



THE CROSS-CULTURAL CHALLENGE IN LOVE

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Positive Conflicts
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DOING POSITIVE CONFLICT TECHNIQUES WITH AN SPOUSE FROM A DIFFERENT CULTURE

Conflict in couples presents special difficulties, coming from the intimacy of the relationship. The “intimate enemy” concept, described in Chapter 7, is complicated in this chapter because the Other is foreign born, or raised in a different culture. This presents a new set of issues, which make more difficult the purpose of processing the fair fighting method in a satisfactory way.

What are Intercultural Marriages?

It is the union of two people from diverse cultures as well as different countries, which may also but not necessarily, indicate differences in race and /or religion. Differences from ethnic or cultural origin, together with gender differences, common to any marriage can cause problems. Differences are either resolved or accepted, or the conflicts become habits and part of everyday life as being bicultural partners.

Of course, this is added to the gender differences (the “Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus” kind of differences), which makes the project a little more complicated than when looking at people who grew up in the same culture.

TIP: the usual assumptions about what behaviors you can expect automatically from your significant Other don't work any longer: miscommunications, confusions and outright opposite perceptions are the norm. And all are very deep, so emotional battles will follow. Here, in this territory, the word is: Expect the unexpected, and then you won't be disappointed!



MAIN AREAS OF FRICTION AMONG CROSS-CULTURAL PARTNERS

None of us ever really appreciates how many things we learn about life when we are young that we take for granted every day. We consider many of these things just plain 'common sense' but they're only common if you and your partner have common backgrounds. If there are no common elements in both backgrounds, then you will have to negotiate every one of the aspects of daily life. For instance, there is no universal rule for appropriate social behavior since customs are based on the values of individual. So, you will have to learn the customs, traditions and courtesies to better understand the behavior of your intercultural partner.

When people from different cultures get married, they have to negotiate the whole definition of what is life about and how to live it: things taken for granted in couples from the same background, here have to be discussed and agreed upon. The question: by whose cultural standards decision will be made? Who gives? Who takes? Or: who has the control over decision-making, can be theoretically solved in this way.

The areas of friction are all the areas that serve as a battleground for couples, with the added challenge of having to fight for definitions of what is important in life:

- Sense of time: being late, being punctual; respecting schedules
- Sense of space: how far do we go? To be conservative or adventurous?
- Sense of privacy: how much? How invasive or sharing is the Other?
- Relationships: how private? How much shared with the Other?

The Crisis Point: What happens when they don't realize that they are applying different points of views, assuming that there is a shared one when it isn't?

At the end of his college years, Alice decided to hone her skills in French and spend three months in Alsace. She worked at a NGO where Jean was the accountant. They had a short courtship and decided to marry before she was due to return to Ohio. After the wedding, attended by some of their mutual friends, he announced that they were going to his parent's home, where they would live afterwards. His reasons? He wanted to save rent money, but also decided by himself that his mother could train her in cooking and home making. "I would not be happy if you continue cooking as now," he declared. Now, Alice feels trapped: nothing was said about her career plans, and it's assumed by her in-laws that she has to become a good homemaker. Where did the initial excitement go?



HOW TO DEAL WITH CULTURAL DIFFERENCES:

There are four basic or “natural” possibilities to solve this relationship dilemma relating to someone who was not raised with the same value system as yours, and each one of them has pros and cons, and one fourth a little different:

- Either one of them submits to the other’s culture, and forgets his own;
- Or they compromise some aspects of their culture in the process of mutual accommodation, or
- They obliterate their own cultures and go to a new, a third one,
- They try to get decisions by consensus on what is important to each, regardless of cultural preferences.

1) Submission

The most frequent marital model (and for many people most successful) is that in which one partner submits to the culture of the other partner, abandoning or denying his or her own in doing so. This type of marital model nullifies cultural conflict. Might be merely superficial but the couple maintains a more balanced relationship.

2) Compromise

Each partner gives up certain (often important) aspect of their culturally –bound habits and beliefs to make room for the habits and beliefs of the other. Theoretically, it is a good solution as it indicates equality in the relationship- and this is an important ingredient. It shows a sense of fairness, flexibility, and openness, all of which are essential to the success of intercultural relationships. But, it means also making “trade offs”. By definition, it means to settle differences by mutual agreement, with concessions on both sides. It could also mean to endanger the interest of one of them, because she surrenders or gives up her interests and principles. It means that there has been a sacrifice made for the sake of co-existence, which satisfies neither partner. And it can have a heavy emotional toll.

