a licensed marriage and family therapist, a licensed professional counselor, a licensed clinical social worker, or a licensed psychologist.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There are several limitations to this study. First, the purpose of qualitative research is to investigate personal experiences in depth, and such research does not attempt to generalize the results to others of the same target population (Creswell, 2007). I, as the researcher, developed the interview questions based on my perspective and worldview, which might be different compared to participants' beliefs and perceptions of how cultural and language differences affect their intercultural/multilingual romantic relationships. The interview questions for this research were designed to be open-ended and conversational. The follow-up questions were adjusted throughout the interview process according to participants' reactions and answers to the interview questions, to ensure the questions were easy to understand and nonjudgmental. Nevertheless, there

might still be a chance participants had difficulties sharing or articulating their experiences due to the way the interview questions were designed.

Jamieson (1982) discussed how social desirability can impact participants' self-reports because people have the tendency to answer questions in a manner that will be viewed favorably by others. Social desirability is also constructed differently in each culture and country. In the process of interviewing the participants for this research, the participants might have been influenced either consciously or unconsciously by social desirability factors rather than answering the questions from their own unique perspectives. Participants might have had the tendency to only share positive experiences of their relationships and to ignore the challenges and negative experiences, which is another limitation of the study. The interview process of this study for each couple started with a conversation in which I asked the couple to share the history and narrative of their relationship with the purpose of helping the couple to feel more comfortable and to build a trusting relationship with me. Although all the couples interviewed seemed to build rapport with me and realize that I would not judge their relationship in any way, only one couple discussed more about the negativity and difficulties within their relationship, which brings up the possibility that other participating couples might still have had concerns about the social desirability of their responses and wanted to present themselves in a favorable light.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, the increasing prevalence of intercultural/multilingual couples was discussed. The lack of research of the unique needs of this population was described and the need to more fully explore the experiences of these couples was emphasized. A

rationale was provided, research questions were listed, delimitations were outlined, and definitions of key terms were given. As this country has become radically more diverse in recent decades, the once taboo idea of interracial and intercultural couples have become a reality, there is a strong need to conduct research on such relationships, which is the motivation for the study.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Most of the research about intercultural/multilingual couples has used qualitative methodology. Early research focused on interracial couples, especially Caucasian/African American couples; later, the focus shifted to Caucasian/Hispanic couples. Recently, researchers are beginning to pay more attention to the broader category of intercultural relationships. Language differences with intercultural couples have received some attention, but not much. In an intercultural/multilingual relationship, couples have some unique characteristics such as coming from different cultures-of-origin and speaking different languages and these characteristics serve them as strengths to overcome challenges that do not exist in a monocultural/monolingual relationship (Molina et al., 2004).

#### **Intercultural/Multilingual Relationship**

In 2009 and 2010, there were 690,923 international students in the United States, an increase of 26% since 2000 and 2001 (Institute of International Education, 2010). Furthermore, U.S. and foreign air carriers transported 156.4 million passengers between the United States and the rest of the world from October 2009 to September 2010, up 3.3% from the same 12 month period a year earlier (U.S. Department of Transportation, 2011). Technology has been booming and traveling internationally and overseas has become much more affordable in the last 20 years, which has made it easier for

people to leave their homeland to visit, travel, study, and work overseas (Romano, 2008). Now more than ever before, it is easy for people from different cultures to meet each other and form relationships.

Migration is also changing the cultural dimensions of the United States. According to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2011), 73,311 refugees resettled in this country in just the year of 2010; from 2000 to 2010, a total of 691,401 refugees resettled in the U.S. With a greater number of refugees either willingly or forced by circumstance to move and settle down in another country, the cultural landscape of this country is changing. The U.S. Census Bureau (2010) indicates that one in eight residents of this country is foreign born and this number has increased from 9.6 million in 1970 to 38.9 million in 2009 (4.7% to 12.5%), which is four times as many compared to 40 years ago.

Once upon a time, intercultural couples were more unusual, although their history goes at least back to biblical times when Ruth, a Moabite, married a Hebrew (Romano, 2008). In the legend of Antony and Cleopatra, retold in Shakespeare's (1623/2005) famous play, Cleopatra is the last pharaoh of ancient Egypt. She was also in two intercultural relationships, one with Julius Caesar and another with Mark Antony, who were both from Rome (Perry, Jacob, Chase, & Jacob, 2009). Intercultural romantic relationships were not an unheard concept even thousands of years ago; they were often used to consolidate power and unite empires.

The term "blue blood" was first mentioned in Spanish as "Sangre azul" in 1492 (American Heritage Dictionaries, 2007), which indicated nobility in Spain. Intercultural marriages between European royalties, also called royal intermarriage, were very



common and were the most important way to maintain the “blue blood” within royal families in different countries (Radziwill, 1915). These histories suggest that intercultural/multilingual marriages were not uncommon, but that the reasons people had for being involved in these marriages were quite different compared to now. The way people have perceived and defined these marriages also has changed throughout the centuries.

Nowadays, throughout globalization, international romantic relationships do not only happen to members of royalty. Societal views of intercultural relationships have changed as the understanding of different cultures has expanded. Interethnic, interfaith, and interracial couplehood provides individuals with possibilities for enriching relationships that challenge and expand worldviews (Chan & Wethington, 1998; Falicov, 1995; Perel, 2000). People outside of royal families now have more opportunities and more desire to meet prospective partners from other lands or countries through travel, educational exchange programs, immigration, and other direct forms of international contact (Romano, 2008). It is estimated that since the 1960s, between 41% and 52% of Jewish people marry outside their religious group. More than 80% of Italians and more than 40% of Hispanics, respectively, choose partners outside their own cultural groups. The rates of marriages between African Americans and European Americans have tripled over the past 20 years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). These numbers suggest that the rate of intercultural marriages has increased drastically throughout the years.

There are many different definitions of intercultural/multilingual relationship. Some people believe that every marriage is cross-cultural (Falicov, 1995), whether defined by different genders, spiritual backgrounds, or social status. In every union, there

is a degree of challenge in understanding each other's world. On the other hand, an intercultural couple is defined specifically as one in which each partner grew up in a different country-of-origin, which means that they are from a very different cultural background (Sullivan & Cottone, 2006). Compared to other romantic relationships, the challenge of understanding each other's world of intercultural couplehood is magnified by the greater difference in terms of beliefs, expectations, and boundaries from the culture-of-origin (Sullivan & Cottone, 2006).

In this study, the target population is the couples that are both intercultural and multilingual. Language difference also plays an important role in couple's communication (Romano, 2008). Speaking the same language is essential for any kind of verbal communication, especially communications that require higher-level of processing and verbal comprehension, such as counseling, or in-depth discussion of various topics (Foster, 1998). If each partner has a different first language, choosing which language to use to talk to each other can be a huge decision that challenges the relationship (Piller, 2002). Throughout the couplehood, intercultural couples create their unique stories then revisit and renegotiate their expectations, boundaries, shared language, and cultural lenses (Molina et al., 2004); these stories and these couples' experiences were the focus of this study. In the following sections, cultural and language differences are discussed in more detail.

### **Systemic/Relational Theory**

Intercultural/multilingual couples not only develop their own system, they develop their own intricate, multilayered systems (Rosenblatt, 2009). These couples are also affected by the many other systems in which they are embedded, including their

families, cultures-of-origin, and mother tongues. According to systemic/relational theory, human beings are surrounded by and living in all kinds of different systems and interpersonal relationships; these systems and relationships affect each other circularly and continuously (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008).

In the early 1940, a series of conferences, the Macy Conferences, produced numerous ideas from dialogues, discussions, and research sharing. Many scholars and experts described how different systems—such as biological systems, social systems, and other groups of things—operate. This was the beginning of systemic theory and cybernetics, which led to family and couples therapy, a new approach to psychotherapy which is not simply a therapeutic modality, but is also a philosophical view of human behaviors (Gehart, 2010; Segal, 1991). Bateson (1972) explored cybernetic theory through conducting research and through participation in the Macy Conference, and this theory influenced many disciplines, including communications, anthropology, and family therapy (Gehart, 2010).

Cybernetic means “steersman” in Greek, which indicates the functional principle of cybernetic systems: they self-correct to be able to reach or maintain homeostasis. All living systems are able to steer their own course rather than needing an outside force to steer them in the way that non-living systems, such as automobiles, for example, require (Bateson, 1972). Homeostasis is an important concept of systemic/relational theory; it refers to the unique set of behavioral, emotional, and interactional norms that create stability for the social group/system (Gehart, 2010). There are two different types of feedback can happen internally in the system, negative feedback and positive feedback. Negative feedback serves to return a system to an existing state, and thus has no effect on

the system--it stays the same. Positive feedback serves to push a system to a new state and has a good amount of influence on the system, driving change. Examples of positive feedback impacting a family system could be moving to a new location or changing to a new job. An important point in systems theory is that the influence of positive feedback could be either helpful or cause distress for a family or be both helpful and stressful. The term "positive" refers only to the fact that this type of feedback leads to change, not to whether its effects are pleasant (Bateson, 1972; Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967). When a system responds to positive feedback, it restructures its homeostasis and shifts itself fundamentally, which is called a second-order change. When the system returns to its previous homeostasis after the positive feedback, it is called first-order change because the change was more superficial than radical (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). When positive feedback happens to the system, the system steers itself to maintain homeostasis, such as when families and couples are motivated to adjust themselves to maintain stability when changes happen. At the same time, families and couples might restructure their homeostasis (second-order change) or stay at the same place without deeper level changes (first-order change).

Emotionally Focused Therapy is an empirically-supported treatment for treating couples, and is one of the most thoroughly researched approaches in the field of couples and family therapy (Gehart, 2010). In Emotionally Focused Couples' Therapy, a couple's relationship is conceptualized by each partner's different attachment styles and how these styles impact the interaction between the partners (Johnson, 2004). Some people have an attachment style that needs less emotional support than others, and some could be insecure if they do not receive the attention they need from their partners. The different

attachment styles of each partner impact the couple's communication and interaction, which form the homeostatic state of the couple's relationship; there are times this homeostasis helps the couple to maintain a healthy relationship, and there are times this homeostasis could cause dysfunction in a couple's relationship. This approach suggests that each person is hugely shaped by their interactions with others (Gehart, 2010), which is consistent with systemic/relational theory.

Every human being is in a continuous process of pursuing stability, driven by the motivation of living in a system with homeostasis. The same is true for intercultural/multilingual couples; they are always striving for homeostasis in their relationships. One thing that is exceptional for intercultural/multilingual couples compared to other couples is that they create a new culture, a new language, and a new phenomenon of their own instead of choosing one partner's culture or language for the relationship (Rosenblatt, 2009).

### **Cultural Differences**

Culture is a set of concepts that includes many different elements (Hays & Erford, 2010). In this study, culture is specifically defined as the social heritage of a person and includes social norms (such as rules of conduct), social values (beliefs and common understandings), and social practices (what people say and do), which are assumed to be shared by a group of individuals (Bystydzienski, 2011). Some specific elements in intercultural/multilingual romantic relationship are more essential than others, such as food and drink, intimacy, gender roles, place of residence, in-laws, and religion (Henrikson et al., 2007; Romano, 2008). Since this country is more diverse than ever in terms of culture, race, and ethnicity (Bystydzienski, 2011), multicultural competency is

recognized as one of the most important skills for mental health professionals and multicultural competency is required in the field of counseling psychology (Sue et al., 1992; Sue & Sue, 2008). Also, multiculturalism is a salient issue that is often discussed by the general public. People in general are more passionate about learning about cultures other than their own compared to the past (Rogers & Hart, 2002). However, when people from different cultural backgrounds live in the same household and deal with their cultural differences multiple times a day, which is many intercultural/multilingual couples' daily experience, cultural differences become more obvious and more challenging to manage (Romano, 2008). Zens (2012) explored all the challenges intercultural couples have to overcome once they are married to each other, such as immigration status, language differences, economic and career challenges. Furthermore, Kim, Edwards, Sweeney, and Wetchler (2012) pointed out that the level of acculturation and differentiation (Gehart, 2010) are significantly related to relationship satisfaction for Asian-American intercultural couples. It is obvious that intercultural couples face different challenges in their relationships compared to monocultural due to the nature of their relationships.

### **Food and Drink**

Romano (2008) conducted a series of interviews and concluded that a few main differences that could be challenging for intercultural romantic relationships. The one single cultural difference that was cited the most often by couples he interviewed was food (Romano, 2008). Have you even been to an exotic Indian restaurant with a few friends? Did all of the people with you enjoy the Indian food that is full of spices and strong smells? Some people love exotic food and some do not. Since the world is more

globalized than ever, people have a variety of choices of food nowadays. Think of how difficult it can be to choose a restaurant everyone likes when family or friends gather. That is only for one meal; for an intercultural couple in which each partner has different preferences about different types of food, having one or sometimes two to three meals together in one day is much more challenging (Romano, 2008).

Every individual has different preferences when it comes to food and drink, and for partners in a couple who have totally different habits of eating, making a decision about what to eat for dinner can be a daily battle (Ho, 1990). In most cultures in the world, food is often the main part of celebration, ceremony, and rituals, a part of special events but also daily life (Romano, 2008). We also know that eating jointly is one way to spend quality time together for couples (Fitzpatrick, 1990). For intercultural couples, discovering how they can eat together and sometimes compromise for each other's eating habits is definitely an adjustment.

According to Leeds-Hurwitz (2009), food and drink in daily life are not the only challenge in intercultural/multilingual couples' relationships; if the couple decides to have a ceremony (i.e., wedding, commitment ceremony, civil union celebration) to celebrate their commitment and relationship together, or even just a gathering to which both partners' family and friends are invited, figuring out how to make guests from both cultural backgrounds enjoy the event and find it meaningful is not an easy task. When in-laws come into the picture, food and drink can be even more of a challenge for intercultural couples' relationships (Romano, 2008).

Longing for the food of one's own culture may play an important role in a couple's relationship, especially when one partner left his or her homeland to live in the

partner's country (Romano, 2008). Food represents different things in every culture, and specific kinds of food have unique meanings for each holiday and celebration. For example, in Chinese culture, there is always fish on the table for dinner on New Year's Eve because people believe this can carry on the good luck to the next year. Sometimes food is not just food, it means much more in the context of culture (Ho, 1990). Furthermore, when the meal is served, where the meal is served, and how the meal is eaten are all different elements of this unique ritual (Romano, 2008).

***When the meal is served.*** In Portuguese culture, lunch is the most important meal of the day. Everyone stops, no matter what they are doing, to take time to enjoy their lunch (Cunha & Cunha, 2010); on the other hand, in American culture, lunch is usually a short break and people just pick up something simple so it is not an event that takes too much time out of people's day. Also, Portuguese do not eat dinner until after nine o'clock in the evening; Americans usually have dinner between six in the afternoon to eight o'clock (Cunha & Cunha, 2010). Considering the differences of when it is appropriate to eat in these two cultures, for an intercultural couple in which one partner is from Portugal and the other one is from the United States, significant compromise and adjustment would have to be made for them to have a meal together (Romano, 2008).

***Where the meal is served.*** Where a family chose to eat its main meal shows a great deal about a family's characteristics and whether they are formal or informal, united or fragmented, authoritarian or permissive. Where to eat varies from culture to culture and sometimes from family to family (Romano, 2008). In Portuguese culture, since lunch is the most important meal of the day (Cunha & Cunha, 2010), it is not a meal that can be eaten on a stool in the kitchen or in a restaurant with co-workers or couple of friends like



most people do in the United States; it requires that the family meets in the dining room to enjoy their meal at the dining table. For a partner that is Portuguese, lunch is the time to share what is going on in life and to spend time together with the people he or she cares about (Cunha & Cunha, 2010); for the partner that is culturally American, it is the time to take a short break and get ready for the rest of the work day, which is fundamentally different. The couple will have to discuss their expectations and negotiate a compromise that enables both partners to feel like their needs are met by this meal.

*How the meal is eaten.* There are many ways that people handle their food, including forks and knives, chopsticks, or even hands. Different ways or manners of handling food do not just represent different cultures, they may also represent different social classes (Romano, 2008). For instance, a Japanese/German couple may eat the same food with different utensils (Japanese partner may chose chopsticks and German partner may chose a fork) depending on the comfort and proficiency level of each partner with the specific utensil. Also, how the table is set, who sits and who serves, and what constitutes good or bad manners according to each cultural or family practice are things to be discussed and also differences to be worked out between the partners so they both feel respected and comfortable when they enjoy their meal (Romano, 2008).

The difference in food tastes and customs for many intercultural couples are treated with humor rather than discord (Romano, 2008). In Bystydzienski's (2011) research, a Japanese/Polish couple shared that they have no problem admitting the differences in their preference for food and related customs; what they chose to do is to mix the cultures of food together so both of them and also their families and friends can enjoy meals at events and in daily life. In conclusion, the customs surrounding food and

drink in each culture can be challenging for intercultural couples, and involve important issues that couples need to discuss openly. Respect of each other's preferences is essential in order to turn these differences into unique strengths in intercultural romantic relationships.

### **Intimacy**

Historically, most racial and ethnic groups have recognized, separated, and defined gender roles for males and females; the expectations of males and females concerning the initiation of sexual intimacy also vary from different cultures (Ho, 1990). When intercultural couples marry, often one of the realities they least expect is the emergence of sexual problems because of differing expectations of sexual intimacy for each gender which can change as the relationship develops (Romano, 2008). For example, in some Hispanic cultures, the bond of marriage and the assumption of husband and wife roles drastically alter the couple's sexual relationships (Frame, 2004). While sex may be enjoyed prior to marriage by both genders, after marriage the wife may be expected to satisfy her husband's sexual needs and desires. The husband, on the other hand, may expect to be free to engage in sexual dalliances with other women (Garcia-Preto, 1996). When such a sudden change in expectations happens in couple's relationship, it may be both a surprise and a cause of discord for the intercultural couple (Frame, 2004).

For Koreans, virginity of women is highly valued, especially before they are married (Brennan, 1999). In Frame's (2004) research, a Korean/Caucasian couple struggled with being intimate sexually while they were dating each other because the Korean female partner still believed in the traditional value of keeping her virginity for her husband, and the Caucasian male partner had a more permissive view of sex and had

a difficult time comprehending his partner's struggles. This is another example of the impact that diverse cultural values about sexuality can have on a relationship and how they can vary depending on the couple's marital status, which may create discord for the couple (Frame, 2004).

Sexuality is not the only element of intimacy for a romantic relationship (Romano, 2008). It is also important to express affection to each other in ways other than sex to communicate the love felt toward each other such as through hugging, kissing, holding hands, and cuddling; sometimes different things like preparing a hot meal or pay attention when the partner is speaking can also make the other partner feel loved and pampered (Chapman, 2010). In Ho's (1990) study, a Latino/Caucasian couple disagreed about the ways of expressing love in their relationship. The Caucasian wife did not feel loved at times due to the lack of verbal expression, so she refused to respond to the physical affection expressed by her Latino husband; her refusal in turn made the husband feel unloved in the relationship. In this couple's experience, each partner's individual culture determined the manner in which they expressed their affection, and cultural differences in expression of affection interfered with the negotiation of intimacy in their relationship (Ho, 1990).

Finally, religion is a fundamental element of the construction of many cultures in relation to intimacy (Romano, 2008). Different religions may have different, even opposite expectations for males and females regarding the expression of affection and intimacy in couple's relationship (Ho, 1990). According to Romano (2008), one of the intercultural couples in her study shared that the one partner, from an Irish-Catholic background, could never change many of her beliefs such as the concept that some sexual

practices were sinful, even though she thought she had put these ideas far behind her when married her Italian husband. She was never taught to openly discuss sex in her Irish-Catholic background. The Italian husband could feel that his partner had not been always honest with him regarding some of her expectations about intimacy and sexuality, and a gap was created in their communication.

In conclusion, intimacy in romantic relationships can be defined and expressed differently from culture to culture, and intercultural couples face more challenges than monocultural couples when it comes to expectations about intimacy. Still, many intercultural couples manage to work out their culturally based sexual differences with few problems by using ethno-sensitivity and open communication. Certainly, avoidance will not help solve the problem, and may be damaging to intimate relationships (Romano, 2008).

### **Gender Roles**

In each culture, there are different expectations for gender roles for men and women. Although these roles have been questioned and sometimes even overthrown in the last 30 years, these roles are still impacting couples' relationships (Lott, 1994; Ortner & Whitehead, 1981; Ryan, 1979). Like expectations of intimacy, gender roles, as constructions of identity and behavior rooted in notions of femininity and masculinity, still affect couples' relationships in a variety of ways, and are often related to culture, class, and race (Bystydzienski, 2011). When cultural differences within intercultural couples' relationships are great and each partner has contradictory and firm beliefs about appropriate gender roles, gender issues can become especially complicated (Frame, 2004).

The challenges are also increased if the intercultural couple resides in a country whose gender role expectations are well-defined and strict (Romano, 2008).

Bystydzienski (2011) described an Italian-American/East African couple's different beliefs about gender roles and the ways they negotiated and compromised to bridge their differences. The female Italian-American wife was aware of the expectation that a female does all the cooking in the household from her East African husband's culture; she clearly told her husband this expectation contradicted her own cultural belief about the role of women, and she asked him to share the responsibility for cooking because they both worked. The East-African husband respected his wife's belief and was willing to share the chores of the household, but he also admitted that when his wife was staying home after their first child was born, it was very easy for him to expect her to do most of the cooking, housework, and childcare.

Furthermore, some cultures have strong beliefs and expectations about which gender should be the head of the household or the "bread winner" of the family (Rastogi, 2009). The East-African husband in Bystydzienski's (2011) study shared that his culture expects men to work and support the family and that women should stay home and take care of all the house chores; if men do any of the women's work is considered shameful. Partners in another couple who are Scandinavian and South American suddenly realized that they held different expectations of gender roles when they decided to marry each other; the South American male partner suggested that the wife's role should be staying at home to take care of children rather than pursuing her career interest, which was contrary to the permissive feminist belief from her own family background (Frame, 2004).

Mahboubi and Mahboubi (2008) told their story as an Iranian/African American couple, and how each partner had to learn the different expectations of gender roles in the other partner's culture and to find a balance so that both of them agreed on what to expect from each other. Different expectations for each gender role can be challenging for any couple, and intercultural couples run into this issue more easily due to the nature of their relationships and it can turn into a major stressor for them (Bustamante et al., 2011).

Interestingly, intercultural couples appear more egalitarian than those in the general U.S. population, where most women, though they typically work outside the home, still do the majority of household and childcare labor while men usually "help" (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000; Coltrane, 2000). The same-sex intercultural couples in Bystydzienski's (2011) study showed an even greater tendency toward equal sharing of domestic responsibilities than the heterosexual couples, which is consistent with past research (Coontz, 2008; Peplau & Spalding, 2000) comparing the household responsibility shared between monocultural homosexual and heterosexual couples. In intercultural romantic relationships, neither partner is expected to conform to traditional precepts so couples attribute the relative gender equality in their relationships to the more fluid context of intercultural relationships. Together, they are often able to consciously create a union that may not fit the prescriptions of either culture (Bystydzienski, 2011).

### **Place of Residence**

For couples that are from different countries-of-origin, deciding where the permanent or temporary location of residence will be for the couple is one of the very first challenges that these couples run into (Molina et al., 2004). Perhaps both partners want to live somewhere close to their family-of-origin, but their respective countries of

origin are thousands of miles away from each other, and it seems almost impossible to compromise and find a location which both partners agree to (Romano, 2008).

On the other hand, immigration is not just about where people want to live, it is also about where people are allowed to live because of all the legal issues and the immigration process of moving to a new country (Zagelbaum & Carlson, 2011). Furthermore, if one partner is very close emotionally to their extended family but the other partner is not, they also need to consider how much of a relationship they would like to have with each other's extended families, because expectations from their respective cultures could be on two extreme ends of the continuum (Ho, 1990).

Romano (2008) noted that a sense of unresolved sadness over the loss of moving away from one's home country can exist in an otherwise very happy relationship. In Romano's (2008) study, a German wife expressed the fact that she did not really like living in the United States since her American husband retired from the Foreign Service; she claimed she often felt the desire to go back to Europe for her "cultural fix." In another couple in this study, a wife who was Dutch-English moved to her Japanese husband's homeland and often felt very uncomfortable being stared at when she went out because of her blond hair and blue eyes.

Aside from the external effect of a country on a romantic relationship, the relationship pattern itself may be affected by the place of residence. The pattern that the couple adopted and which works in one country may not necessarily work for them in another country (Romano, 2008). An intercultural couple chooses their place of residence for many reasons, such as better education for their children, job opportunities or work placements, distance to extended families, and immigration status (Molina et al., 2004).

Wherever the intercultural couple goes, there is adapting to be done, which includes effort and sometimes strain.

### **In-Laws**

Definitions of family vary regarding who is involved and how stationary the boundaries are around the relationships between family members (Llerena-Quinn & Bacigalupe, 2009). There are two main kinds of family in different cultures: nuclear family and extended family (Ting-Toomey, 2009). In more individualistic cultures, such as British and German culture, nuclear family which only includes parent(s) and the children is most likely to be a part of the couple's relationship; in collectivistic cultures such as Chinese and Hispanic culture, extended family, which includes extensive family members beside parent(s) and children, is more involved with the couple's relationship (Ho, 1990).

Individualistic culture refers to a culture which places relatively more emphasis on the importance of individual identity over group identity, individual rights over group rights, and individual needs over group needs, and which promotes self-efficiency, individual responsibility, and personal autonomy (Ting-Toomey, 2009). On the other hand, collectivistic culture refers to a culture which places relatively more emphasis on the importance of the "we" identity over the "I" identity, group rights over individual rights, and group needs over individual needs, and which promotes relational interdependence, a relational self, group harmony, and a mutual face-saving conflict tendency (Ting-Toomey, 1999).

When each partner belongs to a different belief system in a romantic relationship, such as a Japanese/British couple in Romano's (2008) study, the British husband had a



difficult time understanding why every decision his Japanese wife made had to involve her family members' opinion; on the other hand, the Japanese wife tried to explain to her husband that her parents' opinion is sometimes valued more than her own due to the importance of saving face and maintaining group harmony. When intercultural couples have children and start their own families, childrearing may also be an issue, since in collectivistic cultures grandparents play an essential role while in individualistic cultures they are not as involved (Frame, 2004).

For most couples, acceptance from their family-of-origin of the partner they choose is very important and the same is true for intercultural couples (Llerena-Quinn & Bacigalupe, 2009). When two individuals from different cultural backgrounds and different countries-of-origin decide to form a romantic relationship and become committed to each other, they expect their family to give them their blessing and to be happy for them. If an individual is from a collectivistic culture, the acceptance of family members is even more important, and sometimes if one's family does not support the choice of the partner, their lack of acceptance can damage the couple's relationship (Romano, 2008). Overall, the involvement of each partner's family-of-origin can be both beneficial and stressful for intercultural couples, and it is important for them to find the balance between different cultural beliefs so that boundaries are set in a way that the involvement of each partner's family-of-origin is beneficial for the couple (Bystydzienski, 2011).

### **Religion**

It is common for two individuals who have similar cultural backgrounds to have different religious views when they enter a romantic relationship; it is even more

common for partners in intercultural couples to have different religious views that bring in different perspectives and worldviews when they enter the relationship. These differences may enrich the relationship and may also be an obstacle that needs to be overcome (McGoldrick, Giordano, & Pearce, 1996). Studies indicate that religious compatibility has a significant effect on the stability of both monocultural and intercultural couples' relationships (Heller & Wood, 2000).

Religion has a profound impact on what people think and how they behave and is the carrier of various values (Frame, 2004). In fact, in some religions, such as Islam, religion and culture are closely tied together and difficult to unravel (Frame, 2004). Since religion often represents the fundamental elements of a culture, it exerts a powerful force on couples and may influence other aspects of couplehood and family life such as childrearing, gender roles, sexuality, food, holiday traditions, and rituals (Romano, 2008). In Romano's (2008) study, a Belgian wife who lived in an Islamic country could not bring herself to abandon her Catholic faith and follow her Muslim husband to practice the faith of the country. Differences between gender roles and sexuality due to the gap between the two religions were the most difficult for her to overcome.

If an intercultural couple decides to hold a wedding or a celebration of their commitment to each other, this may be the most meaningful day of their relationship or even for each partner as an individual, and following the religious rituals of this sacred celebration can become something that is non-negotiable (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009). In the movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (Hanks, Goetzman, Wilson, & Zwick, 2002), the groom-to-be is from a different religious and family background from his partner but he decides to convert to his bride-to-be's religion because it means more to her and her

family than it means to him. The wedding ceremony and celebrations all follow her religious background so the story has a happy ending. Unfortunately, real life does not always have happy ending, and for intercultural couples overcoming the challenge of how to adjust to and respect different religious views is always not an easy task (Heller & Wood, 2000).

### **Language Differences**

Language difference is not always a problem in intercultural/multilingual couples' relationships. However, it is a unique issue that is not easy to negotiate and it is an issue that monolingual couples will not face (Llerena-Quinn & Bacigalupe, 2009). As mentioned above, speaking the same language is a basic necessity for higher-level communication (Foster, 1998). For a couple's relationship, speaking a common language is vital for daily communication (Ho, 1990; Llerena-Quinn & Bacigalupe, 2009). Couples in which both partners speak the same language often have trouble hearing what each other is really expressing (Gottman, 1999), and it is even more challenging for couples in which each partner speaks different languages and processes in different ways to understand what their partner is expressing. If one partner's native language is chosen to mainly communicate with, it may be necessary for the other partner to learn a whole new language just to compromise (Molina et al., 2004). The same is true for each partner's extended family; translation may be useful but people may not ultimately be able to really communicate when they do not speak each other's language (Forster, 1998).

In a study conducted by Llerena-Quinn and Bacigalupe (2009), a Caucasian/Latina couple told their story as a multilingual couple. The husband only spoke English, and every time the couple visited the wife's family in Mexico, he felt

excluded because of language; the wife felt more intimately connected to her family when speaking her native language. At the same time, she also struggled with it because it was difficult to have a normal conversation as she had to translate for both sides. Nonetheless she wanted her husband to feel involved and cared for in such situations.

It is not uncommon for intercultural/multilingual couples to start out not being able to communicate much due to the fact that one or both of them are not fluent in a shared language (Rosenblatt, 2009). They are still spending lots of time and putting in great effort to understand their partners and to be understood by them (Romano, 2008). Eventually, intercultural/multilingual couples are likely to come to have more fluency in a common language. However, whose language is chosen to be the primary one? Rosenblatt (2009) suggested that sometimes the language that comes to be the couple's language is more likely to be the language of the partner who has more power within the relationship. However, Piller (2009) pointed out that the decision could be made depending on the place the couple chooses for residency and it may be an ongoing negotiation instead of a one-time decision.

Piller (2009) conducted a study investigating various forms of desire that are intermeshed with the desire to speak another language, a phenomenon she described as “language desire” (Piller, 2002). Her study focused on the romantic desire for a partner from a different language background and on the desire to raise one’s children bilingually. In Piller’s (2009) study, there are more expressions of desire for English, English-speaking partners, and English-speaking communities found in the data than the other way around, which was not a surprise for her due to the extensive use of English in the media and the ever-expanding use of English around the world. Thus, the prevalence of a

language and its connections to perceived economic, political, and cultural dominance could be another motivation a couple has for deciding which language to use as their shared language.

Foster (1998) suggested that individuals relate to their native language and acquired languages in different ways as a result of learning languages under different circumstances and in different developmental stages. People who are bilingual or multilingual learn their second or the third languages at different phases in their lives than their native languages and develop different attachments and relationships when they learn these languages as a result. Due to the nature of intercultural/multilingual couples' relationships, at least one partner needs to speak an acquired language to communicate with his or her partner. When speaking an acquired language to communicate with their partner, at times an individual might feel disconnected from the emotions he or she is trying to express because the language they are speaking is not his or her mother tongue (Romano, 2008).

