

Sexual communication among intercultural couples with a Finnish partner

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>In this study the topic of sexual communication, satisfaction, and accommodation in intercultural relationships is examined. Intercultural couples are in need of more attention in scholarly research, especially on the topic of sexual communication. This study aims to bring the topic into clear view. One research question leads this study in asking: “what factors play a role in how intercultural couples discuss sex?” 18 participants, making up 9 couples, were interviewed separately about their sexual communication; following the interviews each couple completed a survey together on the same topic. The Communication Accommodation Theory is utilized to evaluate how accommodative intercultural couples are while discussing sex with one another. The findings from this research highlight 3 main factors which play a role in how intercultural couples discuss sex: open communication, cultural differences, and speaking English.</p>	
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Sexual Communication and Intercultural Couples

Introduction

This study discusses sexual communication among intercultural couples. Throughout this monograph the topics of communication, sexual communication, sexual and relationship satisfaction, intercultural couples, Finnish culture, global sex education differences, societal sex standards, and the Communication Accommodation Theory will be discussed by identifying and analyzing studies which have covered said topics. The previously mentioned topics are wrapped up to cover the general topic, which relates to the article attached to this monograph, being sexual communication within intercultural relationships, specifically intercultural relationships where one partner is from Finland and the other is from any country other than Finland. This topic is of special importance because it is an understudied area. The individual topics of sexual communication and intercultural relationships have been studied in great detail but few, if any, studies combine the two subject areas. Research is needed in the field of intercultural sexual communication to enhance the knowledge of what, if any, differences and challenges intercultural couples face when dealing with sexual communication. To simply assume intercultural couples and intracultural couples face the same challenges in sexual communication would be incorrect. Research shows the difficulties intercultural couples face are unique from intracultural couples because the former faces difficulties and disapproval from family members (Brummett & Steuber, 2015), has higher chances of misunderstanding one another (Bustamante, Nelson, Henriksen, & Monakes, 2011), must understand and support cultural differences (Reiter & Gee, 2008), and must negotiate assumptions and expectations to create shared meanings (Silva, Campbell & Wright, 2012). With the previous statement in mind, it would be wise to

consider that intercultural couples most likely face distinct challenges in their sexual communication with one another.

Travel, social media, study and work abroad, and expatriate communities have made intercultural relationships a commonality. An intercultural relationship may be defined by numerous factors varying from cultural traditions and customs, to beliefs, values, religion, country of origin, and race (Kellner, 2009). People in intercultural relationships may see themselves as bicultural or multicultural because they adapt to their partner's culture (Bustamante et al., 2011) and thus experience two culturally different worlds. Combining two cultures can be difficult as negotiations between two different worldviews to find common ground is not easy on all subject matters. Intercultural couples must be able to openly communicate with one another to solve cultural misunderstandings and ensure mutual relationship satisfaction. Obtaining relationship satisfaction is based on a variety of variables, two of which being communication and sexual satisfaction.

Effective communication is one of the most important components of a relationship. Partners disclose information about themselves to one another as a way of breaking down barriers and getting to know one another better. The motivation to disclosure information is based on liking, reciprocity, wants, and relationship prolongation, and thus, partners who are motivated to stay together longer will self-disclose quite often, especially in the beginning of a relationship (Faulkner & Lannutti, 2010). Couples who are involved in a lot of self-disclosure and communication with one another are more likely to better understand one another and feel closer to each other than couples who do not. Distressed couples are more likely to experience less constructive communication and more avoidance communication, which signals to communication being at the heart of a happy, functioning relationship (Litzinger & Gordon,

2005). Couples who can communicate well together and self-disclose on many levels are likely to have a more successful relationship than couples who cannot. Self-disclosure is especially important when it comes to more personal relationship topics, like sexual wants and desires.

Sexual satisfaction in a romantic relationship is a key component to relationship satisfaction. Couples who discuss their sexual likes and dislikes are likely to be more sexually satisfied because their partner understands their desires (MacNeil & Byers, 2005). When partners discuss their sexual wants with one another both partners have a better understanding of what is desired and how to please each other. Trudel (2002) found men were more likely to experience performance anxiety and women had troubles reaching orgasm during sex, indicating sexual communication is essential as it can lessen these issues. When partners discuss sex together it can lessen anxiety and increase awareness of what is desired and appreciated during intercourse. For a couple to be sexually satisfied, communication about sexual wants and likes is necessary as it is the easiest way to determine a partner's sexual desires. Couples who discuss sex together have a better understanding of what each other desires, which may be especially important for intercultural couples who have vastly different backgrounds.

When children are exposed to different cultural norms, they are less likely to have ethnocentric attitudes and more likely to have stronger social flexibility (Silva et al., 2012), meaning that intercultural relationships later in life may be more possible because there is experience with different people and social customs. People involved in intercultural relationships must be willing to negotiate traditions and values with one another because there will likely be many differences in upbringing and backgrounds. It is important for intercultural couples to discuss their cultural differences and support those differences to better understand and maintain their relationship (Reiter & Gee, 2008). Intercultural couples who want to sustain

their relationship long-term need to understand one another, which can be accomplished through satisfactory communication, and respect and participate in some of their partners' cultural traditions and customs. Intercultural couples will have to lose some of their original culture to make room for the new culture of their partner, which is a task couples have to be willing to do to maintain a healthy and balanced relationship.

Intercultural couples must depend on communication to aid their daily issues. For this thesis, 9 couples were interviewed and surveyed on their sexual communication habits. The data from the interviews and surveys was then used to draw conclusions about sexual communication among intercultural couples. This study is the first of its kind and is a good starting point for others who wish to continue on in this topic. There is a lot of research which has yet to be conducted; more research in this unique field will likely lead to more answers and understanding of the way intercultural couples communicate and negotiate about sexual topics.

Sexual Communication

Introduction to sexual communication

Sexual communication involves the self-disclosure of desired and undesired sexual acts as well as sexual likes and dislikes to a romantic partner (Byers & Demmons, 1999). Sexual communication is involved in most all romantic relationships and “is important to the development and maintenance of satisfying sexual relationships” (MacNeil & Byers, 2005, p. 170). Many couples engage in sexual communication to express their frustration and/or satisfaction with one another which allows for adjustments to be made for future sexual encounters. Communication about sexual topics is important in romantic relationships as it aids in gaining consent, determining sexual desires, and can be a main factor in determining sexual and relationship well-being (Faulkner & Lannutti, 2010).

Many scholars have highlighted the importance of sexual communication in maintaining successful romantic relationships. Sexual communication can be done verbally or nonverbally although discussing the act during or before the sexual encounter usually leads to desirable results. In a study by Faulkner and Lannutti (2010), participants stated talking about sex directly before or during the act lead to better sexual satisfaction and a desire to have sex with that person again. This type of sexual communication can be thought of as sexual self-disclosure which is a person's willingness to communicate about sexual topics (Tang, Bensman & Hatfield, 2013). Talking about sexual desires is the quickest and simplest method for mutual partner understanding and sexual satisfaction to occur.