(After five years of marriage with Celia, Kip was sure that their basic agreement was working: they would follow his family’s traditional rituals in his Jewish religion, while Celia was free to attend her church whenever she felt like so, but not as a regular practice. She herself expressed that she was not so much interested in maintaining her Catholic traditions...So, this is now Xmas Eve, the house has a tragic atmosphere, and Celia is wallowing in tears on the floor.... She feels deeply cheated from having a Christmas celebration, giving up her Christmas tradition has cheated her of something very valuable, that makes her “feel a gaping hole in my heart” and her nostalgia for the holidays of her childhood is so big that leaves Kip out in the cold. Who is this woman, thinks Kip, I don’t know her? And, how to console her of this unexpected” traditional Christmas celebration” loss?)



3) Obliteration

Marital model in which couples try to manage their differences by erasing them, by denying their individual cultures altogether. These third –culture couples form a new cultural identity without memories, no cultural causes for conflicts, and no traditions. They often give up their languages, life-styles, customs and even their beliefs and values. In a sense, they run away from potential conflicts. Both partners have lost their ethnic heritages. They have renounced an important part of themselves and denied their children the warmth and richness of their cultures. They are “culture poor “ and they often without any kind of support system or any sense of truly belonging.

(Beth and John went to Australia just married. They were coming from Canada and the US, but found the opportunity to start they married life away too tempting. It was an easy choice: same language, same traditions... so why do they feel so lost and lonely there? Making friends is easy, but they still feel as superficial relationships, despite their efforts. Oh, well, they have each other...but secretly both are missing their old friends, outings and fun from their previous places. Beth begins corresponding with them, reading papers from home, and making a niche for her that is disconnected from their Aussie friends. John is confused about this, and feels doubly abandoned: Beth has left their shared project and has left him, while re-connected with her friends from Canada.... what is him supposed to do now?)

4) Consensus

Related to compromise in that it implies give and take on the part of both partners; but it is different in that it is not a “trade off” but an agreement and there are no scores kept. In this model neither partner sacrifices things that are essential to his or her well being- as often happens in other situations.

Both are whole people and whole partners, with a solid sense of self, of their own differences, and their own individual needs, values and expectations for which they are willing to fight. This is win –win relationship. As Gandhi puts in “ winning is not only a matter of conquest; winning requires “ a transformation of the relationship”.

(After endless negotiations, Sarah and Jose had a clear idea of the main focus of conflict among them. Even when it was a rude awakening for their illusions, they accepted that they were radically different in too many areas. So now, what was each one of them ready to trade off? Sarah decided that she could do temporary trade offs: she would accept his mother in their house, for a limited time, (three months) and with rules of behavior (Sarah would have one hour of free time for herself, not dedicated to the house, or to her, each day) Even when Jose knew that this was a need for her, it was hard to accept. Only the idea that, in this way, he was able to see his friends each Sunday to watch the game with Sarah’s blessing was encouraging. Finally, they agreed on reviewing the agreement at his mother’s departure, to evaluate how well they were doing.)

Whatever the decision, it is not an easy one, and probably some re-negotiation of the original decision will happen at the next opportunity when each one of them needs to reassert a little identity. This is because relationships, and power balances are always changing, no matter what the culture of the partners....



SOME (VERY BEAUTIFUL) CROSS-CULTURAL ILLUSIONS

When in love, we can deceive ourselves in many ways. We can project on the Other such imagined perfect qualities that would be impossible to deliver; we can set up expectations so high that are self-defeating the purpose of understanding each other. So here is your list of assumptions:

1. - WE UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER REGARDLESS THE LANGUAGE

This is really a very damaging illusion: you think that gestual language will be enough, so depriving the relationship from the very basic tool to strengthen it. How are you going to know what the other person thinks and believes, if you two can't share in a common language? Do not take as permanent any decision made without a reasonable understanding of what the Other is saying.

