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Brynly Rich
brynlyrich27@gmail.com

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Marital Satisfaction Among Interracial and Intercultural Couples

By Brynly Rich

Brigham Young University

Abstract

Though intercultural couples typically face a variety of challenges unique to those in marriages between members of the same culture or race, there are several principles that can be applied to increase overall marital satisfaction. Couples who place a greater emphasis on increasing their commitment levels to the relationship as well as their appreciation for one another's cultures are more likely to feel unified, accepted, and validated. This literature review analyzes a variety of research articles that highlight intercultural relationships and the elements that lead to flourishing. The guiding principles and practices for greater marital satisfaction are evaluated and summarized in order to provide direction towards the betterment of these marriages.

The overall satisfaction in a marriage seemingly stems from a marriage's ability to flourish (Fahd & Hanif, 2019). A flourishing marriage is a relationship in which a couple typically experiences positive social interactions, feels positive emotions, and practices positive psychological functioning (VanderWeele, 2019). A flourishing relationship can strengthen one's confidence in themselves as well as in their marriage (Fahd & Hanif, 2018). However, a couple will often face adver-

sity in their quest towards flourishing. For example, married couples must learn to make time for their families while maintaining lives outside of the home (Apostolou & Wang, 2020). Sacrifices of time and preferred activities become necessary to maintain a healthy and happy relationship with a spouse (Apostolou & Wang, 2020). Additionally, couples may often fight, face financial problems, and struggle in their faithfulness toward one another (Apostolou et al., 2019; VanderWeele, 2019).

In order to combat such challenges, many couples of the same culture have found refuge in increasing their commitment levels to one another (Hou et al., 2019), while also increasing their religious commitment (VanderWeele, 2019; Davis et al., 2018). Commitment is what motivates a couple to cling to one another and continually protect their relationship (Hou et al., 2019). When two people are committed to one another, other matters are simply obstacles they must learn to work through (Hou et al., 2019; VanderWeele, 2019). Similarly, the commitment that married couples demonstrate towards their religious beliefs and practices has the ability to fortify their marital bonds (VanderWeele, 2019; Davis et al., 2018). A couple's commitment to

attend and participate in church meetings brings much healthier outcomes not only to their relationship, but also to their own well-being. Though effective, such principles have only been proven to apply to those couples who marry within their same culture and race. However, a varying set of obstacles arises for individuals who desire to marry someone outside of their cultural or racial group.

People come from varying places, backgrounds, home situations, and experiences. As such, individuals constantly have to adapt to, understand, and appreciate the varying cultures their significant other comes from (Sim et al., 2021; Seshadri et al., 2013; Caselli & Machia, 2022). Oftentimes, couples may need to practice self-expansion in order to open themselves to the ideas of another culture or belief system (Caselli & Machia, 2022). Self-expansion is the ability of an individual to see beyond themselves and better understand the traditions, ideologies, and customs of another person (Caselli & Machia, 2022). It takes both partners equally working to share and listen to the experiences and cultural norms of the other person (Sim et al., 2021; Seshadri et al., 2013; Rosenthal et al., 2019). The more an individual works to better understand and accept the traditions of their spouse other, the greater confidence there will be in their marriage (Caselli & Machia, 2022). The cultural identity and heritage that an individual holds is a large part of who they are. It greatly explains how and why people think in a certain way. As individu-

als come to be more cognizant of their couples culture, their commitment, satisfaction, and closeness levels will increase (Caselli & Machia, 2022).

Intercultural and interracial relationships are often interchangeably in the literature (Skowroński et al., 2014, Caselli & Machia, 2022; Lemay & Teneva, 2020; Seshadri & Knudson, 2013). For the purposes of this paper, a reference to “intercultural” relationships includes those which are explicitly labeled as such as well as other relationships which include variation between the partners on the basis of ethnic, racial, or religious identity. Such use seems consistent with much of the literature and the purpose of highlighting challenges and opportunities that these couples face. Though couples will need to adapt in any type of varying cultural situation, a unique set of challenges is found when individuals of differing ethnic and/or racial backgrounds strive to form a strong marital relationship (Skowroński et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2017). Individuals in intercultural relationships may find that they have difficulty balancing social and familial structures (Boratav et al., 2021; Chebotareva et al., 2017). There also may be language barriers that impact the couple’s ability to communicate effectively (Boratav et al., 2021). Such challenges can either drive couple’s apart or provide them more opportunities to strengthen their marital bonds. Although there are unique challenges associated with being in an intercultural marriage, intercultural relationships can flourish if both partners have high commitment levels