According to Wittgenstein's (1974) theory of language, the language we use can reflect what kind of logic we follow. In other words, the fundamental logic of our thinking varies from language (Kuusela, 2006); when each partner has a different logic of speaking, thinking, and expressing, communicating with each other turns into a complicated event for multilingual couples. Furthermore, Hakuta, Butler, and Witt (2000) reported that even in one of the most successful English-as-a-Second-Language education programs in the United States, oral proficiency takes 3 to 5 years to develop. In conclusion, unless both partners in the multilingual relationship are fluent in the language they choose to communicate with, they need additional time compared to monolingual

couples to develop proficiency in the language before they can understand and be understood with each other.

### **Intercultural Communication**

Communication in intercultural/multilingual romantic relationships is a main focus of this study. People not only communicate in different verbal languages, they also communicate in different cultural contexts, which are shared matrices of meaning and include everything people use to exchange meaning with one another—words, tones of voice, shoulder shrugs, yawns, silences, etc.—and are comprised of both verbal and non-verbal communication (Romano. 2008).

Intercultural communication is an extensive study of interpersonal communication between individuals of different cultures (Rogers & Hart, 2002). Different theories of cross-cultural communication have been developed and tested to help individuals engage in intercultural communication more effectively (Gudykunst, 2002a). Cultural convergence theory (Barnett & Kincaid, 1983; Kincaid, 1979) defines communication as “a process in which two or more individuals share information in order to reach a mutual understanding of each other and the world in which they live” (Kincaid, 1979, p. 31). Kincaid (1979) argued that mutual understanding will never be achieved but that it definitely can be approached. This concept is applicable to intercultural/multilingual couples’ relationships because there is no perfect communication between any couple, but instead commitment to continue improving in a never-ending process.

The acculturation and adjustment of immigrants has been of interest to the intercultural communication field for nearly 50 years, but theories were not developed formally until recent years (Gudykunst, 2002b). Communication acculturation theory is

one of the main intercultural communication theories and one of its main principles is that acculturation and deculturation are part of the cross-adaptation process and that creates stress in a person's life; at the same time, stress also motivates people to grow, adjust and adapt (Kim, 2001). For intercultural/multilingual couples, adjusting to cultural and language differences is an ongoing process and different stressors in their relationship may actually turn into motivation for couples to develop better coping skills and improve their communication (Bustamante et al., 2011).

The greatest issue faced by scholars conducting research with intercultural communication may be differentiating intercultural communication from the related research area of international communication and cross-cultural research (Barnett & Lee, 2002). In my study, I do not intent to differentiate intercultural communication and international communication, because my participants are both intercultural and international. Also, my study follows the definition of intercultural communication as the exchange of cultural information and is concerned with how it occurs as a phenomenon.

### **Couples' Counseling/Therapy with Intercultural/Multilingual Couples**

When Sue (2001) published the cultural competence model for the field of counseling psychology, multiculturalism became one of the most important competencies in this profession. It was a concept the field of counseling psychology had long discussed (Sue et al., 1992) but until Sue (2001), no specific theory was developed and researched to provide a framework for considering psychologists' competence in treating multicultural clients.

What is multiculturalism? In the field of counseling, multiculturalism means mental health professionals participate in both their own cultural construct and clients'

cultural construct; during the process of counseling, we need to carefully be aware of our own biases and understand clients' worldview and show our respect to each of them (Hays & Erford, 2010; Ponterotto, 2010). According to American Psychological Association's (APA, 2002) guidelines of multicultural education, training, research, practice, and organizational change for psychologists, psychologists need to be aware of one's own culture and their client's culture, and prepare themselves with knowledge and skills when providing services or working with multicultural clients (Toporek et al., 2006).

For intercultural couples, the cultural differences play out with more complexity due to the fact that there is not only cultural difference between client and counseling psychologists/therapists, there is also difference between the clients that are coming in together as a couple (Softas-Nall & Baldo, 2000; Sullivan & Cottone, 2006). It is estimated that 13 percent of the U. S. population is composed of immigrants (DeAngelis, 2010; Shin & Bruno, 2003) yet there was little research on couples' counseling/therapy with intercultural couples conducted until recent years (Sullivan & Cottone, 2006).

Bhugra and De Silva (2000) identified two main strategies when conducting counseling/therapy with intercultural couples, the educational element and the psychological element; counseling psychologist/therapists should make sure both elements are emphasized during the process of therapy. Hsu (2001) again outlined the importance of counseling psychologists/therapists' multicultural competence as the basic requirement for working with intercultural couples. Similarly, Perel (2000) pointed out how counseling psychologists/therapists' cultural competence can assist couples to deal with cultural differences effectively and constructively. Furthermore, Perel (2000) added



the concept of a “transcultural reality that connects the couple even at moments of crisis or transition” (p. 198). This “third reality” is a new culture that the intercultural couple creates throughout couplehood and is a reframing approach to encourage intercultural couples consider themselves as tourists in a foreign country when encountering cultural differences in their relationship.

One unique characteristic of the target population of this study is that they are multilingual, which means that each partner has a different mother tongue. For intercultural/multilingual couples, cultural difference is not the only issue; language difference can turn into an additional challenge in their relationships (Piller, 2009). When conducting counseling/therapy with multilingual couples, the therapist/counseling psychologist needs to consider carefully the language used because of the nature of multilingual couples, and to keep in mind that the language used in counseling/therapy is a second language for one of the partners (Sullivan & Cottone, 2006).

According to Foster (1998), bilingual or multilingual individuals learn their second or third language at different times and under different circumstances in their lives, so they actually develop a variety of attachments and relationships when using different languages. In addition, research has shown that experiencing an event in one language and then discussing the experience in counseling/therapy in another language can sometimes prevent the process of healing, because the second language may serve as a defense mechanism and can distance the person from the emotions and the experience related to the event (Foster, 1998). In the United States, one out of five households includes a person who speaks a language other than English (DeAngelis, 2010; Shin & Bruno, 2003; U.S. Census Bureau, 2001) so language difference is not only a challenge

for multilingual couples, it is a challenge for many clients whose first language is not English.

When one of the partners in a multilingual couple is a client in counseling, he or she may think or even express the fact that it feels more comfortable speaking their native language during the process of counseling. If counseling psychologists/therapists do not have the ability to speak and understand that language, counseling psychologists/therapists may employ specially trained interpreters to assist in communicating with clients when a language barrier exists in the therapeutic process (Hays & Erford, 2010). There is limited research on language differences and their impact on couples' communication and couples' counseling/therapy; there is also a lack of research on effective strategies for counseling multilingual couples, which is also an area that needs to be studied more thoroughly so that counseling psychologists/therapists can provide constructive therapy for the couple instead of ineffective counseling that might not be beneficial for them.

### **Couples Creating Their Own Culture**

Seward (2008) pointed out that every couple creates their own unique culture throughout their relationship; the process of creating couple's unique culture is a continuing process that never stops. For intercultural/multilingual couples, there are numerous cultural differences and additional language differences which monocultural/monolingual couples do not experience. It seems more apparent that intercultural/multilingual couples create a new and unique culture and phenomenon of their own (Llerena-Quinn & Bacigalupe, 2009).

Intercultural/multilingual couples and their extended families continue to explore each other's worlds after the relationship stabilizes (i.e., marriage), which includes being introduced to new foods, religions, family members, expectations of gender roles and intimacy, and also languages (Llerena-Quinn & Bacigalupe, 2009). In Frame's (2004) research, intercultural/multilingual couples realized that they enjoyed exploring each other's culture and that the cultural differences they encountered brought lots of excitement into their relationships; however, when they started considering the idea of forming their own family, the differences suddenly turned into disagreements.

According to Seward (2008), intercultural/multilingual couples not only negotiate their identity and create a "third culture" in their couplehood, they also expressed that this is one of the most important elements of a successful intercultural/multilingual romantic relationship. The results of Seward's (2008) research suggested that it requires a high level of intercultural competence for intercultural/multilingual couples to successfully negotiate and clearly articulate their individual, marital, and cultural identity within every context of their life and relationships.

In constructivism, meanings are constructed by the interaction between human beings and their experience (Crotty, 1998). For intercultural/multilingual couples, the romantic relationships they are a part of continuously create new experiences and new meanings for them, which ultimately construct a new phenomenon that is unique and cannot be duplicated by others. Casmir (1999) believed that "communication happens between human beings as they do things together . . . as together they build identities, societies, cultures or institutions for their continued existence and growth in a common social/cultural environment" (p.94), and this process of communication of new culture

building, is “the common or natural survival and adaptation needs of those belonging to one, two, or more different cultures in the same environment” (Casmir, 1999, p. 105). Thus, for individuals, couples, and even families, no culture is monolithic; culture is a fluid concept constructed through interactions between human beings, their relationships and environment (Seward, 2008). Due to the distinctive nature of intercultural/multilingual couples and their relationships, the new cultures they create will change over time to be able to provide better constructs for their relationships.

### **Summary**

In the last 20 years, the development of technology and the changes of the frequency that people travel internationally influenced the way people start and maintain long-distance relationships, which provided more opportunities for people to form intercultural/multilingual romantic relationships (Romano, 2008). Most of the past researches focus on interracial couples; it is not until recently that intercultural couples start to draw more attention from researchers. It has been demonstrated that intercultural/multilingual romantic relationship has its unique characteristics like each partner was born and raised in a different culture and speaks a different native language, which make the couple’s experience more exclusive and cannot be found in monoculture/monolingual relationship (Molina et al., 2004). As the need to understand intercultural/multilingual couples’ experience continues to grow, more research is needed for exploring these couples’ experience and how the unique characteristics affect their relationships, so when counseling psychologists/therapists work with intercultural/multilingual couples they are more competent to provide effective couples’ counseling/therapy to meet their needs.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODS AND PROCEDURES**

#### **Introduction**

This study utilized qualitative research method to explore the phenomenon of participants' experience with intercultural/multilingual relationships. Allen and Walker (2000) suggested that qualitative research methods are the most appropriate methodology for the investigation of close relationship processes, which fits this study's goal of investigating how cultural and language differences affect intercultural/multilingual couples' relationships and communication. Defining a phenomenon is done by describing its essential impact on one's immediate conscious experience (Becker, 1992). In this chapter, I will describe the methodology used in this qualitative study to explore the phenomenon of intercultural/multilingual couples' relationships and communications, which includes an in-depth description of a pilot study, the theoretical framework, the research design, the participants, the procedures, the data collection and the analysis. The stance of the researcher and the trustworthiness of this study are also discussed in this chapter.

#### **Pilot Study**

For the purpose of the development and improvement of the methodology for this study, a pilot study was conducted with three intercultural/multilingual married couples. In the pilot study, each partner in each couple was interviewed both individually and together as a couple so the participants could share their conjoint stories with their

partners and also their individual experiences. In-depth interviews with all participants were two to three hours long for each couple. A dictionary was used as an artifact to draw out more of the unique experiences of cultural and language differences in participants' relationships. All the participating couples in this pilot study expressed appreciation for my interest in conducting a research on intercultural/multilingual romantic relationships and shared their stories and experiences of their relationships generously. The results of the pilot study showed four main themes in intercultural/multilingual couples' experience of their relationships, which can also be considered as their strengths (Tien, 2011). The four themes are as follows:

### **Openness**

All of the participants had spent time overseas and all of them expressed that they were very open to the idea of different cultures. Openness about the culture that their partner was from was seen as extremely important for successful intercultural relationships. As for language, even when both partners in a couple communicated in English, the partners whose first language was English expressed openness to the idea of learning their partner's first language because they wanted to learn more about their partner as a person. Participants emphasized the idea that one cannot learn another's culture without learning the language that is associated with it.

### **Respect**

In intercultural/multilingual relationships, the couples regarded differences as part of daily life. They claimed that the important thing is not the differences, it is how the couple deals with their differences, and whether they do so with respect and understanding of the fact that they are from different cultural backgrounds. Without any

respect, they suggested that it is meaningless to learn about a partner's culture and language.

### **Willingness to Learn**

As one participant mentioned, it is not necessarily about being fluent in the other language or knowing everything about the other culture. The willingness to learn is more essential than the final result. The partners appreciated the fact that their spouse was open to the idea of learning and really put in effort learning about the other's language and culture. They suggested that sometimes openness is not enough, and a willingness to learn can show how much each partner in the couple cares about each other.

### **Spend Time in Both Cultures/countries**

All three couples who participated in this study spent time in each partner's country of origin and planned to continue doing so in the future. It is difficult to understand and learn about the other culture and language unless a certain amount of time is spent in the other country. One couple chose to stay in the North America because the husband had a great job here; they visited her family and friends in Europe every summer and had their children go to school there for a few weeks. Another couple decided to move to another continent where the husband's family lives because they both love the beautiful country; they refused to use the word "permanently" because they did not want to limit themselves and wanted their children to have the opportunity to experience the culture and language of both countries.

Furthermore, intercultural/multilingual couples found it necessary to create their own cultural experience because following either culture exclusively did not work for them. Participants reported that both partners were willing to adjust and compromise

when difference happened in the relationship; following only one partner's culture exclusively did not ease any tension caused by differences because doing so ignored the other partner's need to being understood and respected for their different cultural background. Every intercultural/multilingual couple creates their own reality and being open and willing to learn were the foundation of their unique experience. The pilot study provided me, the researcher, with a great experience conducting a qualitative research study, analyzing the data and also provided an opportunity to improve the questionnaires so the direction of the study not only focused on intercultural/multilingual couples' strengths, but also the differences and challenges of their relationships.

A limitation of this pilot study involved the necessity of interviewing couples from a distance. One of the participating couples was in a long distance relationship; the interview was conducted with one partner in person and the other one through internet communication software. Although the internet communication software provided both audio and video information, at times it was difficult to collect non-verbal information through the computer screen. In the current study, the researcher made specific notes of interviewee's non-verbal reactions during the interview so the data collection is more complete.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The design of a qualitative research begins with philosophical assumptions that the researchers make in deciding to carry out a qualitative study (Creswell, 2007). Theory provides social science researchers a way to conceptualize human nature, personality, abnormalities, and change processes within people's lives. Without a mechanism for organizing the information presented to the researcher as she analyzes the data, the



researcher could be overwhelmed and perhaps lose sight of the purpose of the research and a tangible direction toward conducting the research (Ponterotto, 2005). Theory also provides a framework for making sense of individuals' experiences and struggles (Creswell, 2007).

Crotty (1998) suggested that “meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (p.43). Constructivism takes the view that all knowledge and all meaningful reality are contingent upon human practices and are constructed through the interaction between individuals and their world, and developed and conveyed within a social context (Crotty, 1998). This theory also emphasizes that society is actively and creatively produced by human beings and interactions among them (Marshall, 1994). Constructivism believes that every individual has their own reality; when individuals form different systems such as couples and families, they create different relationships.

From the perspective of constructivism, the goal of research is to heavily rely on the participants' view of their experience and situation (Creswell, 2007). Furthermore, constructivists follow a hermeneutical approach, which suggests that meaning is hidden and must be brought to the surface through deep reflection (Schwandt, 2000; Sciarra, 1999). The interactive researcher–participant dialogue is the bridge to draw forth this meaning. A unique characteristic of constructivism is the connection and the interaction between the researcher and the participants, and deeper meaning can only be uncovered through this interaction. The researcher and the participants co-construct the findings from their interactive dialogue and interpretation (Ponterotto, 2005).

In the present study, these subjective deeper meanings are not merely engraved on participants' experience but are also formed through their interactions with others (i.e., in the current study interactions with partners, spouses, and extended families will be explored) and through historical and cultural norms that they construct in their lives. Instead of conducting research through the lens of a specific theory, researchers create or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meaning of participants' unique experience by interacting (i.e., through in-depth interviews) and analyzing the data from multiple resources (i.e., verbal information and non-verbal observation; Neuman, 2010; Schwandt, 2001). Every relationship is unique and every couple has their own way of communicating. Each couple also constructs their own reality and meaning of the relationship, which is unique but not fixed because construction is an ongoing process between the couple of influencing each other, influencing the outside world, and being influenced by it in turn.

The purpose of the current research was to explore the unique phenomenon of each intercultural/multilingual couple's relationship, and also to find out the common strengths, experiences, and challenges shared by the couples. I chose constructivism and systemic theory as the theoretical framework for this study. Intercultural/multilingual couples construct distinctive phenomenon in their own multilayered system which is influenced by other systems; the combination of constructivism and systemic theory creates an appropriate framework because it conceptualizes people's experience from a systemic perspective and respects them as the experts in their own lives, which fits well for the purpose of this study.

## **Research Design**

In this study, I utilized the phenomenological theory to analyze the qualitative data. The basic assumption of phenomenological research is that knowledge is socially constructed and therefore inherently tentative and incomplete. Researchers are not separate from the phenomena they study and bias is inherent in all research regardless of method used. Common and everyday knowledge about people's worlds is epistemologically important. Also, language and meaning of everyday life are significant. Objects, events or situations can mean a variety of things to a variety of people (Dahl & Boss, 2005). There are two main approaches of phenomenology. The one used in this study is the empirical, transcendental, or psychological phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). This empirical phenomenology approach has a strong focus on epoché, which when investigators set aside their own experiences as much as possible so they can take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination (Husserl, 1970). Moustakas (1994) acknowledged that epoché is a state that is rarely achieved by researchers; on the other hand, by describing researchers' own experience with the phenomenon and bracketing off their own views before proceeding with the experience of others, epoché helps ensure that less bias will impact researchers' descriptions and interpretations of others' experience (Creswell, 2007).

The questions asked in the phenomenological approach are designed to help the researcher understand the lived experiences of the participants. In phenomenological studies, it is important to note that the researcher plays an important role in determining when to stop collecting data. Once the researcher finds common themes and saturation, the researcher stops collecting data (Dahl & Boss, 2005). The purpose of this

methodology framework is to understand the experiences and the influences of the experiences of participants' story. This was also the purpose of the current study, as I wanted to understand how cultural and language differences influence couple's experiences and the story of their intercultural/multilingual relationships.

The purpose of qualitative research was to explore both similarity and dissimilarity in the information provided by each participant. When any similarity and dissimilarity of data were found, they were explained and understood through existing research or within-case analysis. Saturation refers to the situation when the new information obtained does not further provide insight into the themes of data analysis (Creswell, 2007). For each qualitative research study, the number of participants varies significantly due to the need of sampling for similarity, dissimilarity, and saturation (Merriam, 2009). Since Polkinghorne (1989) recommended that in a phenomenological study the researcher interview from 5 to 25 individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. When the information provided by participants began to repeat itself and no new information was apparent, saturation is reached (Merriam, 2009). Saturation was reached when through the process of identifying significant statements and themes from the interviews and analysis, no new information was apparent (Merriam, 2009). After the seventh interview, no new themes were discovered and saturation was established; one additional interview was conducted to assure saturation, and recruitment ended at the eighth interview.

In order to obtain intercultural couple volunteers for this study, a non-probabilistic sampling method was adapted for choosing participants. All the participants met the criteria of this study; they were all in committed romantic relationships with a partner

who was from a different country-of-origin and speaks a different first language. Both partners of the interviewed couples agreed to be interviewed before they participated the study. This sampling method is called criterion sampling; all participants will meet the criterion to ensure the quality of the study (Creswell, 2007). In-depth interviews were conducted with all the participants to collect their descriptions of their experiences and their stories of being in intercultural/multilingual romantic relationships.

### **Participants**

The first criterion of the participants of this study was that the each partner of the couple was born and raised in a different country, and that each of them speaks a different first language. Furthermore, both partners must currently live in the United States. The second criterion was that the couple had to be in this relationship for at least two years and must have lived together for at least six months to ensure they have had the opportunity to experience life together and to develop a shared history (Bystydzienski, 2011). The third criterion was that both partners need to agree to participate in this study before either of them is interviewed. The last criterion was that both partners need to speak proficient English. Both partners of the couple and the interviewer needed to feel comfortable in couples' ability to express themselves and answer the interview questions in English, so that the researcher, me, could understand them when conducting the interview. No interpreter was used for this study.

The participants needed to be at least 18 years old. There was no limit on participants' sexual orientation, nationality, ethnicity, race, etc., as long as they met the criteria listed above. Participants were recruited by a snowball sampling method in which future participants are recruited from among existing participants' acquaintances

(Merriam, 2009). Recruitment was conducted through the personal connections of the researcher and the international students and scholars' office of a university in the Rocky Mountain Region which has access to this population. All participants met the criteria for participation in the study; in each couple the partners were born and raised in different countries, and spoke different first languages from one another, the couples had all been in their relationship for at least two years and were cohabiting for at least six months, and all currently live in the US. Each partner of the couple was born and raised in a different country and speaks a different first language, they have been in the relationship for at least two years and cohabiting for at least six months, and they all currently live in the U.S. Four couples declined the interview due to reasons such as schedule conflict, length of the interview and overwhelmed by other issues happening in their life.

### **Role of Researcher**

Traditional social science research requires researchers to keep their personal bias out of the research and be as objective as possible (Bystydzienski, 2011). Creswell (2007) pointed out that it is impossible to be purely objective when conducting research with human beings due to humanity and human nature. I agree with this perspective and believe that instead of pretending that researchers can be 100 percent objective, discussing the subjectivity and including it as a part of the research is more important. I am originally from Taiwan and have lived in the United States for almost five years. As a foreigner in this country, I am particularly sensitive to cultural and language differences, especially how these differences affect people's lives and relationships. I am interested in multiculturalism when working with clients as a mental health professional; I received my Master's degree in marriage and family therapy and I am especially

interested in working with couples and families. During the last three years, I have been a graduate assistant and earned the experience in teaching courses such as Family Systems and Couples and Family Therapy: Advanced Method; I also have supervised doctoral and masters level counselors providing couples and family therapy in Family Practice. Since I am in an intercultural/multilingual relationship myself and have been for over three years, one of the reasons for conducting this study was because I understand that language and cultural difference can affect intercultural/multilingual couples' relationships in both positive and negative ways. While conducting this study, I wanted to know what kind of difficulties and strengths these intercultural/multilingual couples have and how they overcame them in the relationships; I consider myself and my personal bias a part of this study from the beginning.

Bystydzienski (2011) suggested that when the participants know the researcher shares the same experience as theirs and the researcher's willingness to talk about it and answer their questions, it encourages them to be more open and comfortable with the researcher. I was willing to share my story about being in an intercultural/multilingual relationship and to answer basic questions about my experiences as long as my disclosure was appropriate and did not make the researcher and the interviewees feel judged or uncomfortable during the interview. It was crucial for me to make the participants feel safe and comfortable enough to share their experience by sharing my own experience as the researcher appropriately, and also followed the ethical guidelines for conducting research in the field of psychology (Haverkamp, 2005). As a psychologist in training, I enjoy my experience working with couples and conducting couples therapy. I use my knowledge of psychology to build a healthy intercultural/multilingual relationship myself.

I experience challenges through my own relationship but the challenges have also brought much joy and excitement into my life. I believe being in an intercultural/multilingual romantic relationship is one of the most wonderful things that has happened to me and I want to help couples like me to share their experience so people know it is possible to have a successful intercultural/multilingual romantic relationship.

On the other hand, as a future counseling psychologist, the more I know about the differences affecting intercultural/multilingual couples' relationships and communication, the more I can do for these couples when they have difficulties in their lives and are in need of help. Since intercultural/multilingual couples are not as common as couples with both partners being from the same culture and having the same first language, they may feel alienated because others do not understand what is going on. The purpose of this research was to find out more about the differences and similarities between intercultural/multilingual and other couples, and to provide more resources for intercultural/multilingual couples and help them to build strengths in their relationships.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection for this study included audio-recording interview data primarily, as well as field notes of the behavioral observations of the interview; both methods are commonly utilized in qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). The participants were asked to sign an informed consent document (see Appendix A) to ensure they understand the purpose of the study and that they and anyone who has been mentioned during the interview by the participants used pseudonyms. The participants were interviewed both individually and together as a couple. During informed consent, I also explained to the



couple that I will not share the individual interview content with the other partner; however, they own the decision whether they share with each other or not after the interview.

The interview process was recorded and transcribed. The interview questions were adapted from the Multiple Heritage Couple Questionnaire (Henriksen et al., 2007) and Psycholinguistic History (Foster, 1998) to answer the research questions of the study. The Multiple Heritage Couple Questionnaire is a revision and extension of the Interracial Couple Questionnaire (Watts & Henriksen, 1998). The changes reflect the change of focus from interracial couples to multiple heritage couples, which include interracial couples, international couples, and intercultural couples. The purpose of the Multiple Heritage Couple Questionnaire was to assist mental health professional in exploring some of the unique strengths, challenges, and problem-solving skills encountered by multiple heritage couples in their relationships (Henriksen et al., 2007). The designers of the Multiple Heritage Couple Questionnaire suggest that it be given to each partner separately and answered independently. Each partner was asked about how their own culture-of-origin and their partners' culture-of-origin affect their relationship. The questionnaire also included questions about specific cultural differences and their influence on the couple's relationship, such as time orientation, gender roles, family context, religion and spirituality, and child rearing.

The Psycholinguistic History was created by Foster (1998) and it includes two aspects of psycholinguistics: psychodevelopmental factors and current usage factors. The Psycholinguistic History provided a format for clinical inquiry into these two aspects of language activity with bilingual speakers and provided a way to explore their experience

and gain insight into the potential psychodynamic operations of dual-language functioning. In this study, both language and cultural difference were included in the research focus and research questions. To create the interview questions that suited the purpose and answered the research questions of this study, I incorporated the Multiple Heritage Couple Questionnaire (Henriksen et al., 2007) and the Psycholinguistic History (Foster, 1998). I also added two questions related to the creation of the new phenomenon of the intercultural/multilingual relationship and how mental health professionals can work more effectively with intercultural/multilingual couples. The interviews were semi-structured, in-depth interviews with four major questions:

1. Tell me about the experience of having a partner/spouse from a different culture/country of origin and how it affects your relationship and communication with your partner.
2. Tell me about the experience of having a partner/spouse that has a different first language and how it affects your relationship and communication with your partner/spouse.
3. Considering each of you is from a difference cultural and language background, do you feel like you two have created something unique as a couple?
4. If you were to participate in couples counseling in the future, how could counseling psychologists/therapists be the most helpful to you or intercultural/multilingual couples like you in the process of counseling?

These questions were designed to be open-ended so the participants can elaborate as much as they wish. After each question, I used a check list (see Appendix B) to make sure the participants discuss the impact of each specific difference within culture and

language before moving on to the next one. As the researcher was exploring each difference with participants (i.e., cultural difference in gender roles, food, drink, etc.), the interview remained a conversational interaction so they felt more comfortable. I self-disclosed the reason for conducting the study and the fact that I am in an intercultural/multilingual relationship when it was appropriate; but remained cautious about not telling too many details of my personal experience so that it would not affect participants sharing their experience.

### **Procedures**

The interviews were conducted at arranged times that were convenient for both the researcher and the participants. The locations of the interviews were arranged in places that both the researcher and participants agreed to and were comfortable with; all interviews were conducted in couples' residence. All interviews were conducted face-to-face and both audio and visual information were collected to ensure the multiple sources of data, which is an important element of qualitative research methods (Polkinghorne, 2005). Creswell (2007) pointed out that it is important to complete the field notes either during the interviews or right after the interviews are finished; the researchers need to determine which method is more appropriate for the research so they are not overwhelmed by the amount of data need to be recorded at the same time. In this study, field notes of behavioral observations were recorded by me as soon as the interview was completed; behavioral observations included interactions between the partners such as whether one partner talked more than the other, whether partners exchanged eye-contact during the interview or held hands when answering certain questions. Each participant was asked to choose a pseudonym to protect their identity throughout this study.

During the interview, the couple was interviewed together first and asked about their demographic information and the history of their relationship. At this stage of the interview, a dictionary was used as an artifact to induce the couple to recall more stories about how cultural and language differences affect their relationship. The couple was interviewed separately for the second part of the process, which means one partner was not present when the other partner was interviewed. Every couple decided on their own of who would be interviewed first. The purpose of the separate interviews was to obtain responses which were not influenced by the presence of the other partner (Bystydzienski, 2011). In this stage of the interview, the interviewees were asked for their personal opinions and specific examples of how cultural and language differences affect their relationship.

At the last stage of the interview, the couple was interviewed together again. In this last stage of the interview, the couple was first asked to describe their experience of integrating both of their cultures to create a unique phenomenon of their own, and specific cultural and language differences (i.e., extended family, gender roles, food and drink, intimacy, and language chosen to communicate) were provided to help the participants describe the different aspects of this new phenomenon. Last, the participants, together as a couple, were asked to provide their opinions about how counseling psychologists/therapists could be the most helpful if they were ever to attend couples' counseling. After each interview was completed, three referrals for couples' counseling were provided in case the couple is interested in further exploration of their relationship.

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis of qualitative research starts when the data collecting begins and is an ongoing process (Creswell, 2007). I continued developing and improving new questions and perspectives during the process of data collecting and analyzing. The non-verbal themes which are not usually noted on the audio recording when conducting the interview, such as facial expression and physical movement that are related to participants' expression, were recorded as field notes in a research journal. This journal was also used as an organizer for data collection and analysis.

The process of transcribing the interviews started before the completion of all the interviews so the transcription provides information for improvement of the interview questions. I was the main transcriber and there was a Masters level student who was trained in the field of counseling to assist transcribing the interviewers under my supervision. During the process of data analysis, all the data were well managed and organized so they were safe and protected. All the audio files of interview were stored on a flash drive that is password protected; participants chose pseudonyms which were used instead of real names in the research journal in which I recorded the non-verbal expression of the participants once the interview was completed. In that way, I could identify the different participants and protect their information at the same time.

After the completion of transcription of the interviews, I read the transcriptions repetitively word by word to look for and highlighting "significant statements" according each research questions to proceed with the data analysis (Creswell, 2007) Each of these statements was treated initially as if it had equal importance, through the process of horizontalization (Merriam, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Then I started bracketing the

significant statements into categories, narrowing down the most frequent and important details and forming initial codes for each possible theme within each couple's interview. At the same time, the behavioral observations from my field notes were used to assist the process of data analysis to ensure that the significant statements and initial codes are consistent with these observations. When I found inconsistency between the behavioral observations and significant statements or initial codes, I contacted the participants to confirm the meaning of the significant statements and initial codes to ensure that their experiences were seen and understood accurately. After forming initial codes, I compared these codes between couples' interviews to bracket the emerged themes between each couple's interviews, and ensure these themes were being noticed throughout the different transcripts. The main codes combined from both partners' experience were compared to other couples' experiences to cluster important themes across all participating couples so that the result of analysis is organized and directly answers the research questions of this study.

In qualitative research, thick description is essential in presenting the original story and experience from the participants (Creswell, 2007; Polkinghorne, 2005). It is vital for the researcher to describe the essence of the phenomenon in a way that represents participant's reality. Furthermore, attempting to understand the reality through the lens of their own words and worldview instead of my own is the appropriate way to analyze all qualitative data. As a qualitative researcher, I have the responsibility to make every effort to ensure that others see participants' stories just as they were. All 16 participants were allowed to examine the themes that I identified as emerging from the study, and were able to confirm they accurately represent their experience, this is called a

member check and is used in qualitative methodology to enhance trustworthiness (Creswell, 2007; Polkinghorne, 2005). The themes are represented in Appendix C so they are clear and easy to understand. Throughout the process of data analysis, the research journal was used for the purpose of improving questions and developing new ones.

### **Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is like the reliability and validity of quantitative research; it is the standard of the quality of the study (Merriam, 2009). To ensure trustworthiness, a few different methods were utilized in this study. First, during the process of data analysis and emerging themes, all the transcriptions and the themes from the data were examined by a licensed mental health professional trained in couples therapy and qualitative research methods to comment on the findings as they emerge, to ensure that the analysis and the emerging themes were accurate and not overly influenced by the researcher's personal bias; this is called a peer review (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Second, after the peer review the transcript and themes merged from the transcript, a copy of the themes of each interview was sent to all the interviewees and all eight couples confirmed or clarified that the themes matched their experiences and stories or not; this is called member checking (Merriam, 2009).