2. - MY PARTNER WILL CHANGE FOR ME, (OR FOR THE RELATIONSHIP)

Some adaptation is going to occur between two people who share an intimate relationship but when you start to expect change from the other, and then you start to get into big trouble. And if you need the Other to change ways of behavior to feel happy, then you put yourself into a trap.

Instead of waiting for the other to learn the "right way of thinking and living" (yours, of course), you will want to find out as much as you possibly can about your potential partner and his or her lifestyle.

You would be surprised how much is taken for granted in typical marriages, even among partners of the same background. What priority does the extended family play in the couple's life, how are family decisions made, how much free time (time apart from each other) is considered normal for the partners, how much decision-making power and money is assigned to the husband, etc. And then, work on yourself, discovering how much of that style are you willing to accept, as it is now....

And remember, **IT IS NOT THAT YOUR PARTNER DOESN'T WANT TO CHANGE:** Cultural perceptions are already engraved in our brain, and so they constitute the way each one of us perceives reality, so it's not possible to change them, even if the person tries. They constitute the way we are. What we learn is to "translate" some contents into what our partner sees from his/her cultural eyes, and so understand what is the received message he or she gets....

3. - I WILL ADAPT COMPLETELY TO THE OTHER CULTURE

Much of who we are and what we believe is the result of what we see around us as examples during our childhood.

Never underestimate the depth of the roots of your own upbringing. Sure, it's possible to change (given enough time and enough effort). But no matter how deep

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you dig, you will always be you. Your beliefs, your emotions, your priorities, in short, your whole approach to life, are shaped by the culture in which you were brought up. And, because there is no brain transplant, plan to continue being you (more or less mollified) for the rest of your life....

4. - WHAT I SEE IS WHAT I WILL GET

Hidden assumptions can pop up at any time, changing the reality being discussed. People have scripts: they can do the "rebellious teenager" role with enthusiasm when you meet them at 16, but three years and a pregnancy later, they can fast switch into "dedicated Latina mother" in full gear...So you lost your dancing buddy, and worst, nobody understands why you are mourning this loss.

Or you can have a funny, outgoing Italian partner, who considers that you are supposed to have fun with him every day while dating, only to be transformed into a jealous husband after the wedding, watching proper and improper "married woman behavior" in you.... It's the same person, but different role-playing. Family roles are strongly prescriptive: we don't want to perform them, but they have a way of pressuring our behavior into what we saw while growing up, into what the group of peers expects of us, into what is "normal behavior."

The sad trap is that what is normal in a group is aberrant, and prohibited in other, and those rules are not so explicit. You can have a young person rebelling against his parents, (strong tendency towards individuality) only to go back to them when having a child, to seek support, acceptance and respect, (tendency towards community) and this dependency was never explicit while courting. How to identify those hidden prescriptions for behavior?

Asking lots of questions about: what is "normal in this situation"? "How would you react to this?" "How would your family react to this?" And watch for the behaviors described as repellent, because those will pop up.

5. - MY SIGNIFICANT OTHER DOES CONFLICT AS I DO

The best thing you can do for each other is to acknowledge the fact that conflicts will occur and will often occur for the simplest and most unexpected reasons. Start an argument or two. WATCH OUT FOR YOUR PARTNER'S CONFLICT STYLE. Is he an avoider? A denier? Is she a chronic compromiser, accepting things without challenge only to "forget" them afterwards? Find out what it's like to fight by your partner's rules. It will be inevitable to have a strong fight sooner or later, so it will be better to know what is coming to you.

What are the norms for expression? Is there a lot of shouting and crying? Or there is a lot of silence, with sad faces and no explanations of motives, but a strong expectation of a partner's ability to guess? Is the trend towards drama and door slamming stronger than the impulse towards getting to the table and talking?



No amount of love or respect is going to keep your ship from hitting the icebergs of life. You might as well know whether you will be able to work together toward a solution when the inevitable crisis comes up. If you can't deal with a lot of drama, and the shouting intimidates you, better plan for a way of managing this problem. Have a code for positive conflicting way before everything is decided upon.

