Cultural Influences on Intercultural Relationships for Women

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Abstract. Women are an active group of sojourners to travel to different cultures for various reasons, and marriage is one of them. Women's experience in intercultural relationships may be connected with their backgrounds, values and other factors related to their ethnicity. This case study investigates three women from various backgrounds and explores their perspectives and experiences in their intercultural relationships. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the knowledge base of women's intercultural life and to illuminate the importance of intercultural communication in intimate relationships.

Keywords: Culture, Intercultural Relationship, Women

1. Introduction

Unprecedented globalization leads to an increasing number of intercultural relationships and marriages. These intercultural couples cross both geographical and linguistic boundaries to form new families, but they may struggle with cultural differences that gradually emerge in daily life. On one hand, there is a notion that intercultural couples undergo more stressful and dysfunctional relationship due to their cultural differences (Chan & Smith, 1995; Ibrahim & Schroeder, 1990; Monahan, 1970); on the other hand, there is a recommendation of moving from the either-or cultural binary to study the fluid, multifaceted and ever-changing nature of cultural experience of international families (Ngo, 2008). Extensive research demystifies the intercultural couples' experiences and factors are discovered in influencing the dynamics of intercultural relationships, including intersections among social environment, worldviews, gender, race, culture, religious beliefs and financial management (McFadden & Moore, 2001; Pascoe, 1991; Romano, 2001; Vontress, Johnson & Epp, 1999). This case study intends to examine the cultural impact on three women's experiences in their intercultural relationships.

As Ting-Toomey aptly notes, "the development of an intimate relationship between persons of two contrastive cultures is a complex phenomenon" (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p.37); scholars produce extensive studies to investigate various aspects of cultural influence on intercultural relationships. For instance, Ting-Toomey has perceived how cultural values help shape individuals' interpretation of concepts in a close relationship, such as "autonomy" and "connection" (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 176). By comparing different attitudes held by American culture and Chinese culture towards passionate love, she illuminates that passionate love is more treasured where kinship ties are weak and it is diluted where kinship ties are strong. Similarly, Doherty and associates shed light on the "profound impact" of culture and ethnicity "on how men and women view passionate and companionate love, and how they deal with such emotions" (Doherty, Hatfield, Thompson & Choo, 1994, p.391). In another vein, Gudykunst's prolific work has attained in-depth understanding of how cultural differences impact uncertainty management in intercultural relationships (Gudykunst, 1983, 1985; Gudykunst & Nishida, 1984).

Other factors also emerge from literatures in relation to intercultural relationships, including religion, stereotype, finance management and emotional reliance. (1) "Religion is the bearer of numerous values and has a profound impact on what people think and how they behave" (Frame, 2004, p.224). In cultures where religion has less strict requirements for people, couples of different religions may feel free to practice their different religious rituals. On the contrary, in cultures where religion plays a key role, one partner may have to convert to the other's religion in order to be married legally. Frame finds out that in cases where couples cannot find compromise, they may "move away from their religions and adopt a third, completely different

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religion that meets both partners' needs" (Frame, 2004, p.224). Couples may finally find an approach to solve the problem of religious belief in the end, but the process may be challenging. (2) Stereotyping is "an exaggerated set of expectations and beliefs about the attributes of a group membership category" (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p.161). Stereotyping sometimes can reflect the subconscious belief or values a person holds. Other than constructed by media and society, stereotypes may also occur because people lack communication with each other, and possibly because people are blinded by the differences and they resist to further understanding. In many cases, stereotyping may lead to prejudice, and this prejudice can impede intercultural communication and it may affect intercultural marriages. (3) "Disagreements about finances are a hallmark of marital conflicts" (Frame, 2004, p. 222). Partners from dissimilar cultural backgrounds may have different perceptions about who should make money and how to manage money. In some eastern cultures such as China and Japan, men take the typical role as breadwinner and women are expected to manage money. However, this may be different in western world where men and women make money and manage money more independently. Without mutual understanding and negotiation, conflicts may arise between intercultural couples. (4) Another factor that would influence intercultural romantic relationship is ER---Emotional Reliance. Emotional reliance refers to the "willingness to turn to others in emotionally salient situations" (Ryan, Guardia, Solky-Butzel, Chirkov & Kim, 2005, p.145). Some researchers argue that merely having another available person who can provide emotional support is already a positive feeling for well-being (Cohen, Sherrod & Clark, 1986; Ryan, Stiller & Lynch, 1994), while others challenge that having someone available to help does not mean that people would definitely confide in them. Doherty and his colleagues further explored this issue through a quantitative study on 124 men and 184 women from diverse ethnic backgrounds to see how passionately and companionately in love they were. Their study revealed that attachment style had a significant impact on susceptibility to love (Doherty et al., 1994).