Third, multiple sources of data (i.e., interview recordings and field notes), multiple methods of confirming the emerging findings (i.e., peer review and member checking), and multiple methods of data analysis (i.e., narrow codes or themes to broader interrelated themes to more abstract dimensions) were all utilized throughout this study for triangulation, which was a combination of these three sets of techniques to establish the trustworthiness of the study (Creswell, 2007; Polkinghorne, 2005). Fourth, a log

continuously recording all of my research actions, called audit trail was the researcher's responsibility to keep so that outside people can verify the process, another method to ensure the quality of the research (Creswell, 2007). Audit trail in this study consisted of chronological narrative entries of research activities, included the date and time of the interviews, transcriptions and analytic activities (Creswell, 2007). Lastly, I openly explored and reflected on my personal biases, assumptions and worldviews from the outset of the study and throughout the process of data analysis.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, the methodology of this qualitative study was discussed in detail. A pilot study was conducted and the results helped the researcher to develop better questions when interviewing the participants. The results of the pilot study also suggested that intercultural/multilingual couples construct a new culture and phenomenon of their own. A combination of constructivism and systemic theory was the theoretical framework that supports the development of this study. This study was conducted in in-depth and semi-structural interviews with intercultural/multilingual couples in which each partner is from a different country-of-origin and speaks a different language.

The two major questions of the interview asked participants to share their experience of how cultural and language differences affect the romantic relationship. The couples were also asked to share their opinion on how counseling psychologists/therapists can be the most helpful in the process of counseling. The interviews were conducted both individually and together with the couple so they can share their stories both as a couple and as an individual. Data collection and analysis were an ongoing process throughout the study. All the interviews were audio recorded and



transcribed for analysis. The field notes were making sure all the non-verbal information during the interview was documented. Several different methods of ensuring the trustworthiness were utilized such as triangulation, member checks, peer review, maintaining an audit trail and clarification of the researcher's stance to protect the quality of the current study.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **RESULTS**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, participants' experiences of being in an intercultural/multilingual relationship and how cultural and language differences affect such relationships are described and analyzed to present the phenomenon of intercultural/multilingual relationships. The University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board approved the research procedure before the study proceeded. The approach of phenomenology used in this study is the empirical, transcendental, and psychological phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). This approach has a strong focus on epoché, and as the researcher, I had to set aside my own experience as much as possible so a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon could be utilized to better describe participants' experience and stories.

For the purpose of describing participants' experience, non-verbal observations such as facial expressions and physical movements that were related to participants' expression were recorded as field notes, and also included as an important part of the data to assist and enrich the results. Different codes and themes were noted throughout the data analysis; the comparison within and between couples were also made to explore the similarities and dissimilarities. Last, all the descriptions of participants' stories and experiences in this chapter were summarized from the in-depth interviews and no assumptions were made by me, the researcher. Direct quotes are presented throughout

this chapter as part of the thick description and to allow the reader to consider transferability.

The following questions are addressed and answered in the following section:

- Q1    How do cultural differences affect intercultural/multilingual couples' relationships and communication?
- Q2    How do language differences affect intercultural/multilingual couples' relationships and communication?
- Q3    How do intercultural/multilingual couples integrate their differences and create a unique relationship of their own?
- Q4    If the participants were to participate in couples counseling in the future, how can counseling psychologists/therapists be most helpful in the process of counseling?

### **Participant Descriptions**

Eight couples were interviewed in this study, all from different areas within the Rocky Mountain region, and they all met the criteria for participation of this study which included each partner of the couple was born and raised in a different country and speaks a different first language, they have been in the relationship for at least two years and cohabitating for at least six months, and they all currently live in the U.S. Demographic information such as ethnicity, native language, age, years together, and years of cohabitation of each couple are shown in Appendix D. Inclusion criteria for the study are that each partner of the couple was born and raised in a different country, and that each of them speaks a different first language. All participants currently live in the United States and all interviews were conducted face-to face. The length of each relationship varied from 2 to 39 years, and the length of cohabitation varied from 19 months to 39 years between all 8 couples. The current marriage is the first marriage for all 16 participants. All participants speak proficient English and no interpreter was used in the study. The

following section includes the description and the background information of each couple, such as where they are from, how they met each other, and some cultural and language differences they have encountered since the beginning of their relationship. All eight couples chose their own pseudonyms that are used in the description in the following section. The purpose of the participant descriptions is to tell the story of the couple, and describe the phenomenon of their intercultural/multilingual relationship before introducing the emerging themes between participating couples.

### **Bob and Sakura**

***Their story.*** Bob and Sakura live in a mid-size town in the Rocky Mountain region. The interview was conducted on a Sunday evening in their home. Bob and Sakura were very warm and friendly from the moment they saw me, and were open and talkative during the interview. Bob is Caucasian American and is a 44-year-old special education teacher. English is his first language.

Sakura is originally from Japan. She speaks Japanese as her first language and has lived in the U.S. for the last 16 years. She is now 43 years old and works as a nurse. They have two beautiful children together; they are a 12 year-old boy and a 9-year-old girl. Both children were around during the interview so I had the opportunity to meet them and observe their interaction with Sakura and Bob.

Sakura and Bob met each other at community college when he was a student there, and she came to the U.S. as an international student who wanted to learn English and experience life in the U.S. When they first met, Sakura was 27 years old and Bob was 28 years old. When they talked about the beginning of their relationship, Bob explained, “We were more mature than when we were in our early twenties,” and he believes that

was a factor why they were determined to make the relationship work from the very beginning.

***Behavioral observation.*** Bob and Sakura were friendly and kind from the moment I walked into their house. I took off my shoes by the door because I noticed the shoe racks right next to it. The interview was conducted in the dining room. Bob and Sakura sat across the table from each other throughout the interview. Bob and Sakura seemed very comfortable with each other's company. They laughed a lot together and used humor in discussing many things that had happened in their life and relationship. Half way through the interview, their two children got into an argument and we had to stop the conversation so Bob could help them resolve the conflict. The two children were energetic and did not necessarily agree with their father's decision about who got to play the video games first, but they were respectful and accepted the plan. Bob and Sakura rarely interrupted each other when they were interviewed together, but Sakura was more talkative and Bob needed a few more prompts before he shared his story. The family asked me to stay to stay for dinner; they showed great hospitality towards me, a person they have never met who wanted to know all the details of their relationship. After the interview was completed, they walked me to my car and each of them gave me a warm hug, to thank me being interested in listening to their story. I left their house with great excitement. The first couple I had interviewed had already provided me with such rich data and their personalities demonstrated reasons why they have a successful intercultural/multilingual relationship.

## **Bitsy and Hector**

*Their story.* Bitsy and Hector live in a metropolitan area in the Rocky Mountain region. The interview was conducted on a Thursday evening in the summer. Bitsy and Hector invited me to do the interview on their balcony and enjoy the lovely weather outside. Bitsy is Polish and is now 30 years old; she came to the U.S. in 2001 to work as a nanny. She decided to pursue higher education later on, and received a bachelor's degree and a Master's degree in the U.S. Bitsy speaks Polish as her first language, and all of her family members live in Europe. She works as a mental health professional.

Hector is Cambodian-American. He was born and raised in the US and he is 31 years old. He works in the supply chain management business. Hector's parents are first generation immigrants and both moved to the U.S. from Cambodia when they were teenagers. Hector explained that his first language is English because his parents did not teach any of their children Khmer. Hector does not speak Khmer, the official language of Cambodia, but used to understand it because his parents communicate with each other in Khmer. Hector moved out of his parents' house when he went to college, and said that he has somewhat lost the language now that he does not hear it anymore. Hector feels like his parents did not teach them to speak Khmer because they wanted him to "fit in" with the American culture. They chose not to give him a Khmer name, only an English one, because they did not want Hector to feel "different" compared to his peers.

Bitsy and Hector met through a blind date that was arranged by a common friend in 2006. Bitsy was surprised because Hector didn't have an accent when they talked on the phone, so she did not expect him to be Asian when they first met. Their first date was five and half hours, and both of them said that they did not want it to end. Bitsy and

Hector both admitted that they had stereotypes of each other's ethnicity background when they first met. Bitsy's father used to tell her "Asian people are going to put you in a kitchen and they are going to make you work" when she was young. Hector thought all Polish women are blonde and have long Polish last names. Their relationship really broke the stereotypes and assumptions of the cultural background for both of them.

They moved in together six months after they met. They got married at the courthouse in 2010, and the wedding ceremony was held in Italy in 2012. Bitsy's father had some difficulties applying for the visa so he could visit the U.S., so they decided to cancel everything in the U.S. and reschedule and re-plan the wedding in a third country so that everyone in the family could be part of it. Hector and Bitsy were both worried because the wedding was the first time the family members would meet each other. They were not sure if everyone would get along, especially Bitsy's parents who do not really speak English.

The wedding ceremony ended up as a wonderful experience for the couple and their families. Their siblings got along so well they felt like they were "separated-at-birth siblings," and the parents enjoyed each other's company. Bitsy described that her and Hector's mothers were always holding each other's arm and walking around. They are very happy the wedding turned out to be a "blast" for everyone.

Bitsy explained, "I love his Asian-ness and he loves my Polish-ness, it is adorable, you know!" Throughout their relationship, they have realized that their two cultures are different but also have some similarities. For example, they both enjoy cooking at home instead of going out, they enjoy doing things together as a family, they save leftovers, and when they go visit family they stay with their families and eat home-made meals together.

Bitsy and Hector enjoy both the differences and similarities between each other's culture, and living in both of them is an important part of the relationship.

***Behavioral observation.*** I first contacted Bitsy and Hector for the interview in the late spring, but did not have the opportunity to actually meet them until late summer, since they were busy planning and later celebrating their wedding in Spain. Bitsy invited me to sit on the balcony for the interview, and prepared a cup of hot tea for me. Bitsy and Hector sat next to each other when they were interviewed together. Throughout the interview, they were both very well spoken and open about sharing their story and experience. It seemed like Hector and Bitsy were very honest with each other and shared no surprises with each other when they were talking about the relationship. They were equally talkative and also exchanged eye contact frequently when interviewed together. At the end of the interview, they showed me Hector's cat which Bitsy gave it a Polish name, as a symbol of the unique aspect of incorporating two cultures together within their relationship.

### **Ebi and Kani**

***Their story.*** Ebi and Kani live in a metropolitan area in the Rocky Mountain region. The interview was conducted on a Wednesday evening at their home. Kani offered me Japanese green tea the moment I sat down, and both of them were quietly waiting for the interview to start.

Ebi is Japanese. She is originally from Okinawa, an island that is about 400 miles south of the rest of Japan. Although Ebi's first language is Japanese, she also speaks some Okinawan, a unique dialect spoken in the Okinawa Islands. Ebi came to the U.S. in



2007 for graduate school. She graduated with a Master's degree and now works as a mental health professional.

Kani identifies himself as Caucasian-American, and mentioned that he has some Native American heritage in his family. He is now 42 years old and works designing graphics, animation, video, and sounds. He speaks English as his first language.

Kani and Ebi met through an online dating website in 2010. When they first contacted each other, Ebi had two weeks left of the dating website account, and she was not expecting to meet anyone to start a serious relationship since she was getting ready to graduate and move back to Okinawa. She was open about the fact that she is Japanese from the beginning, but did not disclose her real name until Kani suggested they meet in person soon after the conversation started. They had lunch at a Japanese restaurant in town for their first date. This Japanese restaurant has actually turned into their favorite place to eat. Kani enjoyed the first date but was not sure how Ebi felt about him. He offered Ebi a ride back to her nearby campus but Ebi declined, so he thought Ebi was not interested in continuing to see each other. Ebi explained to me that she actually just really wanted to walk, because she enjoys walking after meals and her campus was very close. Due to Ebi's busy schedule with school, they did not go out for a second date until a few weeks later. They went to the art museum in town and this time they spent eight hours together. Obviously, they did not just enjoy the art, they enjoyed each other's company very much.

A few months after they started dating, Ebi returned to Okinawa and shared with her family that she would actually be returning to the U.S. because of her relationship with Kani. They were committed to each other and decided to get married due to Ebi's

immigration status. Her student visa was going to expire, and for her to be able to stay in the U.S., they decided to get married. Ebi and Kani picked a lucky day in the Japanese Farmer's Almanac and went to the courthouse. They became husband and wife in May 2011, six months after they met. They visited Okinawa in 2012 and had a family gathering as an informal wedding ceremony, with Kani being introduced to Ebi's family.

***Behavioral observation.*** I visited Ebi and Kani's house one evening after work. I could tell which townhome belonged to them just walking by because of the Japanese decorations they had right next to their window. Kani surprised me with making the Japanese green tea in the traditional way, which I have only seen on television. Kani and Ebi admitted that they are both introverted and quiet people. They were overly formal to each other at the beginning and it took some time for them to warm up and share their story more openly. Once Kani started opening up, he was not afraid of sharing his experience and his knowledge of Okinawan culture. Ebi was quieter and the one who needed a few more prompts during the interview. It seemed like they have very similar personalities and it serves them well because they both feel very contented and comfortable around each other. They showed me all the cultural decorations around their home very proudly, because these things represent how much they enjoy each other's culture and wanting to integrate them as a part of their relationship, and their life together.

### **Annie and Steve**

***Their story.*** Annie and Steve live in a mid-size college town in the Rocky Mountain region. The couple invited me to their home for the interview, and I went to their house one evening in the late summer. I had the opportunity to meet their two little boys, one age two and the other two months, before starting the interview.

Steve is Taiwanese-American and immigrated to the U.S. with his family when he was 7 years old. He grew up in New York and his parents still live there. His parents decided to move to the U.S. because they wanted a better life and better opportunities for their children. He is now 34 years old and his first language was Mandarin Chinese; he also speaks fluent English. Although he spent the majority of his life in the U.S., he described himself as growing up with traditional Chinese and Taiwanese culture within the family. Steve explained that his family was very poor when they first arrived in this country. He, his parents, and his two siblings shared a one-bedroom apartment with another couple; all five of them slept in the living room and shared the kitchen and bathroom with their roommates for eight years. Later on, Steve's parents were finally able to afford to buy a house of their own. Soon after, they gave up their privacy and rented out the spare bedrooms to help with the house payment, a common practice with Chinese and Taiwanese immigrants. Steve's parents are now well-established financially, but they have never been on a vacation or enjoyed any type of luxury activity. They are very frugal, the same as when they first arrived to this country.

Annie is Caucasian-American, and was born and raised in the U.S. Annie's family is from the south, so they are somewhat more traditional in some customs compared to most others in this country. Her first language is English and she is now 30 years old. Annie's close family lives in the same town as Annie and Steve, so they see Annie's family more often compared to Steve's family.

Steve and Annie met through an online dating website. Annie's parents signed her up as a joke, never thinking she would find the partner of her life. They lived in two different states and were in a long distance relationship for a year and half before they got

married in 2007. Soon after they first started communicating with each other online, Steve called Annie and suggested that he visit her, a 25 hour driving trip “just for coffee,” as Steven said. She was very surprised when he actually showed up, and they had a great time together on their first date. Steve is still very proud he did that: during the interview he looked at Annie and their children and said, “See, it’s a good deal!”

They actually never had the opportunity to meet each other’s friends and families until the wedding. Annie explained, “It has been more of an adjustment since we got married.” Steve’s family has no problem with Annie being from a different ethnicity and cultural background. They said, “As long that’s what makes you happy!” and gave their blessing. Annie’s family was surprised and not as excited, because Steve is from a big city which they think it is very different compared to their southern culture, and they do not like people from the big cities.

For their wedding, Steve wanted to be a part of the planning to make sure a 10-course meal would be served, entertainment would be provided, and a second dress would be worn by the bride during the reception, as expected in a Taiwanese wedding. Annie’s mother had a strong reaction and told Annie to have Steve stay out of the wedding planning because it should be “her wedding, only women are involved in the planning” because that is the norm in her family’s southern American culture. At the same time, Annie’s family was paying for the wedding according to American culture, which is the other reason they believed Steve should have her family plan most of the wedding. However, Steve actually had a budget and was willing to pay for the parts he wanted for the wedding so that his opinion could also be integrated into the wedding planning. Annie’s family also was not sure about have her wearing a second dress during

the reception because in American culture, the bride usually only wears one dress throughout the wedding day. Her family also only wanted wedding cake and fruit punch after the ceremony instead of a formal reception. Both sides ended up compromising, so Steve got his gourmet food (less than 10 courses), a second dress for Annie, and a formal dinner reception; Annie's family had a beautiful wedding cake, fruit punch, and Steve didn't participate too much in the wedding planning.

Most of Annie and Steve's family and friends attended the wedding, but Steve's mother did not. She believed that it was necessary for her to stay at the restaurant they own and take care of the business instead of traveling out of state. Steve understands her decision because "that's what it takes to succeed in the U.S. as immigrants, you do whatever it takes," although he was still disappointed. Annie's family had a hard time understanding the decision, and Steve sees it as "they are people who live in the world of health insurance and guaranteed hour work," and different experience brings different perspectives.

Steve and Annie moved to their mid-size town in the Rocky Mountain region from the east coast a few years after they got married. Steve felt like he stands out more than he is used to, because the town they live in is not very diverse. He is frustrated with people identifying him as an "immigrant" just because he does not have white skin. Annie had an interesting observation that people sometimes ask her, "Where did you adopt these kids?" because they appear Asian, and some would ask her about her ethnic background, just because she took Steve's last name which was obviously Asian. Steve still feels like most people have stereotypes of Asians, and ignore the contributions Asians have been making since the very beginning of the history of this country.

***Behavioral observation.*** When I first arrived at Annie and Steve's house, Steve was out grocery shopping so I spent some time alone with Annie and her two beautiful children. Annie started chatting with me right away. After Steve came home, we started the interview in the living room and the two children played in the open space right next to us. Steve expressed strong opinions that he does not like to be identified as Taiwanese or Chinese, he identifies himself as Taiwanese American; he spoke with a strong voice and was almost defensive when he described his identity. He did not deny his strong Taiwanese family background and he recognizes that he was raised in the Taiwanese culture, but he wishes others to acknowledge the fact that he has been an American for more than 20 years. Annie was nice and smiled a lot, and also was not afraid to share her story and her experience. Steve was more talkative throughout the interview and Annie seemed to prefer to have Steve speak first, and then either support him or express different opinions after he finished. They took turns to watch their children during the interview while having separate conversations with me. It seemed like they work well as a team to take care of their children, and their family.

### **Angie and Brent**

***Their story.*** I met with Angie and Brent at their contemporary-style apartment in a mid-size town in the Rocky Mountain region. The interview was conducted on a Sunday evening. Angie is 37 years old, she is originally from Thailand, and she speaks Thai as her mother tongue. Brent is Hispanic-American. He is now 30 years old and is a computer technician. Brent spoke some Spanish and learned Thai when he lived in Thailand; he considered English his first language. Angie came to the U.S. with a scholarship, studying special education for a Master's degree in 2000. Angie and Brent

met at the end of 2001, when she went to the computer lab he worked in, at the college where they were both taking classes. Brent was only 18 years old and Angie was already 26 years old when they first met. They dated for about six or seven months before they moved in together at Brent's parents' house.

After Angie finished her Master's degree in 2003, she was planning on moving back to Thailand to serve in the school which provided her scholarship, and Brent decided to move with her. Angie was hesitant about the decision at the time, because Brent was very young, and she was not sure how her family would respond to the American man who came back to Thailand with her. Brent insisted that he was going to Thailand with Angie even though he had never been to another country. As Angie fondly explained, "He was young, naïve, and very determined at the time, he doesn't take no one's suggestion." Brent ended up staying in Thailand for the next five years, and they got married in 2005.

***Behavioral observation.*** Angie and Brent live in a contemporary apartment complex. They kindly offered to come down to the lobby to meet me instead of having me wandering around not knowing where to go. Angie and Brent started the interview right away and could not wait to share their story with me. They were both very outspoken but not interrupting each other. They were enjoying telling the story of how they met and of their time living in Thailand with much laughter and jokes. They had some challenging times within their relationship when they were in Thailand, and they were very open about those times and gladly shared that they are in a better place now. Brent is seven years younger than Angie but one could not tell from their appearance. Angie is an Asian woman who looks younger than she is and Brent is a Hispanic man

who looks older than he is. They say that this makes them the perfect match. Angie and Brent sometimes talk for each other but they did not talk over each other. It seemed like there was a fine balance in their relationship and that they are each in charge of different parts of it. Angie and Brent offered me a bottle of wine they ordered for celebrating their wedding anniversary at the end of the interview. Because of their rich story and their willingness to share, I think I will enjoy that bottle of wine very much because it will remind me of listening to their story.

### **Frank and Jennifer**

***Their story.*** Frank and Jennifer live in a historical apartment in a metropolitan area in the Rocky Mountain region. The interview was conducted on an early fall evening. Frank is Caucasian-American. He is now 45 years old and works in IT support and as a martial arts instructor. He was born in the south and moved to the current state he lives when he was about 4 years old. He speaks English as his first language.

Jennifer is originally from Taiwan and is currently 42 years old. She is now a middle school teacher and teaches math and drama. She came to the U.S. in 2005 for her doctoral degree in Theater for Youth and graduated in 2010. She lived in the United Kingdom for a year in 2001 for her second Master's degree in Theater Directing. Jennifer speaks Mandarin Chinese as her first language; she also speaks Cantonese, which is a different dialect of Chinese.

Jennifer and Frank met in 2009. They met on a hiking trail outside of town, and moved in together six months after they started seeing each other. Before Frank moved in with Jennifer, he lived about an hour away from her and they would have to wait until the weekend to get together. They communicated with each other a lot on the phone and



through the internet. Frank and Jennifer decided to get married in summer 2012. Due to Jennifer's work visa status, they decided to get married first so Jennifer did not have to go through the complicated process of renewing her visa. They went to the courthouse, with Frank's family and Jennifer's friends, and became man and wife in July 2012. They are planning a big celebration in the summer of 2013, and inviting Jennifer's friends from Taiwan and different countries to attend the wedding in the U.S. Jennifer explained that work visa is also called H-1B visa, it is a non-immigrant visa in the U.S. allows employers to temporarily employ foreign workers in specialty occupations. To be able to obtain H-1B visa, Jennifer had to find a job that the employer was willing to sponsor her and she had to renew it once every three years. For every foreign worker who is sponsored to apply for the H-1B visa, the employer needs to provide proof to the U.S. Department of Labor that this foreign worker does not displace or adversely affect wages or working conditions of U.S. workers, which prevents many employers from hiring foreign workers due to the complexity of this process. There is also an annual limit of new H1-B visa approved every year which means no more foreign workers can receive a H-1B visa after the limit is reached and they have to wait till the next year.

Frank had a stroke when he was 2 years old. While chewing a wooden stick and walking around the house, he tripped over an object on the floor, and the stick hit his carotid artery. It caused a bruise and a blood clot, which traveled to his brain and then caused the stroke. Frank was in a coma for two weeks, and half of his body was paralyzed. During his whole life, Frank used his amazingly strong will and tried to do everything that others can do, to prove to himself that he is just like everyone else. He now teaches martial arts, rides mountain bikes, and has also done rock climbing and

many things that no one thought he would be able to do when he first recovered from the stroke. Jennifer is very proud of him and admires his courage.

Both Jennifer and Frank enjoy watching movies very much, especially comedy. Frank uses humor not just in their relationship, but also in life as a catalyst to see things from a positive perspective. Now that they are planning their wedding, Frank wants to put on different skits throughout the wedding to make it special, so that everyone who is a part of the celebration will remember it. Since Jennifer will have many friends and family travel internationally for the wedding, she plans to take a trip to the mountains with all the travelers instead of going on a more traditionally American honeymoon. She believes that she needs to continue to share their joy and happiness even after the wedding, and also make her friends and family feel well treated. Frank and Jennifer also want to make their wedding food special and unique. They are planning to design a menu that creates a combination of the food from both cultures so that it uniquely represents them.

Throughout the interview, Jennifer and Frank corrected each other few times because they used the generalization of “you Americans” and “all the Taiwanese” when describing their cultural differences. They are aware that they still make assumptions of others, sometimes even each other, because of the stereotypes they have for each other’s culture. It is interesting to see how they have self-aware but still, sometimes are blindsided by the stereotypes even though they have learned about each other’s culture for a good amount of time. They admitted that they correct each other and sometimes have conflicted opinions.

***Behavioral observation.*** When I first walked in to Frank and Jennifer’s apartment, I smelled familiar Taiwanese food. Frank and Jennifer prepared dinner for me and we

started getting to know each other while eating dinner together before the interview.

Jennifer is a very strong-minded person and she identifies herself as a feminist. Because Frank seemed to be an easy going guy at first I did not realize that he also has a strong voice and can be outspoken as well. Throughout the interview, neither of them was hesitant to share their opinions, experiences and stories. When being interviewed together, they respected each other's space when one person was talking, but they were not afraid to disagree or speak about a different opinion compared to their partner. They displayed a unique balance of agreeing and disagreeing with each other which shows that they were very open to each other and comfortable with disagreement. Jennifer was very excited when she talked about planning the wedding and Frank had to throw a few jokes in to share his excitement in a different way. They would use their special nicknames for each other throughout the interview which showed that they really enjoy this unique aspect of their relationship.

### **Daniel and Shata**

*Their story.* Daniel and Shata live in a mid-size town in the Rocky Mountain region. The interview was conducted at their apartment on a Sunday afternoon in the fall. Shata is a 34-year-old woman from Saudi Arabia. She is an international student who came to the U.S. in 2008 for her graduate degree. She is now a doctoral student in an education-related field. She speaks Arabic as her first language. In Saudi Arabia, women are not allowed to travel or live alone, so Shata had her brother travel to the U.S. and stay with her for few years.

Daniel is also an international student. He is originally from Iran and speaks Farsi as his first language, and he is now 41 years old. He started trying to come to the U.S.

about 12 years ago for higher education and better opportunities. Due to the political situation between the U.S. and Iran he could not get a visa, so he waited until he received confirmation from the Diversity Immigrant Visa program, also called the visa lottery, that he was one of the millions who applied online that could actually receive a green card without conditions required. Diversity Immigrant Visa it is administered by the Department of State started in 1995. There are 55,000 immigrant visas available on an annual basis and millions of people apply for it every year. Daniel gave an example that the percentage of winning the visa lottery was about 0.4% in 2008. It took him 5 years of applying to win the lottery, and he considered himself as “super lucky.” He came to the U.S. to work for his uncle in 2005, and met Shata on an online dating website specific designated for Muslims. They have been married since 2009.

Shata had her mind set from the beginning. “I didn’t want to date someone from my country,” she said, “I came to America and I wanted to do something different.” Daniel also pointed out that in the Quran, the prophet said, “Try to marry someone from another culture to make a good relationship with their culture,” so they are just following the prophet. They communicated with each other through the internet and by phone for the first nine months of their relationship. They were committed to each other and decided to meet in person and confirm the engagement. Daniel came to visit Shata from another state, met her Iranian friends who were like her family in the U.S., to ask for permission for her hand. In the Muslim culture, men need to ask for a woman’s hand in marriage from their family. Since neither of Daniel or Shata’s parents were in the U.S., they had to ask for permission from each other’s family through phone and internet before they could become engaged. They sent photos to their families, and their families

sent gifts to them representing the blessing and the joyfulness. They believed that they had a good understanding of each other before Daniel came to visit. “I think about 70%, that’s how much we knew each other,” Daniel said. They decided to pursue the marriage then; the meeting in person and asking for permission were just confirming their commitment to each other.

After Daniel and Shata received the permission and blessing from their families, they had the engagement ceremony with Shata’s Iranian friends in town, and someone from the mosque performed the ceremony for them. In the Muslim culture, engagement is more important because it represents the commitment between the husband and wife. They usually have a wedding celebration afterwards and it is an announcement to the public that from now on everyone knows they are husband and wife, and they also then receive permission to live together as a married couple.

***Behavioral observation.*** I was welcomed by warm smiles and friendliness into Daniel and Shata’s apartment. They made Iranian tea for me, and shared the snacks and chocolate they brought back from Iran and Saudi Arabia over the summer. They were both very gentle and soft spoken at the beginning of the interview. They slowly opened up and started laughing and joking about different things in their relationship more, yet they were still more conservative than other couples I interviewed. When interviewed together, Shata and Daniel shared eye contact with each other to see who had more to say and who wanted to start first. On the other hand, it seemed like Daniel had a little more to say on certain topics and Shata would share her opinion after Daniel finished speaking, giving her side of the story or giving Daniel’s experience more color. I shared my appreciation with them at the end of the interview for being so very generous and patient

in educating me about everything I did not know about Muslim culture, and they responded with connecting me to another couple who also have an Islamic background, which helped with the study even more.

### **Hadi and Linda**

***Their story.*** Hadi and Linda live in a mid-size town in the Rocky Mountain region. The interview was conducted on a Sunday evening in the fall. Hadi and Linda invited me to visit their beautiful house and meet them and their family. Hadi is a 62-year-old man who is originally from Iran. He came to the U.S. as an international student in 1967, when he was only 17 years old. Hadi is from the northern part of Iran, and he speaks Turkish as his first language. He also speaks fluent Farsi, the official language of Iran.

Linda is Caucasian American. She is 59 years old and speaks English as her first language. Linda and Hadi first met when they were attending the same school. Hadi was running for vice president of the student council and going around drumming up votes, which was the first time they talked to each other. They dated for five years before they decided to get married, and they have been married for 39 years. Hadi was 23 and Linda was only 20 years old when they got married. They got married in the U.S. and also in Iran. A religious ceremony was held for the wedding, and Linda then identified herself as Muslim even though she was not religious at the time. They have three children together, and now they also have quite a few grandchildren.

Hadi's family used to own many businesses in Iran, and "doing business is the only way I know how to survive. I don't know how to work for others," said Hadi. He started with a car dealership in the metropolitan area nearby, while Linda stayed home taking care of their children. A few years later, Hadi moved the dealership to the town

they live in so he could be closer to his family. He also started a dry cleaning business when their children were older, and Linda started helping manage the business since she could spend less time with their children. They also owned different rental apartments and properties. A few years ago, inspired by the fact that Linda makes amazing Iranian food, Linda and Hadi decided to open their own Iranian restaurant. The restaurant has become more and more popular in the town they live in, and they are very proud of introducing authentic Iranian food to others who have never tried it in the past. Linda and Hadi own six different businesses. They worked really hard to make enough money for the family to survive in the past, now they are well-established and their main goal now is just to enjoy family and life.

***Behavioral observation.*** Hadi and Linda own a beautiful house with classy interior design. I was amazed and gave compliments to Linda when she showed me around; she was very proud of their home and she said they “make it just the way I want, it’s perfect.” The beautiful home showed me the fact that they are well established through years of hard work. Hadi was providing religious consultation on the phone with folk in the community so we had to wait for some time. It was obvious that Hadi is well respected in the community and he is deeply religious. Hadi was very talkative and he did not hesitate to share his opinions even when they were the opposite of Linda’s experience and thoughts. Linda and Hadi were obviously different than any other couple I interviewed, they openly shared the challenges in their relationship and admitted that sometimes compromise just to keep the family together. Surprisingly, Linda even confessed that it was more challenging than she had thought it would be and that she might not have chosen to marry a partner from a different country/culture if she could

start over again. Linda would let Hadi talk most of the time when they were interviewed together; but she would jump in and share a sharply different perspective from his and challenge his opinion. At the end of the interview, they encouraged me to visit their restaurant and learn more about Iranian culture from the food perspective, and I was more than happy to accept the invitation.

### **Emerging Themes: The Impact of Cultural Differences**

In the following section, the different themes which emerged between the couples who were interviewed in this study are presented. Analysis of verbal information as well as non-verbal observations are both included in the theme descriptions. Direct quotes and specific examples provided by the participants are utilized to portray the phenomenon of how cultural and language differences affect these intercultural/multilingual couples' relationships and communication and how each couple may have similar or difference experiences.

#### **Religion**

Three out of eight couples that were interviewed stated that believing in and practicing the same religion is a strong foundation of their relationship, and also the reason they choose each other as spouse from the beginning. The other five couples did not practice the same religion when they met each other. Four of these couples have a similar or basic understanding of each other's belief in faith or spirituality, and are also open to the fact that they were raised in different religions. For one couple, although they did not practice the same religion at the beginning of their relationship, the wife, Linda, sensed the expectation from Hadi, her husband and her husband's family, that she should convert to Islam. She took initiative and learned, studied Islam, and decided to convert to



the same religion her husband practiced after about ten years into their relationship.

Details and examples of each couple's belief in faith are described as follows.

