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# Relational Dialectics in Intercultural Couples' Relationships

Carine Cools



## LECTIO PRAE CURSORIA

Lectio prae cursoria for a dissertation in Speech Communication Research publically defended at the University of Jyväskylä on December 19, 2011. Docent Fred Dervin (University of Turku) was appointed as opponent, and Prof. Maarit Valo (University of Jyväskylä) as custodian. Link: <http://dissertations.jyu.fi/studhum/9789513945732.pdf>

*The main purpose of this study is to describe and to understand the intercultural couples' relationships in Finland from the relational-dialectics perspective by Baxter and Montgomery (1996).*

*Following the interpretive research tradition, in this qualitative study, data were collected from 18 heterosexual intercultural couples (36 persons), utilizing the multi-method approach. The multi-method approach in this study includes theme interviews (5 couples), concept map interviews (six couples) and e-mail interviews (seven couples). The data were analyzed following an inductive content analysis approach.*

*The intercultural couples in this study experienced internal and external dialectics, related respectively to intercultural adaptation, e.g. need of support, uncertainty about the future, and identity confusion issues, and to challenges of inclusion and exclusion regarding, e.g. family support, and access to a social network.*

*Intercultural relational dialectical forces present in the intercultural couples' relationships include continual re-negotiation, cultural identity and be-*

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*longing, increased sensitivity to differences and similarities, social power, social support, and uncertainty.*

**Keywords:** external dialectics, intercultural couples, intercultural dialectics, intercultural relational forces, internal dialectics, relational dialectics

**Asiasanat:** kulttuurienväliset dialektiikat, kulttuurienväliset parit, kulttuurienvälisten suhteiden voimat, relationaaliset dialektiikat, sisäiset dialektiikat, ulkoiset dialektiikat

## Introduction and purpose of the study

Whether for personal reasons, for studies or for professional assignments, more people go abroad for shorter or longer periods of time. These stays overseas often tend to fall together in a phase of life when people are looking for a partner or are forming families. Hence, it happens, more frequently than a few decades ago, that people find a partner or a spouse with whom they share a different cultural background.

At the same time, however, we do not have much information, and particularly in Europe there has been little research, about the special form of relationship that intercultural couples represent. We do know, though, that communication and its strategies, which are essential in relationships in general and for couples in particular, tend to govern the well being of relational partners.

In addition, reflecting on intercultural couplehood also touches the debate on immigration. Since 1995, when Finland joined the EU, the immigrant population has increased by ca. 350 percent (350 %). However, although a general phenomenon, the situation of intercultural couples in Finland is still a rather recent trend, and so their number is

not yet so large as in many other European countries. Still, in Finland in 2010, ten percent of registered married couples were living in an intercultural relationship.

My reasons for choosing to study this topic also stress the importance of the topic. First of all, this study is anchored in interpersonal communication, in the family communication research tradition, where relationships of an intercultural nature are explored. And secondly, intercultural couplehood forms a current, present-day societal tendency, which also concerns migration studies.

Are intercultural couple relationships actually different from intracultural ones? How often does it happen that intracultural couples claim their relationship is also intercultural because "he is from Savo and she is from Karelia". Or then the gender issue, according to which all couples are claimed to be cross-cultural, pointing to the male-female difference. To some degree, of course, they may be right. Families do develop their own micro-culture, their own traditions and speech cultures, their own expectations and inside jokes. In this sense, all relationships are intercultural as each couple forms its own unique culture, which is called relational culture.

However, as this study shows, ignoring particular complexities intercultural couples confront, is to leave unacknowledged the losses, people in intercultural relationships may suffer, the wide historical differences that reach into the hearts of people who come from different parts of the world, and who speak different languages.

## Research questions and method

In this qualitative study I look at the romantic relationships of heterosexual couples, where both partners come from different cultural backgrounds. The main purpose of this study is to describe and to understand the intercultural couples' relationships from the relational-dialectics perspective. Relational dialectics theory, by Baxter and Montgomery (1996), carries the idea that tensions in a relationship are a fundamental feature. These tensions are quite different from conflicts or problems. Thinking dialectically about relationships then, means that in every relationship there are internal tensions

(between the two partners), and external tensions (between the couple and their social surrounding).

