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BOOK CHAPTER

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B. Working with intercultural couples

Reenee Singh and Sumita Dutta

In the previous section, Yvonne Ayo and Melanie Gabbi discussed the issues for mixed race heritage children, young people, and their families. In this section, we will focus more specifically on the couple/parenting subsystem within such families.

Who is this section for?

This section is aimed most directly at training couple counsellors. However, it is also relevant for those working with individuals and families, as couple issues often emerge as part of the work with individuals and families. For example, if you are training those working in school settings, they might receive a referral for a child who is refusing to attend school. If and when the school professional convenes a family meeting, she might find that the child is staying at home to protect his parents from their conflicts with each other.

What do we mean by intercultural couples?

Although the title refers to intercultural couples, by which we mean couples who are from different cultural backgrounds, the issues relate to *all* couples, regardless of their racial and ethnic origins. If we think of culture as fluid, shifting, and dynamic (Krause & Miller, 1995) differences between people of a similar cultural background may be as difficult to negotiate as differences between people of very dissimilar cultural backgrounds. For example, in the Indian subcontinent, there may be vast differences between a Punjabi man and a woman from Kerala with regard to their diet, child rearing practices, and cultural beliefs and values. This may be the case despite the fact that both are "Indian" and belong to the same class and religious background. Similarly, a woman from the north of the UK may experience her culture as profoundly different from a man who has always lived in London, although they might both define themselves as white English or white British.

We believe that the establishment of any couple relationship requires a negotiation of differences—in areas such as how festivals are celebrated, what kind of food is eaten, relationships with families of origin, and rules about bringing up children.

Step families or reconstituted families provide one instance of highlighting difference; when couples bring children from previous relationships into a new relationship, the process of negotiating difference also applies to children, who might have different sets of rules in the different households that they belong to (Gorrell Barnes, 1998). Working with intercultural or interfaith couples is yet another instance of a more *explicit* process of negotiating differences. Although, thus far, we have referred to heterosexual couples, the issues raised in this section also apply to same sex couples. For the purposes of this section, we will refer to intercultural and interfaith couples interchangeably, as we believe that there is considerable overlap in the issues for couples from either different cultural or different religious backgrounds.

If, as we have argued, being in any couple relationship entails a negotiation of differences, what might be the issues more specific to intercultural or interfaith couples? We will now discuss a few themes that, in our experience, cut across our work with intercultural couples.

Transitions and change

Although life cycle or developmental changes may be challenging for any couple and family, perhaps the differences become particularly pronounced when the couple is from different cultural and religious backgrounds. Carter and McGoldrick (1989) point out that negotiating changes in the family life cycle is often done in reference to, and in support with, the cultural and community resources available to people. For example, a child is marked as coming into the world in various ceremonies, such as a christening or a “mundan” (a Hindu ceremony). Similarly, some cultures mark the move into adolescence through ceremonies such as the Jewish celebration of a Bar Mitzvah. When there are competing ideas within the wider family and community networks about which developmental stage should be privileged, and in what ways, this can sometimes lead to conflict.

Similarly, when there are two faiths, sometimes one partner in a couple is forced to let go of their faith in order to be accepted by the other person’s community. This can be a very painful loss that may or may not be fully acknowledged in the relationship. In our experience, we have heard from people about how difficult it can be to be absent from religious celebrations, as it is a reminder of the loss of their first religion. Equally, people have talked about the problem of feeling that they do not have agency to pick and choose which aspects of the second religion they would like to take on for themselves.

Migration, loss, and cut-offs

Stories from one or both partners of an intercultural couple often include a description of losses. Sometimes the losses are in previous generations, like the loss of home for migrant and refugee families (Falicov, 1995). Sometimes, marrying outside of one’s faith or culture can also involve a loss of relationships with one or both partners’ parents or siblings. Such cut-offs can be extremely painful, and come to the fore during the celebration of festivals or rituals, like marriage and childbirth. An exploration of these migration histories and losses can be a very useful way to understand the

lived experiences of intercultural couples. In our experience, although this work has to be carried out sensitively and with caution, couples often feel more able to face current dilemmas and negotiations once they feel that their own earlier experiences have been taken into account.