Sexual communication may take many forms and variations. Hess and Coffelt (2012) broke sexual language into three categories: vernacular/colloquial terms, clinical/medical terms, and euphemisms/agreed on terms or phrases. In their study of sexual communication among romantic partners, clinical/medical terms were used the least and vernacular terms and euphemisms were used fairly equally. Each couple had different language with which they used and were comfortable, signaling communication among couples is different and unique based on the individuals. This study also showed higher use of sexual terms was positively associated with sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction (Hess & Coffelt, 2012). There is a link between sexual communication and sexual/relationship satisfaction, making sexual communication highly important in romantic relationships.

Relation to sexual and relationship satisfaction

Sexual communication is of the utmost importance in a relationship because it positively correlates to sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction (Byers & Demmons, 1999). Sex is a key component of romantic relationships and the satisfaction with this component can aid other

parts of a relationship like overall communication satisfaction and relationship satisfaction. Sexual satisfaction requires both individual and dyadic effort (Theiss, 2011) as both relationship partners need to discuss sexual desires and dislikes in order to be mutually satisfied. Sexual satisfaction can be defined as being happy with sexual interactions and aspects of a relationship, pleasure during intercourse, and having good sex (Mark & Jozkowski, 2013). Relationship satisfaction can be defined as a “partner’s experience of conflicts within the relationship, feelings of being loved, and emotional closeness and distance from a partner” (Mark & Jozkowski, 2013, p. 411). Both sexual and relationship satisfaction are important factors for successful relationships as there is a positive correlation between the two and an individual’s overall happiness (Mark & Jozkowski, 2013).

Most commonly, conversations about relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and any relationship/sexual issues are conducted in the bedroom and more specifically, in the bed (Faulkner & Lannutti, 2010). The previous statement hints at the fact that couples are most comfortable talking about sexual topics in places where sexual communication would be expected and best accepted, since most often sexual acts occur in the bedroom. Mark and Jozkowski (2013) found relationship satisfaction directly predicted sexual satisfaction, and sexual communication directly predicted sexual satisfaction for both men and women, signaling there is a direct link between satisfaction and communication.

Sexual communication is essential to sexual satisfaction because “individuals who are direct about the sexual behaviors they enjoy are more likely to receive those behaviors and, therefore, more likely to be satisfied with their sexual encounters” (Theiss, 2011, p. 577). Litzinger and Gordon (2005), found sexual satisfaction was linked to relationship communication and vice versa, implying sexual communication plays a role in sexual

satisfaction. Their study found, for both men and women, if relationship communication was already high, sexual satisfaction only increased relationship satisfaction a bit; if relationship communication was low, sexual satisfaction increased relationship satisfaction much more. The previous statement indicates sexual satisfaction is a bonus to already satisfactory relationships and an aid or mending tool for relationships where satisfactory communication is not as evident. Byers (2005) found individuals with high relationship satisfaction also reported high sexual satisfaction and individuals with low sexual satisfaction reported low relationship satisfaction. There is a distinct link between sexual communication, sexual satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction, indicating a need for self-disclosure and sexual communication in romantic relationships.

Individuals self-disclose more about their sexual likes and dislikes if their relationship involves high self-disclosure on other topics as well (Byers & Demmons, 1999). The previous statement highlights the importance of communication, in general, to a relationship and further points to the importance of sexual communication in creating a comfort zone between partners. As demonstrated by the Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), the more self-disclosure, breadth, and depth of topics in which partners engage, the more comfortable they will feel with one another. This is true for all subjects, meaning the more couples discuss and negotiate sexual desires, the more comfortable they will become and the more they will understand one another. Couples must self-disclose and assert their desires to one another for maximum sexual communication and satisfaction.

Assertion skills are necessary in a relationship to enforce safe sex and express desires (Troth & Peterson, 2000). MacNeil and Byers (2005) described the expressive pathway, which states mutual sexual self-disclosure leads to more relationship and sexual satisfaction, as well as

the instrumental pathway, which states personal sexual self-disclosure leads to more partner understanding of sexual desires and higher sexual satisfaction. Both pathways utilize sexual communication and assertion skills in a romantic relationship to give a partner a better understanding of sexual desires. Couples who discuss their sexual likes and dislikes are likely to be more sexually satisfied because their partner understands their desires (MacNeil & Byers, 2005). Sexual communication has been demonstrated to be important to a relationship, although at times there may be factors affecting a couple's communication.

Power balance and duration of a relationship may affect a couple's sexual self-disclosure with one another (Tang et al., 2013) as comfort levels determine what is appropriate to discuss in a relationship. Parker and Ivanov (2012) found comfort level with a partner and length of acquaintanceship are important factors in determining if sexual communication takes place. When partners have not been together long and do not feel fully comfortable with one another, sexual communication may be less likely to occur.

In a study by Trudel (2002), men were more likely to experience performance anxiety and women were more likely to have troubles reaching orgasm during sex. Both of these issues could be lessened by sexual communication; more sex-talk can lead to anxiety-reduction and a better understanding of what is sexually pleasing/an orgasm achieving act. Miller and Byers (2004) found evidence to suggest sexual communication aids to understanding of partner satisfaction. Their study found ideal duration of foreplay was more influenced by social stereotypes rather than actual desired amount of foreplay by the self or a partner. The study found both men and women estimated women wanted to have longer foreplay and men wanted to have shorter amounts of foreplay, although these assumptions were based on social stereotypes, not actual desires (Miller & Byers, 2004). This suggests sexual communication is

essential in creating the divide between what is stereotypically thought of as desirable and determining what an individual partner finds desirable. Sexual communication can help to eliminate social stereotypes in the bedroom and enhance self-disclosure and understanding of personal likes of a romantic partner.

To gain positive sexual outcomes in a relationship both partners must engage in sexual communication which includes planning time, engaging one another, and building a shared meaning about sex (Hess & Coffelt, 2012). When couples have a shared meaning about sex they both can understand one another and decrease their chances of conflict on the topic. Creating a shared meaning of sex where dialog can be open and direct also creates a comfortable environment where partners feel as though they may discuss their feelings and desires without judgement. When partners feel comfortable with one another, more sexual communication is likely to occur causing more sexual satisfaction to occur.

Social-sexual communication, or communication which contains the message of a sexual/romantic nature, helps partners to understand open-mindedness, sexual availability, and romantic intentions (Hall, 2016), and it also lessens tensions or fears of subject-avoidment. Couples with relationship uncertainty may experience high levels of embarrassment or possible face threats during sexual communication because they are insecure in their relationship (Theiss, 2011). When sexual communication becomes an embarrassing topic it is easy to avoid engaging in such communication, although this may cause damage to the relationship. As purported by Theiss (2011), “the road to sexual satisfaction typically involves open and direct communication about sexual desires” (p. 569), and as has been mentioned previously in this paper, sexual satisfaction leads to relationship satisfaction, which further highlights the importance of sexual communication between romantic partners.