I have posed the following three research questions: 1) What internal and external dialectical tensions do intercultural couples experience in their relationship? 2) What intercultural-related dialectical tensions do intercultural couples deal with in their relationship?, and 3) How do the couples see their different cultural background affecting their relationship?

To find answers to these questions, data were collected from 18 heterosexual intercultural couples (36 persons) utilizing the multi-method approach. This includes three types of interviews with intercultural couples: thematic interviews with ten people (five couples), concept map interviews with twelve people (six couples), and email interviews with fourteen people (seven couples). All the couples consisted of a Finnish and a non-Finnish partner. The data were analyzed following an inductive content analysis approach.

## Findings

The findings of this study bring forth inspiring and thought-provoking topics. On the internal level, between the partners, support was a major topic. Support is seen of the utmost importance for intercultural couples. The partners experienced support through interaction with each other which helped them manage uncertain situations and helped them cope with stressful circumstances. However, support can be accepted, and rejected. This points to the tensions between the partners in need of support, and partners who provide the support, such as too much dependency, feelings of guilt, shame, and being a burden.

Whereas the intercultural partners explicitly expressed the certainty of their relationship, they also articulated the need for spontaneity, for being surprised and romanced. Uncertainty about the future was mostly conveyed by the complicated decision-making processes about, for instance, where to live, where to find work, how to uphold traditions, and how to tackle long-term planning. All couples faced these uncertainties, but the extra variations, some of which are brought about by cul-

tural diversity lead them to making tough choices, for instance choosing whether to move between two countries or two continents, versus moving between two cities or villages. The making of such choices intensified feelings of confusion and exclusion by the intercultural couples.

On the external level, between the partners and their social environment, the intercultural couples faced dialectical tensions in their need for support, this time, however, for support of family, in-laws, friends and acquaintances. They considered various networks crucial for being included with others, especially as they tend to have only one partner's family nearby. Therefore they couldn't always count on the support, which is generally available to intra-cultural couples. The couples perceived themselves as pretty conventional in one way, such as conforming to traditional relationship ideas, but they also considered themselves as being unique, like taking pleasure in the idea of difference and seeing it as a good thing.

The couples' motivation for disclosing was related to their need to share, to enjoy company and to create safe and encouraging social encounters. For the non-Finnish partners, this was not always possible as they, at times, felt unable to communicate in the host-country's language, an issue they perceived as disadvantageous. In all the couples, both partners consciously attempted to preserve their mother tongue as they knew it to be the only medium that allows them to reveal and share with others in their social network.

The effects of the intercultural couples' cultural background on their relationships are many fold. Most striking, yet not surprising, are the intercultural couples' continual negotiations, which seem to constitute their lives – internally and externally. These negotiations consist of repeated decision-making and compromising about nearly everything: holidays, friends, religion, traditions and celebrations and their acceptance in the larger social network, the upbringing and education of their children, and values and gender issues. Adaptation is presented as problematic and involved power issues of disadvantage since one partner often is the weaker link in interactions.

The intercultural couples were repeatedly faced with language issues, which were experienced as

powerful elements in their daily lives. These included for instance persistent language learning for the non-Finnish partners, language use between the partners, which contains the daily management of at least two languages, and the pain of language loss.

The partners gave evidence of episodes of being included, and excluded, and they touched on issues of belonging. Concerns of belonging affected the partners in instances of identity search, visibility, rootedness, and transnational connection.

Cultural identity was something the non-Finnish partners reflected on from the perspective of their presence and participation in the target culture (Finland), but it was also something that concerned them when returning "back home". Not only the non-Finnish partners but also the Finnish partners were affected by identity search, as a result of being in an intercultural partnership and of having spent time in their non-Finnish partner's home culture.