to one another and show interest in and acceptance of the other's cultural and racial heritage. This literature review will analyze how the factors of commitment level and cultural acceptance can greatly increase the likelihood of intercultural marriages flourishing.

Commitment: The Motivating Source of Marital Satisfaction

Commitment is significantly associated with a couple's satisfaction level in intercultural and interracial relationships (Brooks et al., 2018; Hassan-Abbas & Ronen, 2022; Dainton, 2015). There are several factors that affect the level of commitment people in such relationships experience, such as their ability to work together and be open (Dainton, 2015; Seshadri & Knudson, 2013), their quality of alternative options and fidelity levels (Brooks et al., 2018; Dainton, 2015), and their inward and outward investment in the relationship (Brooks et al., 2018; Dainton, 2015; Seshadri & Knudson, 2013). Many individuals believe that there cannot be a sense of openness between them and their partner as some matters, often financial or familial, are personal; however, several research sources affirm that creating a "we" in a relationship and working to be transparent can boost a couple's sense of commitment to the relationship (Dainton, 2015; Seshadri & Knudson, 2013). Similarly, those individuals who have poor alternative options for a significant other and show low indications for infidelity tend to also show higher commitment levels for one another (Brooks et

al., 2018; Dainton, 2015). Alternative options are potential people that could replace one's spouse or partner; therefore, having poor alternative options is a sign that the individual's focus lies especially upon their significant other (Brooks et al., 2018). Lastly, partners who experience a strong sense of intrinsic (or emotional) and extrinsic, (a more physical manifestation) investment towards their partner and begins to sacrifice parts of their life for the sake of the relationship also show greater signs of commitment (Brooks et al., 2018; Seshadri & Knudson, 2013). Overall, the greatest thing an intercultural couple can do for their relationship is to work to become more united, more faithful, and more invested in their relationship (Brooks et al., 2018; Dainton, 2015; Seshadri & Knudson, 2013). In so doing, their commitment towards one another will grow (Brooks et al., 2018; Dainton, 2015; Seshadri & Knudson, 2013), as will their relational satisfaction (Brooks et al., 2018; Dainton, 2015).

Working together to become more united in the relationship can be applied in several different ways. Couples can try counseling together about family matters, sharing bank accounts, evenly distributing household tasks, communicating openly about mistakes, motivating their partners in their work or home efforts, and/or serving their spouse (Jeanfreau et al., 2020; Oliveira et al., 2020; Gonczarowski et al., 2019). These are simple practices couples can begin to implement into their marriage to create or strengthen their "we"

mindset. Coming together and being transparent may require effort, but in so doing, those in intercultural or interracial marriages can strengthen their overall commitment levels toward one another (Dainton, 2015; Seshadri & Knudson, 2013). Many practices overlap as spouses work to be more faithful to and focused on each other instead of others. Communicating honestly about feelings, being present during intimate moments, avoiding comparison, practicing greater self-control, and expressing gratitude are ways these marriages can overcome infidelity or its associated tendencies (Gonczarowski et al., 2019; Gerschwer 2022; Pronk et al., 2019). The more faithful couples are to one another and to the relationship, the higher commitment levels they will possess (Brooks et al., 2018; Dainton, 2015). Furthermore, as individuals show and experience high levels of investment in their relationship, their commitment levels will also grow (Brooks et al., 2018; Dainton, 2015; Seshadri & Knudson, 2013). Couples may also try prioritizing the needs of their spouse, touching each other intentionally and often, investing money into the relationship, setting aside time to go on dates, and/or learning to laugh more and keep a lighthearted attitude. All of these acts are intentional and require effort; however, when love is the driving force, such tasks do not seem as demanding. Similarly, as such couples learn to love the culture and racial backgrounds of both

partners, the struggles that intercultural relationships face become less important.