Purine and Carey (1997) found sexual satisfaction was linked to men's understanding of women's sexual preferences and couple agreement in general, demonstrating communication about sexual likes and dislikes is important as well as communication and accommodation to find agreement. When both partners agree on mutually satisfying sexual acts, those acts are more likely to take place because they are seen as more desirable (Purine & Carey, 1997). Finding mutually desirable acts leads to the sexual satisfaction of both partners, meaning sexual communication functioned appropriately.

Gaining mutual agreement on topics, specifically sexual topics may be difficult, especially for couples who come from different backgrounds. Each individual in a couple has been raised in different environments. This means education on sexual topics may vary depending on specific factors, some of which being: media representations of sex, societal influences on sex, communication with parents about sex, and sexual education learned in school. Couples who have different cultural backgrounds may have more difficulties in finding similarities between themselves because there is a higher chance for misunderstanding one another in intercultural relationships than intracultural relationships (Bustamante et al., 2011). Intercultural partners are likely raised in two distinct cultures which have different traditions and customs when it comes to discussing sexual topics. When partners come together from intercultural backgrounds it can be expected that there will be different evaluations of sexual communication and how/when/why such conversations are appropriate.

Relation to intercultural couples

An intercultural relationship may take many forms varying from cultural traditions and customs, to beliefs, values, religion, and race (Kellner, 2009). Intercultural dating is usually prominent in individuals who have experienced or been exposed to other cultures during their early life

(Remennick, 2009). Successful relationships function when both partners can understand one another and when relationship standards are set and followed. Relationship satisfaction is directly related to what a partner's personal standards for a relationship should be, meaning, "discrepant standards between spouses might make achieving a mutually satisfying relationship challenging, and this might be a particular issue for intercultural couples" (Hiew, Halford, van de Vijver & Shuang, 2015, p. 816). Partners in intercultural relationships cannot maintain equal amounts of their old and new culture (Remennick, 2009), hence, adaptation and integration must occur at some level. In order to properly adapt and integrate into a romantic partner's culture and life, each partner must understand the standard and basic cultural values important to one another.

Maintaining a personal, cultural identity is important, but learning the cultural scripts of an intercultural partner is also important (Silva et al., 2012) as it can aid in the process of communication, in general. Becoming competent in a cultural script means learning a partner's mainstream and host society cultural differences, respecting cultural differences, and adopting key values and traditions into one's own life (Silva et al., 2012). People in intercultural relationships may see themselves as bicultural or multicultural because they adapt to their partner's culture (Bustamante et al., 2011) and thus, experience two culturally different worlds.

Over the course of a relationship, intercultural couples are at a higher risk of experiencing adjustment issues (Silva et al., 2012), because their backgrounds, values, and beliefs differ and their ways of communicating may be difficult to change or adjust. Intercultural couples should discuss their cultural values and beliefs early on to observe the differences and prepare for future conflicts dealing with those differences (Silva et al., 2012). If couples know of their differences

in communication style and backgrounds, it will be easier to ease into difficult subjects that may be uncomfortable or embarrassing for one partner to talk about.

Negotiating assumptions and expectations is important for intercultural relationships in developing shared meaning on topics. When partners can agree on core values, an intercultural relationship is more likely to occur and sustain in the long-term (Silva et al., 2012). Silva et al., (2012) stated culture affects emotion and emotional expression, thus intercultural couples need to understand expression of feelings and that emotions may not be similar meaning it will take patience and time to adapt to one another's preferences and find a medium emotional-ground together.

In a study of Russian immigrants married to native Israelis, Remennick (2009) found the Russian/Soviet partners preferred to not speak about negative emotions and were often quite awkward in expressing themselves emotionally. This contrasted the Israeli partners, who were more accustomed to talking about their feelings and problems with one another. A simple issue like this, talking about negative feelings and emotions, can make a big difference when it comes to a relationship's satisfaction levels. If emotions are being hidden because of feelings of awkwardness, sexual issues may not be brought up and this could lead to less sexual communication which leads to less sexual and relationship satisfaction. Although it may be uncomfortable for one partner to open up and discuss negative emotions which are not usually discussed in their culture, it must be done in order to accommodate to their partner and solve relationship issues. Intercultural couples need to realize there will be culture gaps in their relationship and if they want the relationship to be successful and not end in divorce, they will need to work to fill in those gaps (Remennick, 2009).

The heterogamy hypothesis, or heterogamy effect, states individuals in a heterogamous relationship (culturally dissimilar relationship) are more likely to divorce than those in a homogamous relationship (culturally similar relationship) (Kalmijn, de Graaf & Janssen, 2005). In a study of the heterogamy effect, Kalmijn et al. (2005) found in Dutch individuals married to foreigners, the heterogamy effect appeared to be especially true for couples who have one Dutch partner and another partner who comes from a culture strongly dissimilar from that of the Dutch. The study showed mixed-nationality couples have double the chance of divorcing than intracultural couples. This was especially true for couples who came from radically different cultures. This leads to the belief that couples who come from similar cultures, for example a Finnish partner and a Swedish partner, would likely have less difficulties, differences, and a lower divorce probability than a couple with one Finnish partner and the other Kenyan, simply because Finland and Sweden are closer in geographical relation and share much of the same climate, holidays, religious beliefs, and customs than do Finland and Kenya. This is not to say intercultural couples from strongly dissimilar cultures cannot have successful relationships, simply that open communication is needed to negotiate values and understand one another.

Reiter and Gee (2008) purported open communication is an important factor for intercultural couples because it may be the source of relationship satisfaction and development later on. Therefore, intercultural couples who can engage in open communication have less chances of divorce simply because they can discuss and solve their differences and issues together. Reiter and Gee (2008) also found higher levels of cultural support were linked to lower levels of relationship distress. This suggests understanding and caring about a partner's culture can create a sense of comfort and reduce stress in an intercultural relationship. Understanding a

partner and their culture from first-hand experience with that person also helps to diminish preconceived stereotypes about a culture.

In many countries it is commonly stereotyped that adjectives such as courageous, daring, dominant, forceful, independent, and tough are associated with males, whereas adjectives such as anxious, dependent, meek, sensitive, shy, and submissive are associated with females (Williams, Satterwhite & Best, 1999). These stereotypical adjectives can lead to the assumption that men initiate and take control when communicating whereas women are shyer and simply comply with what is said. These stereotypes can transfer over into the sexual communication sphere as well. The typical sexual communication scripts do not promote diversity as women are supposed to self-disclose less than men and men are supposed to be direct and assertive about their desires (Theiss, 2011). These typical scripts are reinforced by media and pop culture meaning if young adults do not get supplemental education outside of the media and pop culture, their views on sex may be skewed towards “traditional”, or unrealistic, sexual stereotypes promoted in their cultural society. At times, stereotypes can make negotiating relationship goals difficult as each partner has preconceived notions about their partner and where they come from.