The common thread surfacing in the couples' accounts of how their different cultural backgrounds are reflected in their relationships is unquestionably the continual negotiation between the two partners themselves, and between the couples and their social networks. In a sense these define their intercultural relationship, as all their moves are "negotiated" moves. Interculturally-related dialectical forces in the couples' relationships include continual re-negotiation, cultural identity and belonging, increased sensitivity to differences and similarities, social power, social support, and uncertainty.

## **Relevance of the study and conclusions**

What do these findings bring us? The most important discovery of this study is that the intercultural couples experience intercultural tensions in the form of continual re-negotiations through which other intercultural tensions are initiated. These results are of contemporary relevance as they affect our knowledge and our understanding of relational communication in an intercultural context. Awareness of these tensions offers opportunities to deepen the understanding of relating in an intercultural context.

But, this study definitely also addresses a need for more scholarship on intercultural couplehood.

Moreover, as the findings originate in an interpersonal communication study, they are also of relevance to counselors involved with guidance and counseling for intercultural couples. The main goal of couple counselling inherently lies in making couples to understand more profoundly their relationship, while improving their relational communication. Thus, knowledge of these intercultural tensions is new, in that it admits, and allows for couples to experience various tensions which are ever fluctuating, and which must be considered an inherent and important, part of relating.

While it is essential to understand how intercultural relationships are sustained by the fairly young couples in this study, future studies could examine dialectical tensions with older intercultural couples. As the history of research on intercultural couples is still relatively young, and almost a novelty in the field, also a longitudinal take could offer new light on the dynamics in such relationships, and how they might affect long-term commitment.

Since negotiations constitute a very important part of a couples' relationship, language as a tool for communication, is of great importance in this study. "What language to speak" can reflect hesitation, issues of support, and ambiguity about being in a disadvantaged position. In the end it probably refers to one's genuine willingness to be accepted in the new society.

Yet, regarding the language use, research on older intercultural couples could bring out important findings. For instance, research conducted on older intercultural couples in Australia shows, that migrant partners in older intercultural couples form a significant proportion of those who use interpreting services. These older migrants include a number of people who used to be proficient in the target language but due to old age and its accompanying memory loss, have reverted to their native tongue. This means they are no longer able to express for instance their healthcare needs in the target language. It also implies an urgent need for significant knowledge of the dynamics of language and its transformations over time in older intercultural couples.

Continued work in this area, and particularly longitudinal studies on intercultural couples, would make it possible to explore how such couples could benefit from research into relationships with their

external networks, and on transcultural care issues which affect the migrant partners and their networks in the respective target or home-country.

To conclude, studying intercultural couples shows that cultural issues naturally interrelate with issues of personal and relationship history. In the end, the intercultural couples' refusal to accept simple answers, and their determination to continue to discuss an issue until a midpoint has been found, is what emerges from this study as most characteristic of these couples. Their accounts reveal the kind of challenges explored. Evidently, these are not just issues about food or clothes or funny mistakes, even if sometimes they are stories about food – like whether or not to use jam on bread – about clothing, and on occasion about funny mistakes. But none of these issues stands on its own: topics of food and clothes, holidays and mixing up words are almost always linked to larger ones. Discussions about appropriate clothing can stand for uncertainty about whether the family will think it good enough. The question of where to live can also imply a concern about who will take care of the parents when they are old, which points to issues of transnational care.

Finally, it is vital to realize that knowledge about intercultural tensions is not only of profound consequence to the couples, or to the nuclear family, but it also affects their children and their families, it affects their friends and their colleagues, and it affects their neighbors and acquaintances. In a way one can say it affects everyone in our society.

What I pictured from the start, and what is echoed in the stories of the intercultural couples in this study, is that they survive and thrive through complicated movements between spaces, places, and beliefs. They find themselves choosing not to choose between their own cultures of origin; instead they move among cultures, between tensions and periods of harmony, accepting what they can, and articulating what they can not, negotiating over and over again what they mean, and trusting the inarticulate to somehow make itself known – eventually. They experience intercultural tensions, which need to be seen to, and discussed countless times, through significant negotiations that often seem never-ending. This can be best illustrated by the words of one of the intercultural partners in this study:

***"As our differences are much more apparent, and obvious, they just have to be discussed; we have become the mediators in our own cultures."***