What do these cultural factors imply to women in intercultural relationships? What challenges do women experience due to gender role mismatches and other deep-rooted ethnic cultural values? This case study examines three women from dissimilar ethnic backgrounds who are in an intercultural romantic relationship, and discusses the role played by their ethnic culture in their relationships. These three women, Sachiyo, Mahsheed and Rania, are studying in the same Master's program in England so they often get together to share feelings about their relationships. Case study enables me to gain an in-depth understanding of these participants in the real-life setting through in-depth semi-structured interviews, observations and informal communications (Yin, 2008).

2. Ethnic Cultural Values and International Romantic Relationship

2.1. Sachiyo's Story

Sachiyo is from Japan and is dating an Englishman. Her sister is married to an Englishman and she said that her parents are open to intercultural marriages. She traveled in European countries before but it is her first time dating someone from another culture. She feels tremendous support from her family to her relationship but there are still challenges. In particular, she shared that Japanese couples would feel comfortable living with parents after marriage but British people would find it very strange. She predicted that whether to live with parents after marriage would propose a huge dispute between her and her British boyfriend if they decide to get married in the future. Another challenge in her mind is financial management style. Even though Sachiyo is not married yet, she clearly sees this as an issue for possible negotiation if she and her British boyfriend are going to get married.

> "Traditionally in Japanese culture, women keep all the money at home, like, so husbands make money outside and women keep all the money inside, so I've heard that some of their problems, um, have occurred, because of that, because western men didn't really want their wives to keep all the money".

Sachiyo's story exemplifies the pressure of ethnic value on intercultural couples. Values are like windows through which people can look into others' belief systems and behaviors (Hall, 1990). The culturally derived value differences shape and impact intercultural marital relationships. Take family value for example. Family is highly valued in eastern cultures such as Japanese culture, but this is not the same case in many western cultures where individualism is more emphasized. Even if intercultural couples had

deep passionate love towards each other, external problems such as their cultural view of family, parents and community can become the barrier or cause conflicts in relationship (Graham, Moeai, & Shizuru, 1985; Nguyen, 1998). In this case, solving the problem requires compromise or one party's assimilation. When asked about solution to this problem, Sachiyo saw herself as the one that would compromise because her Japanese culture informed her that husband is more dominant in the family. This agrees with some scholars' notion that usually the wife would have pressure to accommodate to the culture of the other spouse (Chen, Gudykunst & Mody, 2002). Her worry about managing money also echoes with Frame's analysis that "diverse belief about who should manage money, who should spend it and under what circumstances" is a conflict between partners from culturally different families (Frame, 2004, p. 222).

2.2. Mahsheed's Story

Mahsheed is originally from Iran, but she has lived in England for over nine years because of her marriage with an Englishman. They have a four-year old daughter but recently got divorced. At first, she claimed personality clash as the reason for divorce, but more in-depth interview revealed the influence of four interrelated cultural factors that led to the end of their relationship. The first challenge is the Iranian perception of family and community that differs from English culture. In interview with Mahsheed, she told me the story of meeting her ex-husband Jack in Cyprus to talk about their wedding when Mahsheed's mother insisted going along with her. Mahsheed said that her mother was not intended to join their planning, but she wanted to accompany her daughter because it was an important decision in life. While she appreciated her mother's concern and followed the cultural practice, it was an unheard-of to the British husband. Mahsheed said that she felt offended when Jack repeatedly teased this cultural difference after their marriage.

The second challenge comes from managing finance. Mahsheed also shared her frustrating experience in handling income with her British husband; however, different from Sachiyo's experience, Mahsheed's ethnic cultural experience believes that wives would *not* be involved in the financial matters and men would purchase everything for the family. On the contrary, when she was a stay-at-home mother without any income, her English husband encouraged her to ask for money for purchases, and expected her to manage money together.

The third challenge for her is the religious conversion. She said that their marriage also required her ex-husband to convert to her religion. In the meanwhile, she could not change her religion, or the legal sentence would be death. As mentioned earlier, religion can be a serious concern in some intercultural romantic relationships (Vontress et. al, 1999). One of the most serious religious restrictions is from Islam, where "the interrelationship between religion and culture is hard to unravel"(Frame, 2004, p.224). The loyalty to Islam is beyond personal choice; it affects the whole family and extends to the public. Families' religious belief and tradition are powerful in determining one person's mate selection, who to marry and under what conditions (Heaton & Albrecht 1996; Lamanna & Riedmann, 1999).