Couples who come from different cultures may have a more difficult time negotiating relationship values and standards, especially when the two cultures are distinctly different like with collectivist and individualistic cultures. In collectivist cultures, men are thought of as the ones with sexual desires and the women need to fulfill those desires; collectivist societies see sex as a function of the well-being of the family, not as the key in a couple’s happiness (Kellner, 2009). Individualistic cultures see each individual’s happiness, needs, and goals as the important factor in well-being and success. The divide between opinions on sex in collectivist and individualistic cultures can lead to misunderstanding and confusion for intercultural couples

involved in such a relationship. In general, sexuality and sex are frequently neglected topics of conversation among families (West, 1999), although it is thought that individualistic cultures value sex more than collectivist cultures, meaning partners from an individualistic culture may be more open to discussing sex than those from collectivist cultures.

Relation to Finnish culture

Finland is a country located in the northern region of the European continent. The country has been stereotypically characterized by its cold weather, naked saunas, numerous islands, and “silent” citizens with “the key to the Finnish character [being] quietude” (Carling, 2007, p. 28). It has been observed and documented that Finnish people place value on silence and understanding its place and purpose. Silence in other countries during social events such as dinners, bus rides, and outings with friends may be characterized as odd, but apparently for Finns it is not only considered the norm, but is also socially acceptable. Carling (2007) purported, “Finns rarely enter into conversation with strangers; words are chosen carefully; [and] small talk is considered suspect” (p. 28). The idea of silence and quietude are the main stereotypes when thinking of Finland culture.

Many sources have latched-on to this stereotype and fully believe it. One newspaper journalist wrote, in Finland “it is not unusual to walk into a restaurant and spot most people eating dinner in silence, content to chew and not chatter. Silence is a sign of wisdom and good manners, not boredom and half-wittedness” (Alvarez, 2004, p. 2). As demonstrated by the previous quote, silence is thought of as something to be valued in Finnish culture. Finns are thought to value a “natural state of being” known as “luonteva tapa olla” as well as being uninterrupted in their thoughts and actions, known as “omissa oloissaan” (Carbaugh, Berry & Nurmikari-Berry, 2006). The previous two values are points which could apply to almost any

culture; all people enjoy silence every once-in-a-while. The silent Finn stereotype has been taken so far that it is thought an individual should speak either when it is an unobtrusive time or when there is something of importance or worth to say (Carbaugh et al., 2006). Once again, the previous statement could apply to many cultures and seems like a polite and sensible rule. Through repetition of the stereotype and reinforcing its “truth”, the idea of a silent Finnish culture has become common knowledge.

Some scholars believe Finnish silence to be an academic myth (Olbertz-Siitonen & Siitonen, 2015). Much of what is “known” on the silent Finn stereotype in research is not based on solid-ground as many of the original studies regarding this stereotype involve surveys or interview questions that elicited responses which perpetuated the silent Finn myth (Olbertz-Siitonen & Siitonen, 2015). It is difficult to rid of a stereotype when researchers, media, and individuals continue to perpetuate the myth; despite attempts to disprove the stereotype, the silent Finn myth has become something that people have just accepted.

When a population already has a stereotype built in their mind and then is asked about said stereotype, it is quite easy and obvious to note the stereotype will come to the fore-front of the conversation. Much of the most popularly quoted and cited literature on the silent Finn is old and would not hold up to today’s academic research standards (Olbertz-Siitonen & Siitonen, 2015). It seems as though the stereotype of the silent Finn began as something which was somewhat playful and meant to be a joke but is now considered a cultural trait of Finnish individuals. Now, being Finnish is also associated with being socially silent, which many times also translates to being socially awkward. The result of this stereotype is unfair as it characterizes an entire nation as being socially incompetent. Unfortunately, there is a self-replicating nature attached to the silent Finn myth which makes it difficult to rid of (Olbertz-Siitonen & Siitonen,

2015). With Finnish people themselves perpetuating the silent Finn myth, it has become a stereotype which is commonly accepted and acknowledged in everyday life although there is no solid background to the idea.

Keeping this in mind, it is important to note that learning is passed down through elders. Finnish children likely grow up hearing about the Finnish silence myth and although they may know it is a stereotype they begin to believe certain aspects of the myth, further perpetuating the stereotype. It is difficult to break the silent Finn myth, as can be said with any myth or stereotype. As children grow up, if they are placed in an environment which supports the stereotype and even jokes about the silence of the culture, it is likely that the stereotype will live on and be passed down generation to generation.

Cultural Differences in Sex

Young adults and sexual education across nations

In Finland, sex education was introduced into the school curriculum in 1970 (Kontula, 2010). Since its implementation young adults have experienced a decline in teenage pregnancies and an increase in sexual knowledge (Kontula, 2010). Finnish schools can be said to have an effective sex education program because they teach about sex and sexual health beginning at an early age, which presents sex as a natural activity. The very basic sexual elements are taught as early as kindergarten and then are expanded throughout the rest of the adolescent schooling period (Kontula, 2010). With Finnish children receiving an early and open education to sex, it could be assumed the sexual culture is open for discussion and the topic of sex is not something to be shy about, even in the stereotypically “silent” and socially awkward culture. On the contrary, Finland can be seen as a sexually liberated culture where sex is openly discussed.

Discussing sex is something young adults need to learn in order to gain maximum benefits from their sexual encounters. In a study of young women's sexual encounters, Parker and Ivanov (2012) found 62% of participants indicated during their first sexual experiences they were too embarrassed to talk about sex, although they were doing the act. When a partner feels embarrassed it can lead to being insecure about sexual discussions which can inhibit such discussions from happening at all (Parker & Ivanov, 2012). As has been previously stated, sexual discussions are important to the overall success and satisfaction of a relationship and thus, sexual communication is a must.

Gender stereotypes are apparent in all countries, which is why it is especially important to discuss sex with young adults to ensure both men and women understand they have an equal opportunity and right to discuss sex with romantic partners. The use of pancultural gender stereotypes, or "the psychological characteristics differentially associated with women and men across many cultural groups" can be harmful to young minds if they are reinforced in society (Williams, Satterwhite & Best, 1999, p. 513). Having communication difficulties in talking about previous sexual partners, STDs, and condom use put young people's sexual safety in jeopardy (Troth & Peterson, 2000).

In a study by Cleary, Barhman, MacCormack, and Herold (2002) it was found of the 22 Canadian women interviewed, there was no sexual health discussion before first intercourse with a new partner and those who did have a conversation usually only talked about wearing a condom. In this study, many female participants reported growing up in a family where sex was not openly discussed which led them to feel uncomfortable in discussing sexual issues with their partners. Some women reported having sexual health conversations in the past made it easier to

discuss sexual issues with future partners, indicating practice and experience may make sexual conversations easier to have.

