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# Bicultural Couples in China: Factors Related to their Adjustment

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## Literature Review

Research on bicultural couples has mainly been conducted in the USA and is primarily focused on interracial couples. The main challenge for biracial couples according to literature on the subject is dealing with racism (Batson *et al.*, 2006; Bischoff, 2005; Bratter & King, 2008; Firmin & Firebaugh, 2008; Hibbler & Shinew, 2002; Jacobson & Heaton, 2008; Kalmijn & van Tubergen, 2006; Killian, 2003; Thompson & Collier, 2006; Yancey, 2007). Few studies address cultural differences (Rodríguez García, 2006), including dating/cohabiting bicultural couples (Firmin & Firebaugh, 2008; Yancey, 2007). In China, the bicultural couple rate is increasing along with the immigrant flow. Unfortunately the divorce rate among the bicultural couples is similarly rising (DeHart & Zhang, 2010; Li, 2004). Although the non-Chinese members of the bicultural relationship in China can come from various nations, very few empirical studies have been conducted in English on this group.

Results from the literature suggest that individuals entering bicultural relationships are often motivated by factors such as physical or sexual attraction (Blakely, 1999), curiosity (Morgan, 2007), or to complement or avoid negative same-culture traits (Constable, 2003; Morgan). For the Chinese partner, in addition, avoiding a controlling Chinese mother-in-law has been listed as a motivation factor (Lim, 2011). Furthermore, a common Western assumption is that Asians mainly show an interest in forming romantic bicultural relationships in order to acquire a foreign passport and financial benefits, whereas there is a Western notion of Western males forming relationships with Asian women in order to find submissive females (Constable). Pan (2000), however discovered a new trend whereby, as a result of China's economic growth, Chinese males are growing in popularity and are now regarded as financially resourceful.

Same-culture couples have in previous studies been found to have the greatest satisfaction level (Fu, Tora & Kendall, 2001). Complications addressed as some of the main reasons to avoid bicultural relationships are associated with cultural differences (Morgan, 2007) and language barriers (Constable, 2003; Morgan, 2008). Additional factors impacting the bicultural couples include: culturally defined variances in gender roles (Kalmijn & van Tubergen, 2007; Morgan, 2008, Qian, 1997; Rodríguez García, 2006), geographical location (South and town area) (Johnson & Jacobson, 2005; Killian, 2003),

amount of time spending in the foreign country (Jacobson & Heaton, 2003), immigration experience (Qian & Lichter, 2001), labor need allowing ethnic integration (Fu, 2007), legal sanctions (Firmin & Firebaugh, 2008; Fu, 2008; Wallenstein, 2005), marriage pool same-culture (Pu, 2008), marital status (Constable, 2003), multicultural family background (Blackwell & Lichter, 2000), political orientation (Johnson & Jacobson), race (Gordon, 1964; Gullickson, 2006; Kitano, Yeung, Lynn & Hatanaka, 1984; Schoen and Cheng Yen-Hsin, 2006), religion (Rodríguez García, 2006; Tolson, 2007), socio-economic status (SES) (Gullickson, 2006; Jacobson & Heaton, 2003; Johnson & Jacobson; Fu; Schoen & Cheng Yen-Hsin), similar values and cultural practising (Fu), and Zeitgeist (Rosenfeld, 2006). When the couple has resources cultural differences seem appealing; however, when the stress levels increase, tolerance of cultural differences diminishes (McGoldrick et al. 2005). Age is also a factor related to openness to entering a bicultural relationship (Johnson & Jacobson, 2005; Jacobson & Heaton, 2003; Yancey, 2002), And finally the primary listed stressor described for bicultural couples living in Western cultures is racist reactions coming from strangers as well as family members (Batson, Qian, & Lichter, 2006; Rondilla & Spickard, 2007), The greater the cultural difference of a bicultural couple, the greater the complications the couples are likely to have. Several researchers have found the individuals entering a bicultural relationship to be unprepared to manage these challenges (Bischoff, 2005; Constable, 2003; Fu, Tora & Kendall, 2001; McGoldrick & Hardy, 2008; McGoldrick *et al.*, 2005).

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological research was to explore how bicultural couples (in this study, native-born Chinese and Western foreigners who immigrated to China) adjust to their bicultural situation. Clinical experience in China with bicultural couples and the lack of empiric data on this population created an interest in developing research of this phenomenon.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework used for this study was McGoldrick and Hardy's (2008) multicultural family system theories defining each person by various demographic identities such as race, culture, gender, age, sexual orientation, disabilities, religion, and spirituality. Demographic identities are affected by larger structures such as nation or community, colleagues, friends, and family members' reactions to these factors. As China opens up to the rest of the world the increase in the number of these bicultural relationships will result in more focus being put on the resulting problems. Most Western research on bicultural couples finds racism to be one of the major challenges for those couples. For the Chinese, Asian and European descent is seldom a source of racial discrimination in China. The challenges experienced by the bicultural couples in China are therefore better explained through McGoldrick & Hardy's demographic identities.