The fourth challenge in her marriage is emotional reliance. She stated that in Iranian culture, there is a stronger sense of attachment and men protect women. However, the English perception of interdependence between couples made her feel ignored. She senses her personal emotional change in her intercultural marriage. Her reaction agrees with the assumption raised by Kashima and associates that women across cultures have stronger emotional reliance (Kashima et al., 1995). Emotional reliance is a measure to see "a person's readiness to enter into interaction where emotional support may be available" (Ryan et al., 2005, p.146). It is believed that emotional reliance varies significantly across relationships, cultural groups and gender. Kashima and other researchers reveal that women across cultures have stronger emotional reliance and lay more importance in "comforting skills, intimate communication and interdependence" than men (Kashima *et al.*, 1995). In other words, women in some cultures may be more reliant and explicit to reach out for comfort and intimacy than in other cultures. This is probably not as acceptable or understandable if their partners are from a culture with different views.

What's intriguing in Mahsheed's story is that her inner struggle is also related to her personality. She claimed herself to be an independent and adventurous career woman, but her independence was threatened by the fact that she was expected to give up her career to be a full-time housewife. The gender role is

intertwined with money management, religious loyalty and emotional reliance in affecting her experience in the intercultural marriage.

> "I could see that financial expectations are a little bit different in, in British culture, see that my pride, say, a bit depressing myself, like my pride wasn't letting me ask for the money, so it was a bit frustrating, thinking that well, you know, um, it's a different country, eh, I want to have a family, but at the same time, I don't want to work and I used to be an independent girl. Um, so there was a lot of, you know, passional, emotional, financial pressures really, that it did affect my marriage to a non-Iranian person, due to the cultural diverse."

2.3. Rania's Story

Rania is from Jordan and she is in a relationship with a man from Pakistan. She sees herself as a combination of traditional and non-traditional cultural being. She has strong religious belief but does not closely follow cultural rituals, such as wearing a veil. Like Sachiyo, Rania has extensive international experience by residing abroad but it is her first time living in England and having a romantic relationship with someone from another country. Rania's story reveals two predicaments for her intercultural relationship: religious perception on intimacy and cultural stereotypes.

Even though Rania's boy friend is also Muslim, other numerous values bared by religion also matter in her intercultural romance, such as perception on intimacy. When reflecting on their intercultural relationship, Rania talked about her feelings of guilt for the intimacy with her boyfriend, "When I did, and I did violate some of those rules when I did that, I just, same thing, I really felt bad. I really felt guilty, and I still feel guilty every single time I do something that, you know, contradict my values and religion." Religion "has a profound impact on what people think and how they behave"(Frame, 2004, p.224). This powerful force also affects other aspects between intercultural couples, such as intimacy before marriage. This can explain why Rania frequently feels stuck between the desire for intimate behaviour and the guilt experienced afterwards.

While Sachiyo's family knew of her intercultural relationship, Rania feels too nervous to tell her family because she was confident that her parents would oppose to her dating a Pakistani man due to their stereotype.

> "Um, if I tell them he's from Pakistan or India, that's, or Malaysia, that's even, you know, more difficult, India, those Asian countries are not the kind of countries that we interact with a lot in back home. You can, you can meet a lot of Asian people in the gulf, and usually, what the thing is, eh, Asian people usually work kind of low, kind of jobs, the low-paid stuff, like cleaning, being porters or carrying stuff, you know, so we have stereo-, we have stereotype that Pakistan and Indian people are not that intelligent and they are not, eh, they don't come from, no well-educated background and sophisticated people, and what, what makes me hesitate tell anyone that I have a boyfriend who is from Pakistan."

Public stereotypes also construct pressure on the mate-selection and intercultural relationships. A stereotype is "an overgeneralization about an identity group without any attempt to perceive individual variations within the identity category" (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p.161). Stereotypes are very likely based on lack of interaction with the identity group; therefore it may be biased and prejudiced. It may heavily affect an individual's mate selection and determines whether or not an individual will marry someone racially or culturally different from one's beliefs, values and traditions (Zebroski, 1999). This accounts for why Rania does not plan to reveal her intercultural relationship to her family and friends. Even though her boyfriend is also a Muslim, his Pakistani identity group is stereotyped as people with bad education and low-paid jobs.

In conclusion, this case study depicts three female participants from Japan, Jordan and Iran about their experience in intercultural relationships. Their stories divulge that intercultural marriage is a social-cultural phenomenon jointly influenced by a variety of factors, such as different values, religious beliefs, financial perspectives and emotional attachment. These factors are rooted in the ethnic cultural influence. Intercultural romance and marriage in some cultures involve the entire family and the extended community. Additionally, responses to stereotypes may contribute to "growth or retrogression" in the intercultural relationship (McFadden & Moore, 2001, p.6). If couples can disregard the stereotype and respect the partner as an individual, their relationship may progress. However, positive responses are also connected with support

from family and friends, without which, intercultural couples find more difficulties in navigating their relationship. This study hopes to contribute to the knowledge base on women's experience in intercultural relationship and shed light on the importance of communication between intercultural couples.

3. Acknowledgements

4. References

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