***Bob and Sakura.*** Bob was raised as a Christian, but stopped going to church when his parents separated. Sakura was raised in traditional Japanese Buddhism and Shintoism. She first got in touch with Christianity when she was in high school; she went to a free English class at a local church and met an inspiring teacher. After that, she fell in love with English and was motivated to learn because she wanted to communicate with her teacher. After Sakura and Bob decided to get married, Sakura suggested to Bob that they should start going to church and practicing Christianity, because she believed that since their cultural backgrounds are different, belief in the same religion could be the common ground of their relationship, bond them closer and make them stronger. The family practices Christianity now, and Bob and Sakura both stated that religion is a solid foundation of their relationship. During the interview, Sakura gave multiple examples of how she and Bob form their family following Christian and biblical guidelines.

***Bitsy and Hector.*** Hector's parents are Buddhist, and they also practice Christianity and go to church sometimes. However, they never forced any religion on Hector and let him choose what he wants to believe. Hector described himself as a faithful person, but not practicing any particular religion. Bitsy was raised Catholic and she has not been practicing this religion since she came to the U.S. She still takes Hector to church for important holidays such as Christmas and Easter. Bitsy makes traditional food during these holidays because it is a way for her to remember her home and family in Poland, which she will never forget. Bitsy describes herself now as a spiritual instead of a religious person.

***Ebi and Kani.*** Kani's father and his side of the family are religious Christians; they pray and say grace before each meal. They also adopted many children from different backgrounds to share their love with children in need. They were also open and friendly toward Ebi when they were visiting. Ebi's family practices Ancestor Worship, an indigenous religion in Okinawa that is heavily influenced by Confucianism and Buddhism. They also believe in Shamans in this religion, who have the power to contact ancestors, and are called "Yuta" in Okinawan. Growing up in the Ancestor Worship religion, it was natural for Ebi to go to the family altar and pray, and the family gets together for events such as ancestor worship.

Kani identifies himself as a very spiritual person but he does not practice any specific religion. He admitted that he has a hard time with organized religion, and he has had more interest in eastern religions such as Buddhism. Kani decorated their home with different statues of holy figures from different eastern religions. He actually did some research and study about Ancestor Worship, and is fascinated by how Okinawa's culture has been impacted by different cultures such as Chinese and Korean in the past. Ebi laughed that sometimes she feels like Kani knows more about Okinawan history and religion than she does.

***Annie and Steve.*** Annie and Steve are both Christians, and described themselves as religious and following Christianity. Steve's parents believe in Buddhism and practice traditional Taiwanese beliefs. He converted to Christianity when he was 14 years old. His parents have not had any negative opinions about his beliefs, and his father says, "As long as you are happy." Steve knew having the same religious beliefs in a romantic relationship was very important for him, so he was not hesitant to talk about faith when

he and Annie started their relationship. “She took that with a level of maturity and didn’t feel weird that some guy talked about Jesus with her from day one,” as Steve said. Annie had the same idea, that they both only wanted to date someone who has the same faith from the very beginning. “It’s the foundation of our relationship, it would be a deal-breaker otherwise,” said Annie.

**Angie and Brent.** Brent was raised Catholic, but his family let him make his own decisions regarding religion after he became a teenager. He told his father after his first communion that he did not want to have just one religion or one belief; he wanted to be open-minded about all different religions. After he started seeing Angie, Brent developed a deeper understanding of Buddhism, which is the religion Angie and her family practice, and he enjoys going to temple and practicing religious rituals with them. Since Brent is open-minded and willing to be a part of her spiritual beliefs, Angie and her family never feel the need to push Brent to be a part of their religion, and in addition, preaching is not as emphasized in Buddhism as it is in other religions. When they need to practice religious rituals that are significant to them or their family, they try to incorporate both religions together so it is meaningful for both of them.

**Frank and Jennifer.** Frank was raised Catholic, and now only goes to church for important holidays. He still believes about 70% of the core values of Catholicism, and thinks that the other 30% needs to be updated. Jennifer was raised Christian, and she also only believes about 70% of the core values and does not agree with the rest of them, because she believes in marriage equality for people with all sexual orientations. They decided that religious rituals are not the main concern of their wedding. It does not have

to be in a church because they can get married anywhere to show their commitment and love for each other.

***Daniel and Shata.*** Daniel and Shata met on an online dating website that is designated for Muslims. They decided to do that because they both believe in choosing a spouse who practices the same religion. They believe that practicing the same religion is the necessary foundation of a successful relationship. Shata and Daniel both belong to Shia, a specific sect of Islam, which is one of the reasons that Shata and Daniel chose to start communicating through the internet. It is very important because they want to have religion and the culture of their religion to be the common ground of their relationship.

Shia is the minority sect in Saudi Arabia but it is the majority sect in Iran. Daniel pointed out that although Islam is being practiced by many people in the world, it is practiced differently in every country. For example, women are not allowed to travel alone in Saudi Arabia, but it is not a taboo in Iran. Both Daniel and Shata believe that it is a woman's personal choice whether to wear a hijab or not, and Daniel respects Shata's decision of not wearing one. Hijab is a veil which covers the head which is particularly worn by Muslim women beyond the age of puberty in the presence of non-related adult males.

***Hadi and Linda.*** Hadi and Linda both practice Islam. Hadi was raised as a Muslim but he was not as religious when he was young. "I thought I was a Muslim just because that's how I was taught," said Hadi. Later on in his life, he spent more time actually studying Islam to understand his own religion, and has had very different experiences compared to his early life. He has become more religious throughout the years, and he enjoys sharing and educating others about Islam now that he has a deeper

understanding. Linda was raised Christian; she converted to Islam almost 20 years ago. Linda and Hadi never had an official discussion about their religion before they were married. Hadi somewhat pushed Linda into the religion at the beginning of their marriage, and Linda did not accept nor refuse it. After she moved to Iran for a while, she started to understand the importance of the religion in Hadi's culture and family, and that was when she started becoming interested and wanted to learn more about Islam. It took her 10 years to learn and explore the religion of Islam before she decided to convert. Linda recognized that being a Muslim is very important for her now and she believes in Islamic guidelines. Also, they both agreed that practicing the same religion built a strong foundation and strengthened their relationship.

### **Extended Family**

All eight couples described having good relationships with their extended families. All of the eight couples had the freedom to choose their spouse from the beginning of the relationship. Four of them took their parents' permission more into consideration because they believe receiving their parents' blessing is very important, and in their culture, marrying someone is not just about the two individuals, it is about two families making a connection and turning into one big family.

***Bob and Sakura.*** Bob and Sakura decided they wanted to be married to each other a week after they met; Bob told Sakura that his dream was to "spend the rest of my life with you." Sakura described that she felt "so natural to be with him and totally trusted him . . . it was good just being me." The couple was very excited, but Sakura's parents were not happy about her choice when she first announced the engagement to them. In Japanese culture, Sakura explained that marriage is "family to family" instead of

individual to individual, so the blessing from her parents for the marriage is extremely important. Sakura stated that she understood it was difficult for her parents. “My mom and dad were struggling, and feel torn apart because of the fact that probably I’m going to stay in the United States and they don’t get to see me as much. That fact really hurts their feelings.” Bob was concerned and getting impatient at the time, and also getting worried that she would leave the relationship because of her family. It took Bob and Sakura a year to convince them to give their blessing, and it was not easy.

Bob and Sakura had a wedding ceremony in the U.S. and a traditional wedding ceremony in Japan a year later; Sakura’s parents did not come to the U.S. for the ceremony and instead sent relatives as representatives. Sakura believes that her parents love Bob and now have a good relationship with him, but her mother still struggles sometimes because “she said maybe she is jealous, and the jealousy makes her attitude towards him sometimes a little not nice or more rigid.” Sakura described the jealousy as “she’s finding things that she wanted to do before I go and she had some dreams and plans and they never go as she thought. That’s why she feels really frustrated.” This seemed like an emotional topic for Sakura and she was teary when sharing her thoughts on it. Bob reached his arm over to Sakura and tried to comfort her and be supportive when she showed the sadness of this struggle between them and her mother.

When talking about Bob’s side of family, he said “they fell in love with her from the beginning.” According to his description, his side of family is closer to the “redneck culture” and they were not quite sure how to interact with Sakura at first. At the same time, Sakura described them as “warm and open” so there was no issue getting along with them. She stated that his family’s lifestyle is very different then her culture, for example,

the cleanliness of their homes and the fact that they have never tried sushi and cannot accept the flavor. However, his family is very laid-back so she does not think cultural differences have impacted their relationship. Sakura also explained, with some embarrassment, that she does not clean her house as often as Japanese people, and she really lowered her standard of “what is clean.” On the other hand, she uses the extra time to interact with her children and with Bob, and she really enjoys it. Sakura gave an example of a bible story to describe that “I learned to be relaxed and treasure the time I spend with friends and family . . . being together and enjoy each other’s company is a valuable thing.” Sakura laughed and brought up another example of when her mother was visiting from Japan. She would be cleaning the house all the time, and Sakura felt like she had to be cleaning all the time too. Sakura decided to ask her mother, “Can you relax and enjoy?” because spending time with family is more important to her.

***Bitsy and Hector.*** Bitsy’s family fell in love with Hector over time and loves everything about him. Bitsy’s father had been interested and had been learning more about Cambodian culture and history during the past few years. He watched a few documentaries about Cambodia and changed his perception of Asian cultures and Asians. Bitsy stated that it is hard to believe that he passed down his stereotypes of Asian culture to her in the past, and now she is proud that her family is always very understanding and loves Cambodian culture. Hector believes that as a new immigrant, Bitsy reminds his parents of themselves when they first came to this country. They had to work very hard to be able to survive and make a good life in the U.S., and that is how Bitsy is like. Because of the similar background as an immigrant, Hector’s family liked Bitsy from the beginning, and his parents absolutely respect his choice of partner.

Hector has some relatives in different parts of the U.S. but most of his family is still living in Cambodia. Since he was born and raised in the U.S., it was an interesting experience visiting his family in Cambodia. “My only grandmother was so happy to see me and to see her daughters who had left the country a long time ago.” He also described how he did not like feeling as if he did not fit in. “I was walking around and Cambodians didn’t think I was Cambodian, maybe because of the way I dressed, they thought we were French.” Hector never thought of himself as Asian until he went to Cambodia, but because of the fact that he does not look American, and even in his parents’ country people did not identify him as Cambodian, he felt as if he “doesn’t belong to anywhere” and it was difficult for him.

***Ebi and Kani.*** Both Ebi and Kani’s parents were divorced when they were young. Ebi’s mother moved back to Okinawa with her from Tokyo after the divorce; Ebi’s mother is from Okinawa and most of her family still lives there. Ebi has not had much contact with her father since then; she spent most of her life with her mother and her extended family members. Kani’s parents both remarried and now live in different states from Kani and Ebi. When Ebi was first telling her mother that she and Kani had decided to get married and that she is likely to stay in the U.S. for a while, she was very nervous about her mother’s reaction. “She doesn’t know much about American culture, American people. She doesn’t have any friends who are American.” Ebi really was not sure how would her mother take it, especially because in Japanese culture, the couple would go meet each other’s parents, be formally introduced, and ask for the approval for the marriage, but Ebi and Kani did not have the chance to do that. Fortunately, Ebi’s mother



gave them her blessing and her family was very welcoming when Kani finally got to meet them in Okinawa.

When they went to visit Kani's family, they would always take everyone out to eat which is very different than Ebi's family; when Kani and Ebi went to Okinawa, they cooked and ate at home most of the time at family and relatives' homes. When Ebi's family first met Kani, they were surprised that he does not look like the "typical American" that wears tank tops or flip flops all the time, and they felt comfortable interacting with him. Ebi's family was also surprised how much Kani likes Japanese food and that he pretty much ate everything.

*Annie and Steve.* Steve still has family and relatives in Taiwan, but he does not have a close relationship with them because he rarely goes back to visit. Steve mentioned that he identifies himself as American, and does not feel like he "fits in" when he goes to visit Taiwan, especially when he feels such distance between his family and relatives there. Steve's parents still live in New York and he has a brother who lives in the same town he does. Most of Annie's family lives in the same town as well. Since Annie's family is close by, there are more interactions with her family when it comes to daily life. Steve described that throughout the years, they learned that each other's family has different cultural expectations, and they "teach each other how to be successful from their parents' eyes." For example, Steve's parents sent money for their grandson's one-year-old birthday, which is culturally appropriate in the Taiwanese culture.

On the other hand, Annie's parents bought some toys for their grandson as birthday gifts. What happened in the past is that Annie's parents did not understand the meaning of sending an one-year-old money because he does not know how to spend it,

and Steve's parents do not understand why Annie's parents bought more toys for him since he already has plenty. Annie and Steve learned that they will just have to not give too many details of the things each other's parents do to keep the peace, as long as they both understand that all the grandparents are doing the best they can for their grandson. Steve described how they help each other with cultural expectations:

It's cultural expectations that are, that are . . . nobody told you it should be that way, but it's there. So we . . . we agree that we will always do what we can to ensure our, the people on, our other sides make use of our opposite side successful. So she will make me look good in front of her parents and translate what that means, and I will make her look successful in that. And I think that's, that should be more of a stronger marriage.

When it comes to siblings, because Steve is the oldest, he feels responsible for his younger siblings if they have made bad decisions. He would like to help them to get back on their feet if he can, because it is his responsibility to make sure they are on the right track. Just the opposite, Annie's sister has made some poor choices and she is determined that her sister must take responsibility for her own actions. Annie is willing to help her as long as it is appropriate, but she does not feel responsible for her.

**Angie and Brent.** When Brent first arrived in Thailand and met Angie's family, they were very friendly and treated him nicely. Soon after that, Brent asked Angie's father to marry his daughter, and Angie's father was very upset because he was not ready for this. "There were lots of broken chairs," Angie said, with a smile on her face, and she still could not believe how angry her father was at the moment. Angie explained that the stereotype of Western men coming to Thailand and marrying Thai women is that these men are not trustworthy and they are there to "steal their daughters." Angie's father did not know Brent long enough to see the true quality of his integrity, and he did not have property or assets to ensure that he can take care of Angie in the future, which is the most

significant concern Asian parents have when they marry their daughter to another man. Furthermore, Brent is seven years younger than Angie and it is not common in Thailand that a woman marries a man who is a lot younger than her. This also concerns Angie's parents and they question whether Brent has the ability and the maturity to take care of Angie. To be able to get the approval from Angie's parents, Brent and Angie started working really hard toward their goal of buying their own house, their own car, both having decent jobs and building social connections with people at higher positions to prove that Brent is being respected by others. It took them two years to reach all their goals and Angie's family's finally granted their approval and blessing for them to get married.

During the two years they spent working on getting the approval of Angie's family, many challenges came up and both Angie and Brent admitted that the relationship was not as smooth as it is now. First, Angie was well respected in Thailand because she is a teacher, and people look up to teachers because they are expected to follow higher moral standards. Angie had to put her reputation and social status at risk when moving in with Brent, a foreigner, when they bought a house together. "Everyone at school knows that I brought a young American guy back home and that was ruining my reputation," Angie said. She had to restrict her interactions and expression of affection with Brent in public before they were married, and Brent had to learn to understand and follow the rules even though it is very different in the culture he is coming from. Also, Angie asked Brent to stop shaving so he looks closer to her age because she was worried about how others would see her as "the teacher who was dating a young foreigner."

There was also a huge amount of financial stress on them when they were saving money to buy a house and a car. This was how Brent described it.

We were both working two jobs, and we even worked during the weekends . . . we didn't have time to rest and spend time with each other," said Brent. "It was very turbulent the first year . . . but everything worked out and we established this whole social marriage that we've put on for everyone else.

They finally got married after two years, and traveled back to Thailand where they had a traditional Thai and Buddhist ceremony. Four hundreds guests were invited for the wedding. Brent's father just had surgery before the wedding so he was not able to travel that far, so Brent's mother flew to Thailand by herself for the big day. Surprisingly, Brent's mother could not handle the climate, the big city of Bangkok, and everything about Thailand. Brent explained that his mother grew up on a farm and had never been anywhere that is different from her culture, so it was way too much of a culture shock for her. She only stayed one day and insisted on leaving the day before the wedding. Brent, Angie, and Angie's parents could not understand why she would fly somewhere thousands of miles away and then not even join the celebration. Brent was disappointed but he enjoyed the company of his friends in Thailand because they were just like his family there, which made the process a bit easier for him.

Brent and Angie still are not quite sure what happened and never talked about it with Brent's mother afterwards, and they are not bothered by it anymore. Besides this incident, Angie has no problem getting along with Brent's family and they have welcomed her as a part of their family from the beginning of their relationship. Angie follows the Thai culture which respects and takes care of elders, so it was easy for her to be accepted because she was polite, respectful, and very helpful when it came to taking care of Brent's parents.

***Frank and Jennifer.*** It is difficult for Frank to understand how Jennifer's family communicates with each other. When Jennifer's mother visited them in the U.S., she did not say "hi" to Frank and he wondered if he had said something wrong. Jennifer had to explain to him that "my mom doesn't even say hi to me." When Jennifer calls her mother in Taiwan, she would say "Why are you calling me?" instead of wanting to talk to Jennifer. Jennifer understands that her mother does not want her to spend money for international phone calls; her mother would rather they saved the money to buy a house in the nearly future.

Jennifer described her mother as not showing much affection in Frank's eyes because she shows affection in different ways. First of all, in traditional Taiwanese culture, her mother does not hug them, does not say "I love you," and does not cry or show sadness when Jennifer leaves Taiwan for the U.S. Secondly, her mother shows her love for them by supporting them financially, bringing many different kinds of homemade food when she comes to visit, and asking them, "Have you eaten yet? Did you have enough to eat?" every time they talk. Jennifer explained that it is not that Frank thinks that her mother does not welcome him to the family, it is because she has been a single parent most of her life and "being tough and strong, and not relying on anyone" is what helped her survive in the past, so that is the way she acts.

Although Frank was not used to the way Jennifer's mother treated him and Jennifer, he described that they enjoy each other's company, and he really looks forward to getting to know her more in the future, which is difficult now because of the physical distance. Jennifer knows her mother is happy for her and that she loves Frank. "She was worried that I would never get married!" said Jennifer with laughter. "It took her

sometimes to accept Frank's disability because she still has the stigma of people who have a disability, because she wants the best for me."

Frank's family has always been very open and accepting of Jennifer, and she has no problem getting along with them. Frank's father is a retired engineer and he has a great passion for mathematics; he and Jennifer sometimes discuss mathematics together and challenge each other with different math questions, which is a very unique bond between them.

***Daniel and Shata.*** Shata has a big family, with five brothers and four sisters. Her father passed away a few years ago when visiting Shata and her brothers in the U.S. Shata's family was well provided for by her father and the family inheritance; they live in a big house with servants. Daniel also has a big family, with five sisters and two brothers. Daniel's father passed away when he was 4 years old. His uncle and grandfather continued with the family business and supported the family. According to Iranian tradition and culture, Daniel's uncle married his mother and took over the responsibility of taking care of the family. Daniel is the oldest child so all of his siblings are half siblings from the marriage of his mother and his uncle. Although the financial status of the family has never been an issue, Daniel started feeling responsible for his family at an early age and worked in the family business to bring more income to support them, because he is the oldest son.

In the summer of 2012, Shata and Daniel went back to their countries for the first time after they got married. Daniel could not enter Saudi Arabia due to the policy of the country, so his family came to Iran to meet him. Shata also spent time staying with Daniel's family in Iran. This is the first time they met most of each other's family. "It

was very important for us, we don't just enjoy spending time with each other's family, we also get to know each other even better" said Shata. "I wanted to show her how my family and my culture is really like, it finally feels complete," said Daniel. Considering the traditional Iranian culture, Daniel pointed out that it would not be his own choice who to marry in his twenties. When Daniel first decided to ask Shata to marry him, his family asked many questions about Shata's background, culture, religion, and family. Daniel's mother told him "as long as you love her and like her character" they would let him make his own decision. Daniel admitted that it was easier for his family to agree because he was older and he is male. On the other hand, Shata's family is open-minded and they let her have more say in her own marriage because she was far away from them. They considered themselves lucky to receive permission and the blessing from both sides of their family without too many difficulties.

***Hadi and Linda.*** When Linda and Hadi first moved to Iran, they lived with many of Hadi's family members because that is the tradition in his culture. Linda never had strong opinions about it: "You do what you have to, and I did it," said Linda. After they moved back to the U.S, Hadi's family slowly immigrated here as well. "His mother, his sisters, and his niece, they all lived here with us for a few years," said Linda. "It was just something that was expected from me from day one." Hadi added, "In my culture, the mother comes first, which is different than the U.S. culture, that the wife actually comes first." Linda understood that she could not change the cultural value, and accepted it. Linda is close to her family as well, and she had her mother live with them for a while when her health was in bad shape, which was fully supported by Hadi.

## Gender Roles

Seven out of eight couples described that they are actually moving away from traditional gender roles and expectations from the cultures of both partners; instead, they discuss what the best way is to work together as a team, to take personal differences into consideration, and to find the middle ground. One couple stated that they followed the traditional gender roles in the husband's culture throughout most of the time in their relationship, but it has started to change recently, after more than 30 years of marriage. They have realized that age makes a difference and the husband is compromising more now, which is the opposite compared to the past.

***Bob and Sakura.*** This is how Sakura described traditional Japanese gender role for males and females: "I know my mom worked, she worked outside and she did everything [in the house], that's how it's supposed to be. My dad would say tea and then my mom brings tea." She stated that this is not possible now that she is working full-time; Bob and the two children all have to share the household chores. Sometimes they do their part but there are times that they forget and still leave things for her to do after working all day. Bob is very happy that Sakura started working full time after taking care of their children and attending school for many years, because she can use her professional skills to help people and the extra income is always beneficial for the family. They both agreed that they are still adjusting to this change and trying to find a better way to share the household responsibilities.

***Bitsy and Hector.*** In traditional Polish culture, women usually are in charge of the household chores, which include cooking all the time and ironing the husband's shirts. Bitsy's mother sometimes asks her, "Have you ironed your husband's shirts yet?" or,



“What did you cook your husband for dinner?” Bitsy had to explain to her mother that Hector is very capable of ironing his own shirts and it was not her turn to cook dinner that night. She acknowledges that she does not want to follow the traditional expectations for gender roles because she lives in a different country and a different time.

In Hector’s family, his mother has always been the one who cooks at home, but he enjoys cooking so he and Bitsy share the duty of cooking in their relationship. Furthermore, Hector has always told Bitsy that if she ever becomes wildly successful, he would have no problem staying at home and taking care of their family if need be. Bitsy and Hector both agreed that they are moving away from traditional gender roles in both cultures, and they both make a conscious effort to make it more equal for both of them. “The cultures are changing and we are changing too,” said Hector. Bitsy admitted that she is slowly moving away from traditional Polish expectations for females.

***Ebi and Kani.*** In traditional Japanese culture, women are expected to cook and take care of all the household chores. Kani actually does not have any expectation of gender roles like that and Ebi feels relief. “Here it’s very casual, it would depend on each couple but he doesn’t really demand what to do. He doesn’t have any expectations, that’s huge.” For instance, when they first moved in together, Ebi said to Kani, “I suppose I should be doing your laundry,” but Kani told her that she does not have to do his laundry just because she is female.

***Annie and Steve.*** Before they got married, Annie and Steve had some discussions of their gender role expectations; Annie told Steve that she would not be cooking because it is not her thing, and Steve agreed that he would be the cook of the family. Now that they have been married for five years, Steve does most of the cooking, goes grocery

shopping, and is in charge of outside chores; Annie deals with all the bills and takes care of their two children most of the time because she is now a stay-at-home mother. Annie and Steve both agreed that they do not follow specific gender roles from either culture, they follow whatever makes sense and is the most efficient for the family because they work together as a team.

**Angie and Brent.** Angie and Brent pointed out that in Thailand, men are expected to be strong and to be the leader of the family, so everyone can look up to him and follow him, which is different compared to the U.S. culture that Brent grew up in. They both see that American culture actually provides more equality and better balance between the two genders. Angie feels lucky because “he’s American, so he prefers everything to be equal, and he doesn’t have to act like the leader of the household, and I can tell him whatever I want.” Also, Angie does not expect Brent to read her mind and he is absolutely fine with her telling him to clean the house or go fix the car instead of hoping he will do things without being asked, which is breaking the gender expectation of communication. They both appreciate the open communication and do not have the expectation of one taking care of one another, instead, they just take care of each other.

**Frank and Jennifer.** Jennifer calls herself “a strong feminist” and does not believe in traditional gender roles where women have to rely on men to be the breadwinner and stay home and take care of the kids. Frank grew up in the 70’s and he saw many women following this expectation for women at the time, but it has been changing throughout the years. He also does not believe in traditional gender roles where women cook and do the laundry, and men fix cars and take care of yard work. Frank and Jennifer decided not to follow traditional gender roles in both American and Taiwanese

culture, instead, they “follow whatever feels equal for the relationship.” Jennifer appreciates that Frank believes in gender equality as she does, and that makes it easier for their relationship and for their communication.

*Daniel and Shata.* In Saudi Arabia, contact between men and women follow strict guidelines. They should not have any type of physical contact, including hand shaking, if they are not husband and wife or close family members. For example, when they get together with Sunni Muslim friends, men and women are expected to sit at separate tables. Daniel and Shata said that it is actually more comfortable and relaxing for both men and women so they can talk about specific subjects that are not appropriate to discuss in front of the other gender. On the other hand, the custom is more open in Iran, where speaking to the other gender, physical contact during greetings, and sitting at the same table is not a concern at all. Men and women also act more freely in front of each other compared to Saudi Arabian culture. At the beginning of their relationship, Shata was not used to talking with male Iranian friends without Daniel’s introduction or company. Once he explained to her that “it is okay, you don’t want to be rude” and that it is a part of his culture, she started practicing and is now more used to it. Vice versa, when they spend time with their Saudi Arabian friends, Daniel learned that he needs to be aware of the contact between him and other females including both verbal and non-verbal contact, and he now sits with the men so everyone feels more comfortable with each other.

From Shata’s family’s cultural background, it is not seen as a woman’s job to complete the household chores because they have servants to help with those. Shata never had to do any chores, and she never did her own laundry, bought her own groceries, or paid her own bills. She had to learn how to take care of herself and her home when she

moved to the U.S. “I didn’t know how to clean, I had someone come to help me with my laundry and clean the apartment when I moved to the U.S. until I married Daniel.”

In Daniel’s culture, women are in charge of most of the chores in the house, and they are responsible for cooking, child rearing, and cleaning. Daniel left Iran seven years ago, and without female family members, he had to learn how to take care of himself once he was on his own. He was surprised at first but then realized that Shata never had the opportunity to learn how to do the chores. Daniel started teaching Shata patiently, and although cleaning is still not her specialty, they share different chores and work together as a team to keep their home in good condition.

Daniel enjoys cooking very much, so he cooks half of the time which is not usual for males in his culture. Shata’s mother is very happy for her that she learned how to take care of herself and her husband now that she has had the opportunity to practice different house chores every day. When Shata’s Saudi Arabian friends learned that she and Daniel divide the chores and share equal responsibility, they were all surprised. Some of them were not optimistic about their intercultural marriage at the beginning, but they are amazed at how successful their relationship is now, and by the fact that Daniel does not fit gender role expectations or norms in Shata’s culture at all.

***Hadi and Linda.*** Linda admitted that she did not think about traditional gender roles when she first married Hadi, because it was just something that “happened naturally, I was expected to follow it.” Linda noticed that she was expected to follow Hadi’s lead and decisions for the family, and she was expected to live with his family and to help take care of them. When Hadi first started his own business, she stayed home and took care of his family and children. “It was difficult for me to do the parenting on my own, but I also

have to consider his expectations for the children,” said Linda. “That was challenging, I didn’t like it.” Hadi realized that because Linda was the one staying at home, he wanted to have her make most of the decisions for parenting, but he admitted that he still has his expectations. Linda was the one who compromised more throughout most of the relationship, but Hadi is now more flexible and willing to compromise his side to make Linda happy and to make the relationship work.

### **Food**

All eight couples cook a combination of food from both partners’ cultural backgrounds. Some of them enjoy the cuisine from one culture more than another, but they all try to find a unique balance that is enjoyable for both partners. Seven of these eight couples also described that they create special recipes that incorporate both cultures and these recipes became a unique aspect of “fusion style” that cannot be duplicated by others.

***Bob and Sakura.*** Sakura enjoys cooking a variety of food; she mentioned that she cooks Japanese, Mexican, Italian, American and even Middle Eastern food. She said, “I don’t cook Japanese food all the time. We don’t like to cook the same thing over and over, and they eat everything I cook.” Their two children and Bob eat everything Sakura cooks and they enjoy all of it. Bob and the kids have no problem using chopsticks, the traditional utensil used in Japan, when they eat Japanese food. On the other hand, Bob stated that Sakura has no problem trying different types of food herself, so they usually have no problem with the kind of food they choose because everyone is open and willing to try different things. At the same time, Sakura has noticed that the town she has lived in

for the past 12 years now has more variety of restaurants compared to the past, and she enjoys the different options.

***Bitsy and Hector.*** Hector described comfort food for each of them: “She has to have potatoes with everything and I have to have rice with everything.” They obviously feel comfortable with the food they are used to in their own culture. On the other hand, Hector actually likes Polish food and Bitsy likes Cambodian food, so they also enjoy the cuisine of each other’s culture. Before having any experience with Polish food, Hector was nervous that he would not enjoy it, but he actually loved it after he tried traditional Polish food. In Asian culture, food is very important and symbolizes many different things such as family, love, and togetherness; Hector admitted that he is passionate about food and more willing to try different kinds because it is a part of his Asian culture. He later realized that there are some commonalities between the foods of each culture, such as using beef tripe and duck blood as ingredients which are also common in Asian food.

Other than eating the food from each other’s culture, Bitsy and Hector also enjoy cooking food from each other’s culture. They always ask for the recipes from their mothers so they can make them at home. Now they have created something unique: they make combinations of both Polish and Cambodian food, and sometimes even invent new recipes to incorporate both cultures and flavors. Bitsy said, “When we create the menu for the week of what we are going to eat, it’s always, you know, Polish, Asian, Polish, Asian.” Hector also taught Bitsy how to use chopsticks, and now they use them with noodles because that was how Hector was raised: he eats noodles with chopsticks and everything else with a spoon.

***Ebi and Kani.*** Ebi and Kani actually like similar food, and Kani enjoys Asian food very much. Ebi was impressed by how well Kani used chopsticks when they first met. Kani also enjoys fish, miso soup, and he can even make Japanese green tea in the traditional way, which needs to be very skillfully prepared, and Ebi admitted that even she does not know how to do that. Ebi enjoys American food as well but they both like Japanese or fusion style better. Ebi usually makes Japanese food and Kani cooks with a fusion style; Kani uses Asian cookware such as a bamboo steamer to steam both meat and vegetables. Kani had the opportunity to try many more Japanese foods when he visited Okinawa, and he loved most of them except for sea urchin. He even tried nattō, a traditional Japanese food made with fermented soy beans. As unique as it sounds, Kani was fine with it but not “in love” with it.

Ebi also has adjusted to American food. She likes a good hamburger once on a while, but she does not like the fact that many American foods are eaten by hand, saying, “I’m still getting used to eating with my fingers, it sometimes gets oily and messy so I always have to wash my hands, especially when the food is too big.”

***Annie and Steve.*** Steve and Annie’s older son just had his second birthday few weeks ago. When it comes to children’s birthday, Steve believes that “you bring gifts for my child so I need to prepare good food for you to show appreciation,” because that is how he has been taught in Taiwanese culture. Also, Steve grew up with very little financial resources in his family so he wants to make sure that his son will be treated with what he deserves. “I did it right for my kids,” as Steve said. On the other hand, Annie believes that nothing is as important as the dessert, meaning the cake at the birthday party, because that is how her family taught her in American culture. At the end, Steve had to

compromise and prepared less fancy food than he wanted and Annie had to compromise to get a less expensive birthday cake than she wanted, so both sides of the family who came for the birthday would be happy and satisfied.