## Method

This phenomenological research involved 6 bicultural couples in China meeting the following inclusion criteria: 1) currently live in mainland China, 2) one member of the couple being a native of mainland China and the other from a Western culture (*e.g.*, European, North American, Canadian, or Australian.), 3) both members of the couple having a sufficient English level to follow the interview, and 4) the couples had to identify themselves as being in a committed relationship and having been together for a minimum of 12 months. The final inclusion criterion was despite the fact that Chinese law prohibits cohabitation (Guo, Luo & Zhou, 2007) inspired by McCabe (1999) by which both studies used the minimum of 12 months of partnership to define committed relationship reflecting common trends in current Western romantic lifestyle.

The participants included 5 female and 1 male Chinese individuals, and 1 female and 5 male Western individuals originating from Australia, Canada, Denmark, Switzerland, and the USA. Participant average age was 37 ranging from 30 to 50 years old, and the average age difference between the couple members was 5.2 years (1-8 years). The couples had been together for an average of 8.8 years (1.5-15 years). All but one of the couples were married and none of the couples had children at the time the interviews were conducted; however, one was pregnant. Two of the couples had met in the Western member's country, 1 couple had met in a neutral country, that is, not a native country to either of the members, and 3 couples had met in China. All participants except 2 of the Chinese participants had experienced living abroad. For one Western participant China was the only immigration experience. The couples, with one exception, communicated together in English, 5 Western participants spoke Chinese, and one Chinese participant spoke her husband's language, German. The Western participants had lived in China on average for 9 years (range 5-14 years).

The participants were collected through non-probability sampling and the snowball effect, recruited through 3 email channels in China; a medical clinic monthly newsletter, a non-profit helpline volunteer and employee e-mail list, as well as friends, colleagues, and acquaintances. The data was collected through face-to-face interviews taking place in integrated clinics in Urban China. All participants were interviewed individually and the interviews recorded by a tapeless recorder, and transcribed word-for-word. The interview duration varied between 38 and 96 minutes. The couples were given a token of appreciation for their time and travel expenses were reimbursed.

An expert panel (2 method- and 2 context experts) was recruited to review the interview protocol. The interview questions were semi-structured. The data analysis was guided by Moustakas (1994) 7 stages of data analyses, and the data was analyzed by the pen and pencil method. Ethical aspects involved: Informed consent, member checking, epoche (Moustakas, 1994), as well as IRB proposal approval prior to collecting the data. Trustworthiness was obtained by the sample size, a thick description (context, participants, research- procedure and analysis), and triangulation.

## Results

The main themes that emerged from this research were: 1) Personal and professional enrichment, 2) cultural challenges, 3) residence, 4) linguistic challenges, 5) social reactions, and 6) adjustment.

Personal and professional enrichment elicited following topics from the participants: Personal growth (e.g. made me more tolerant and empathic), flexibility privately (e.g. the spouse behavior extended my world view and gave me a deeper understanding of the environment, cultural confrontations promoted personal introspection), continuous excitement and attraction (cultural stimulation and exploration promoted constant movement in the relationship feeding personal curiosity, prevents routine, as well as flourishing partner attraction by continuously rediscovering each other), professional flexibility (become an *international citizen* who understands international work etiquette, learn more languages, flexible dealing with staff and clients of different nationalities), artistically broader (films, art and movies from diverse cultures), introspection as reflection of the other culture (learn about both cultures and take the best of each), and cultural authority or freedom in both cultures (the expert on the other culture and acting differently because of other culture influence is accepted).

The cultural challenges varied among the participants but overall they were listed as following: more or different problems than same-culture couples, early stage hardship (many of the challenges are related to understanding each other's culture), individual vs. cultural differences, and cultural critique (frustration) taken as personal attack, environmental factors in China (noise, pollution, pushing, spitting), Western reactions to Chinese etiquette (challenge to the Chinese member), space for diversity (e.g. attributing a cold to temperature as opposed to a virus). Acknowledgement of Chinese culture prior to meeting the spouse (incl. speaking the language) has assisted some of the participants.

Another major challenge was related to *residence* which involves following concerns: Couple dynamics (the native is the strongest in business and privately), couple separation (e.g. in between job and paperwork), and where to age and die. Reasons for choosing *residence in China* included: Work situation in China compared to the West, a good standard of living, urban safety (low crime), language flexibility, the avoidance of prejudice in Western cultures, and re-expatriation difficulties for Western members. 50% Chinese feel responsible for taking care of their parents, 50% of the Western participants are happy to live in China (cultural fascination), 50% of the Westerners have mixed feelings related to living in China (missing native family and friends, Chinese culture challenges). Rationale for residence outside of China involved: Close to the Western member's native family and friends, linguistic- and cultural equality (if in a neutral culture), and opportunity to explore a new culture together. Living in a neutral culture however also involved spending vacations separately (visiting each native family),

where both were linguistically disadvantaged, and both lacked *guangxi* (trusted social network). Asia was regarded by several participants as racially neutral compared to the majority Western cultures. Some participants found it to be easier to meet on neutral ground (at a distance from the family).