In many countries, sex/HIV education programs are designed to reach a large number of youth in schools, clinics, and community settings. In a study by Kirby, Laris, and Rolleri (2007), out of 54 studies in various nations where sex/HIV education programs promoted condom use, almost half (48%) of those programs increased condom use among participants. It was also found that of the 28 studies attempting to decrease sexual risk-taking behaviors, the programs reduced risky behavior for half of the participants and the other half remained the same. These simple statistics demonstrate sexual education programs work to some extent and are able to, at a minimum, teach young adults about sexual topics and expose them to sexual conversations on a general level. Sex/HIV education programs are more likely to have a positive than negative outcome on participants (Kirby, Laris & Rolleri, 2007) because if nothing else, they demonstrate that it is useful to talk about sexual related topics with others, especially with a romantic partner.

Young people need to be taught interpersonal communication skills, including how to discuss their values, intentions, and desires (Parker & Ivanov, 2012) because although teaching what sex is and how to use a condom is important, it does not necessarily encourage open discussions about sexual desires and communication in general. As stated by Parker and Ivanov (2012), “knowledge does not necessarily translate into the interpersonal skills necessary to negotiate safer sexual behaviors,” but teaching sexual communication skills likely would (p. 93). Although many nations include some sort of health or sexual course at some point in their education system, that does not mean young adults are prepared to discuss sexual topics with a romantic partner because they may still be lacking the interpersonal communication skills necessary to have such conversations.

It is important to recognize there are differences in sexual education programs across nations. Sex is talked about differently depending on what country or region an individual comes from. Although two romantic partners may know about sexual topics, they still may lack the interpersonal skills of discussing said sexual topics if they have not had practice and experience with them before. Couples may also have issues in discussing sexual topics, even if both partners know about sexual issues, if one partner grew up in a society where it was acceptable to talk about sex and the other partner did not. Societal standards for sex determine how it is talked about and when it is appropriate and acceptable to discuss.

Societal standards and differences in sex

In individualistic societies, individuals are encouraged to focus on themselves and their goals; in collectivist societies, individuals are more concerned with the group as a whole and the group's goals (Tang et al., 2013). These cultural differences could mean individuals from individualistic cultures are more open about their sexual desires and wants and those from collectivist societies are more quiet and closed off about their sexual desires, simply because their lives have revolved around either an "I-based" society or an "us-based" society. North Americans and Europeans are known as more individualistic societies whereas China, Japan, and Latin countries are known as more collectivist societies (Tang et al., 2013).

In collectivist cultures, the man is thought of as the one with sexual desires and the women need to fulfill those desires (Kellner, 2009). Additionally, collectivistic societies see sex as a function of the well-being of the family, not as a key in a couple's happiness (Kellner, 2009). The previous statements aid to the idea that when a romantic relationship develops between partners where one partner is from a collectivist society and the other an individualistic, there will likely be issues on ideas of how to discuss sex and how each partner views sex in

general. Partners who come from vastly different cultures may have vastly different opinions on topics, such as sex, and how sex should be discussed. These issues can be brought to the forefront, discussed, and hopefully mediated through successful sexual communication with one another, which requires both partners to accommodate one another and attempt to understand each other's differences.

Across European countries there are vast differences in traditions related to relationships. According to Kalmijn (2007), the average age of marriage for a woman in central Europe is 22 whereas in northern Europe it is 27. Obvious implications can be made from the previous statement; if an immigrant from central Europe moves to northern Europe, they may not find a romantic partner to marry until years after they would ideally like to get married, simply based on regional marriage trends. Many northern European countries have high levels of individuals who cohabit before marriage which may be an issue for foreigners who come from southern Europe, or other regions where cohabitation before marriage is not very common or regarded as an acceptable action (Kalmijn, 2007). The main reason behind these traditions may be religion or simply tradition. The differences in marriage behaviors across Europe are quite large (Kalmijn, 2007); it is easy to speculate other continents have similar differences and the mixing of partners from different continents could lead to even larger differences in marital and relational behaviors and standards.

There are numerous differences in sexual cultures from country to country. Gender-based double standards exist for young Thai women as they are expected to not have any interest in sex or sex-related discussions (Bangpan & Operario, 2014). For Thai women, making sexual decisions can be based on a variety of factors, some of which being cultural/economic environments, individual ideas, family, and peers (Bangpan & Operario, 2014). Bangpan and

Operario (2014) found the Thai values of social harmony and social status were motivators for many women to be careful about their sexual behavior as they did not want to upset or disappoint their families. The previous is an example of how a collectivist society plays a role in all aspects of life, including sexual aspects. Not only is the individual thought of when it comes to sexual matters, but also the family and the family's reputation. A contrasting example would be that of the Netherlands which is a country widely known for its liberal sexual standards and open communication of sexual topics (de Looze, Constantine, Jerman, Vermeulen-Smit, & ter Bogt, 2015). In the Netherlands, "through sexual communication, parents convey knowledge, values, beliefs, and expectations about sex and sexuality to their children" (de Looze et al., 2015, p. 257-258). The culture in the Netherlands is more about helping young adults become proud of their individual sexuality rather than being closed off about the subject and ashamed of sexual encounters. It can be imagined that if a couple consisted of one partner from (collectivist) Thailand and another from the (individualistic) Netherlands there would be distinct differences in sexual communication.

When couples experience differences in cultural values, beliefs, and traditions, those differences need to be understood and integrated into one another's lives. In order to better understand each other, couples need to accommodate one another. A partner coming from a minority culture group will likely adapt more to their partner's majority group culture than their partner will adapt to the minority group's culture (Remennick, 2009). Although, there must be some give-and-take in an intercultural relationship and a mending-of-cultures needs to take place. Both couple members need to realize they will lose a bit of their old culture but gain a bit of a new culture. A negotiation of customs and traditions needs to take place for couples to better understand one another and accommodate to each other's needs. When sensitive subjects, such

as sexual topics, need to be discussed and negotiated the Communication Accommodation Theory is a useful model for describing how couples accommodate to one another.

Communication Accommodation Theory

CAT overview

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) began under the name Speech Accommodation Theory in the 1970s which changed to encompass not just verbal but also nonverbal communicative interactions (Coupland & Giles, 1988). The main premise of CAT is that people communicate to share information and while doing so either accommodate (converge) or nonaccommodate (diverge). The CAT is used not simply to share information but to control and regulate interpersonal and intergroup relationships (Toma, 2014). When converging and diverging take place an interlocutor is making a statement about who they are and what their position is in an interpersonal or intergroup communication scenario. By either converging or diverging in a conversation a message is being sent and communicators have to adjust their communicative style to accommodate one another. Because CAT can be seen in all communicative messages, it is apparent that it has a variety of uses and is a highly utilized theory in communication research.

Generally, CAT is seen as an interpersonal or intergroup theory that every conversation utilizes since converging and diverging happen whether communicators realize it or not. It can also be said the CAT is a theory of communication competence as it focuses on people “knowing when and how to accommodate and showing willingness to do so to accomplish interaction goals” (Pitts & Harwood, 2015, pp. 92). The previous statement hints at the notion that accommodation and nonaccommodation are conscious acts which humans have the ability to take part in. This means the ability to accommodate is a choice and people can decide when to do

so. It is also possible that accommodation and nonaccommodation are subconscious acts in some scenarios, like when nonverbal acts are mimicked out of comfort and showing similarity. For the previous reasons, the CAT is an interesting model to study because accommodating can be seen as a choice as well as an involuntary response to communicative actions, although this review will highlight accommodation that is done purposefully and with intent.