The impact of global conflict

In the case of a couple that I (RS) once worked with, where the husband (Ahmed) was Algerian Muslim and the wife (Pat) was Australian Christian (the couple's names have been altered to protect confidentiality), they found themselves distanced from both their families. Pat's family viewed Ahmed's Muslim background with suspicion, and, despite the fact that Pat had converted to Islam; she was never fully accepted by her husband's family. They had met at a time before the terrible happenings of 9/11 in the USA, the Gulf War, and the bombings in London (7 July 2005). The couple and their two children experienced racism and Islamophobia. During one of our sessions, Ahmed and Pat poignantly recounted that they did not like to watch the news on television, as it reminded them of the conflict between the Western world and the Islamic world. If they kept the outside world at bay, they could preserve the idea of their family as a peaceful unit. However, while this strategy protected them at one level, it also isolated them from the rest of the world on another.

Bi-lingualism

When Pat and Ahmed first met, they spoke to each other in French, in which they were both fluent. However, after they had children, Ahmed wanted to bring up his children to speak Arabic. The language spoken at home thus excluded Pat, who had imagined, before the children were born, that their family life would be conducted in French. Burck (2005) writes about the dilemmas for couples, parents, and families of living in different languages. Language can be used in couple relationships to regulate distance and closeness and to mark power differences.

Second and third generation migrants will often talk about the imbalance in their couple relationships where one member of the couple is from the dominant culture. The one from the minority culture is already subsumed within the dominant language, which means that the minority language has to be introduced in an explicit way, often with the dominant partner having to opt to learn their partner's language. This puts the onus on the minority partner to persuade the other partner to preserve their own language, hence aspects of their own culture.

Rules about bringing up children

Rules about how children should be brought up may vary from one culture to another. Although there is, of course, much intracultural variation as well, with rules about parenting differing between one family and another *within* the *same* cultural background, there may be some marked differences that could be based on cultural and class differences. In some cultures, for example, it is the norm for children to sleep with their parents or in their parents' room, whereas in other cultures, such a practice would be frowned upon.

Sometimes, conflicts or disagreements between intercultural couples focus less on the differences in the rules and more in the way such rules can acquire racial/cultural significance. For example, in my own family, I (RS) am South Asian, married to a white Englishman. Our three-year-old son is mixed race. Recently, when we were on holiday with my mother-in-law, I bumped up against differences in my own and my mother-in-law's ideas about how children should behave in public. My own view is that children should be quiet and well behaved when they are in public places like restaurants, whereas my mother-in-law is of the belief that "boys will be boys" and should be allowed to express themselves through physical activity, despite the context. Following a disagreement between us, when I unpacked these two differing sets of beliefs further, I realised that when my son misbehaved (from my point of view) in a public place in a predominantly white area, I felt acutely aware of my own racial and cultural background as a black person and how this might affect others' perceptions of whether I am a good enough parent. My expectations from my son may be

different when I am in a situation where I do not stand out as being from a minority ethnic background.

Conclusion

Although working with intercultural couples involves, at many levels, the same processes as when working with monocultural couples, this section outlines particular areas that the professional could focus on. The exercises that follow are intended both as training tools for those training couple counsellors working with intercultural couples, and as tools that could be used in clinical work with intercultural/interfaith couples.

References

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Exercises

Exercise 1: Couple cultural genograms

Context/organization

This exercise was devised by Reenee Singh, adapted from Hardy and Laszloffy's (1995) Cultural Genogram (p. 33). It can be used in clinical intercultural work, as well as to train professionals.

Aims

- To encourage participants to think about the cultural influences in their own families of origin.

- To help participants to understand how one's own cultural background may differ from one's partner.
- To help participants learn how to negotiate cultural differences in a couple relationship.

Instructions

Participants: between 4 and 16 (even numbers required); total time: approximately two and half hours; resources: flipchart paper, coloured pens/pencils, handouts with typed questions.

1. Break the group into pairs. Spread them across the room, or, ideally, in break-out rooms attached to the main training room (5 mins).
2. Provide each pair with a piece of flipchart paper and coloured pens/pencils (5 mins).
3. Ask one person to help the other to draw their own cultural genogram/family tree of three generations and then that of their partner's. Direct participants to use colours to identify different cultural backgrounds within their own family and that of their partner's family (45 mins).
4. After the families have been mapped out, ask each pair to reflect upon the following questions. How are the two genograms similar and different? What is the impact of cultural, faith, and language differences on parenting? How were intercultural/interfaith differences negotiated in their own and their partners' families as they were growing up? In their couple relationships, what patterns and themes about cultural/faith difference do they think they have adopted/changed from their own and from their partners' families (30 mins)?
5. Break: pairs should now swap over and repeat the above stages (45 mins).
6. Once both people in the pairs have had a chance to be interviewed, bring the large group back together and ask them to reflect upon the process of doing the exercise and reflect together on the main learning points (20 mins).