Language was listed as another major challenge. Among the participants, 4 Westerners spoke Chinese, all couples communicated in English except for one who communicated together orally in Chinese and written in English. Linguistic challenges the participants shared were as follows: language is crucial to understanding each other's culture, and is particularly important when emotions are involved. Without some language knowledge it is difficult to survive in China. Language knowledge eases miscommunication problems over time, and makes it easier to make friends and develop deeper relationships to each other's family. Also on the positive side, family members learn another language, the couple must communicate extensively, the couple can use each other to improve their language skills, and learn flexible communication style:

I will think I try to use your way to please you because you are not Chinese. And if I want to tell you how much I love you I sometimes need to use your way. Because according to the Chinese way I think lots of things doesn't have to be communicated. I think you should know because we Chinese are very shy people. And now I found out if I really love you, sometimes I should learn from you and I should use your way to tell you. Then you easily get it. (A1, p16)

The social reactions from family members were commonly welcoming with reservations mainly related to fears of geographic distance. For some Western families a bicultural marriage was expected. For the Chinese families, there was an expectation for their children to marry before the age of 30. Some family members and friends on the Chinese side have questioned age gaps between the couple members. Friends' reactions for some participants were smoother in an urban Chinese city with an international atmosphere and everyone speaking English. Some Chinese friends perceived not choosing a Chinese spouse as favoring the Western culture. Some women were warned about Western men only wanting to have fun, while on the other hand suggesting the couple will have intelligent (non-mutating) and cute babies. It was suggested that Western friends don't express their reservations explicitly. Chinese are curious about couple details whereas Western people are interested in the individual (from China). Strangers' reactions depend on urban vs. rural environment in both China and the West. The bicultural couples receive more attention compared to same-culture couples. Chinese strangers typically express curiosity, stare, expect the Westerner to have money, offer better service to the couple, assume the Chinese speaks good English, welcome the Western member, and have low language expectations. In Western cultures acceptance appears to depend on occupational status (local vs. expat), and Chinese education is partially rejected even from some of the best universities. Explicit prejudice is shown, stereotyping and racism is expressed, and accent in the language is not easily accepted. The bicultur-

al relationships help in diminishing misinterpretation and prejudice on both sides.

Finally adjustment was related to previous experience in living abroad and in rural areas of China, seeking information on the culture, and cross-cultural interaction has helped the couple's *international preparedness*. Food traditions were another topic which cropped up spontaneously in almost all interviews. 4 Chinese and 2 Western participants still struggle adjusting to their spouse's food traditions. Some have negotiated meal style, and others incorporated an international kitchen. Adaptations to some extent were gained by re-introducing unfamiliar dishes and over time learning to appreciate the dish. Another challenge related to food was eating habits (sitting at table vs. mingle standing, cold snacks vs. hot dishes, communication vs. silence). Another topic of adjustment involved family traditions. Some Chinese parents continue to monitor, care for and live with their children which can be a challenge for a Western spouse's need of personal space. How to address relatives, greetings, and what is communicated also varies greatly. Gender roles were in China described as a nuclear family tradition which has been blurred by the Western dependency of their Chinese spouse. Complementing or avoiding elements from one's own culture was regarded as a positive contribution to their bicultural relationship. Finally, business and finance style was mentioned as an adjustment problem. The Chinese were described as appreciating quantity, they tend avoid waste, success is expressed or measured in assets, they save assets for later life phases as a sort social insurance system. They are competitive, they accept to late work-related calls, have creative methods for achieving success, and As opposed to *guangxi* compared to Western traditions of working more to spend and enjoy in the present.

### **Limitations of the study**

The expert panel was recruited solely to comment on the interview protocol and therefore was not involved with the data analysis. The panel suggestions ranged in length of questions and focus of different protocol categories which were used as guidelines shaping the final questions for the participants and guided by the second committee member. Some of the limitations of the study involve: Small sample size, limited existing scholarly literature in English on the topic, open-ended questions which allow participant to choose the focus of the study and avoid the negative aspects, the Western members were all of European descent (therefore haven't experienced racism in China), and the researcher's perspective is from a Western background despite analyzing both cultures. Finally, the audience for this study may be mainly practitioners whereas bicultural couples in China might benefit from accessing this study.

## Conclusion

Bicultural couples in China are ambassadors to breaking down prejudice and stereotypes on both the Western and the Chinese side. Adjustment involves learning about each other's culture as well as navigating social reactions which mainly in Western cultures can be more hostile. The couples face different and more problems compared to same-culture couples, in particular in the early stages. However, they gain a deep insight into themselves and other cultures through extensive communication. In addition, their bicultural lives prolong excitement and attraction through the continuous stimuli, and they develop more flexibility and tolerance.

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