In most cases, accommodating sends the message of ‘we are similar’, whereas nonaccommodating sends the message of ‘we are different’. Motivation to accommodate or not can be based on the goal of the conversation (Hehl & McDonald, 2014). Converging is typically seen as the socially correct thing to do whereas diverging is seen as going against the grain and making a point to be different and not match communicative styles. Throughout its history, CAT has been utilized to study many scenarios. One beauty of the theory is that it is a strong model for generating and observing data because in studying accommodation researchers are able to observe real and natural conversations (Pitts & Harwood, 2015). To begin, a discussion on convergence and divergence and their purpose within the theory will be approached.

Convergence and divergence

Convergence and divergence are at the heart of Communication Accommodation Theory. It is important to recognize that both verbal and nonverbal behaviors may be converged or diverged towards. Convergence is when interlocutors try to decrease differences and adapt to each other whereas divergence is the emphasizing and/or increasing of style difference between communicators (Coupland & Giles, 1988). Toma (2014) stressed the three kinds of behavior type used in communication adjustment and accommodation: modality, which is the nonverbal or verbal behaviors utilized; similarity, which is the way in which a person adapts to another; and unit of analysis, which is the number of behaviors adapted in a conversation. When

communicators converge and diverge, their modality and similarity determine what behaviors are adjusted and their unit of analysis determines how many behaviors are adjusted. Typically, adaptation is seen as a good and polite thing because it leads to an increase in rapport between two communicators (Toma, 2014). Although converging seems like the ‘right’ thing to do, it is not always done correctly or even at all for various reasons.

In a study of supervisor and subordinate workplace accommodation by McCroskey and Richmond (2000), it was found in interpersonal conversations, many supervisors were flexible and reciprocated or accommodated to their subordinate’s communication style. This proved to be beneficial for employees who understood their positive, upbeat communication style would result in a more positive response from their supervisor but was not beneficial for subordinates who lacked the ability or want to portray positivity. Many supervisors were found to “‘give what they get’ from their subordinates,” signaling accommodation is a choice in some scenarios (McCroskey & Richmond, 2000, p. 286). In studies like the previous mentioned, it could be that some subordinates did not understand or possess the ability to accommodate or portray positivity in communication with their supervisor, or it could have been a deliberate choice to diverge.

Convergence is a strategy found to be done out of the desire of social acceptance (Giles & Williams, 1992), but not always are communicators looking for social acceptance. Non-accommodation occurs when an individual wants to appear different or distinct from the person with whom they are communicating. People want to express their identities and one way of doing so is through language; sometimes individuals may not accommodate the way they speak in order to remain true to their identity (Giles, 2008). This may be especially true for minority groups who feel ridiculed and want to hold on to their roots through speaking their native language or dialect. This point shows how accommodation can be purposeful in that people may

not be failing to accommodate, but rather succeeding at keeping their own identity (Giles, 2008). In maintaining one's identity, sometimes convergence is unnecessary and inappropriate.

As has been described previously, accommodation can be seen as a bad adjustment in some scenarios. Dorjee, Giles and Barker (2011) demonstrated how sometimes convergence to the social norm or preference is not always the best option. In their study of Tibetans living in diasporic India they found the use of the honorific Tibetan language was preferred by most Tibetan people, although it had its place. Using honorific Tibetan could be seen as being arrogant or contextually-inappropriate in a casual setting with neighbors or at work. Conversely, the use of honorific Tibetan also highlighted a perceived "in-group" among Tibetans and was used to show a sense of similarity. In this sense, convergence and accommodation may change based on topic and setting and how a person wants to be perceived.

The CAT realizes miscommunication in convergence and accommodation may occur because of stereotypes, interactional style, and conversation expectations (Coupland & Giles, 1988). When accommodation occurs because of misperceptions of an individual's needs or wants, offense may be taken as it could be seen as mimicry or making fun of a communicator. When too much or not enough accommodation occurs, it is labeled over-accommodation and under-accommodation, and it may take place for various reasons (Toma, 2014). Finding the medium amount of accommodation comfortable for both conversation partners is the key to accommodation success.

Over- and underaccommodating

Over- and under-accommodation are subjective as they are based on how the recipient of the accommodation feels about the level of adjustment (Gasiorek & Giles, 2012). This means conversations need to be personally adapted and not everyone desires the same amount or level

of accommodation as others. Deciding how much accommodation is needed in a situation can be seen as a learned skill, developed over time. Accommodation can be essential to finding a personally-desirable sense of self (Pitts & Harwood, 2015), which requires practice and experience in accommodating to others and likewise, being accommodated to. Knowing this, it may be that young people do not have the same amount of accommodation skills as older people, although a variety of factors play into how accommodative a person is. Increased globalization and intergroup encounters through business, travel, and studies have given people, including young people, more opportunities to manage their identities through accommodative and nonaccommodative conversations (Pitts & Harwood, 2015). With this notion, a young person may have more accommodative knowledge and skills than an older person simply because they have traveled more and have experienced more difference in others.

Accommodation is supposed to be aimed towards a goal but sometimes it may backfire if there is a misinterpretation of a conversation partner's needs or wants (Toma, 2014) leading to over- or under-accommodation. Giles (2008) purported over-accommodation can lead to feelings of condensation and being controlled. Some people may take over-accommodation as being mimicked or made fun of and will react negatively to the adjustment. Others may realize the over-accommodation comes out of trying to create a sense of similarity and will recognize their communication partner tried to adjust to them, although adjusted too much.

In a study of communication with older adults, Hummert, Shaner, Garstka and Henry (1998) found there to be direct and over-nurturing communication styles directed towards older adults. Participants in this study were given a scenario and shown pictures of older adults, some in nursing homes and others depicted as neighbors, and then were asked to give advice or persuade them on a particular issue. Older adults who were perceived as being helpless, known

as despondents, were likely to receive more nurturing messages whereas older adults perceived to be more self-sufficient, known as golden-agers, were likely to receive more direct and affirming messages (Hummert et al., 1998). More patronizing, or over-accommodative, language was used when subjects were perceived as despondents or as being less self-sufficient. This type of over-accommodation is typically not done out of bad intention, rather an attempt to accommodate and not fully understanding how.

Inferred motive, or that which the message receiver deems to be the implied motive (over-, under-, or appropriate accommodation), is of the utmost importance in conversations (Gasiorek & Giles, 2012) because it is not what the speaker specifically says or does, but how their message is perceived by others that is influential. Gasiorek (2013) purported under-accommodation can be managed by directly addressing the issue, ignoring it, or trying to change the subject. When people perceive negative motives during under-accommodation, such as under-accommodating on purpose and out of disrespect, they are less likely to let that adjustment pass and are more likely to express a negative response to that communication by accommodating less to their communication partner (Gasiorek, 2013).