6. - WE HAVE THE SAME PHILOSOPHY CONCERNING MONEY

Why leaving this important area in the dark? Even in mono-cultural marriages, money seems to be the biggest problem in making decisions together. According to lots of experiences, money is even more important in cross-cultural couples. There are enough differences in family finance between Western and Eastern cultures that you should really want to know how your beloved thinks in terms of family finances. Is there a tradition of thrift and saving for the future, so each purchase needs to be negotiated and approved, making people feel without enough freedom? Or he grew up in an inflationary situation, where the best thing is to spend all now, because you can't plan for the future? Money has lots of emotional aspects, together with security, freedom and other values, so you will have lots of conflicts on this area. And you need to have a creative confrontation about use of money, the sooner the better.

7. - THE EXTENDED FAMILY HAS NO STAKE IN THIS UNION

This is especially true if your partner is the one from some non-Western culture. **WHAT IS THE ROLE OF PARENTS IN THIS UNION?** It seems that in Western cultures we have developed a great deal of independence from our families. We hardly notice, and sometimes don't even care, what our parents think of our choice in partners. And this is no offense for our parents, too busy with their own lives.

However, the same is not true in Latin America. There is still a great deal of synergy between parent and offspring, even well after they have left the nest and formed families of their own. They tend to see a lot of each other, not only in holydays. Children are strongly supposed to take care of their parents when they need it, like in some Asian countries. Children are the retirement support of their parents. And parents need to be there for Christmas, weddings, births and every family opportunity that is important for family purposes, which can be a lot of them, almost all!

The worse thing that can happen to both is to have your partner's parents (or your own) constantly undermining the relationship, either consciously or not, or even worst, controlling every important decision that you could take.

Watch out and look at how they deal with each other, even if your fiancée is estranged from the family, there will come a time when they will get together again, and what you see happening now will include her.

POSITIVE CONFLICT WITH A PERSON FROM A DIFFERENT CULTURE

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Intercultural marriage is a complicated route in life, because it takes more work, empathy, negotiation skills and more of everything than in a same culture partnership.

So, how to go about challenging the status quo?

- First, find out what are the cultural ways of reasserting or confronting in your partner's culture. Do they go around, but do not mention the dispute at all? Do they fear losing face by acknowledging that something is wrong?
- If this is the case, as much as you assert yourself, the worst you are. There is a need to find non-confrontational ways of expressing what you need. Perhaps finding an intermediary would help: try her best friend or someone from his family to convey the message.
- You need to remember to avoid being confrontational, but cooperative: frame whatever you are proposing into a more consensual frame: "if this is what you would like to do," "with your consent," "understanding your reservations," etc.
- Plan for a possible confrontational meeting calling it "a meeting of the hearts," instead. Take a lot of time agreeing on procedures: how long the conversation would be? What to do? One issue or two? How many breaks? Include silent periods of reflection and conversation through writing individual ideas and exchanging them.

If you are very reserved and quiet, having a very explosive partner confronting you, then having a conflict with him or her can be very challenging. It is possible to try ideas from this list:

- Do not be shy to declare that shouting, even raising voices to high pitch interferes with your ability to understand. Paint a "loud noise sign" on the wall, and point to it whenever the discussion gets too heated.
- Ask for time out, walk away, or do something very expressive with your body language to call the other person to tone down. Perhaps raising an arm could be the message conveyed beforehand.
- Invite your partner to write in a piece of paper his or her needs. Then, continue the dialogue by phone or writing, up until it feels safe to sit down and talk.
- Rehearse alone expressing your needs in loud voice, especially using the phrase: "No, I don't like that," and use voice to convey different degrees of refusal.
- Have a combined list of unwanted behaviors from each side that generate common conflicts and post it in a very visible place. You can refer to it, to awaken the other side to the repetition of unproductive actions.
- If you are of the expressive type, try not to overwhelm: what can be a lively conversation for you can be experienced as an invasive walk into Other's privacy...agree on time alone periods, time together, and permission to be exuberantly expressive without guilt when you feel like so.



Finally, as soon as you are in a situation where you feel alone, misunderstood and miserable, find what is the cultural difference fast! Do not blame the relationship itself, but the very demanding conditions under which it has to develop, and be patient and hopeful. You can blame almost everything to a cultural difference, and thus saving face and easing negative feelings of humiliation and rancor. It's not the behaviors of the two of you, of course, but the cultural differences that made you fight! Perhaps improving mutual understanding, things will get better.

EXCERPT FROM THE E-BOOK:

["POSITIVE CONFLICTS"](#)

by Neil Warner.

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