Notes for trainers

- This is a long and complex exercise, best suited for professionals who already have experience in drawing genograms and cultural genograms.
- Those who do not have a current partner could be asked to think about a previous relationship.
- When participants and their partners are from what they would consider to be monocultural and unifaith backgrounds, they may be

encouraged to think about culture in its broadest sense, as encompassing differences in class and place.

- This exercise could evoke strong feelings about the participants' family and couple relationships, and you should allow space for participants to approach you and talk in private, if necessary.
 - It is important that you let people know at the start of the exercise that they will not be expected to share details of their discussion in the large group and that they can take away their genograms at the end of the session.
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Exercise 2: Couple multi-dimensional ecological comparative analysis (MECA).

Context/organization

This exercise was devised by Reenee Singh, based on Falicov's (1995) MECA framework.

Aim

To help participants to explore the differences between couples, using Falicov's (1995) MECA as a framework.

Instructions

Participants: 8–24; duration: approximately one and a half hours; resources: handouts with descriptions of Falicov's four MECA parameters.

1. Briefly summarize each of the parameters of Falicov's MECA (p. 14) (10 mins).
 - Ecological context.
 - Migration/acclulturation.
 - Family life cycle.
 - Family organization.
2. Break the group into pairs (5 mins) and spread them out across the room. Ask each pair to assign roles of interviewer and interviewee.
3. Explain to the group that they can choose one of Falicov's four parameters to think about in more detail. The trainer should try to ensure that all parameters are covered among the pairs, if possible.
4. Once each pair has been assigned a parameter, they are given a further handout with a description of their parameter and an opportunity to clarify any further aspects of Falicov's model (5 mins).
5. Using the assigned parameter, the interviewer asks the interviewee to consider what connections they make to the parameter from the position of

- (a) their own growing up and family of origin;
 - (b) their partner's growing up and family of origin (20 mins).
6. After twenty minutes, ask the pairs to switch roles and repeat the above stages (20 mins).
 7. Bring the pairs back into the large group and ask people to reflect upon some of the couple differences/similarities that emerged, in a way that they feel comfortable sharing (15 mins).

Notes for trainers

- This exercise relies on a previous theoretical discussion (p. 14) that includes the idea of Falicov's (1995) MECA as a training tool (14 mins).
 - This exercise could evoke strong feelings about the participants' family and couple relationships and you should allow space for participants to approach you and talk in private, if necessary.
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Exercise 3: Mind your language

Context/organization

This exercise was devised by Reenee Singh, based on Charlotte Burck's (2005) research on multilingualism.

Aims

- To help participants to reflect on how differences in languages between any two people can be negotiated.
- To facilitate an awareness about the richness and strengths in being able to speak in more than one language.

Instructions

Participants: 2–12; duration: between an hour and hour and half; resources: handouts with typed questions.

1. Break the group into pairs (5 mins).
2. Ask them to interview each other in turn with regard to the following questions (40 mins):
 - When you were growing up, what language(s) were spoken at home?
 - If your parents/carers came from different language backgrounds, how were decisions made about what language(s) should be spoken and in what contexts?
 - In your current family situation, what language(s) are spoken and when?

- If you speak in more than one language, what is it like for you to switch from one language to another?
 - What do you think might be the advantages/disadvantages of speaking more than one language?
3. Ask the pairs to reconvene in the large group (2 mins).
 4. Ask the group for feedback about what the process of doing the exercise was like for them, and how it might translate back into their work with bilingual and multilingual couples (15–20 mins).

Notes for trainers

- When introducing the exercise, you should let participants know that you are referring to language in the broadest sense. Language can include differences in dialect, in accents, and even sign language.
- Doing this exercise can bring up strong feelings of loss, particularly if languages (and, by implication, culture and class) have been adapted or lost over generations. You should allow enough time for the last part of the exercise, where you enquire about the process of doing the exercise.

Exercise 4: East is East

Context/organization

This exercise was devised by Reenee Singh.

Aims

- To help professionals to think about how cultural and religious differences are managed in intercultural and interfaith couple relationships.
- To think about the impact of these differences on parenting.