Gasiorek and Giles (2012) found under-accommodation was more negatively evaluated than over-accommodation, probably because under-accommodation signals a speaker is not trying to adjust and respect their conversation partner whereas over-accommodation simply signals the speaker is trying too hard and over-shoots their target adjustment levels. Nonaccommodative behaviors that are seen to be done unintentionally are seen as more acceptable than those which are seen to be done intentionally (Gasiorek & Giles, 2012). This means although under-accommodation and nonaccommodation are typically seen as bad things,

if they are done out of unintentional reason there is more forgiveness than if it appears to be intentional and done to be hurtful and mean.

Encoding and decoding

Encoding a message can be seen as productive accommodation whereas decoding a message can be seen as receptive accommodation (Pitts & Harwood, 2015). Productive accommodation creates or produces a behavior and receptive accommodation determines the meaning of said behavior. Many times, productive and receptive accommodation work together in a conversation in the sense that both communicators are constantly adjusting and accommodating to one another as they encode and decode messages. Individual's perceptions of each other change as a conversation takes place and accommodative or nonaccommodative behaviors occur (Giles, Linz, Bonilla & Gomez, 2012). With this in mind, it is important to remember the way a message is decoded is based on how accommodative a sender is, and encoding is based on the same criteria as well as how accommodative a sender wants to be perceived.

The CAT specifies how people change their communicative behaviors to accommodate others' behavior for hopefully positive conversation outcomes (Giles, Linz, Bonilla & Gomez, 2012). People converge or accommodate to show they like one-another or that they are part of an in group and to show respect (Dorjee, Giles & Barker, 2011). But sometimes, a lack of accommodation is not a lack of respect and can be forgiven or overlooked based on certain circumstances. Gasiorek and Giles (2012) stated nonaccommodation can lead to misunderstandings in conversations, which is true although there seems to be exceptions to this rule. People with disabilities, like autism, may have a more difficult time accommodating to others because they cannot engage in mimicry (Pitts & Harwood, 2015), and thus, if their conversation partner realizes there is an issue with accommodating appropriately, mishaps in

accommodation may not be as big of an offense. All conversations are incomplete in the sense that a message receiver knows what they perceive but they do not know how the message sender is intending to be perceived (Gasiorek & Giles, 2012).

Accommodative skills, resources, and abilities are thought to be built and improved across a lifespan (Pitts & Harwood, 2015). This means younger communicators may not always be the best at accommodating because, although some accommodation may come naturally, a lot of it is based on practice and experiencing/understanding differences in others. As was mentioned earlier, life experience may be the key factor in how accommodative someone is, not age, although most typically older people have more experience with others and different varieties of people. Many young people claim to have difficulties in engaging with older people which may just be an error in accommodation techniques (Giles, 2008), by both young and old individuals. As people age their accommodation skills hopefully continue to expand as they experience new and different communicative situations which lead them towards understanding and more satisfying communicative experiences in the future.

Conclusion

The main motives of CAT are to explain a speaker's intentions and behaviors and how their conversation partner will react to and evaluate those behaviors (Gasiorek & Giles, 2012). This model has been used in a variety of settings because of its apparent need and prevalence in all communicative interactions. Accommodation is something that can be practiced and developed over time; conversely, nonaccommodative behavior can also be practiced and put into use in situations where accommodation does not seem appropriate, like when a speaker wants to maintain their language identity (Giles, 2008) or if an individual disagrees with their conversation partner. Convergence and divergence are maintenance strategies individuals can

use to adjust their communication with others (Coupland & Giles, 1988). Through understanding and utilizing the Communication Accommodation Theory, interlocutors are able to better understand the process of adaptation and adjustment in communicative messages.

The Communication Accommodation Theory has proven to be a useful tool for interpersonal situations in which showing similarity or dissimilarity is the goal. Intercultural relationships will likely demonstrate use of the CAT in their communicative behaviors, especially when discussing topics like sex. Sexual communication, as has been demonstrated throughout this monograph, is important to relationship satisfaction and therefore, differing views on sexual communication must be adjusted and intercultural partners must accommodate to one another. In the process of accommodation, intercultural couples will likely converge or diverge to show their feelings and express their inner thoughts and desires to one another.

The links between the sections of this monograph should be apparent by now. Communication is needed in all successful relationships as it acts as a mending tool. Poor communication may result in less relationship and sexual satisfaction (Byers, 2005). Effective communication can be seen as conversations with high levels of self-disclosure leading to deeper relationships and a better understanding of individuals. Couples who are involved with good communication in their relationship are likely to have a better success rate than couples who struggle with communication as communication satisfaction links to relationship satisfaction (Byers, 2005).

Couples who are able to discuss sex together are also more likely to be satisfied in their relationship. Sexual satisfaction is an important component of successful relationships. Couples who engage in sexual communication are more likely to discuss their sexual likes and dislikes which leads to more sexual satisfaction because their partner understands their desires (MacNeil

& Byers, 2005). In a relationship with open communication about sex and other topics, it is likely that satisfaction in the relationship and sexual life will occur. Open communication about such topics can be especially important for intercultural couples who come from different backgrounds and need to accommodate their communication styles to their partner.

As has been demonstrated, sex is discussed differently in various nations and cultures which leads to differences in opinions and knowledge for intercultural couples. Because of this, it is especially important for intercultural couples to engage in healthy communication on all topics, especially sex as negotiating assumptions and expectations is important to developing shared meaning (Silva et al., 2012). Sexual and relationship satisfaction appear to be factors in the overall happiness of an individual and thus, discussing sex as an intercultural couple is pertinent to individual happiness together (Mark & Jozkowski, 2013). Intercultural couples who can communicate and come to agreements on shared values and morals will likely have an easier time negotiating topics and being happy, in general.

The research to follow this monograph explores how intercultural couples, specifically those couples in which one partner is Finnish and the other is not, discuss sexual communication and how accommodation occurs while discussing said topic. Because intercultural couples are seen to have a higher risk of misunderstanding one another it is important to see some sort of open communication and accommodation occurring in a relationship (Bustamante et al., 2011). Finnish individuals, as have been demonstrated, are stereotyped to be a part of a silent culture though their sexual education in school seems to be positive and open from an early age, leading to the idea of Finland being a sexually liberated nation. The following thesis aims to discover how Finnish individuals and their intercultural partners from various different nations discuss sex together. As not much research has been conducted in the field of intercultural sexual

communication, the following research is the first of its kind and offers new insight into the topic area.

Reflections

Reflecting back on the thesis process, I have learned quite a bit. I spent the past academic year researching for my monograph and article and developing my own study. It was a hefty task but it seemed to go by quickly and without too much stress because I really enjoyed the topic. I had many hardships while writing and reading for this thesis, as well as many accomplishments and highlights that I will always remember. I will begin by discussing the hardships which occurred while writing this thesis.