Since Steve is the cook for the family, he cooks mostly Asian and fusion style to make sure everyone in the family enjoys the food. Steve enjoys trying different recipes and sometimes he makes something unique to share with Annie and the children. Annie admitted that she does not like all of it, so Steve will prepare different food for everyone in the family to make sure they all get what they like. For instance, Steve recently wanted to use bitter melon as an ingredient but Annie did not like it, and they researched online to find out that bitter melon may cause adverse reactions in young children. At the end of the day, Steve had to eat all the bitter melon he cooked and he was fine with it, because he does not force others to eat food they do not like. The family only uses chopsticks when Steve's parents are visiting, otherwise Annie does not really use chopsticks much.

**Angie and Brent.** Angie's family spends more time with each other compared to Brent's family, and he actually enjoys it very much because it makes him feel close to her family. Angie is sometimes even jealous of how well her family treats him, especially her mother, who makes his favorite food even though Angie does not like it for the family gathering. "My mom always prepares his favorite food and she doesn't even know what I like!" said Angie, with laughter between them.

Brent loves Thai food, and he actually gained 60 pounds in three months after moving to Thailand because he could not stop eating and enjoying every type of food in Thailand. He loves Thai food so much that he decided to learn how to cook it because he cannot find it in any restaurant in the U.S. Angie is proud of Brent's cooking skills and



said, “He can start his own noodle bar because they taste so good, and he can cook some Thai foods that even most Thai people don’t know how to make!” Brent not only enjoys most of the food in Thailand, he also loves the street food in Thailand and a fruit called durian which most westerners cannot handle.

On the other hand, Angie does not like American food. When they first started dating, Brent took Angie out for a meal and ordered a sandwich for her. Angie was very upset, she told Brent to eat it all because she was not going to touch it, and she even cried after the meal because she was so upset. Angie described that she has tried different types of American food throughout the years because she did not want Brent to feel like, “This girl cannot even eat a sandwich, how is she going to live here?” but she still does not like most of it. “I hate hamburgers and sandwiches, unless that’s my last choice, or else I won’t eat it,” said Angie. “I don’t make sandwiches for him, hamburgers either, he would just have to eat whatever I make and he loves all of it.” As a result, they take turns cooking but 95% of the time they make Thai food at home. Brent now can make delicious Thai noodles and Angie can make spaghetti and roast chicken, they both compromise and have learned to cook different things from each other’s culture.

***Frank and Jennifer.*** Frank had not had much of an opportunity to try many types of cuisine in the past until he met Jennifer. Jennifer and Frank attend a group gathering once every week that is organized by students from many different countries. The group many times would try out different restaurants, especially Asian restaurants that Frank had “never thought of walking in before.” He enjoys most of the Asian food he has tried, but he does not like squid or chicken feet.

Jennifer enjoys trying out different types of food, includes American cuisine, but there are moments she does not like it. Last Christmas, Jennifer and Frank had a celebration with Frank's family. The family got together the morning of Christmas Eve, but their habit is to snack throughout the day without lunch because they have a great dinner planned. Halfway through the day, Jennifer was hungry and she could not eat anymore potato chips. She requested that Frank take her out to get some Asian food in the afternoon. It is interesting for her that Frank's family can snack throughout the day without having an official meal, which is very different than her culture where "food is very important, I don't like to miss meals and just eat snacks, that's not how we were taught in Taiwan."

Jennifer not only enjoys tasting food, she also enjoys cooking. Jennifer described that her mother took over all the responsibilities in the kitchen and did not let her kids work in the kitchen. Jennifer, on the other hand, wants to do it differently. "I'm trying to control my part as a partner, so he can actually get more time in the kitchen, making food he enjoys." Jennifer and Frank evenly share the preparation of dinner for each other. Frank grew up eating "junk food" and when it is his turn to prepare dinner, he used to buy fast food and Jennifer does not like that. Jennifer is now trying to motivate Frank to do more cooking at home, and Frank stated he has been trying to change his eating habits to balance his diet so it is healthier.

One of Jennifer's friends came for a visit from Taiwan, and she brought a big orange-colored barbecued squid, a whole dried chicken, and many other things; half of her luggage was filled with food. When Frank saw the amount of food she brought, he was confused because "do they think we don't have food here?" Jennifer had to explain

to him that bringing food is a common way of people to show their love, care and friendship in her culture. Now that Frank understands, he always expects food as “presents” when Jennifer’s friends or family come to visit.

***Daniel and Shata.*** Following Muslim standards, Daniel and Shata do not drink alcohol nor do they eat pork. They mainly eat Halal foods, which are foods that Muslims are allowed to eat under Islamic Shari‘ah law. The criteria specify both what foods are allowed, and how the food must be prepared. The foods addressed are mostly types of meat and animal tissue. In addition, Daniel and Shata cook food differently from each other, even when using the same ingredients. Shata uses more spices and makes food spicier; they enjoy foods from both countries and they take turns to cook both. For example, people enjoy drinking coffee in both Saudi Arabia and Iran, but they drink different kinds of coffee. When Daniel first tried the coffee they drink in Saudi Arabia, it was a strange taste for him. “I never tried it before, and I am slowly . . . slowly liking it.” Also, Daniel drank more tea and Shata drank more coffee. Now they have tried both and they enjoy both, so Shata drinks more tea than she used to and Daniel drinks more coffee than he used to. They are both influenced by each other’s culture.

***Hadi and Linda.*** When Hadi and Linda went out to eat in the past, they always had to go to an Iranian restaurant. “Like it or not, she had to go always!” said Hadi, laughing. Linda admitted that she was always compromising when they were young, because she wanted to make him happy. On the other hand, nowadays Hadi is willing to go to restaurants Linda would like to try that are not Iranian cuisine, as long as they do not serve alcohol because Hadi cannot eat in restaurants that serve alcohol due to the restriction of his religion. Linda laughed, “I’m still compromising because there are not

many restaurants that do not serve alcohol.” Linda admitted that she actually cooks more Iranian food compared to American food. She was taught by her mother-in-law how to cook Iranian food, which was what Hadi has always preferred. “I was around Iranian culture and food, also I was trying to please Hadi because that’s what he likes,” said Linda. Hadi still strongly believes that Iranian food is more nutritious and tastes better compared to the American food, but he would try it if Linda orders a steak in a restaurant; he is more open to it now that he has aged. Hadi also pointed out that Linda just naturally found Iranian food delicious without him pushing anything on her. “I never had yogurt, I never had rice, but after I tried them, they are not bad and I got used to it,” said Linda. Linda also became very good at cooking Iranian cuisine, and they eventually decided to open up their own Iranian restaurant.

### **Affection Expression**

Seven out of eight couples discussed the cultural differences when it comes to expressions of affection. All of them described notable differences such as the use of non-verbal expression, especially in public, because it is perceived differently in different cultures. It seems like they all try to make sure to use some type of expression to express their love and affection toward each other, regardless of whether it is verbal or non-verbal, because they all agreed that it is important to have your partner feel loved and treasured.

**Bob and Sakura.** Comparing American culture to Japanese culture, the Japanese is more conservative when it comes to displaying affection through direct words and in public. Sakura has no problem showing affection toward Bob and her children with non-verbal expressions. On the other hand, she has a hard time showing affection toward Bob in front of others, especially her Japanese friends and her family, because “it makes my

parents and friends uncomfortable, they may tease me too.” Bob shared an example that Sakura is okay with touching or behaviors that do not attract much attention most of the time in front of others, but she says, “Don’t touch me,” quite often when they are with Sakura’s parents because she does not feel comfortable doing that. The other thing is, Sakura started learning how important it is to say “I love you” in the American culture and she actually enjoys expressing her love toward her family in words because “I want to verbalize it so they know.” Sakura admitted that she needs to be reminded by her children sometimes to verbalize more of her love toward her family, and she thinks that she still does not say it enough. Bob feels like it is not an issue for him that Sakura does not say it often but he is touched and moved every time Sakura says “I love you,” he knows she does not say it easily, and she really means it when she says it.

***Bitsy and Hector.*** Physical expression or verbalization of emotions was not a part of Hector’s family when he was growing up. “You don’t kiss, you don’t hug, you don’t say I love you,” Hector said, and he still is very conservative regarding expressing affection in the public, but he has no problem expressing it with Bitsy, when the two of them are alone. Bitsy described that her culture is actually similar, because they do not necessarily express affection by hugging or kissing in public, so she is comfortable with what Hector is comfortable with.

On the other hand, because Hector was raised in a culture that often does not verbalize emotions even with family, she has found it difficult “reading him” because her family would always share things with each other regardless of whether it was negative or positive. They have attended couples counseling in the past and Bitsy expressed her concern in therapy by saying, “Sometimes I feel like I don’t even know if he actually

needs me.” Hector thought that was eye-opening because he never realized how much appropriate emotional expression had been impacting their relationship. Hector learned different words for emotions and skills to express them appropriately. Hector is aware that he needs to learn to do things differently sometimes compared to his culture to better communicate with Bitsy and also to make the relationship more complete and successful.

*Ebi and Kani.* Ebi did not realize that she and Kani were holding hands or just simple touching each other to express their affection in Okinawa until she was looking at the photos they took afterwards. Ebi agreed that Japanese culture is more conservative in expression of affection, both verbally and physically. She actually does not think about it too much because Kani is also not a touchy person, so there are not too many cultural differences between their habits. At the same time, Ebi feels more comfortable saying “daisuki,” which is “I love you” in Japanese, instead of plain “I love you” in English. She believes it is closer to her heart when she says it in her native language; Kani now also says it instead of “I love you,” which turned into a unique way that they express affection toward each other.

Besides “love,” Ebi noticed that she sometimes has difficulties expressing anger. Ebi agreed that Japanese do not express anger as freely as some other cultures, and she feels like she is less comfortable expressing anger compared to happiness. Kani on the other hand, does not have much problem expressing himself when he is angry, even in public. For example, the other day they were at a store waiting to check out, when someone cut the line in front of them. Kani was upset that some people are just inconsiderate, and he was trying to talk to the person. Although that person responded well and left the line, Ebi was trying to stop Kani from expressing his opinion and

feelings, and she was frustrated and somewhat embarrassed by his behaviors. They both agreed that this is a cultural difference and also a gender difference, because Japanese women are expected to express their anger less than Japanese men. Kani tries to be more sensitive with Ebi's reactions and sometimes he has to read her emotions by non-verbal expression or just ask Ebi about her feelings and communicate with her.

**Annie and Steve.** Annie had noticed that in the Taiwanese culture, family or parents asking if you have eaten yet is a way of showing love and expressing care. Steve also recognizes it, and he tries to put effort into reminding himself to say "I love you" more often to make sure his wife and children know the fact that he loves them. On the other hand, Annie does not mind him asking them "Have you eaten yet?" because she knows that is how he shows love and affection, so it still makes her feel happy and also ensures that he cares about them. When Annie and Steve were visiting in Taiwan, Steve told Annie not to show too much affection through behaviors such as kissing and touching, especially in front of his family, because he does not necessarily feel comfortable with it. On the other hand, Steve has no problem showing affection toward Annie with non-verbal behaviors.

**Angie and Brent.** Public displays of affection by couples who are not married is not approved of in Thai culture. Angie and Brent had to restrict their expression of affection in front of others before they were married even though they were committed to each other and working toward getting married. They felt free to show some affection after getting married but still, Thai culture is more conservative and Angie did not feel comfortable kissing or hugging in the public. Although Brent is not a "touchy-feely" person, he had some difficulties understanding the culture and why Angie cared so much

about how others view them, but he adjusted throughout time and tried to be thoughtful so Angie does not feel embarrassed.

Besides expressing affection with non-verbal behaviors, Angie was also not used to verbally expressing her affection to the people she loves. Angie never said “I love you” to her parents to express her feelings toward them before she met Brent, because it was not something people would say in Thailand. After Angie and Brent started dating, she learned from Brent that “it is okay to express feelings in words, especially love.” Someday when she was talking to her mother on the phone, she ended the conversation with “Mom, I love you” and her mother stayed silent for a while, said nothing, then hung up the phone. Angie explained that she understands it is very different for her mother to hear her saying “I love you” because it is not a part of Thai culture. On the other hand, Angie believes “love is a very powerful word” and she likes the positive attitude it brings to her relationship with her family. Angie’s mother actually talked to Angie’s sister because she was confused by the fact that Angie told her “I love you” because she has never done it in the past. Angie decided to continue using the phrase toward her family and also toward Brent, because she wants her family to know how much she loves them and how important they are for her. Angie’s mother is much more used to it now.

***Frank and Jennifer.*** Frank noticed that he and his family express affection differently than Jennifer, her family, and her friends. He enjoys saying “I love you” because he believes that no one can predict the future and affection should be expressed and known as much as possible. Jennifer agreed that at the initial stage of the relationship, she was not used to saying “I love you” because no one in her family does that. When they first visited Frank’s parents, his father hugged Jennifer and she had a feeling of



being warmly loved, which changed her perception. “I’m trying to do it more, because I want him to know I love him.” At the same time, she stills struggles and even feels awkward when she hears her co-workers saying “I love you” and “love you more” on the phone to their spouse or family. “That’s just not the way I was taught, I will not do it, I won’t.” She likes to keep her expression of affection more in private instead of in public where everyone can see or hear.

***Daniel and Shata.*** Shata noticed that when she is angry or upset, she tries to speak in English because there is more “distance from my feelings, so I don’t get angrier or start cursing, because that’s what happens if I speak Arabic.” At the same moment, Daniel will speak “bad words, cursing words” in Arabic as a humorous way to make Shata laugh and release her emotions. Shata pointed out that they believe in expressing emotions in words, but they also believe in expressing emotions with actions. “It’s not only about words, it’s about what you do to make people feel loved” said Shata. Even though Shata enjoys when Daniel uses words such as “honey” to express his affection toward her, she enjoys it even more when Daniel takes care of her and buys her gifts and show his love through actions.

### **Residency**

All the couples who participated in this study currently live in the U.S. Among all eight couples, seven of them discussed how residency has been discussed throughout the relationship. Six of these seven couples were open to the idea of moving to another country or the other partner’s country-of-origin, to experience the culture, life, opportunities, and to be closer to their families. The couple who is not planning on moving, Hadi and Linda, moved to Iran briefly but decided to move back to the U.S. due

to the political conflicts between Iran and the U.S. They have now lived in the US for over 30 years and much of Hadi's close family is in the U.S. as well. They are well settled and established, so they visit Iran often but have no plans for moving there permanently.

***Bob and Sakura.*** Bob and Sakura were still attending school in the U.S. when they were first married, and they naturally built their own family in this country. Sakura's parents have visited them in the U.S. and Sakura has also visited Japan with Bob and their kids a few times. Sakura's parents, especially her mother, predicted that she would end up staying in the U.S. from the beginning of the relationship. Sakura understands that to this day, her mother is still resistant to the fact that she lives thousands of miles away. Sakura enjoys living in the U.S., and she is very much used to it now. She knows that if they move to Japan, it would be a challenging transition for her children because of the language barrier, and because the educational system is so different. Bob is actually open to moving to Japan if an opportunity comes up to bring a different experience to the family. For now, they both agree that the status quo is easier for the family.

***Bitsy and Hector.*** Bitsy and Hector met in the U.S. and have started a life in this country. Bitsy came to the U.S. to experience life in a different country and she enjoys what she has. At the same time, they have seen how Bitsy's sister and her family living in Ireland changed their life attitudes, such as how taking vacation is more emphasized compared to working overtime in U.S. culture. They are both open to move to a different country in the future if there is an opportunity, so they can experience a different culture, a different life style, and perhaps be closer to Bitsy's parents.

***Ebi and Kani.*** Since Kani is passionate about learning about Okinawan culture and other Asian cultures, they have previously discussed the possibility of moving to a different country in the future, especially in Asia or Japan. They admitted that it would take a tremendous amount of effort and determination to move to a different country because they own a house together and they each have a career in the U.S. Ebi still wants to be closer to her family if possible, so they are open to moving out of the U.S. if the opportunity arises.

***Angie and Brent.*** After living in Thailand for five years, Angie and Brent decided to move back to the U.S. temporarily. Throughout the time she was teaching, Angie realized that she needed more education herself to be able to help special needs children better in Thailand, because it is a field that has fallen behind compared to western countries. Angie was accepted by the same school she went to for her Master's degree, for a Ph.D. in special education. Even though Brent was very comfortable and had already adjusted to life in Thailand, he knew he had to come back to his family, to spend time with them and help take care of them, so they moved back to the U.S. in 2008. It took Brent some time to be able to find a job but they finally settled down again.

Angie is planning on graduating in 2013, and then she will be returning to Thailand to continue her job as a teacher serving children with special needs. They decided that Brent would stay in the U.S. for a bit longer because he would be still going to school to get a higher degree. Angie and Brent had many discussions about their future residency, and they came to the conclusion that they will move back and forth between Thailand and the U.S., because they want to make sure they spend time in both countries and take care of both sides of the family. "We got to be fair to both of our families

because we love them.” Brent’s parents are in their later years and Angie’s parents are the same. They both struggle between fulfilling their dreams and taking care of their families sometimes, but they believe they have to compromise to be able to find a balance and reach both of these goals. They are willing to be separated by the distance for a few months if needed, because their families and their personal dreams are just as important as their relationship.

***Frank and Jennifer.*** Frank and Jennifer have discussed a few times the possibility of moving to different countries in the future. Frank admitted that he has never visited any place outside of the U.S. and he is comfortable with the environment he is used to now. However, he is open to the idea of moving to a different country if there is an opportunity. Jennifer has lived in the U.S. for seven years and she has planned a career track for herself here. She feels like living in the U.S. is the best option they have now, because they both enjoy the area they live in and enjoy their life here. More importantly, they both have stable jobs that support their lifestyle. On the other hand, she is hoping that she can return to Taiwan and teach there in the future because she wants to share her professional knowledge and use her ability to help promote youth theater and benefit the children in Taiwan.

***Daniel and Shata.*** Both Shata and Daniel want to stay in the U.S. and work for at least a few years before they move anywhere else. They have discussed maybe moving back to the region where they are from, but not to Saudi Arabia. According to Saudi Arabian law, it is very difficult for a Saudi Arabian to apply for even a visa for their spouse from a different country, because they want to discourage such marriage to “protect their citizens, because no one knows the background of the foreigners,” said

Shata, “and keep the culture within our country.” Shata and Daniel want to be close to their families, but Daniel would not even be allowed to visit Shata’s family in Saudi Arabia due to the immigration policy of Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, if they have children in the future, the children would not be qualified for Saudi Arabian citizenship because “their father is not Saudi.” If they moved back to the Middle East region, they would choose Iran or another country that is between the two countries. Shata does not necessary agree with her country’s policy but it is the reality she has to face marrying someone not from her country.

***Hadi and Linda.*** Hadi and Linda had always planned to move to Iran and live with Hadi’s family ever since they were married. Hadi never even applied for a green card until later because he believed that they would move back to Iran eventually. Hadi’s family owned many different businesses in Iran when he was growing up. His family has always been well established and “every opportunity was there, why would I want to go anywhere else?” said Hadi. They went to Iran and stayed for a few months after their first child was born. They came back to the U.S. and their second child was born. They went to Iran again, thinking “we are moving permanently this time.” Just five days after they moved back to Iran, in 1979, the Iranian revolution started and the Iranian hostage crisis happened.

Due to the anger Iranians have toward Americans, Linda traveled back to the U.S. She went to Switzerland after a while with her mother to meet Hadi and was trying to get back to Iran after the political situation was more settled. The day before she planned to travel to Iran, the government of Iran confiscated all the business holdings and property of Hadi’s family. Linda and Hadi started to realize that it was not safe for Linda and the

children, or even Hadi, to stay in Iran anymore. Linda decided to fly back to the U.S. first and Hadi would join her in the U.S. once he made sure his family was safe and taken care of. Unfortunately, the Iran-Iraq war started around the same time and all the flights were cancelled and no one could travel out of the country of Iran. Hadi ended up staying for another five or six months after separating from Linda in Switzerland. The family finally settled down after Hadi reunited with Linda and the children. They did not have the opportunity to visit Iran for many years after that, until the political circumstances were stable again. Now they still visit Iran often to visit friends and family, and for their business, but they have no plans to move out of the U.S. in the near future.

### **Child Rearing**

Three among eight couples have children from their current relationship. All three couples discussed how cultural differences play a role in different parenting styles and philosophies. Not only culture, religion and personality impact each partner's belief in parenting. It seems like they all try to compromise, communicate and find a middle ground that both parents agree will be the best way to raise and educate their children. One couple was the exception, Hadi and Linda, because Hadi just let Linda take over parenting responsibilities because he was busy making a living to support the family. Linda wishes that Hadi could be more involved and that their children could understand Hadi's culture and language on a deeper level, which is not the case currently.

***Bob and Sakura.*** Sakura would speak to her children in Japanese when they were infants, but because of the dominant English environment, she spoke to them less and less, and now they do not really speak Japanese. Sakura and Bob brought their two children back to Japan and placed them in Japanese school for few months last year, and the

children really had a hard time because of the language and education system. Sakura blamed herself on “not doing a good job” having the children learn Japanese when they were young, because now at their age it is more difficult for them to learn the basics.

Sakura described that traditional Japanese parents would never praise their children in front of others; they will only do it when there are no others around. She explained that this is being “humble” and it is an important concept of the moral standard of Japanese culture. Bob and Sakura both want to do better when it comes to this topic because Sakura wants to praise her children more, but she says, “I’m so rooted to my old value, I still have a hard time praising them.” Bob admitted that he does not do it often either due to his military background and his belief in discipline, and Sakura makes fun of him because his parenting style is actually closer to the Japanese culture. However, she prefers to use an American parenting style, which has given them the opportunity to make their own decisions and know that it is okay to praise their children in front of others.

**Annie and Steve.** Traditional Taiwanese culture believes that anything that is cold will damage people’s physical health, especially children. Steve’s family did not want Annie to give their children anything iced or cold, but her family said that water tastes better when it is cold. Steve and Annie decided to research online and keep the discussion open and try to find the best way for their children. Steve recognized that sometimes his family does things in a certain way just because it has been done the same way for a long time and they never thought about finding out the practical reason for it. When his parents cannot explain how a parenting skill could be beneficial for the grandchildren, Steve has to do his own research and then decide if it is the best way to do it.

Although he grew up in New York, Steve was very much raised in the Taiwanese culture. He remembers his parents taught him how “not doing your best is being lazy” and “you can always improve, always try to be faster, better, always remember there are others better than you” to motivate him to continue working as hard as he could. Steve is trying not to impose these beliefs on his children because he wants them to be happy and successful instead of just being successful. Steve wants his children to be themselves and to be autonomous, instead of being the same as everyone else; he wants them to do things the way they want instead of the way he wants them to do. Steve stated that he tries to pick out the better pieces of parenting from both American and Taiwanese culture, and he always discusses this with Annie to make sure they are doing the best for their children.

Last, Annie and Steve hope they can teach their children both English and Mandarin Chinese, because they want them to be able to understand both cultures and communicate with people who are from a similar cultural background. It has been difficult for them to teach their children Mandarin Chinese because there is not much Mandarin Chinese spoken around them, so the environment is not very friendly and almost challenging for them to start learning when they are young. Annie and Steve still hope that in the future they can educate their children in a way where they can be bilingual and fluent in both languages. They believe the more languages a person speaks the better he or she can communicate and understand others from a different perspective, and the more successful the person will be.

***Hadi and Linda.*** Linda and Hadi have been married the longest among all the couples I interviewed for this study. Linda explained that their parenting style has changed throughout time, and what they do now is actually quite different than what they



used to do. Most of the time throughout their marriage, Hadi was actually very busy with work and all the businesses he owned; Linda was doing most of the parenting when their children were growing up. Their cultural differences became more obvious after they had children. “He expects certain things from them and things have to go his way, but that is different than the U.S. culture,” said Linda. “He did not spend a lot of time with them, so it is difficult to reinforce his cultural values and language for the children.” For example, when their daughters were young, Hadi would tell Linda not to have them wear shorts, because that does not follow the Muslim and Iranian culture. “The older the children got, the more they want to do things their way or everyone else’s way in this culture,” said Linda. “He had to let them make their own decisions.” Linda remembered that it was challenging for her to raise the children according to Hadi’s standards, and she sometimes felt “helpless” because she was trying to make everyone happy.

Although their children have a close relationship with Hadi’s family because many of them lived with Hadi and Linda in the past, they never had the experience of their father’s culture, country, and language, and this creates distance between them and Hadi’s side of the family. “Because they don’t speak the language, they don’t understand the language,” said Linda, and “that is the key because his family still speaks Turkish to each other most of the time.” Their oldest child, who lived in Iran for about a year and half, learned to speak some Turkish and Farsi when she was there. As soon as they moved back to the U.S., without her father being around and speaking those languages to her, she stopped speaking them and never picked it back up. Their other two children never visited Iran, and Linda and Hadi never force learning Turkish or Farsi on them. None of them practice Islam either because it was never reinforced or learned by them.

Being a Muslim and trying to learn the languages herself, Linda is sad and disappointed that none of her children speaks their father's language, and "there is always be something missing there, the closeness, and until this day, they don't have a deep understanding of Hadi's culture," said Linda. She wished that they could have put in more effort educating their children about their father's culture and language, so they could have an even closer relationship with him.

### **Finances**

Only two couples discussed specific examples and differences related to finances, such as the attitude toward spending and debt. It is interesting to see that for both couples, their different beliefs were influenced by their family background and economic status when they were growing up.

***Angie and Brent.*** Angie's family is from a lower socioeconomic status and they believe in hard work and frugality. Angie always has worked hard to support herself throughout her adult life and education. Brent described his family as blue collar, and they also believed in hard work. This was the second marriage for both of Brent's parents. All of his siblings are a lot older than him so he was raised like an only child, and pretty much given anything he wanted as long as his parents could afford it. Angie described that she lives only with the necessities and does not spend extra money if she does not have to. On the other hand, Brent is used to "randomly utilizing money for different purposes when I have money," he admitted. Angie said, "I save the money and he spends the money." They realized the way they manage money is very different from each other, both related to cultural and age differences. They learned how to communicate and compromise. Angie had to be blunt with Brent to show him how wasteful he used to be

and help him to plan better. Brent also realized that there are ways to be frugal and still live a good life because that is what he has seen in Thai people instead of enjoying materialism without considering the financial consequences like many Americans.

***Frank and Jennifer.*** Frank's family is upper middle class when it comes to their socioeconomic status, which is different compared to Jennifer's family. Jennifer's parents divorced when she was still young, and her mother was a single parent supporting her two children with living expenses and education. Jennifer's mother had to sometimes seek financial support from family and relatives to be able to take care of Jennifer and her brother. Jennifer started working part-time and supporting herself when she was in college, and said, "I'm very good at saving, and I work hard to make money." Furthermore, Frank has not visited Taiwan yet because Jennifer feels like their priority should be saving money for the wedding and buying their house, so Jennifer has been holding off Frank's trip to Taiwan for financial considerations. Frank does not necessarily agree with Jennifer, but she is the one who is in charge of saving money for all their expenses, so he compromised and followed Jennifer's decision. On the other hand, Jennifer admitted that Frank has more knowledge about how to make investments and retirement plans, so he is in charge of long-term saving and she is in charge of short-term saving.

### **Emerging Themes: The Impact of Language Differences**

#### **Communicating with Extended Family**

A common theme that emerged from the interviews was the impact of language differences in how each partner communicates with their in-laws, especially

when they do not speak the same language. All eight couples mentioned this theme in the interview.

***Bob and Sakura.*** Sakura's parents speak very limited English, and Bob communicates with them using simple English and Japanese words, and also hand gestures and other non-verbal expressions. Sakura had to use a dictionary to look up words in English early on in the relationship, but not anymore because she is more used to communicating in English. Bob uses a dictionary to look up Japanese words when they are in Japan and sometimes asks someone to assist him in communicating with his father-in-law.

***Bitsy and Hector.*** Hector used a dictionary when they visited Bitsy's family in Poland, because she could not be there all the time to interpret or translate for him. During their wedding ceremony, Hector and Bitsy used both English and Polish to share their vows because they believe both cultures and languages are important for this relationship and their families, and it also showed the unique characteristics of their cross-cultural relationship.

***Ebi and Kani.*** When Ebi and Kani visited Okinawa, Ebi had to be the interpreter for Kani and her family because most of her family members do not speak English. Sometimes the conversation would get too long and she would just have to summarize the interpretation. Kani described his experience in Okinawa as "I was comfortable, even though I was not talking to people all the time. As an introvert, I was less shy, and felt okay having a conversation with others." He felt like he was like everyone else there, and he does not feel the need to "have conversations that do not mean anything" in the U.S. He would prefer less talking but more meaningful or deeper conversation like he had in

Okinawa, and not be forced to be social with others all the time. During the family gathering as an informal wedding ceremony, Kani gave a speech in English and he used one word in Okinawan dialect. Ebi explained, “my family loved it . . . they loved it!” and Kani said, “I made everyone laugh and then everyone seemed more relaxed after that.”

**Annie and Steve.** Steve’s parents have owned different businesses since they have been in the U.S., and they currently own a Chinese restaurant. They only speak simple English such as greetings or anything people might ask in a restaurant. When they come to visit Annie and Steve, they use many non-verbal communications with Annie, but Steve still has to interpret for them sometimes. Steve usually interprets the meaning of the conversation or paraphrases it in a cultural appropriate way instead of giving the literal interpretation. He also speaks to his siblings in Mandarin most of the time and they make jokes in Mandarin that only people who understand the language and the culture can comprehend.

**Angie and Brent.** One time when Brent went to Angie’s parents’ house on his own, her mother pointed to the door after he sat down and started speaking Thai, which Brent did not understand a word of and thought she was asking him to leave. He left the house confused and frustrated because he did not know what he did wrong. Afterwards Angie came home and realized that her mother was telling Brent to close the door after he came in the house but Brent just left without a reason, so she was confused as well. Angie and Brent both laughed when they talked about this story. From that moment on, Brent decided to learn Thai because he wanted to be able to communicate with not just Angie’s family, but everyone else around him so he does not make a fool of himself anymore. Brent never took any formal classes; he just learned and started picking up Thai

throughout daily life and listening to the conversations around him. He can speak Thai quite fluently, but writing and reading are more difficult for him.

**Frank and Jennifer.** Since Frank is still learning about the way Jennifer's mother communicates with Jennifer and other family members, he feels the need to ask Jennifer many questions and have Jennifer educate him about the communication style of her family. Frank admitted that he really wants to learn Mandarin Chinese because he wants to be able to communicate with Jennifer's mother and her family in a culturally appropriate way, since her mother does not speak much English. On the other hand, Jennifer does not have much of a problem communicating with Frank's family. She describes them all as friendly and kind, but she is also wanting to spend more time in the future with his family to get to know them better, because then she would feel more comfortable "talking to them about many more things in English."

**Daniel and Shata.** During the time visiting Daniel's family, Shata was situated in the language of Farsi and the culture of Iran, so she picked up Farsi quickly. "I could understand more than I can speak in Farsi," said Shata. "I could understand about 75% of the conversation and I use observation for the other 25%." Daniel did not have to interpret for Shata most of the time because she could understand most of the conversation. On the other hand, Daniel speaks some Arabic but has not had much of a chance to spend quality time with Shata's family; so far he uses his broken Arabic and English to communicate with them and has not had any issues.

**Hadi and Linda.** After 40 years of being in a multilingual marriage, Hadi and Linda both agreed that it is more challenging for a couple who speaks two different first languages, because the differences will always be there. "Sometimes she cannot

understand what I'm saying even if I'm saying in English," said Hadi. "This is just a part of this marrying somebody from someplace else." Linda agreed, and she explained that the way Hadi speaks Turkish is more dramatic than how other people express emotions, such as "they will say things like I will cut the sheep's head off or even my own for you to show my love," an example given by Linda. "If he had a wife from his own country speaking the same language, they would have a deeper language connection than what he has with me." She has taken classes in the past about his languages and religion. She understands more than she can speak, and she speaks enough Farsi and Turkish to communicate with Hadi's mother.

### **Expressing Self and Communicating in a Second Language**

It is not easy to express oneself, one's feelings, and specific cultural terms in a second language; all the couples agreed with this. Each couple has their own way to build effective communication, such as using a dictionary, explaining things with greater description and details, and being patient with each other. All eight couples mentioned this theme during the interview.