Instructions

Participants: 3–50; total time: 30–45 mins; resources: DVD, DVD player, flipchart paper, handouts.

1. Advise participants that you are going to show them a clip from a film.
2. Ask them to bear the following questions in mind as they are watching it (you may want to have these questions on flipchart/handouts).
 - What cultural and faith differences do you notice?
 - How are these differences managed and negotiated in the couple relationship?
 - What is the impact of these parenting differences on the children's mixed race identities?
3. Now show the participants a ten-minute clip from the film *East is East*, (This is a BAFTA Award winning British comedy drama, directed by

- If you speak in more than one language, what is it like for you to switch from one language to another?
 - What do you think might be the advantages/disadvantages of speaking more than one language?
3. Ask the pairs to reconvene in the large group (2 mins).
 4. Ask the group for feedback about what the process of doing the exercise was like for them, and how it might translate back into their work with bilingual and multilingual couples (15–20 mins).

Notes for trainers

- When introducing the exercise, you should let participants know that you are referring to language in the broadest sense. Language can include differences in dialect, in accents, and even sign language.
- Doing this exercise can bring up strong feelings of loss, particularly if languages (and, by implication, culture and class) have been adapted or lost over generations. You should allow enough time for the last part of the exercise, where you enquire about the process of doing the exercise.

Exercise 4: East is East

Context/organization

This exercise was devised by Reenee Singh.

Aims

- To help professionals to think about how cultural and religious differences are managed in intercultural and interfaith couple relationships.
- To think about the impact of these differences on parenting.

Instructions

Participants: 3–50; total time: 30–45 mins; resources: DVD, DVD player, flipchart paper, handouts.

1. Advise participants that you are going to show them a clip from a film.
2. Ask them to bear the following questions in mind as they are watching it (you may want to have these questions on flipchart/handouts).
 - What cultural and faith differences do you notice?
 - How are these differences managed and negotiated in the couple relationship?
 - What is the impact of these parenting differences on the children's mixed race identities?
3. Now show the participants a ten-minute clip from the film *East is East*, (This is a BAFTA Award winning British comedy drama, directed by

Damien O'Donnell and released in 1999. It is based in Britain in the 1970s and is a poignant exposition of the dilemmas faced by a mixed race family, where the father is Pakistani Muslim and the mother is English, of Irish Catholic origin.)

4. Now ask the group to reflect upon what they have seen. This can either be in pairs or as a large group. Ask people to also consider the impact that the film clip has had on them. If this reflection is done in pairs, then bring the group back together and ask participants to share some of their reflections in pairs with the large group, making sure that each of the questions are covered.

Notes for trainers

- You could substitute the film *East is East* with another film about inter-cultural couple relationships.
- Rather than asking individuals to cover all three questions, you could break the group into two and ask Group 1: What cultural and faith differences do you notice and how do these get managed and negotiated in the couple relationship? Group 2 could be asked: What is the impact of parenting differences on the children's mixed race identities? Discussion and feedback as per above.
- In one of the training groups that I (RS) facilitated, a Muslim participant objected to the way in which his religion was represented in the film. You may want to allow enough time for discussion and debriefing after showing the film, or you may want to check that nobody in the audience has strong feelings about the film before showing it.

Exercise 5: The dinner table

Context/organization

This exercise was devised by Sumita Dutta. It can be used to guide clinical sessions with intercultural couples as well as training professionals.

Aims

- To look at what food is eaten within the home.
- To explore the origins and meanings associated with food from a cultural perspective.
- To consider how what gets eaten in the home is thought about and negotiated.

Instructions

Participants: 4–24 (even numbers required); total time: 45 mins–1 hour (30 mins pair interviewing, 15–30 mins large group feedback); resources: hand-outs with typed questions.

1. Break the group into pairs. Spread them out across the room. Give each pair a handout with the questions that are going to be asked (see questions below).
2. Ask each pair to identify themselves as an interviewer and interviewee.
3. Explain to the group that they will take it in turns to interview each other about the ways in which family meals are thought about and have been experienced in their family of origin.
4. The interviewer is now directed towards asking the following questions around the following areas (as per handout) (15 mins):
 - What did you eat last night at home?
 - How did what you eat at home get talked about or negotiated in your partnership/with significant others?
 - How does this compare to the food that you ate in your family of origin?
 - Do you make any cultural associations with food?
 - If your partner/a significant other person to you were here, what would s/he be able to tell me about what cultural associations you have with food?
5. After fifteen minutes, the trainer should direct the pairs to swap over, so the interviewer is now interviewed, and to repeat the above (15 mins).
6. Ask the group to come back together and feed back on the process of the exercise and some of the connections that they made to their own lives and their work with intercultural couples (15–30 mins).