The Mediating Role of Cultural and Racial Appreciation

Couples with the ability to appreciate their cultural and racial differences experience greater relationship satisfaction (Caselli & Machia, 2022; Lemay & Teneva, 2020; Seshadri & Knudson, 2013). A study examining the differences in relationship satisfaction among interracial and same-race couples found that White participants who could effectively take the perspective and understand the point of view of their partner showed significantly higher levels of marital satisfaction than those who did not participate in the same practice (Caselli & Machia, 2022). Not only did this benefit their marriage but it also widened their view of the world around them to understand it better (Caselli & Machia, 2022). Moreover, a different study performed by the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology found that Black participants experienced greater satisfaction in their relationships as they felt positively viewed for their cultural rituals and racial differences (Lemay & Teneva, 2020). On the other hand, those who did not work to better understand or positively view the culture of their significant other struggled more with conflict resolution (Seshadri & Knudson, 2013) and experience lower rates of satisfaction (Caselli & Machia, 2022; Lemay & Teneva, 2020). Allowing both cultural voices to play an

equal part in the relationship permits greater respect and validation between the couple (Seshadri & Knudson, 2013, Caselli & Machia, 2022; Lemay & Teneva, 2020). Those who can better accommodate to the needs or views of their spouse are also found to be more satisfied in their relationships (Hassan-Abbas & Ronen, 2022; Seshadri & Knudson, 2013). When couples work to bridge the gap between their contrasting cultural views and varying races, they will see higher levels of flourishing. The greater the equality (Seshadri & Knudson, 2013; Hassan-Abbas & Ronen, 2022) and perspective-taking within a relationship, the greater the overall satisfaction levels will be (Caselli & Machia, 2022).

Promoting equality in intercultural relationships is a principle that can help couples overcome struggles with cultural integration and recognition (Seshadri & Knudson, 2013). Though it can greatly impact the well-being of a relationship, it takes intentional, hard work to accomplish. In order for spouses to treat each other equally, they can practice active listening when the other is speaking, make decisions together, avoid following gender norms, and communicate freely and often (Oliveira et al., 2020; Gonczarowski et al., 2019; Lachica et al., 2021). Practicing taking and understanding the perspective of a significant other also aids couples in this process to better accept new cultures (Caselli & Machia, 2022). Through similar practices as those mentioned earlier, intercultural and interracial

couples can develop this important skill. Their efforts may also include asking more questions about their loved one, participating in activities that the other enjoys, recognizing mood shifts, taking time to reflect when problems arise, and intentionally spending time with their friends and family (Svedholm-Häkkinen & Lindeman, 2016; Maniotes et al., 2020; Chapman & Guven, 2016). Essentially, each of these practices can be applied in a marriage and a plethora of positive outcomes will result due to their implementation.

Conclusion

Marriage to any individual requires great effort and is often quite challenging. Though marriage between interracial and intercultural couples brings a different set of obstacles in a relationship, there are a few principles that can be implemented in order to combat the additional stressors and hurdles (Skowroński et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2017; Boratav et al., 2021; Chebotareva et al., 2017). Marital satisfaction and marital flourishing can be achieved as couples raise their commitment levels (Brooks et al., 2018; Hassan-Abbas & Ronen, 2022; Dainton, 2015) and deepen their appreciation for their spouses' cultural and racial differences (Caselli & Machia, 2022; Lemay & Teneva, 2020; Seshadri & Knudson, 2013). Such tools enable individuals in this situation to focus outward rather than inward. Instead of fostering negative emotions or feelings towards their significant other, couples have the opportunity to hum-

ble themselves and be more open to the ideologies around them. As such, their perception of their marriage and their overall sense of the world around them will expand (Caselli & Machia, 2022). This self-expansion (Caselli & Machia, 2022) comes with higher commitment levels to (Brooks et al., 2018; Hassan-Abbas & Ronen, 2022; Dainton, 2015) and greater appreciation for their spouse (Lemay & Teneva, 2020; Seshadri & Knudson, 2013).

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