***Bob and Sakura.*** Sakura admitted that sometimes it is difficult for her to explain some concepts that only exist in Japanese culture, because it is not just about the language, it includes the culture as well; she occasionally feels overwhelmed by trying to explain these concepts to Bob. Sakura never has any issue talking or communicating to Bob in English because he is always very patient and she can take her time to explain herself better. Sakura definitely thinks in English in her head most of the time, unless she cannot find the correct English word in translation. Interestingly, she noticed that it takes her a few days sometimes even weeks to speak fluent Japanese when she goes back to

Japan, because she is so used to speaking and processing in English nowadays. Even speaking to her Japanese friends in the U.S., there are moments she stutters to find an accurate way of expressing herself because she has to translate from English to Japanese in her mind.

***Bitsy and Hector.*** Bitsy spoke very little English when she first came to the U.S. She used an English-Polish dictionary quite often when she first started school in the U.S. Bitsy decided to stop using the dictionary after few years because she believed it was not beneficial for her if she kept trying to find words in Polish. “I think that actually helps me build my vocabulary because I wouldn’t always go back to the Polish word . . . so that’s why my wordy explanation sometimes work better for me than trying to find the Polish word.” Bitsy now only uses a dictionary for academic or professional matters. Bitsy mentioned that sometimes she forgets Polish words because she does not have many opportunities to speak Polish besides talking to her family and a few Polish friends in the U.S. She uses detailed descriptions to describe things she does not know how to explain in English and vice versa. She feels sad that she is forgetting some of her native language. Even though Bitsy has been in the U.S. for over 10 years and speaks English 95% of the time, she admitted that it is still difficult for her to find accurate and sometimes appropriate words to express herself in English when she is tired, because it is more effort to speak in a second language and she does not have the concentration for it.

***Ebi and Kani.*** Ebi enjoyed learning English when she was young, and she received English immersion education in college, which strengthened her ability and interest in speaking in English. She still uses a dictionary sometimes to look up new words or the words Kani uses that she does not understand. She admitted that her English



tends to regress when she is tired after work or when she is surrounded by Japanese or Okinawan speakers. She can concentrate and think only in English if she has enough energy to focus, but other times she is still used to thinking in Japanese. She is aware that she tends to be more careful when she speaking English, choosing the appropriate words, but speaking Japanese words come out from her mouth without thinking very naturally.

**Annie and Steve.** Steve has been in the U.S. for 26 years and speaks fluent English which means he was in school speaking English in the U.S. longer than the time he spent speaking Mandarin Chinese in school in Taiwan. Steve notices that for things he learned in Mandarin, he has to process or think them in Mandarin. For instance, he learned to memorize his multiplication tables in Mandarin so he has to use Mandarin in his head to go through math most of the time. He still speaks Mandarin to his parents and siblings.

Steve and Annie both agreed that they are more emotionally connected to their first language than the second language. Steve experiences this more often since he is the one who speaks a second language in the relationship. He has said to Annie, “I wish I could talk to you in Mandarin Chinese,” because it would make it much easier for him to communicate and explain cultural concepts and beliefs to her, because “sometimes words can be explained, but the meaning is hard to understand or follow by people from a different culture,” said Steve.

**Angie and Brent.** At the beginning of their relationship, it was not easy for them to communicate with each other because Angie’s English was not very fluent, and that also caused some arguments between them. Besides language, other differences also

came up over time such as cultural and age differences, and Angie not being fluent in English does not necessary help with their communication.

***Frank and Jennifer.*** When it comes to language, Frank admitted that he has had moments where he feels frustrated and tries to explain something to Jennifer but she has a hard time understanding, but he has never used a dictionary for their communication. Frank tries to explain it in different ways and uses different words so it is easier for Jennifer to comprehend. Jennifer gave a few examples and stated that she usually does not have trouble understanding different words. It is usually references to old movies and TV shows that she has a hard time with, because that is also related to culture, not just language. When this kind of situation happens, they go online and find clips of the reference so Jennifer understands the reason Frank is referring to these old films. Now that they have been together for a few years, they have many inside jokes that other people do not understand because it is usually about something they laughed about together.

***Daniel and Shata.*** Arabic and Farsi are actually somewhat similar to each other, about 10% overlaps; they share the same alphabet but Farsi has four more letters than Arabic. Because Daniel and Shata met in the U.S., it was natural for them to communicate in English, which is the second language for both of them. They use a dictionary sometimes to find the right words to explain or communicate with each other. If they cannot find the English word that has the translated meaning, they will try using their native languages, because there are terms used only in the Middle East region so they can guess the meaning more easily using Arabic or Farsi. Besides using the dictionary and their native languages, they also try to communicate with more specific

details in English to help each other understand. Daniel admitted that it is challenging sometimes to explain his feelings in English, but at the same time, they believe that “love does not have to be expressed in language, you can show love in action.” Daniel explained that because they share similar cultures and religion, it is not too difficult for them to understand each other in English. “It is not just about the language, it is also about the culture.” At the same time, they are used to the way and pattern the other uses when speaking English; because they are both using a second language, they are less and less challenged to understand each other now.

***Hadi and Linda.*** Linda and Hadi admitted that they may have used a dictionary to help them communicate with each other at the beginning of their relationship, but they have not done it for a long time. “I never explained, and she got tired of me asking, so we just kind of let it go,” said Hadi. Hadi speaks fluent English and he is used to communicating with Linda in English. On the other hand, because Linda lived in Iran with his family for a while, she is the only one who does not speak Turkish at home. Many times she has asked Hadi to explain the language and the culture in detail, but he would answer, “I can’t translate that.” Linda was very patient at the beginning but after a while, Hadi was tired of explaining and Linda was tired of asking, so they eventually started to learn from experience and observation instead.

### **Learning a Different Language**

All eight couple pointed out that they had put into effort to learn the first language of their partner. The main reason and motivation was to communicate more effectively with their in-laws, also understand the culture better since language and culture are inseparable.

**Bob and Sakura.** Bob has always wanted to learn Japanese from the time he met Sakura, so he has learned the basics but Sakura just never had the patience and they did not put in enough effort for him to learn Japanese at a higher level. Sakura admitted that “I never had the patience to teach him, too much trouble.” Sakura also regretted that she stopped speaking and teaching her children Japanese when they got older. The main reason Bob would like to understand more Japanese is because he wants to keep the Japanese culture and language in the family, to make sure they do not lose that part of their background and to be able to communicate with Sakura’s family better in the future, so she does not have to be the interpreter for them all the time.

**Bitsy and Hector.** Hector learned enough Polish to read his vows during their wedding, and he wants to learn more so he can have direct communication with Bitsy’s family instead of having her interpret or translate everything when they are visiting in Poland.

**Ebi and Kani.** Although Kani only speaks English, he is in the process of learning Japanese. He said he has always been interested in learning Japanese and now it is very helpful that he can ask Ebi questions all the time; they even have the Japanese channel at home so he can learn from watching TV as well. Kani admitted that he wishes he could have understood more when surrounded by Ebi’s family speaking Japanese in Okinawa, which really motivated him to learn Japanese because he believes that if he wants to learn more about the culture, he has to speak the language first.

**Annie and Steve.** Since most of Steve’s family can communicate in at least simple English, Annie has not thought about learning Mandarin Chinese other than some terms and concepts that come up in their daily life. On the other hand, she would like her

children to learn how to read, write and speak Mandarin Chinese, because she wants them to be involved in the culture that their father is coming from, and also be more competitive in the future if they speak more than one language.

*Angie and Brent.* Angie actually did not ask Brent to learn Thai and she has not spent time teaching him. Angie agreed that Brent worked very hard to learn the language and she enjoys the fact that he can communicate with her family no problem, but she joked about the fact that she cannot talk behind his back with her mother anymore because he knows everything they are saying. Both Angie and Brent agreed that they still have moments where they want to get the dictionary to help with communication, but they usually just try different things such as non-verbal gestures and different words to explain things to each other, which takes patience for both of them.

Brent in fact noticed that his Thai actually has continued to improve since they moved back to the U.S. because he has more time to listen carefully and process when Angie and her friends are speaking Thai. Also, he recognized that he is more sensitive to different Asian languages when he hears them, and can usually tell what language it is now that he has learned Thai. Brent and Angie use English as the main language to communicate, because that is the language they used from the start of the relationship, and it has become a common ground for their communication. English is actually less complicated for them to use and understand each other. “If I speak Thai to him I will have to find the simple words he can understand . . . English is easier,” said Angie. On the other hand, they use certain Thai words because it is more meaningful for Angie, such as calling each other “honey” in Thai. Brent uses it as well because he knows Angie is more emotionally connected to that word instead of the English word.

**Frank and Jennifer.** Frank and Jennifer both agreed that learning a language is also learning the culture, and that is the main reason Frank wants to learn Mandarin Chinese, so he can have a better understanding of the culture and communicate more with Jennifer's family and friends. Frank sometimes takes photos of objects to help him learn the Mandarin name for them. With Jennifer's help, Frank now has a Chinese name, and he is very proud of it and it makes him feel closer to her culture. On the other hand, Frank had a hard time understanding why Jennifer spent most of the time speaking Mandarin when they got together with her friends early on in their relationship. He felt left out and was frustrated that he could not join the conversation because he does not speak Mandarin. Jennifer had to explain to him that she has a strong attachment emotionally with Mandarin Chinese because it is her mother tongue. She feels the need to speak her mother tongue whenever she has the opportunity because she misses the "feeling of being myself" in her own language. Jennifer described that she felt very awkward when she first started teaching in English. It took her some time to find her own style that is different than her old style when she used to teach in Taiwan. Now she is more comfortable with who she is as a teacher and how she teaches, and does not worry about how others may see her as a foreigner teaching in English.

**Daniel and Shata.** Daniel learned Arabic when he was in grade school; it was one of the second languages they had to study, so he understands some of the language. Daniel is trying to use more Arabic when he has the opportunity, because he wants to be able to communicate with Shata's family in the future. Both of their goals are to learn and be more fluent in each other's language in the future.

***Hadi and Linda.*** When Linda lived in Iran, she was motivated to learn more about the language and religion. Unfortunately, there were only Farsi classes available since it is the official language of Iran. Linda had to learn Turkish through observation and by listening to others having conversations. She can speak some Turkish and that is enough for her to communicate with Hadi's mother most of the time.

### **Lost in Translation**

Language and culture are usually inseparable, and four of the couples pointed out that they find themselves "lost in translation" sometimes, because without the cultural context, it is difficult for their partner to understand the concepts that only exist in their specific culture. Four out of eight couples mentioned this theme during the interview.

***Annie and Steve.*** Steve sometimes still uses the dictionary when he has difficulty explaining some Taiwanese cultural concepts in English for Annie, such as "guan-xi" and "mian-zi." "Guan-xi" means relationships, and it is more emphasized in the Taiwanese culture because every interpersonal interaction is based on "guan-xi," no business or transaction can be done without "guan-xi" and every little interaction contributes to the "guan-xi" and determines if it is going to be successful. For "mian-zi," which means "face" it is about how Taiwanese would like to present their best side to others and keep whatever happens within the family or the system, because they very much care about how others judge or see them.

These two concepts have different meanings compared to their direct translation in English, because the culture values them differently. For example, when Steve runs into an old friend who is also Taiwanese, they will exchange information such as how much they make, and what they are doing as a career. In American culture, asking people

about their income is very rude but it is very common in the Taiwanese culture; people might think you are rude if you're not willing to share. As a result, people would like to maintain the "guan-xi" so they will share their income, and to save "mian-zi," they will make sure they say the highest income they have ever had in their career so they do not have to be "looked down" by others.

It took some explanation and examples from Steve to help Annie understand these two concepts and to help her be aware because Steve has to follow these concepts when he is dealing with his family or other Taiwanese and Chinese people. If Annie still has a difficulty time understanding the meaning of the cultural concepts after Steve's in-depth explanation and vice versa, they both agreed that they would, as Annie says, just "accept it, it's just the way it is even though I don't quite understand, but it's fine" to make peace. They agreed to have each of them deal with their own family and friends, as long as they agree that it is not going to burden their relationship. For example, Steve always buys the plane tickets for his parents when they come to visit, because he is trying to make the trip easier for them, which Annie does not necessarily understand; his parents always pay him back and sometimes more than the tickets are worth, because they do not want to burden him and want to do what they can to take care of him. As long as they have appropriate expectations like this, Annie and Steve will just give each other the power to make their own decisions about what is best for them and their families.

**Angie and Brent.** After they moved to Thailand, Brent started to pick up Thai because he wanted to communicate with her family and be able to survive in that country. Before learning Thai, Brent did not understand why Thai people have to talk so loudly and so aggressively toward each other. Angie had to explain to him that it is just the way



Thai people talk and communicate with each other, “it is very passionate.” At the same time, at different social events, Brent would sometimes misunderstand when others communicated with him but he could not ask Angie in front of others due to social pressure, and then they would fight about it when they are alone, asking, “Why did you have me do that?” It was not easy for their relationship.

**Frank and Jennifer.** Due to Frank’s disability, he always tries to see things from a different perspective, so he watched many Cantonese and Chinese martial art movies and comedies. He tried to understand the humor in those movies, and he realized that he had to learn about the culture before he could “get the jokes.” He would always ask Jennifer to explain the concepts around the specific joke so he could catch it the next time, and they both enjoy that because those turned into more inside jokes between, makes them feel even closer. For example, the phrase “pig head” was used in many Cantonese movies to make fun of people who are slow processors, which did not make sense to Frank because it does not seem funny when translated into English. Jennifer had to explain that pig represents “slow and naïve” in Chinese culture so Frank could understand the original source of this reference, so that he could catch the humor and enjoy the movies.

**Hadi and Linda.** Hadi and Linda both agreed that they are attached to their first language at a different level compared to a second or third language. Hadi admitted that he sometimes has a hard time expressing himself in English, so he would keep his thoughts and feelings to himself. At that same time, Linda might think that he is not expressing himself because he does not want to share with her, which creates difficulties in their relationship. Even though Hadi has lived in the U.S. for over 30 years and he is

very much used to speaking English most of the time, he finds himself still having a strong desire to speak, think, and read in both Turkish and Farsi, so he can still feel connected to his languages and culture. Hadi is a well-respected Muslim elder in his community, and many people seek religious opinion from him all the time. Hadi enjoys talking to others in his own languages because it releases stress, and also he can tell jokes that only people who speak the language understand. Hadi speaks Turkish to his family, and he speaks Farsi to his Iranian friends. He actually thinks in Farsi more than Turkish because he has more opportunities to speak Farsi most of the time. He also reads more in Farsi, because that was the language taught and used when he was in school in Iran. Hadi noticed that he dreams in Turkish, reads poems in Farsi, and does business in English; it all depends on how he is related and attached to the language.

### **Uniqueness**

Seven out of eight couples agreed that their relationship is unique like no one else's relationship. Since each couple has their own unique themes, there are not emergent themes between each different couple; rather, the following section is to describe how each couple sees their uniqueness and differences from others.

#### **Bob and Sakura**

Sakura and Bob see themselves as a unique couple, because they are two unique people forming a strong relationship. Both of them feel like the uniqueness just happens naturally for them, Bob described it as "I don't know, it's one of those things that just happened. I don't feel that I have to make room for the Japanese culture in my heart, my life, or my home, it just happens naturally." Sakura agreed. "In daily life, I don't really feel any different or special, it's not my focus I guess." This couple believes that it is

important to acknowledge their different cultural backgrounds and language differences, but it is more important to see them as a part of the relationship instead of as problems, issues or even challenges. Bob said “the key to overcoming the differences is just, just the unconditional acceptance of each other. Don’t dwell on the differences, celebrate the differences,” and this is the uniqueness of their relationship.

### **Bitsy and Hector**

Bitsy and Hector have created their own recipes and menus which are a mixture of Cambodian, Polish, and American food, that is unique and like no other couple. Hector jokes that they should open a restaurant that combines the two cultures from a food perspective, and the restaurant will be named “Pobodian,” combining Polish and Cambodian. In daily life, they use soy sauce with Polish food and they call that “Pobodian in action.” Bitsy described their habit of eating is “we will eat Polish soup from the Asian bowls with the Asian spoons,” and both of their cultures are melting into their relationship all the time. Also, Hector and Bitsy use humor as an important part of their communication, and they make jokes that no one else would understand. Bitsy sometimes has a difficult time and feels frustrated trying to explain things to Hector, and Hector always breaks it with humor, then they laugh together and release the pressure between them.

Hector had a cat before he met Bitsy and the cat remained a member of the family after they moved in together. At some point Bitsy started calling the cat a Polish name which is different than the cat’s original name, and everyone in the family seems to love it and now the whole family calls the cat the Polish name. Hector also noticed that his family has started to learn some Polish words and they use them to be humorous with

Bitsy and her family; Bitsy's family is learning about Cambodian culture and her father talks to Hector about the political situation of the country. Both families are melting together and being impacted by each other's language and culture, which they believe is unique and they are very proud of it.

### **Ebi and Kani**

Ebi and Kani made up Japanese nicknames for each other and they love calling each other these nicknames all the time, which is unique to them and no one else would understand the meaning of the nicknames. Kani and Ebi were interested in learning about each other's culture (American and Asian) before they met, which was a strong foundation of the relationship. After they met, they tried to learn even more about each other's cultural background and they believe this is the reason they have overcome their differences. This has made their communication successful, and is also part of what makes their relationship unique. Kani was very interested in Asian culture, art, and architecture, and Ebi feels like it is now easier to open up and talk to Kani than at the beginning of their relationship because he already has the basic knowledge of the culture she grew up with. After all, Kani believes that they are different from any other couple because they each have very unique personalities and that creates something exceptional about them, both as two individuals and as a couple.

### **Annie and Steve**

Annie and Steve both believe that their relationship is very unique compared to others. Annie described their relationship as "a mixture of American and Taiwanese culture, maybe about 75% American and 25 % Taiwanese," and gave examples like how they eat beef and broccoli at home which is an American Chinese food and they do not

celebrate the Moon Festival which is a traditional Chinese/Taiwanese holiday. Steve believes that over time, there will be some parts of his culture that he will hold on to but some parts he will let go, it all depends on how it fits their relationship and their family. Furthermore, they have strong faith in Christianity, and as Steve said, “we do it the way we feel comfortable with, and also according to the biblical standard.”

### **Angie and Brent**

Brent and Angie both agreed that their relationship is unique and exceptional. Brent described that they pulled out different aspects of both American and Thai culture to complete their relationship, saying, “There are many things I wish I could bring across from Thai culture to American culture and vice versa . . . we do that in our relationship all the time.” Brent also sees that they are different compared to many Thai-Western couples. “They didn’t seem to have what we have,” said Brent. Brent and Angie recognized that they dedicate much more effort into open communication compared to other intercultural couples they have met, and that is the main reason why their relationship is more successful than some of these other couples. This is how Angie described the uniqueness of their relationship:

We sacrifice, we try to understand each other, we spend more time to understand each other, and the one thing that we hold is each other because of love, I mean, just love, yeah, all about love, that would be holding the relationship, I always think like I am, I will be like, I think if I lose him, what’s going to happen to my life, I cannot accept that, so . . . even if we, we have argument and I know what thing I am gonna leave you so I think love, sacrifice, and understanding, and patience, that make us unique and special.

### **Frank and Jennifer**

A very unique aspect of Frank and Jennifer’s relationship is that both Jennifer and Frank enjoy watching movies very much, and they learn more about each other’s culture

and language every time they watch a movie together, no matter if it is from China, Taiwan or the U.S. Furthermore, they invented nicknames for each other, “Agent J” and “Agent F.” Due to Frank’s request that Jennifer start teaching him Mandarin Chinese, Jennifer invented their own way of communication which is a mixture of English and Mandarin Chinese, just including simple words to have Frank get used to the sounds of them. No one else can duplicate the new language they use to talk to each other. “We are cultured in a way that is not like the American way or Taiwanese way, we created our own way.”

Jennifer also noticed that when they need to make decisions together, they do not necessarily follow the American perspective or the Taiwanese perspective; instead, they compromise, and make the decision together according to their personalities and the circumstances, “In our own way,” Jennifer emphasized. Another example is that Frank and Jennifer do not believe in traditional gender roles from both cultures, so they just follow whatever feels equal for the relationship, and create their own gender roles. “If you don’t like it, don’t do it,” said Jennifer, “it’s not you need to become American culture or you need to become Asian culture, we meet each other halfway.”

### **Daniel and Shata**

Shata and Daniel decorate their home with items from both cultures. “The tea set is from his country, the chocolate is from his country, but the rug is from my country,” Shata explained. They combine things they brought from both countries to make their home represent both Iranian and Saudi Arabian cultures, not just furniture, but also food and everything else. They also follow their own comfort level with traditional gender roles, for example, Daniel enjoys cooking very much and he even does make-up for Shata

sometimes, saying, “It surprises her friends, because their men don’t do that, but I do it, because I like it.”

When it comes to food, they also incorporate different elements from both Iranian and Saudi Arabian culture into daily cooking. For example, Daniel will use Saudi Arabian spices with Iranian food and call it something new: “No one has it, it’s new!” said Shata proudly. They enjoy picking out different elements from each culture and integrating them into their relationship. “We like to make a combination that is wider than just his culture or mine, to make it unique,” said Shata. “We enjoy both cultures, we don’t choose sides, that is why our relationship is unique and successful.” Lastly, Daniel and Shata emphasized the fact that they are attracted to each other because of the differences between their two cultures and two languages. “It is not really hard or challenging, we just have to learn each other’s culture and enjoy them both, and we love it,” said Daniel.

### **Hadi and Linda**

Hadi and Linda actually do not feel like they have a unique relationship that is that different from others. “We’re just like everyone else, who’s willing to sacrifice for their relationship and family, to make it work,” said Linda. Although this couple does not feel specifically different or special from other couples, they were the first couple I interviewed that were not afraid of sharing the unsuccessful parts of their relationship so bluntly and openly. I think they are very unique compared to any other couple, even other intercultural/multilingual couples.

The first unique aspect of their relationship which emerged throughout the interview is that Hadi and Linda actually admitted that they never had very open

communication with each other when they were younger. “Our communication actually gave each other space, and we left each other alone,” said Hadi. They just tried to compromise, and did whatever they could to make the relationship work and keep the family together. “There is no perfect marriage, and there are good and bad things about every relationship, it is just human nature,” said Hadi. Linda also agreed that “you have to find the balance, and give or you lose it, you just have to be the peace maker sometimes.” “We sacrificed enough to keep the family together,” said Linda. “Many people are not willing to give in as much as we did. We have sacrificed to hold each other together, and that makes us stronger.” They have seen many intercultural/multilingual couples who have had successful relationships do the same thing they do, compromise.

Nevertheless, Hadi and Linda believe that there are going to be things a partner from a different culture will never be able to understand. The couple just has to learn from it, accept it, and decide if it is worth sacrificing or not, for example, Hadi would not tell Turkish jokes to Linda because she will not understand them due to language and cultural differences, and she is more than happy now that he keeps them to himself and his friends. Lastly, Linda was honest and mentioned that if she could start it all over again, she probably would not choose a partner from a different culture again because it has been challenging and not easy at all.

### **Couples Counseling: How Can it be Helpful**

#### **Understanding and Learning Both Cultures**

All the couples who were interviewed in this study pointed out that counseling psychologists need to have enough knowledge of both partners’ cultural backgrounds, to



be able to understand each side's perspective and recognize the dynamics of the relationship. Furthermore, counseling psychologists need to be open to learning about the different cultures so the couple can feel equally respected or else it could be difficult to build a therapeutic relationship with both of them.

***Bob and Sakura.*** Bob and Sakura cannot stress enough that counseling psychologists must understand the cultures of both partners and then celebrate the culture, the language and the differences, which they consider an essential concept for successful couples counseling. Observing other intercultural/multilingual couples around them, they see them being challenged by overcoming cultural and language differences, so they believe the differences are not the problem, but not being positive and accepting is the cause of the conflict. Lastly, counseling psychologists need to provide enough space for each partner/spouse to talk and process during counseling, so that perspectives are heard and understood in this healing process.

***Bitsy and Hector.*** According to Bitsy and Hector's experience of couples counseling, both Hector and Bitsy believe it is important that counseling psychologists need to be open and willing to learn about both partners' culture backgrounds and beliefs. Hector described that it was very helpful that he and their couple's therapist had a deep discussion of his Cambodian-American cultural background and how it affects and shapes his personality and behaviors. On the other hand, Bitsy felt like the couple's therapist could have been more interested in her cultural background and spent more time discussing how her culture impacts her personality and behavior. She was not sure if it was because she is European Caucasian, so perhaps her culture was not discussed as much because the assumptions were that it is similar to American culture.

***Ebi and Kani.*** Both Ebi and Kani believed that a counseling psychologists need to be open to both partners' cultures instead of leaning toward either one of them. Also, counseling psychologists need to have general knowledge of both cultures so he or she can understand the perspective and beliefs of their cultural background. Ebi admitted that this is subjective, but, even herself as a mental health professional, she would prefer and feel more comfortable seeing counseling psychologists who look similar to her in terms of ethnic background and gender. Ebi expressed her honest opinion, "I would be hesitant to see a middle-class background Caucasian American counseling psychologist who just graduated from school," unless he or she can show her their experience and competency in multiculturalism.

***Annie and Steve.*** Annie and Steve both identified that counseling psychologists need to have a basic knowledge of both cultures instead of only having experience with one of them; counseling psychologists need to be able to see both cultures and both perspectives. For instance, Steve believes that if counseling psychologists do not understand the meaning of "guan-xi," it would be difficult for them to understand the importance of "guan-xi" and may not be able to help them solve communication issues. Also, Steve thinks it is important for counseling psychologists to understand how each partner wants to be validated in a culturally appropriate way, so they can actually feel validated throughout counseling and by their partner. At the same time Steve believes that it would be helpful if counseling psychologists are sensitive toward cultural differences and knows what is going to be offensive to people because of their cultural background, so the couple can feel respected no matter which culture they are coming from. Lastly, since the couple practices Christianity, they would like counseling

psychologists to always be neutral and help them to “see the biblical way of doing things” so they can make their relationship successful.

**Brent and Angie.** If Brent and Angie were to participate in couples counseling, Brent believes that counseling psychologists would have to have very strong knowledge of both cultures, because counseling psychologists should be able to understand the beliefs and perspectives from both cultures and not side with one of the partners. More importantly, Angie and Brent both think it would be even more helpful if counseling psychologists have experienced and lived in both cultures, because counseling psychologists need to understand how two people from very different backgrounds can build a relationship and make the relationship work together, and there is no other way to understand it better than experiencing it themselves. Specifically, because of the stigma people have in Thailand about counseling, Angie believes it is important for counseling psychologists to understand how much courage it takes for someone from Thailand to attend counseling. She suggests counseling psychologists really provide encouragement and be sensitive to different reactions that might come up for the couple during the process of counseling.

**Frank and Jennifer.** “The counseling psychologist has to be multicultural,” said Frank, “They need to have some inkling of both cultures,” and Jennifer added, “Not just textbook knowledge but actual life experience.” They both agreed that counseling psychologists need to have knowledge and actual experience with both cultures, or else it would be difficult for counseling psychologists to understand the perspectives and beliefs of both cultures, because counseling psychologists would not be able to share the same experiences of the couple, which will not help a couple who already have challenges.

Also, counseling psychologists should be open and willing to learn about both cultures at a deeper level, the meaning of different languages, and understand that there are many different ways to communicate and build a relationship. "The single way is not working, we need to think about the different ways to accommodate people from different cultures," said Frank, and Jennifer nodded to agree.

***Daniel and Shata.*** The most important thing for counseling psychologists to do is to be open about learning about both cultures. "They need to ask what is your culture, what is important to each of you," said Daniel. "Take the points and perspectives from both and learn, try to understand both of them." They believe counseling psychologists need to be able to see viewpoints from both partners and both cultures before they can be helpful.

***Hadi and Linda.*** Hadi pointed out that counseling psychologists need to have a high level of understanding of the relationship, "more than basic knowledge" said Hadi. "You cannot help people if you don't know their culture, what they are thinking about." Once counseling psychologists have enough knowledge of both cultures, he or she can understand the differences and see if the issue can be compromised by both partners, or if sometimes one of them needs to compromise. For example, Hadi's culture believes that his family comes before his wife, which is different than Linda's American culture, and he cannot compromise that because it is a core principle of his culture. In this kind of situation, Hadi believes that counseling psychologists will need to thoroughly help both partners explore the reasons behind the core values and discover different ways to make it work. "Unless you know what can be changed and what cannot, otherwise you cannot help the couple" said Hadi.

## Language Barriers

Since it is not easy for people to process in therapy with their second language, it is important for counseling psychologists to acknowledge that the partner who is using a second language may need more time to accurately communicate thoughts, ideas, and emotions. Counseling psychologists may want to accommodate the second language speaker to ensure both partners' voices are being heard in the process of therapy.

***Bitsy and Hector.*** Bitsy believes it is important for the couples counseling psychologists to acknowledge both partners, both of their cultures, and both of their languages. She had the experience of needing more time to express herself sometimes, especially in therapy, since the conversation would have to be thoughtful and insightful. Therefore she recognizes the importance of counseling psychologists giving the partner who is speaking a second language more time in therapy so he or she can have permission to express thoughts, ideas, and emotions instead of being nervous and shutting down. Lastly, they both agreed that counseling psychologists need to acknowledge the differences between the two cultures and respect the differences, understand the cultural aspects, and the rationale of both partners' beliefs and behaviors.

***Ebi and Kani.*** Kani and Ebi think it would be helpful if counseling psychologists are sensitive with not just the language difference between the partners and how it affects the relationship and their communication, but recognizing that it is also important to acknowledge the language differences happening in counseling because one partner might need more time to process and express themselves in a second language.

### **The Purpose of the Relationship: Love**

Two couples pointed out that counseling psychologists need to remind the couples of the foundation of their relationship, so they can be motivated to continue working on the relationship. If they lack the motivation of love, it would be difficult for any relationship to last and be successful.

**Bob and Sakura.** Bob and Sakura strongly believe that the couples counseling psychologists need to remind the couple of the original purpose of the marriage/relationship, which is love, so the couple can again see their foundation and rebuild their relationship upon it.

**Hadi and Linda.** Linda thinks counseling psychologists need to remind the couple the reason they are together: “Love, you have got to think about the relationship between two people and sometimes it’s more than just culture or language,” said Linda. “If the couple is still willing to make it work as a unit, it is still hopeful.”

### **Results and Research Questions**

In this section, each research question is answered with the summary of the results and integration of the themes across participants, to ensure the results meet the purpose of the study and the research questions are clearly addressed.

#### **Q1     How do Cultural Differences Affect Intercultural/Multilingual Couples’ Relationships and Communication?**

Bob said “the key to overcome the differences is just, it’s just really unconditional acceptance of each other. Don’t dwell on the differences. Celebrate the differences.” This was after he had been in an intercultural/multilingual relationship with Sakura for 17 years. Seven other couples all agreed that it was better to accept the differences rather

than ignoring them. Some couples see the differences as challenges, and others see them as the reason they are still together. “I knew I want to marry someone who is not from my country,” said Shata. As a Muslim woman from Saudi Arabia, she took initiative and chose someone who is from a different country, and she enjoys all the cultural differences they encounter in daily life. Her husband Daniel, learned how to cook Saudi Arabian food and they both do not mind compromising on cultural differences because this way they get to choose what suits their relationship the best, rather than following only one culture or the other.

On the other hand, Linda decided to compromise on the cultural differences she had with Hadi, and chose to be the one who compromised more “I’ve become more demanding instead of being passive through age, it’s difficult . . . all I did was trying to make the relationship work.” After 39 years of marriage, Linda admitted “I don’t regret anything I did to keep this family together, but if I can start all over again, I’m not sure if I would choose to marry someone from a different culture, it was very challenging.” Intercultural/multilingual couples obviously have different ways of viewing how cultural differences affect their communication, both positively and negatively. But in order to make the relationship work, they often accepted the differences, openly discussed the differences and compromised on the differences. At the end of the day, they all recognized that their partner and the relationship are uniquely meaningful to them, and that they are worth fighting for.