Notes for trainers

It is important to recognize that food or "home food" can be a very evocative subject, with strong emotional and contextual associations with, for example, poverty, racism, or loss. For this reason, I usually leave 15–30 minutes for large group feedback.

Participants have often fed back how useful this exercise is to directly transfer into their work with intercultural couples because of the strong resonances it can create.

Exercise 6: The celebration

Context/organization

This exercise was devised by Sumita Dutta. It can be used to guide clinical sessions with intercultural couples as well as training professionals.

Aims

- To look at what celebrations take place within couple relationships.

- To consider how cultural celebrations and rituals get thought about and negotiated in couples.

Instructions

Participants: 4–24 (even numbers required); total time: 45 mins–1 hour (30 mins pair interviewing, 15–30 mins large group feedback); resources: handouts with typed questions.

1. Break the group into pairs. Spread them out across the room. Give each pair a handout with the questions (see below).
2. Ask each pair to identify themselves as an interviewer and interviewee.
3. Explain to the group that they will take it in turns to interview each other about the ways in which they celebrate festivals or rituals within their couple/family.
4. The interviewer is now directed towards asking the following questions around the following areas (as per handout) (15 mins);
 - What was the last festival that you celebrated together as a couple/family (e.g., Christmas, Divali, etc.).
 - How does this compare to the festivals or rituals that you experienced in your family of origin?
 - How did what you celebrate get talked about or negotiated with in your partnership?
5. After fifteen minutes the trainer should direct the pairs to swap over, so the interviewer is now interviewed and to repeat the above (15 mins).
6. Ask the group to come back together and feed back on the process of the exercise and some of the connections that they made to their own lives and their work with intercultural couples (15–30 mins).

Note for trainers

It is important to recognize that all couples have to negotiate how to do festivals within relationships, even if they are from the same culture. For example, how Christmas gets negotiated in a couple from the same culture can often be very complicated. This is sometimes a nice way to introduce the exercise and connect participants to their own cultural experiences.

Exercise 7: Exploring views on intercultural couples

Context/organization

This exercise was devised by Sumita Dutta.

Aims

- To look at your own views of intercultural couples.
- To consider how these views were influenced.
- To explore the views of people around you on intercultural couples.

Instruction

Participants: 2–24 (even numbers required, ideally); duration: 55 mins–70 mins (40 mins pair interviewing, 15–30 mins large group feedback); resources: handouts with typed questions.

1. Break the group into pairs. Spread them out across the room. Give each pair a handout with the questions that are going to be asked (see questions below).
2. Ask each pair to identify themselves as an interviewer and interviewee.
3. Explain to the group that they will take it in turns to interview each other about their views on intercultural couples.
4. The interviewer is now directed towards asking questions (as per handout) around the following areas (20 mins):
 - What are your own views on intercultural couples? How were these shaped? Did you know any intercultural couples growing up, in your early adulthood, later life? Did any public representations of intercultural couples influencing your views? Did anyone around you have strong views that influenced you?
 - If your partner were here, what would s/he say were their views on intercultural couples? Do you know how these were shaped? Did they know any intercultural couples growing up, in their early adulthood, later life? Did any public representations of intercultural couples influence their views? Did anyone around them have any strong views that influenced them?
 - If your parents/children or significant others from your life were here, what would they say were their views on intercultural couples? Do you know how these were shaped? Did they know any intercultural couples growing up, in their early adulthood, later life? Did any public representations of intercultural couples influence their views? Did anyone around them have any strong views that influenced them?
5. After twenty minutes, the trainer should direct the pairs to swap over, so the interviewer is now interviewed, and to repeat the above (20 mins).
6. Ask the group to come back together and feed back on the process of the exercise and some of the connections that they made to their own lives and their work with intercultural couples (15–30 mins).

Note for trainers

This exercise can bring forth people's own experiences of being discriminated against, both within their couples and their families of origin. It may be important to keep some time "in hand" to fully process the exercise, I usually leave 15–30 minutes for large group feedback, as well as naming discrimination and racism as an aspect of many intercultural couples' life experiences.