## Q2      How do Language Differences Affect Intercultural/Multilingual Couples’ Relationships and Communication?

Obviously, speaking a different first language is challenging for romantic relationships, but all eight couples managed to have at least one partner who speaks

fluent English as a second language so that they could communicate with each other. For Steve, it is not just about the language, it is about the cultural implication behind the language, “I do wish Annie could speak Mandarin sometimes, so I don’t have to feel like I need to explain everything, and some of the concepts people who are not from the same culture just won’t understand.” On the other hand, for Brent and Kani, they really wanted to learn their partner’s native language and be fluent in it, not only so they can understand the cultural implications better, but also so they can improve their communication with their partner’s family. “After that one time I misunderstood Angie’s mom, I realized that I have to learn the language, and learn it well,” said Brent. He successfully learned how to speak Thai fluently without formal education, because he had the opportunity to live in Thailand, and immersed himself in the language, and the culture.

For Kani, although he has not had the opportunity to live in a Japanese environment, he started reading books related to the history of Okinawa to gain more knowledge of Ebi’s cultural background. They subscribed to a the Japanese channel through the cable service and tried to make it as immersing as possible, so Kani can learn the language even when they live in the U.S. Language differences certainly impact intercultural/multilingual couples’ relationship in many different ways. They each utilized different methods to make sure they communicate clearly with their partners, such as using a dictionary, detailed explanations, and non-verbal observation. Sometimes they just have to ask their partner to trust them and let them deal with the language differences especially when it comes to communicating with extended family. “As long as we trust each other, and be open about it, eventually the differences won’t be a problem anymore,” said Steve.



**Q3     How do Intercultural/Multilingual Couples Integrate Their Differences and Create a Unique Relationship of Their Own?**

For all eight couples interviewed for the study, each of them had a unique way of integrating their differences into the relationship and creating a unique phenomenon of their own. For one couple this involved cooking and the preference of cuisine. “I love Thai food, and I can make lots of Thai food that many Thai people don’t know how to make,” said Brent. Angie agreed and she was very proud of Brent’s cooking skills. The couple enjoys more Thai food than American food because Angie just does not like most of the American food. Brent does not have a problem with it and he enjoys making home meals for Angie every time he is available. A second example involves how much one partner chooses to learn about their partner’s culture and country. Ebi did not realize how much Kani enjoys reading about Asian history, “he knows about the history of Okinawa, which most people don’t because they just think we are a part of Japan, but we weren’t in the past . . . sometimes I feel like he knows more about Okinawa than I do,” said Ebi.

A third example involved how cultural media could be an important tool for communication. Frank and Jennifer both enjoy watching movies very much. They have watched many martial arts films together because that is something they both are interested in, especially the Asian martial art movies. “He picks different movies and we watch it together . . . we have lots of fun, I try to explain the different cultural concepts and language to him, and vice versa, he does it for me too,” said Jennifer. Last, finding a balance of the gender roles is also very important. In Shata and Daniel’s relationship, even though they have the same religious background and belong to the same sect, the traditional gender roles that are tied with their religious beliefs are still different from culture to culture. “I never learned how to clean, how to cook or how to do the laundry

before I came to the U.S., but Daniel taught me with lots of patience even though in his culture women are supposed to do those chores,” said Shata. They both let go of part of the traditional gender roles of their own culture, and met in the middle to ensure they both feel comfortable with the expectations within the relationship. They did not feel like following either one of the cultures because it does not match with their unique balance. For example Daniel cooks and does make up for Shata, and Shata decorates the house and does the laundry.

Although each couple has unique ways of integrating their differences into their unique relationship, one theme that is commonly mentioned by all couples is that they all meet each other on different points of the continuum for different aspects. One couple could lean toward more of the female partner’s culture when it comes to food but feel more comfortable with how male partner’s culture express affection to people they love. Similarly for the other couples, since each of them owns different unique aspects of their relationship. Even though two couples might compromise on the same theme but they do so in a different way. Every couple chooses to meet each other differently on different aspects of the relationship, and this is how they integrate the differences into their unique relationship and it is impossible to be duplicated.

Q4     If the Participants were to Participate in Couples Counseling in the Future, How Can Counseling Psychologists/Therapists be the Most Helpful in the Process of Counseling?

One consistent theme brought up by all participants, was that counseling psychologists need to have at least basic knowledge of both partners’ cultures, be open to learn or even experience them to have a better understanding, and be able to see things through the different angles of both cultures. “Maybe more than a basic knowledge, both

cultures,” said Hadi, “If you don’t have that knowledge, you cannot help anyone. You don’t know what they’re thinking and what you do. You have to enter their thinking, you got to know their culture.” Also, counseling psychologists need to build a safe and comfortable environment especially for the partner who speaks a second language in the relationship and in the process of counseling. “I don’t want counseling psychologists to talk to me in Japanese, because he won’t understand what’s going on,” said Ebi, “but I want to make sure I have the space to say that I feel left out, I need to feel comfortable to say that if that’s what happens.”

Furthermore, some couples believed it is important for counseling psychologists to remind the couple that the purpose of the relationship is that two people who love each other want to spend the rest of their life together. “When you’re looking at marriage, you’re supposed to be a unit . . . sometimes I don’t think we should go back as deep and just look at the cultures,” said Linda, “you got to think about the relationship between the two people and forget about the cultures. This is love.”

### **Summary**

In this chapter, all the themes provided by the participants were thoroughly described to present how culture and language impact intercultural/multilingual couples’ relationships and communication. All the participants provided rich data and a thick description of themes answering the interview questions. For cultural differences and how these differences impact couples’ relationships, themes like food, residency, finances, extended family, child rearing, gender roles and expressions of affection emerged among the participants. For the language differences and how the differences impact couples’ relationships, themes like communicating with extended families,

expressing themselves in a second language, issues getting lost in translation, and learning a new language were observed among the participants. Each couple also showed the unique aspects of their relationship and the fact that no one else has the same kind of relationship was obvious throughout the interviews when they were telling their stories. Advice for couples counseling psychologists from the participants was also provided to help mental health professionals be able to deliver more effective treatment for intercultural/multilingual couples, such as understanding and being open to learning about both partners' cultural backgrounds, language barriers in therapy, living in a country that is not the country-of-origin of either of the partners, and reminding them that the foundation of their relationship is love, in order to motivate them to continue working on their relationship.

While the themes emerged between couples, specific examples from each couple's experience with building an intercultural/multilingual romantic relationship are also provided with details to present the uniqueness of their relationship and experiences. Considering the system/relational and constructive theoretical frameworks of this study, it is important to recognize that no participants have the same experience, and each of their stories is full of their life experiences which represent the strength of them as individuals, and as a part of the family system, that is irreplaceable.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION**

In the previous chapter, I described the emerging themes and the uniqueness of each couple and between couples. The findings of this study were obtained by rigorous analysis of the data, which were collected through face-to-face interviews, review of transcriptions, member check and expert checks, and field notes. Eight intercultural/multilingual couples were interviewed, with each member of the couple contributing unique experiences and perspectives regarding being in an intercultural/multilingual relationship. I was able to gain a better understanding of how cultural and languages differences impact couples' relationships and how mental health professionals can be more effective when conducting couples counseling with intercultural/multilingual couples. In this chapter, the research questions and the purpose of this study are reviewed, and I will provide a summary of the findings, discuss the limitations of the study, and suggest implications for the field of counseling psychology and future research.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The ethnic makeup of the United States is more diverse than ever (DeAngelis, 2010). At the same time, new technology creates a friendlier environment compared to the past for people to start and maintain international or long-distance relationships (Bystydzienski, 2011; Romano, 2008). Both of these factors contribute to the fact that intercultural romantic relationships and marriages are more common nowadays

(Bystydzienski, 2011; Clemetson, 2000; U.S. Census Bureau 2010). At the same time, the field of psychology has started to notice the challenges mental health professionals face in providing counseling, therapy or treatment for intercultural couples. Olver (2012) discussed that for counseling psychologists, one of the most challenging issues can be counseling intercultural or multicultural couples. Kim, Prouty, and Roberson (2012) conducted a case study and presented an example of how to utilize narrative therapy with intercultural couples, and they discovered that using narratives to focus on the exploration of issues such as acculturation, societal pressures, and divergent role beliefs aided in the construction of a unique couple identity.

Given the unique challenges and characteristics of intercultural/multilingual romantic relationships (Bystydzienski, 2011, Molina et al., 2004), the purpose of this study is to explore how cultural and language differences play a role in intercultural/multilingual couples' relationships and how these difference impact the couple's communication and relationship. This study was conducted by collecting qualitative data and utilized phenomenology as the theoretical framework.

Followings are the research questions addressed in this study:

- Q1     How do cultural differences affect intercultural/multilingual couples' relationships and communication?
- Q2     How do language differences affect intercultural/multilingual couples' relationships and communication?
- Q3     How do intercultural/multilingual couples integrate their differences and create a unique relationship of their own?
- Q4     If the participants were to participate in couples counseling in the future, how can counseling psychologists/therapists be the most helpful in the process of counseling?

### Summary of Findings

The findings in this study were obtained by careful word-by-word analysis through the transcriptions of in-depth interviews. To answer the research questions, the emerging themes are summarized in this following section.

#### Research Question 1

According to the participants, there are eight different aspects of how cultural differences affect their relationships and communication. Each couple also provided a variety of examples they encounter in everyday life.

**Religion.** Three out of eight couples interviewed expressed a strong belief that religion is an important foundation of the relationship. These couples were aware that religion is an essential aspect of their relationship and that being in a relationship with someone who has a different religious background will create more differences and challenges, so they chose to only date someone who has the same religious background before committing to each other. One of these eight couples, Hadi and Linda, did not have the same religious beliefs when they first start seeing each other, but Linda eventually converted to Hadi's religion and became a Muslim. She also agreed that having the same religious beliefs is a significant foundation of their relationship. Even though Hadi never pushed Islam on Linda, she still sensed that it was somewhat an expectation of his family that his wife practice the same religion, so she made this choice to make their relationship stronger. For the other interviewed couples, they either do not have strong religious beliefs or are more flexible and open to different religious beliefs. If they came from different religious backgrounds, it seems like they were willing to learn

about each other's religious beliefs and incorporate both into their life or even the wedding ceremony.

***Gender roles.*** Seven of the eight couples interviewed shared their similar experiences with traditional gender roles; they have been moving away from tradition and starting to find the roles that actually fit their personalities and make their relationship more successful. They all described that following their own idea of gender roles and openly communicating about what they are comfortable with actually makes the communication easier because there is no assumption or false expectations. The last couple, Hadi and Linda, stated that they mostly follow the gender role expectation in Hadi's culture because "that's how we make the relationship work." In the past, Linda followed expectations and Hadi's lead with the family, but recently it has changed and Hadi has started to soften and make more compromises for the relationship, which is different from traditional gender roles in his culture.

***Food.*** All eight couples interviewed cook a combination of food from both partners' cultural backgrounds. Some of them enjoy the cuisine from one culture more than the other, but they often communicate about it, and find a unique combination of cuisine that both partners enjoy and are satisfied with. Some of the couples are open to many different types of cuisine, some of them enjoy the cuisine of both of their cultural backgrounds, and some couples enjoy the cuisine from one partner's culture more than the other. They also create new recipes that combine different elements of both cultures, for example, Bitsy and Hector describe their cooking as "Pobodian," a blending of Polish and Cambodian. All participants described that it is essential that both partners find a unique balance and special recipes that can fit the needs of both partners.



***Affection expression.*** Seven of the eight couples shared some of the cultural differences they run into in their relationship regarding the expression of affection. The differences between cultures are non-verbal expression, touching, and kissing, especially in public. Some cultures are more conservative, and the partners are not used to expressing affection in a physical way in front of family and friends. All seven of these couples described that open communication and compromise are necessary for their partner to understand their level of comfort with expressing affection in public. On the other hand, social expectations are not as influential when it comes to showing their affection to each other in private. A few of the participants who are from more conservative cultures admitted that they actually enjoy expressing affection both in words and actions not just to their partner, but also their children and parents, to make sure they share their love with each other.

### **Residency**

All couples interviewed currently live in the U.S. Seven of these couples have at least one partner who is from the U.S., and there was one couple in which both partners are from countries other than the US. Among all eight couples, seven of them have discussed moving to their partner's country-of-origin or somewhere outside of the U.S., so they can experience a different culture and be closer to family. One couple, Hadi and Linda, had moved to Iran in the past but decided to move back to the U.S. due to the political situation between the United States and Iran. To be closer to his family, Hadi ended up moving his family members to the U.S. so he and Linda can be close and take care of them. It was really important for all these couples to discuss and be open about the possibility of moving to a different country in the future, since the desire of wanting

to experience different countries and cultures is a characteristic of partners who are in intercultural/multilingual relationships in the first place (Molina et al., 2004).

***Child rearing.*** Three of the eight couples interviewed have children in their relationship. Two of them still have children who are younger, and they described that rearing children with a partner who is from a different cultural background requires continuous communication to find out the best way to raise them. The other couple, Hadi and Linda, Linda was in charge of the child rearing when the kids were growing up, and Linda admitted that she wishes Hadi could have been more involved in their children's upbringing and that they would have had more connection with Hadi's culture and religious beliefs. Hadi also described that he had expectations for his children but it was difficult because they all grew up in the U.S., and followed more of the U.S. culture. They both wish things could have been different if they could do it all over again, but they are happy with their children and their families.

***Finances.*** Two of the eight couples discussed specific examples and differences related to finances. All of them agreed that the attitude of financial planning is not only related to cultural differences, but is also related to family background. Both couples have to learn about each other's habit of spending money and slowly compromise and discuss which way will be the most beneficial for their current financial situation.

## **Research Question 2**

After analyzing the data, four different themes emerged and showed how language differences can affect couples' communication and relationships. To answer the research question, themes are listed as follows.

***Communication with extended family.*** It is not easy for a partner to communicate with their partner's extended family, especially when they do not speak the same language. For most of the couples, the partner has tried to learn the basics of the other language so they can understand their partner's family better. At the same time, all couples noticed that communicating is not only about language, it is also about non-verbal expression. Many of them described communicating with their extended family or in-laws with body language and some of their native language, which is actually the best way to communicate. It is important to be patient and open to different communication styles when it comes to language differences, and all the couples expressed their desire for better communication with their partner's extended family, with the help of their partner.

***Expressing self and communicating in a second language.*** It is not easy for anyone to express him or herself in a second language, especially when it comes to expressing feelings and emotions. Furthermore, when it comes to specific terms that are related to cultural concepts, it is even more difficult for their partner to understand if they cannot comprehend the cultural concept. Each of the couples interviewed has their own way of effective communication, such as using a dictionary, explaining different concepts with more details or other tools like showing movies or telling stories. They all agreed that being patient is essential when communicating with each other. In addition, speaking a second language all the time can be straining, so it is important the other partner understands the need to speak their native language with friends and family. Lastly, understanding cultural concepts is the key to communication, and the couples interviewed all try to explain cultural meanings with different perspectives, beliefs, and behaviors.

Their partners try to be open and learn more about the other culture to create smooth communication.

***Learning a different language.*** All the couples interviewed expressed a desire to learn their partner's language, if they did not already speak it. As described above, culture and language are two concepts that almost cannot be separated. When one partner wants to learn more about the other culture, they realize that they have to also learn the language to fully comprehend the meaning of the language. One challenge they face is that the environment they choose to live in always has more of one language than the other, so it is difficult to fully learn the language when they are not immersed in it. Learning their partner's native language not only makes it easier for them to communicate with each other, it also helps them to communicate with their partner's family. Although it is not easy, all participants feel strongly about it and want to strengthen their relationship by learning about each other's language and culture.

***Lost in translation.*** Language and culture are usually inseparable, and four of the eight couples pointed out that sometimes they feel something is "lost in translation" because of the lack of understanding the cultural concept behind the language. These four couples expressed that learning the culture and learning the language are two continuous tasks for their relationship. The lack of understanding of cultural concepts has created stress for the couples. They have learned to do a better job explaining not only the language, but also the particular cultural concept to each other to decrease the miscommunication not just between them, but also between their partner and extended families. Two of these couples also realized that their partner may never fully understand all the different concepts of each other's culture; they just have to live with it, be patient

and accept the differences, but never make assumptions or blame their partner for getting lost in translation from time to time.

### **Research Question 3**

Seven of the eight couples described their relationship as unique and exceptional. They provided many different examples of how they integrated elements from both cultures and create unique aspects of their relationships. Some couples have created new recipes which include both cultures' cuisines; some couples plan and design unique wedding ceremonies to incorporate rituals and customs from both cultures. Other couples celebrated the differences instead of seeing them as challenges; or invented a new language or nicknames that only they would understand. Finally, all the couples integrated each other's culture into their daily life to different degrees for certain issues, such as Linda and Hadi following the more traditional gender roles of Iranian culture but followed the American way of education for their children. Each couple decided on their own to pick the best of both worlds to build a unique relationship, a special phenomenon that no other couple has experienced.

### **Research Question 4**

*Understanding and learning both cultures.* All participating couples pointed out that the most important aspect of couples counseling for them would be if counseling psychologists have knowledge and experience of both partners' cultures or if he or she is willing to learn about them. Participants believed that it would be almost impossible for counseling psychologists to understand the rationale for each partner's communication style if counseling psychologists lacked of knowledge of the cultures that are integrated into the relationship. Since intercultural/multilingual couples' relationships are even more

complicated than monocultural/monolingual couples', it is essential for counseling psychologists to understand each partner's cultural background, language differences, different customs and different cultural beliefs to be able to see the perspectives of both partners. Furthermore, if counseling psychologists have experienced the cultures in person, it would be more helpful because counseling psychologists could be able to put themselves into the couple's shoes and share experiences of when they have faced cultural and language differences in life. If counseling psychologists do not have much knowledge of both partners' cultures, counseling psychologists need to be open and willing to learn from the couple, and also do their own work to be able to see the differences in each partner's angle instead of following only one cultural belief in the process of counseling, which might damage the relationship instead of repair or strengthen it.

***Language barriers.*** Therapy and counseling can be an emotionally intense experience for anyone, say nothing of people using a second language during this process. Two couples brought up the importance of providing more space and time for the partner who is speaking a second language in counseling. First, it is already challenging to express oneself on an emotional level and be vulnerable especially using a second language. If counseling psychologists do not have a strong enough relationship to ensure the partner safety in expressing him or herself in a second language, it could build a barrier instead of a healing process. The partner may be hesitant to truly express feelings, emotions and deep thoughts which are crucial for building better communication. In this case, counseling may not be as effective because the partner who speaks a second language in counseling cannot fully express themselves during the healing process.

***The purpose of the relationship: Love.*** The two couples who have been in their relationships the longest emphasized the importance of love. They all agreed that after many years of a relationship or marriage, it is easy for couples to forget the original reason they decided to be together: love. They believe it is important for counseling psychologists to remind couples who are facing challenges or issues in their relationship that they are together because they love each other, and the original purpose of the relationship is that two people fell in love and wanted to build a life with each other. By reminding them that love is the purpose of their relationship, it will be easier to motivate couples to compromise, to celebrate their differences, and work for the relationship so they can continue their life journey together.

### **Findings and Pervious Literature and Research**

#### **Findings Consistent with Prior Literature**

Culture is a set of concepts that includes many different elements (Hays & Erford, 2010). In this study, culture is specifically defined as the social heritage of a person and includes social norms (such as rules of conduct), social values (beliefs and common understandings), and social practices (what people say and do), which are assumed to be shared by a group of individuals (Bystydzienski, 2011). The results of this study are consistent with past research and literature, such as religion, extended family, gender roles, food, affection expression and residency were all mentioned by participants in one way or another, and they also shared specific examples how these differences impact their relationships and communications.

Romano (2008) and Rogers and Hart (2002) all pointed out that people not only communicate in different verbal languages, they also communicate in different cultural contexts, which are shared matrices of meaning and include everything people use to exchange meaning with one another—words, tones of voice, shoulder shrugs, yawns, silences, etc.—and are comprised of both verbal and non-verbal communication. According to the results of this study, all the couples interviewed admitted that they encounter challenges with communication and they all used different methods to improve the quality of communication such as using a dictionary, detailed explanation and non-verbal behaviors, which are consistent with previous literature.

In the field of counseling psychology, multiculturalism means mental health professionals participate in both their own cultural construct and clients' cultural construct; during the process of counseling, we need to carefully be aware of our own biases and understand clients' worldview and show our respect to each of them (Hays & Erford, 2010; Ponterotto, 2010). Hsu (2001) pointed out the importance of counseling psychologists/therapists' multicultural competence as the basic requirement for working with intercultural couples. Counseling psychologists/therapists' cultural competence can assist couples to deal with cultural differences effectively and constructively (Perel, 2000). Furthermore, due to the nature of the multilingual couples, the therapist/counseling psychologist needs to carefully consider the language used because of the nature of multilingual couples when conducting counseling/therapy with them, and to keep in mind that the language used in counseling/therapy is a second language for one of the partners (Sullivan & Cottone, 2006).



Consistent with the previous literature, all eight couples brought up the importance of multiculturalism and provided specific examples how counseling psychologists and therapists can be culturally competent, such as understanding both partner's cultures and be open to learn more throughout the process of treating intercultural/multilingual couples. In addition, two of the couples also brought up the fact that it would be beneficial if counseling psychologists/therapists can provide more time and space for the partner who is using a second language in the process of counseling, so they can be comfortable enough to share thoughts and ideas with their partner and counseling psychologists/therapists; this theme is also consistent with previous literature.

### **Findings Not Predicted in Prior Literature**

On the other hand, two themes emerged in the study that was not widely explored in the past research and literature, child rearing, and finances. Three couples interviewed in this study who have children admitted that they had encountered many cultural differences when it comes to child rearing, such as discipline style, affection expression with children, and even preparing different types of food for children. It was interesting that the same cultural differences between the parents also impacted their way of parenting such as each parent has different preference of food that they want their children to try and want them to like the ones they prefer. The other specific difference was finances. Two couples provided their experience of different beliefs of financial plan and spending money on different things. One couple pointed out that in the wife's country-of-origin, there is no tolerance of people carrying debt just to enjoy the materials pleasure that they do not have the money for, which is very different than the husband's culture-of-origin because everyone uses money that they do not have to spend on

different things. These two specific cultural differences that impact intercultural/multilingual couples' relationships and communication are recommended for future research and further exploration.

Additionally, three couples interviewed pointed out two themes that were not the focuses of past literature and research. First one is that two couples believed it would be important for counseling psychologists/therapists to remind the couple that they decided to be committed to each other because they love each other; without love between the partners, it would be difficult for the intercultural/multilingual couple to be motivated to work for better communication and relationship. The other couple suggested that counseling psychologists/therapists need to discuss the impact of the intercultural/multilingual couple living in a country that is neither of their country-of-origin, which was also not discussed in the past literature and research.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There are some limitations to this study. First, the purpose of qualitative research is to investigate personal experiences in depth, and such research does not attempt to generalize the results to others of the same target population (Creswell, 2007). I, as the researcher, developed the interview questions based on my perspective and worldview, which might be different compared to participants' beliefs and perceptions of how cultural and language differences affect their intercultural/multilingual romantic relationships. The interview questions for this research were designed to be open-ended and conversational. The follow-up questions were adjusted throughout the interview process according to participants' reactions and answers to the interview questions, to ensure the questions were easy to understand and nonjudgmental. Nevertheless, there

might still be a chance participants had difficulties sharing or articulating their experiences due to the way the interview questions were designed. Furthermore, due to the nature of the semi-structured interview format which used open-ended questions, each participant answered the questions based on their thoughts, perspectives, and beliefs at the moment in the time, and it would, therefore, be impossible for researchers to duplicate the study in the future.

Jamieson (1982) discussed how social desirability can impact participants' self-reports because people have the tendency to answer questions in a manner that will be viewed favorably by others. Social desirability is also constructed differently in each culture and country. All the couples interviewed seemed to have strong relationships, and due to the impact of social desirability, it was possible that couples who were facing difficulties in their relationships might refuse to participate in this study because they did not want to be judged by others. In the process of interviewing the participants for this research, the participants might have been influenced either consciously or unconsciously by social desirability factors rather than answering the questions from their own unique perspectives. Participants might have had the tendency to only share positive experiences of their relationships and to ignore the challenges and negative experiences, which is another limitation of the study. The interview process of this study for each couple started with a conversation in which I asked the couple to share the history and narrative of their relationship with the purpose of helping the couple to feel more comfortable and to build a trusting relationship with me. Although all the couples interviewed seemed to build rapport with me and realize that I would not judge their relationship in any way, only one couple discussed more about the negativity and difficulties within their relationship,

which brings up the possibility that other participating couples might still have had concerns about the social desirability of their responses and wanted to present themselves in a favorable light.

Last, one among the eight couples interviewed in the study specifically pointed out that living in the U.S., which is not the country-of-origin of either of them, has a certain impact on their relationship, such as cultural conflicts and adjusting to a new life as an immigrant. “I believe 75% of our relationship is about our cultures. If we know our cultures very good and respect each other, really 75% in the life it’s going easy,” said Daniel, “but the other 25% factors are from the, here in America. What is the economy? Where is the job? What is the income? How do you live? All these could affect the relationship.” Daniel and Shata believe that counseling psychologists need to understand or at least willing to learn how living in the U.S. as immigrants and being far away from all their friends and families affect an intercultural/multilingual couple’s relationship. Counseling psychologists will need to be able to recognize the couple’s experience and appreciate their different life story compared to everyone else. Although Daniel and Shata emphasized the importance of this specific clinical implication, they are the only couple interviewed who currently lives in neither of their country-of-origin. Saturation was not reached for this particular issue so it was not considered as an emerged theme.

## **Implications**

### **Research Implication**

Past research on intercultural/multilingual couples has been limited. Most of the existing literature has investigated and provided an understanding of either the cultural differences or language differences, instead of an in-depth discovery of how language

and culture can be two sides of the same coin and impact couples' relationships and communication (Bustamante et al., 2011). The results of this study suggest some implications that can be applied for future research. First, due to the nature of the relationships and possible social desirability of all the participating couples, there were very limited experiences shared related to unsuccessful intercultural/ multilingual romantic relationships in this study. Future research is recommended to explore and compare successful and unsuccessful intercultural/multilingual relationships to be able to understand the keys to successful intercultural/multilingual relationships. It is also suggested that future studies employ different model or methodology to possibly eliminate the effect of social desirability (Jo, 2000).

Second, one couple in the study who has been in the longest relationship, expressed and shared more difficulties of intercultural/multilingual relationship compared to all other couples interviewed in the study. This couple has been in a relationship with each other for over 44 years, which is at least 28 years longer than all the other couples. Furthermore, they were in their late 50s and early 60s, which is also much older than the rest of the participants. It is recommended for future research to explore if a couple's belief and perspective of their romantic intercultural/multilingual relationship changes throughout time, and if they have different experiences compared to intercultural/multilingual couples who are younger and have shared a shorter relationship history.

Last, another couple in the study pointed out that it would be helpful if counseling psychologists could recognize the influence of living in a country that is neither of the partner's country-of-origin. They report several factors that relate to the fact that they are

both new immigrants to this country, and notice impacts such as limited social support, a less diverse community, and difficulties procuring Halal food that is permitted by their religion. Daniel and Shata face more challenges as new immigrants to the U.S. and they believe it is important for counseling psychologists to be more sensitive, and to acknowledge the challenges that play a part in their relationship and communication. Unfortunately, they were the only couple in the study who are both far away from home since they both traveled overseas to come to the U.S. and they are the only couples who have this type of experience. It is recommended for future to investigate how living in a third country affects intercultural/multilingual couple's relationships and communication.

### **Theoretical Implication**

Systemic/relational theory was used as the theoretical framework for the study. Rosenblatt (2009) pointed out that intercultural/multilingual couples not only develop their own system, they develop their own intricate, multilayered system, which is confirmed by the results of this study. All couples interviewed shared their stories and experiences how they as a couple, were impacted by their personalities, cultures of origin, languages of origin, extended families and the current culture they live in; all these factors formed a multilayered and unique system that surrounds their relationship and makes it different than any other relationships.

In the stories that the experience participants shared during the interviews, it was obvious that each couple's relationship changes throughout time and many of them admitted that they were constantly working for better communications and hope to improve their relationships. The continuous process of improving, negotiating, and compromising is consistent with the concept of homeostasis in systemic theory.

Intercultural/multilingual couples are motivated to live in a system with homeostasis and they use improving, negotiating, and compromising as positive and negative feedbacks (Bateson, 1972; Gehart, 2010) with each other to pursue the stability of their relationship, their unique multilayered system. Furthermore, this never-ending process could be even more challenging for intercultural/multilingual couples because they build their multilayered system on many more differences compared to monocultural/monolingual couples (Rosenblatt, 2009).

### **Clinical Implication**

The purpose of this study is to raise awareness counseling psychologists and even the general population so they can have a better understanding of the phenomenon of intercultural/multilingual couples and to help diminish the stereotype that cultural and language differences are barriers to romantic relationships. The results of the study can assist counseling psychologists to have a better understanding and learn specific examples of how intercultural/multilingual couples integrate the different cultures and languages into their relationship, and the unique challenges and difficulties these couples face in their relationships. Once the counseling psychologists acknowledge the unique aspects of intercultural/multilingual romantic relationships, they can assist intercultural/multilingual couples who are in psychotherapy better and try to normalize their experience because they might be facing the same challenges other intercultural/multilingual couples encounter in their relationships.

Second, one of the research questions of the study focuses on how counseling psychologists/therapists can be more helpful when intercultural/multilingual couples attend couples counseling. The participants recommended that counseling psychologists

need to have at least basic knowledge of both cultures of each of the partners, and it is even better if the counseling psychologists have experienced both cultures him or herself to be able to see the perspectives of both cultures. Third, counseling psychologists need to be sensitive of the fact that one or even both partners are using a second language in the process of counseling. The counseling psychologists need to provide enough time and space to help the partner feel comfortable expressing their true self, their feelings, and their thoughts in front of their partner and the counseling psychologists.

Last, the counseling psychologists need to remind the couple of the feelings of love they had when they first met. The counseling psychologists should also remind them of the purpose of their relationship, which is to build a unique love phenomenon together as a team, so that the couple can be motivated to continue working on their relationship even when it is challenging for them. On the other hand, if the couple does not agree on the purpose of their relationship anymore, the counseling psychologists also need to acknowledge the fact and help the couple to explore the future direction of the relationship. These implications provide not only a direction for future research, but also for mental health professionals who desire or have the opportunity to work with intercultural/multilingual couples. This research provides general guidelines and a sense of cultural competency, so they can better serve this particular population.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, the results of the study were discussed and future implications for research and clinical practice were provided. This is a qualitative study which utilized a phenomenological framework and in-depth interviews to explore how cultural and language differences affect intercultural/multilingual couples' relationships. The specific



themes that emerged from the participating couples' interviews were presented with similarities and differences between couples. Each research question was answered and specific examples were provided of participants' own experiences. Lastly, implications for future research and clinical practice were also discussed so the field of counseling psychology and even the general population can benefit from the results and conclusion of this study, which is the main purpose of any kind of research.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**CONSENT FORM**

## CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

**Project Title:** Communication and Relationships of Intercultural/Multilingual Couples: Cultural and Language Differences

**Researcher:** Nai Chieh (Geri) Tien, M.S., Doctoral Student of Counseling Psychology

**Under the direction of:** Lia Softas-Nall, Ph.D, Professor, Counseling Psychology, (970)351-1631

The purpose of this study is to explore how cultural and language differences may affect intercultural/multilingual couples' relationships and communication, especially the couples in which each partner was raised in a different country and has a different first language. As a participant in this research, you will be asked to respond to interview questions. This study will be conducted at an arranged time that is convenient for both the researcher and the participant. The interview includes questions about how do the cultural and language differences have impacted you and your relationship with your partner. You and your partner will be interviewed both together and separately. The complete interview process should take no more than 3 hours.

For the interview you will be asked to provide your age, gender, ethnicity and the languages you are fluent in. Your responses will be under pseudonym of your choice at the time of data collection. Results of the study will be presented with pseudonyms so that results cannot be linked back to the person completing this research study. All the recoded material will be erased 3 years after the research was completed. Intercultural/multilingual couples and counseling psychologists who practice couple's therapy will be the populations who most benefit from the results of this study. The goal of this study is to explore what are some specific cultural and language differences in your relationship and the influence of these differences on your communication and relationships with your partner.

Risks to you are minimal. The interview questions are not personal, but still may evoke memories and thoughts that are sensitive to you. The benefits to you include gaining insight on how language barrier and cultural difference affect your relationship and learning something about yourself. Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask questions, you will give us permission for your participation. You may keep this form for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs, 25 Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-2161.

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 Participant's Signature

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 Date

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 Participant's Signature

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 Date

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 Researcher's Signature

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 Date



**APPENDIX B**  
**INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### **First set of questions will be asked with the couple together:**

#### **Relationship History**

- a. *Demographic information:*
  - i. *Age*
  - ii. *Gender*
  - iii. *Country-of-origin/Ethnicity*
  - iv. *First language*
  - v. *Marital Status*
  - vi. *Children (if any)*
  - vii. *Religion*
  - viii. *Educational Background*
  - ix. *Social Economic Status (each partner and together as a couple)*
  - x. *Occupation*
  - xi. *Years together*
- b. *How did you and your partner meet? Can you give a brief history of this relationship?*
- c. *How did you two as a couple decide to live in the US?*
- d. *Artifact: Dictionary*  
*During this relationship, has there been any time you felt like taking out the dictionary and finding the right word to express your feelings or to explain whatever you were trying to explain to your partner?*

### **Then I will interview the couple separately using the following questions:**

#### **Culture(s) of Origin**

*Tell me about the experience of having a partner/spouse from a different culture/country of origin and how it affects your relationship and communication with your partner. Can you give me some examples of differences you encountered?*

**\*\*Follow-up check list of specific difference related to each partner's culture, was not provided for participants unless they asked for examples:**

Beliefs and/or messages from *your partner's culture*

- a. Extended family
- b. Traditional gender roles
- c. Food and drink
- d. Intimacy
- e. Place of residence
- f. Religion
- g. What are some things you have done to overcome any difficulties generated by these beliefs and/or messages (from your partner's culture(s)/your culture)?

### Language Difference

*Tell me about the experience of having a partner/spouse that has a different first language and how it affects your relationship and communication with your partner. Can you give me some examples of differences you encountered?*

**\*\*Follow up questions if needed:**

- a. Your partner's first , second, or third language
- b. Your first, second, or third language
- c. When did you learn each of them? When do you speak each of them? Why?
- d. What language(s) does your partner speak when not around you? How does that make you feel?
- e. Language(s) used to communicate with your partner? How was this decided?
- f. What language do you use when you do self-talk?

**\*\*Prompt questions exploring the process:**

- How did you come to this conclusion?
- How did you carry through these differences?
- How did you compromise?

### **Bring the couple back together:**

#### New Phenomenon: Culture of Their Own

*Considering each of you is from a different cultural and language background, do you feel like you two have created something unique as a couple?*

*Can you give me some examples of differences you encountered?*

**\*\*Prompt questions if participants didn't mention:**

- *Differences could be challenging for couples, what is the bond here that keeps you two together?*

### Couples Therapy

*Considering you are from different cultures and speak different languages, if you were to participate in couples counseling in the future, how could counseling psychologists/therapists be the most helpful to you or intercultural/multilingual couples like you in the process of counseling?*

**APPENDIX C**  
**EMERGING THEMES**

### Cultural Differences

Theme	Participants							
	Bob & Sakura	Bitsy & Hector	Ebi & Kani	Annie & Steve	Angie & Brent	Frank & Jennifer	Daniel & Shata	Hadi & Linda
Religion	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Extended Family	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Gender Roles	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Food	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Affection Expression	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	
Residency	o	o	o		o	o	o	o
Child Rearing	o			o				o
Finances					o	o		

*Note.* o means the couple mentioned the emerged theme

**APPENDIX D**  
**PARTICIPANTS' DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION**

# PARTICIPANTS' DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Name	Ethnicity	Native Language	Ages	Years in U.S. and Immigrant History	Years Together	Years Cohabitation
Bob & Sakura	Caucasian American	English	44	Multi-generation immigrant	16 years	15 years
Bitsy & Hector	Polish	Polish	30	11 years	5 years & 9 months	5 years & 3 months
Ebi & Kani	Japanese	Japanese	36	5 years	2 years	1 year & 9 months
Annie & Steve	Caucasian American	English	30	Multi-generation immigrant	6 years & 6 months	5 years
Angie & Brent	Thai	Thai	37	7 years	11 years & 8 months	11 years & 1 month
Frank & Jennifer	Caucasian American	English	45	Multi-generation immigrant	3 years	2 years & 6 months
Daniel & Shata	Iranian	Farsi	41	7 years	3 years & 6 months	3 years & 6 months
Hadi & Linda	Iranian	Turkish	62	45 years	44 years	39 years



### Language Differences

Theme	Participants							
	Bob & Sakura	Bitsy & Hector	Ebi & Kani	Annie & Steve	Angie & Brent	Frank & Jennifer	Daniel & Shata	Hadi & Linda
Communicating with Extended Family	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Expressing Self and Communicating in Second Language	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Learning a Different Language	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Lost in Translation				o	o	o		o

*Note.* o means the couple mentioned the emerged theme

### Couples Counseling: How Can it be Helpful

Theme	Participants							
	Bob & Sakura	Bitsy & Hector	Ebi & Kani	Annie & Steve	Angie & Brent	Frank & Jennifer	Daniel & Shata	Hadi & Linda
Understanding and Learning Both Cultures	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Language Barriers		o	o					
The Purposes of Relationship Love	o							o

*Note.* o means the couple mentioned the emerged theme

**APPENDIX E**  
**INSTRUCTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL**  
**APPROVAL**



March 30, 2012

TO: Maria Lahman  
Applied Statistics and Research Methods

FROM: The Office of Sponsored Programs

RE: Exempt Review of *Communication and Relationships of Intercultural/Multilingual Couples: Cultural and Language Differences*, submitted by Nai Chieh Tien (Research Advisor: Basilia Softas-Nall)

The above proposal is being submitted to you for exemption review. When approved, return the proposal to Sherry May in the Office of Sponsored Programs.

I recommend approval.

Maria Lahman                      4/3/12  
Signature of Co-Chair                      Date

The above referenced prospectus has been reviewed for compliance with HHS guidelines for ethical principles in human subjects research. The decision of the Institutional Review Board is that the project is exempt from further review.

IT IS THE ADVISOR'S RESPONSIBILITY TO NOTIFY THE STUDENT OF THIS STATUS.

Comments:

25 Kepner Hall – Campus Box #143  
Greeley, Colorado 80639  
Ph: 970.351.1907 ~ Fax: 970.351.1934

**APPENDIX F**  
**MANUSCRIPT FOR PUBLICATION**

## COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONSHIPS OF INTERCULTURAL/ MULTILINGUAL COUPLES: CULTURAL AND LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative study aims to explore the influence of cultural and language differences on intercultural/multilingual couples' relationships, the uniqueness of each intercultural/multilingual couple's relationship and how can mental health professionals provide more effective psychotherapy for these couples. Saturation was reached after eight intercultural/multilingual couples were interviewed. Eight common themes related to cultural differences and four related to language differences were found that are factors influencing couples' relationships and communication: Religion, extended family, gender roles, food, affection expression, residency, child rearing, and finances; communicating with extended family, expressing self and communicating in second language, learning a different language and lost in translation. All eight couples agreed that their relationship is unique and provided examples to describe the elements of the uniqueness. Last, participants provided suggestions for mental health professionals on how can they be most helpful in the process of counseling: Understanding and learning both cultures, being aware of language barriers, reminding the couple the purpose of the relationship is "love" and acknowledging the impact of living in a third country. Implications for future research, existing theory and clinical practice for counseling psychologists are discussed.

*Keywords: qualitative study, phenomenology study, intercultural/multilingual couples, cultural difference, language difference, uniqueness, couple's counseling*



## **Introduction**

Intercultural/multilingual couples face challenges and demonstrate strengths in communication and their relationships that are different from the experiences of monocultural/monolingual couples (Molina, Estrada, & Burnett, 2004). As the United States becomes more and more diverse, and the number of couples with partners from different background increases, the unique experience of these couples deserves more attention. Counseling psychologists and other mental health professionals who work with this population need to understand these unique experiences in order to provide effective services (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992; Sue & Sue, 2008).

## **Cultural and Language Differences**

Intercultural/multilingual couples are couples in which each partner was born and raised in a different country, and has a different first language (Ho, 1990). For two individuals that are from different cultural backgrounds forming a romantic relationship, anything in daily life can be a new adjustment. For example, eating meals together may be simple for most couples, but for a couple in which each partner grew up in a different country, was brought up in a different culture, and may even speak a different first language, what to eat for dinner every night can become a serious discussion. These couples face unique challenges, and their numbers are growing (Bystydzienski, 2011).

Culture is a set of concepts that includes many different elements (Hays & Erford, 2010). In this study, culture is specifically defined as the social heritage of a person and includes social norms (such as rules of conduct), social values (beliefs and common understandings), and social practices (what people say and do), which are assumed to be shared by a group of individuals (Bystydzienski, 2011). Some specific elements in



intercultural/multilingual romantic relationship are more essential than others, such as food and drink, intimacy, gender roles, place of residence, in-laws, and religion (Henrikson, Watts, & Bustamante, 2007; Romano, 2008). Nevertheless, when people from different cultural backgrounds live in the same household and deal with their cultural differences multiple times a day, which is many intercultural/multilingual couples' daily experience, cultural differences become more obvious and more challenging to manage (Romano, 2008).

Language difference is not always a problem in intercultural/multilingual couples' relationships. However, it is a unique issue that is not easy to negotiate and it is an issue that monolingual couples will not face (Llerena-Quinn & Bacigalupe, 2009). For a couple's relationship, speaking a common language is vital for daily communication (Ho, 1990; Llerena-Quinn & Bacigalupe, 2009). Couples in which both partners speak the same language often have trouble hearing what each other is really expressing (Gottman, 1999), and it is even more challenging for couples in which each partner speaks different languages and processes in different ways to understand what their partner is expressing. If one partner's native language is chosen to mainly communicate with, it may be necessary for the other partner to learn a whole new language just to compromise (Molina et al., 2004). The same is true for each partner's extended family; translation may be useful but people may not ultimately be able to really communicate when they do not speak each other's language (Foster, 1998).

### **Couples' Counseling/Therapy with Intercultural/Multilingual Couples**

When Sue (2001) published the cultural competence model for the field of counseling psychology, multiculturalism became one of the most important competencies in this profession. It was a concept the field of counseling psychology had long discussed (Sue et al., 1992) but until Sue (2001), no specific theory was developed and researched to provide a framework for considering psychologists' competence in treating multicultural clients.

For intercultural couples, the cultural differences play out with more complexity due to the fact that there is not only cultural difference between client and counseling psychologists/therapists, there is also difference between the clients that are coming in together as a couple (Softas-Nall & Baldo, 2000; Sullivan & Cottone, 2006). It is estimated that 13 percent of the U. S. population is composed of immigrants (DeAngelis, 2010; Shin & Bruno, 2003) yet there was little research on couples' counseling/therapy with intercultural couples conducted until recent years (Sullivan & Cottone, 2006).

One unique characteristic of the target population of this study is that they are multilingual, which means that each partner has a different mother tongue. For intercultural/multilingual couples, cultural difference is not the only issue; language difference can turn into an additional challenge in their relationships (Piller, 2009). When conducting counseling/therapy with multilingual couples, therapists/counseling psychologists need to consider carefully the language used because of the nature of multilingual couples, and to keep in mind that the language used in counseling/therapy is a second language for one of the partners (Sullivan & Cottone, 2006).

## **Couples Creating their Own Culture**

Seward (2008) pointed out that every couple creates their own unique culture throughout their relationship; the process of creating couple's unique culture is a continuing process that never stops. For intercultural/multilingual couples, there are numerous cultural differences and additional language differences which monocultural/monolingual couples do not experience. It seems more apparent that intercultural/multilingual couples create a new and unique culture and phenomenon of their own (Llerena-Quinn & Bacigalupe, 2009).

In constructivism, meanings are constructed by the interaction between human beings and their experience (Crotty, 1998). For intercultural/multilingual couples, the romantic relationships they are a part of continuously create new experiences and new meanings for them, which ultimately construct a new phenomenon that is unique and cannot be duplicated by others. Thus, for individuals, couples, and even families, no culture is monolithic; culture is a fluid concept constructed through interactions between human beings, their relationships and environment (Seward, 2008). Due to the distinctive nature of intercultural/multilingual couples and their relationships, the new cultures they create will change over time to be able to provide better constructs for their relationships.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore and describe the cultural and language differences that intercultural/multilingual couples experience in their relationships and how these differences affect their relationships. Also, as this study has implications for the field of counseling psychology, it aims to discover how

psychologists/therapists can be the most helpful throughout the therapeutic process with couples who are in intercultural/multilingual relationships.

According to Romano (2008) and Henrikson et al., (2007), specific cultural differences that are influential to intercultural/multilingual couples' relationships and communication are food and drink, intimacy, gender roles, place of residence, in-laws, and religion. In this study, a few dimensions of language differences were investigated; the language the couple chooses to use to communicate with each other and the language the couple chooses to use to communicate with each other's extended family members. Also, the couples have created a new culture of their own which is a product of the different cultures and the different aspects of culture they belong to, a possibility which was hoped to be explored more in the study. Exploring the effect of language difference on multilingual couples' relationships and communication is a unique focus of this study. In the future, intercultural/multilingual couples and psychologists who work with such couples will be the populations who most benefit from the results of this study.

### **Research Question**

The following questions were addressed in this study:

- Q1     How do cultural differences affect intercultural/multilingual couples' relationships and communication?
- Q2     How do language differences affect intercultural/multilingual couples' relationships and communication?
- Q3     How do intercultural/multilingual couples integrate their differences and create a unique relationship of their own?
- Q4     If the participants were to participate in couples counseling in the future, how can counseling psychologists/therapists be the most helpful in the process of counseling?

## **Method**

This study employed phenomenological framework and constructivism as the theoretical structure.

### **Participants**

The first criterion of the participants of this study was that the each partner of the couple was born and raised in a different country, and that each of them speaks a different first language. Furthermore, both partners must currently live in the United States. The second criterion was that the couple had to be in this relationship for at least two years and must have lived together for at least six months to ensure they have had the opportunity to experience life together and to develop a shared history (Bystydzienski, 2011). The third criterion was that both partners need to agree to participate in this study before either of them is interviewed and felt comfortable in couples' ability to express themselves and answer the interview questions in English, so that the researcher, me, could understand them when conducting the interview. No interpreter was used for this study.

### **Procedures**

All interviews were conducted face-to-face and both audio and visual information were collected to ensure the multiple sources of data, which is an important element of qualitative research methods (Polkinghorne, 2005). Field notes of behavioral observations were recorded by me as soon as the interview is completed. Each participant was asked to choose a pseudonym to protect their identity throughout this study. During the interview, the couple was interviewed together first and asked about their demographic information and the history of their relationship. At this stage of the

interview, a dictionary was used as an artifact to induce the couple to recall more stories about how cultural and language differences affect their relationship. The couple was interviewed separately for the second part of the process for their personal opinions and specific examples of how cultural and language differences affect their relationship to obtain responses that were not influenced by the presence of the other partner (Bystydzienski, 2011).

At the last stage of the interview, the couple was interviewed together again to describe their experience of integrating both of their cultures to create a unique phenomenon of their own, and specific cultural and language differences (i.e., extended family, gender roles, food and drink, intimacy, and language chosen to communicate) were provided to help the participants describe the different aspects of this new phenomenon. The couples were asked to provide their opinions about how counseling psychologists/therapists could be the most helpful if they were ever to attend couples' counseling. After each interview was completed, three referrals for couples' counseling were provided in case the couple is interested in further exploration of their relationship.

### **Results**

The findings in this study were obtained by careful word-by-word analysis through the transcriptions of in-depth interviews. To answer the research questions, the emerging themes are summarized in this following section.

### Research Question 1

According to the participants, there are eight different aspects of how cultural differences affect their relationships and communication. Each couple also provided a variety of examples they encounter in everyday life.

**Religion.** Three out of eight couples interviewed expressed a strong belief that religion is an important foundation of the relationship. These couples were aware that religion is an essential aspect of their relationship and that being in a relationship with someone who has a different religious background will create more differences and challenges, so they chose to only see someone who has the same religious background before committing to each other. One of these eight couples did not have the same religious beliefs when they first start seeing each other, but one eventually converted to the other's religion and became a Muslim. She also agreed that having the same religious beliefs is a significant foundation of their relationship and made their relationship stronger. For the other interviewed couples, they either do not have strong religious beliefs or are more flexible and open to different religious beliefs. If they came from different religious backgrounds, it seems like they were willing to learn about each other's religious beliefs and incorporate both into their life or even the wedding ceremony.

**Gender roles.** Seven of the eight couples interviewed shared their similar experiences with traditional gender roles; they have been moving away from tradition and starting to find the roles that actually fit their personalities and make their relationship more successful. They all described that following their own idea of gender roles and openly communicating about what they are comfortable with actually makes the

communication easier because there is no assumption or false expectations. The last couple stated that they mostly follow the gender role expectation in one's culture because "that's how we make the relationship work." In the past, wife followed expectations and husband lead with the family, but recently it has changed and husband has started to soften and make more compromises for the relationship, which is different from traditional gender roles in his culture.

**Food.** All eight couples interviewed cook a combination of food from both partners' cultural backgrounds. Some of them enjoy the cuisine from one culture more than the other, but they often communicate about it, and find a unique combination of cuisine that both partners enjoy and are satisfied with. Some of the couples are open to many different types of cuisine, some of them enjoy the cuisine of both of their cultural backgrounds, and some couples enjoy the cuisine from one partner's culture more than the other. They also create new recipes that combine different elements of both cultures, for example, Bitsy and Hector describe their cooking as "Pobodian", a blending of Polish and Cambodian. All participants described that it is essential that both partners find a unique balance and special recipes that can fit the needs of both partners.

**Affection expression.** Seven of the eight couples shared some of the cultural differences they run into in their relationship regarding the expression of affection. The differences between cultures are non-verbal expression, touching, and kissing, especially in public. Some cultures are more conservative, and the partners are not used to expressing affection in a physical way in front of family and friends. All seven of these couples described that open communication and compromise are necessary for their partner to understand their level of comfort with expressing affection in public. On the



other hand, social expectations are not as influential when it comes to showing their affection to each other in private. A few of the participants who are from more conservative cultures admitted that they actually enjoy expressing affection both in words and actions not just to their partner, but also their children and parents, to make sure they share their love with each other.

**Residency.** All couples interviewed currently live in the U.S. Seven of these couples have at least one partner who is from the U.S., and there was one couple in which both partners are from countries other than the U.S. Among all eight couples, seven of them have discussed moving to their partner's country-of-origin or somewhere outside of the U.S., so they can experience a different culture and be closer to family. One couple had moved to Iran in the past but decided to move back to the U.S. due to the political situation between the United States and Iran. It was really important for all these couples to discuss and be open about the possibility of moving to a different country in the future, since the desire of wanting to experience different countries and cultures is a characteristic of partners who are in intercultural/multilingual relationships in the first place.

**Child rearing.** Three of the eight couples interviewed have children in their relationship. Two of them still have children who are younger, and they described that rearing children with a partner who is from a different cultural background requires continuous communication to find out the best way to educate them. The other couple, wife was in charge of the child rearing when the kids were growing up, and she admitted that she wishes the husband could have been more involved in their children's upbringing and that they would have had more connection with his culture and religious beliefs.

**Finances.** Two of the eight couples discussed specific examples and differences related to finances. All of them agreed that the attitude of financial planning is not only related to cultural differences, but is also related to family background. Both couples have to learn about each other's habit of spending money and slowly compromise and discuss which way will be the most beneficial for their current financial situation.

## **Research Question 2**

After analyzing the data, four different themes emerged and showed how language differences can affect couples' communication and relationships. To answer the research question, themes are listed as follows.

**Communication with extended family.** It is not easy for a partner to communicate with their partner's extended family, especially when they do not speak the same language. For most of the couples, the partner has tried to learn the basics of the other language so they can understand their partner's family better. At the same time, all couples noticed that communicating is not only about language, it is also about non-verbal expression. Many of them described communicating with their extended family or in-laws with body language and some of their native language, which is actually the best way to communicate. It is important to be patient and open to different communication styles when it comes to language differences, and all the couples expressed their desire for better communication with their partner's extended family, with the help of their partner.

**Expressing self and communicating in a second language.** It is not easy for anyone to express him or herself in a second language, especially when it comes to expressing feelings and emotions. Furthermore, when it comes to specific terms that are

related to cultural concepts, it is even more difficult for their partner to understand if they cannot comprehend the cultural concept. Each of the couples interviewed has their own way of effective communication, such as using a dictionary, explaining different concepts with more details or other tools like showing movies or telling stories. They all agreed that being patient is essential when communicating with each other. In addition, speaking a second language all the time can be straining, so it is important the other partner understands the need to speak their native language with friends and family. Lastly, understanding cultural concepts is the key to communication, and the couples interviewed all try to explain cultural meanings with different perspectives, beliefs, and behaviors. Their partners try to be open and learn more about the other culture to create smooth communication.

**Learning a different language.** All the couples interviewed expressed a desire to learn their partner's language, if they did not already speak it. As described above, culture and language are two concepts that almost cannot be separated. When one partner wants to learn more about the other culture, they realize that they have to also learn the language to fully comprehend the meaning of the language. One challenge they face is that the environment they choose to live in always has more of one language than the other, so it is difficult to fully learn the language when they are not immersed in it. Learning their partner's native language not only makes it easier for them to communicate with each other, it also helps them to communicate with their partner's family. Although it is not easy, all participants feel strongly about it and want to strengthen their relationship by learning about each other's language and culture.

**Lost in translation.** Language and culture are usually inseparable, and four of the eight couples pointed out that sometimes they feel something is “lost in translation” because of the lack of understanding the cultural concept behind the language. These four couples expressed that learning the culture and learning the language are two continuous tasks for their relationship. The lack of understanding of cultural concepts has created stress for the couples. They have learned to do a better job explaining not only the language, but also the particular cultural concept to each other to decrease the miscommunication not just between them, but also between their partner and extended families. Two of these couples also realized that their partner may never fully understand all the different concepts of each other’s culture; they just have to live with it, be patient and accept the differences, but never make assumptions or blame their partner for getting lost in translation from time to time.

### **Research Question 3**

Seven of the eight couples described their relationship as unique and exceptional. They provided many different examples of how they integrated elements from both cultures and create unique aspects of their relationships. Some couples have created new recipes which include both cultures’ cuisines; some couples plan and design unique wedding ceremonies to incorporate rituals and customs from both cultures. Other couples celebrated the differences instead of seeing them as challenges; or invented a new language or nicknames that only they would understand. Finally, all the couples integrated each other’s culture into their daily life to different degrees for certain issues, such as Linda and Hadi following the more traditional gender roles of Iranian culture but followed the American way of education for their children. Each couple decided on their

own to pick the best of both worlds to build a unique relationship, a special phenomenon that no other couple has experienced.

#### **Research Question 4**

**Understanding and learning both cultures.** All participating couples pointed out that the most important aspect of couples counseling for them would be if the counseling psychologists have knowledge and experience of both partners' cultures or if he or she is willing to learn about them. Participants believed that it would be almost impossible for counseling psychologists to understand the rationale for each partner's communication style if the counseling psychologists lacked of knowledge of the cultures that are integrated into the relationship. Since intercultural/multilingual couples' relationships are even more complicated than monocultural/monolingual couples', it is essential for counseling psychologists to understand each partner's cultural background, language differences, different customs and different cultural beliefs to be able to see the perspectives of both partners. Furthermore, if the counseling psychologists have experienced the cultures in person, it would be more helpful because the counseling psychologists could be able to put themselves into the couple's shoes and share experiences of when they have faced cultural and language differences in life. If counseling psychologists do not have much knowledge of both partners' cultures, counseling psychologists need to be open and willing to learn from the couple, and also do their own work to be able to see the differences in each partner's angle instead of following only one cultural belief in the process of counseling, which might damage the relationship instead of repair or strengthen it.

**Language barriers.** Therapy and counseling can be an emotionally intense experience for anyone, say nothing of people using a second language during this process. Two couples brought up the importance of providing more space and time for the partner who is speaking a second language in counseling. First, it is already challenging to express oneself on an emotional level and be vulnerable especially using a second language. If counseling psychologists do not have a strong enough relationship to ensure the partner safety in expressing him or herself in a second language, it could build a barrier instead of a healing process. The partner may be hesitant to truly express feelings, emotions and deep thoughts which are crucial for building better communication. In this case, counseling may not be as effective because the partner who speaks a second language in counseling cannot fully express themselves during the healing process.

**The purpose of the relationship: Love.** The two couples who have been in their relationships the longest emphasized the importance of love. They all agreed that after many years of a relationship or marriage, it is easy for couples to forget the original reason they decided to be together: love. They believe it is important for counseling psychologists to remind couples who are facing challenges or issues in their relationship that they are together because they love each other, and the original purpose of the relationship is that two people fell in love and wanted to build a life with each other. By reminding them that love is the purpose of their relationship, it will be easier to motivate couples to compromise, to celebrate their differences, and work for the relationship so they can continue their life journey together.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There are some limitations to this study. First, the purpose of qualitative research is to investigate personal experiences in depth, and such research does not attempt to generalize the results to others of the same target population (Creswell, 2007). I, as the researcher, developed the interview questions based on my perspective and worldview, which might be different compared to participants' beliefs and perceptions of how cultural and language differences affect their intercultural/multilingual romantic relationships. The interview questions for this research were designed to be open-ended and conversational. The follow-up questions were adjusted throughout the interview process according to participants' reactions and answers to the interview questions, to ensure the questions were easy to understand and nonjudgmental. Nevertheless, there might still be a chance participants had difficulties sharing or articulating their experiences due to the way the interview questions were designed. Furthermore, due to the nature of the semi-structured interview format which used open-ended questions, each participant answered the questions based on their thoughts, perspectives and beliefs at the moment in the time, and it would therefore be impossible for researchers to duplicate the study in the future.

Jamieson (1982) discussed how social desirability can impact participants' self-reports because people have the tendency to answer questions in a manner that will be viewed favorably by others. Social desirability is also constructed differently in each culture and country. All the couples interviewed seemed to have strong relationships, and due to the impact of social desirability, it was possible that couples who were facing difficulties in their relationships might refuse to participate in this study because they did

not want to be judged by others. In the process of interviewing the participants for this research, the participants might have been influenced either consciously or unconsciously by social desirability factors rather than answering the questions from their own unique perspectives. Participants might have had the tendency to only share positive experiences of their relationships and to ignore the challenges and negative experiences, which is another limitation of the study. The interview process of this study for each couple started with a conversation in which I asked the couple to share the history and narrative of their relationship with the purpose of helping the couple to feel more comfortable and to build a trusting relationship with me. Although all the couples interviewed seemed to build rapport with me and realize that I would not judge their relationship in any way, only one couple discussed more about the negativity and difficulties within their relationship, which brings up the possibility that other participating couples might still have had concerns about the social desirability of their responses and wanted to present themselves in a favorable light.

Last, one among the eight couples interviewed in the study specifically pointed out that living in the U.S., which is not the country-of-origin of either of them, has a certain impact on their relationship, such as cultural conflicts and adjusting to a new life as an immigrant. “I believe 75% of our relationship is about our cultures. If we know our cultures very good and respect each other, really 75% in the life it’s going easy,” said Daniel, “but the other 25% factors are from the, here in America. What is the economy? Where is the job? What is the income? How do you live? All these could affect the relationship.” Daniel and Shata believe that counseling psychologists need to understand or at least willing to learn how living in the U.S. as immigrants and being far away from



all their friends and families affect an intercultural/multilingual couple's relationship. Counseling psychologist will need to be able to recognize the couple's experience and appreciate their different life story compared to everyone else. Although Daniel and Shata emphasized the importance of this specific clinical implication, they are the only couple interviewed who currently lives in neither of their country-of-origin. Saturation was not reached for this particular issue so it was not considered as an emerged theme.

### **Implications**

#### **Research Implication**

Past research on intercultural/multilingual couples has been limited. Most of the existing literature has investigated and provided an understanding of either the cultural differences or language differences, instead of an in-depth discovery of how language and culture can be two sides of the same coin and impact couples' relationships and communication (Bustamante, Nelson, Henrikson, & Monakes, 2011). The results of this study suggest some implications that can be applied for future research. First, due to the nature of the relationships and possible social desirability of all the participating couples, there were very limited experiences shared related to unsuccessful intercultural/multilingual romantic relationships in this study. Future research is recommended to explore and compare successful and unsuccessful intercultural/multilingual relationships to be able to understand the keys to successful intercultural/multilingual relationships. It is also suggested that future study employs different model or methodology to possibly eliminate the effect of social desirability (Jo, 2000).

Second, one couple in the study who has been in the longest relationship, expressed and shared more difficulties of intercultural/multilingual relationship compared to all other couples interviewed in the study. This couple has been in a relationship with each other for over 44 years, which is at least 28 years longer than all the other couples. Furthermore, they were in their late fifties and early sixties, which is also much older than the rest of the participants. It is recommended for future research to explore if a couple's belief and perspective of their romantic intercultural/multilingual relationship changes throughout time, and if they have different experiences compared to intercultural/multilingual couples who are younger and have shared a shorter relationship history.

Last, another couple in the study pointed out that it would be helpful if counseling psychologists could recognize the influence of living in a country that is neither of the partner's country-of-origin. They see many influences in the fact that they are both new immigrants to this country, and it affects their daily life in ways such as limited social support, less diverse community, and even where to buy Halal food that is permitted by their religion. Daniel and Shata face more challenges as new immigrants to the U.S. and they believe it is important for counseling psychologists to be more sensitive, and to acknowledge these challenges that play a part in their relationship and communication. Unfortunately, they were the only couple in the study who are both far away from home since they both traveled overseas to come to the U.S. and they are the only couples who has this type of experience. It is recommended for future to investigate how is living in a third country affecting intercultural/multilingual couple's relationship and communication.

### **Clinical Implication**

The purpose of this study is to raise awareness counseling psychologists and even the general population so they can have a better understanding of the phenomenon of intercultural/multilingual couples and to help diminish the stereotype that cultural and language differences are barriers to romantic relationships. The results of the study can assist counseling psychologists to have a better understanding and learn specific examples of how intercultural/multilingual couples integrate the different cultures and languages into their relationship, and the unique challenges and difficulties these couples face in their relationships. Once counseling psychologists acknowledge the unique aspects of intercultural/multilingual romantic relationships, they can assist intercultural/multilingual couples who are in psychotherapy better and try to normalize their experience because they might be facing the same challenges other intercultural/multilingual couples encounter in their relationships.

Second, one of the research questions of the study focuses on how counseling psychologists/therapists can be more helpful when intercultural/multilingual couples attend couples counseling. The participants recommended that counseling psychologists need to have at least basic knowledge of both cultures of each of the partners, and it is even better if counseling psychologists have experienced both cultures him or herself to be able to see the perspectives of both cultures. Third, counseling psychologists need to be sensitive of the fact that one or even both partners are using a second language in the process of counseling. Counseling psychologists need to provide enough time and space to help the partner feel comfortable expressing their true self, their feelings, and their thoughts in front of their partner and counseling psychologists.

Last, counseling psychologists need to remind the couple of the feelings of love they had when they first met. Counseling psychologists should also remind them of the purpose of their relationship, which is to build a unique love phenomenon together as a team, so that the couple can be motivated to continue working on their relationship even when it is challenging for them. On the other hand, if the couple does not agree on the purpose of their relationship anymore, counseling psychologists also need to acknowledge the fact and help the couple to explore the future direction of the relationship. These implications provide not only a direction for future research, but also for mental health professionals who desire or have the opportunity to work with intercultural/multilingual couples. This research provides general guidelines and a sense of cultural competency, so they can better serve this particular population.

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