To begin, I have never written something so long and academic before. I am sure many students say this, but it was truly a new experience that took time to get used to. I have always liked to finish my work quickly and early but that was not an option with this thesis. I had to spend days, weeks, and months planning and preparing this large work which also meant managing the stress of always knowing I had something I could be doing. As I reflect back now, after having completed the thesis, the hardest part for me was not making generalizing claims. It can be very easy, especially as a new researcher, to want to make big claims and generalize people/groups into one category. I still struggle with this as my monograph and article make large claims about intercultural couples, although some of those claims may also suit intracultural couples. This was something that was difficult to change late in the process; with my thesis written and the majority of the monograph and article using universalist claims, it would have taken many more weeks and months to change this completely. I decided to leave the universalist claims because although they may generalize a bit, I would like to believe that the claims are made from scientific studies and previous research which can back them. I did end

up taking my sources at face-value, but it is difficult to not. I value the work of other scholars and I see the accomplishment of publishing as meaning the study and authors did something right in their work. With that said, I know that not all studies are accepted by all scholars and it is common for academics to write rebuttals to articles, but for this thesis I found myself searching for information that would support what I wanted to study. Looking back, it would be nice to write this thesis over and try to be more critical of my sources but in reality, anything can be critiqued and said to be generalized based on the time or place it happened, but there still lays some truth in each individual study for someone, somewhere.

Another point to think on is utilizing the Communication Accommodation Theory. I think this was a nice theory to incorporate in this study, although I think it would have worked well accompanied by another theory, or possibly using a completely different theory other than CAT could have worked better. During writing the results section of the article, I found myself trying to think of ways to relate everything to the CAT. Some themes/subthemes were easier than others to relate back to the CAT and others needed a bit of a stretch. Overall, I think utilizing the CAT in my study gave a nice foundation for my research, although I think it was not overly necessary. Without the CAT in this study, my results would have likely been the same and I simply would not have related them back to the CAT. With that said, I still like that I utilized the CAT because like I mentioned, it gave me a good framework from which to move forward.

One of the best things I learned while writing this thesis was truly that I can inform myself on any subject. I had no knowledge on sexual communication or satisfaction before I began researching for this thesis. By the end, I had read over 50 articles and I now feel like I can comfortably talk about sexual communication and satisfaction in relationships without feeling like a fraud. I know that reading academic literature does not make me an expert in any sort of

way, but it does make me feel as though I possess some knowledge that others may not. Now I know that if I want to be informed on any subject, I can surely find a plethora of academic work to read and inform myself. It may seem simple, but before researching for this thesis I simply believed and reiterated what I saw on social media and in the media, but now I realize that actively searching for information outside of the media can be richly rewarding and unlock unforeseen information and knowledge.

Another great aspect which came from writing this thesis was a sense of accomplishment in finishing such a large task. I mentioned before that I like to do work quickly and efficiently. With other academic work, I try to study and write as quickly as possible because I do not like to procrastinate and I like the feeling of knowing that I have everything done and nothing to worry about. This thesis created a sense of constant stress for me throughout the entire academic year; oddly enough, the stress was minor. I felt a constant reminder in the back of my head saying “you need to work on your thesis” which is why I was able to finish it so fast. Every day I would come home from class and read two academic articles until I felt the information was saturated. This pre-research began in October and I continued to work and work until I was ready to conduct my own research. The best part of this process was completing such a large and hefty task and *not* doing it quickly. Although I may be quick for finishing the Master’s program, in my book this thesis was a long and slow process. I truly learned to deal with constant stress, on a small level, which helped to keep me pushing forward until the end. I realized that I can take on large projects which will take months to complete and not get too stressed during the process.

Overall, writing this thesis demonstrated to provide me with difficulties and successes. In the end, this is a process I would definitely do again because it allowed me to grow as an individual and realize my potential as an academic individual.

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Sexual communication among intercultural couples with a Finnish partner

Introduction

Travel, social media, study/work abroad, and expatriate communities have made intercultural relationships a commonality. When people have more knowledge and positive experiences with other cultures they are more likely to consider an intercultural relationship (Silva et al., 2012).

An intercultural relationship may be defined by numerous factors varying from cultural traditions and customs, to beliefs, values, religion, country of origin, and race (Kellner, 2009). People in intercultural relationships may see themselves as bicultural or multicultural because they adapt to their partner's culture (Bustamante et al., 2011) and thus experience two culturally different worlds. Combining two cultures can be difficult as negotiations between two different worldviews to find common ground is not easy on all subject matters. The difficulties intercultural couples face are unique from intracultural relationships, or those where both partners are from the same culture, because the former faces difficulties and disapproval from family members (Brummett & Steuber, 2015), has higher chances of misunderstanding one another (Bustamante et al., 2011), must understand and support cultural differences (Reiter & Gee, 2008), and must negotiate assumptions and expectations to create shared meanings (Silva et al., 2012). Intercultural couples must be able to openly communicate with one another to solve cultural misunderstandings and ensure mutual relationship satisfaction. Obtaining relationship satisfaction is based on a variety of variables, two of which being communication and sexual satisfaction.

Effective communication is one of the most important components of a relationship. Partners disclose information about themselves to one another as a way of breaking down barriers and getting to know one another better. The motivation to disclosure information is based on liking, reciprocity, wants, and relationship prolongation, and thus, partners who are

motivated to stay together longer will self-disclose quite often, especially in the beginning of a relationship (Faulkner & Lannutti, 2010). Couples who are involved in a lot of self-disclosure and communication with one another are more likely to better understand one another and feel closer to each other than couples who do not. Distressed couples are more likely to experience less constructive communication and more avoidance communication, which signals to communication being at the heart of a happy, functioning relationship (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005). Couples who can communicate well together and self-disclose on many levels are likely to have a more successful relationship than couples who cannot. Self-disclosure is especially important when it comes to more personal relationship topics, like sexual wants and desires.

Sexual satisfaction in a romantic relationship is a key component to relationship satisfaction. Couples who discuss their sexual likes and dislikes are likely to be more sexually satisfied because their partner understands their desires (MacNeil & Byers, 2005). When partners discuss their sexual wants with one another both partners have a better understanding of what is desired and how to please each other. Trudel (2002) found men were more likely to experience performance anxiety and women had troubles reaching orgasm during sex, indicating that sexual communication is essential as it can lessen these issues. When partners discuss sex together it can lessen anxiety and increase awareness of what is desired and appreciated during intercourse. For a couple to be sexually satisfied communication about sexual wants and likes is necessary as it is the easiest way to determine a partner's sexual desires. Couples who discuss sex together have a better understanding of what each other desires, which may be especially important for intercultural couples who have vastly different backgrounds.

When children are exposed to different cultural norms, they are less likely to have ethnocentric attitudes and more likely to have stronger social flexibility (Silva et al., 2012),

meaning that intercultural relationships later in life may be more possible because there is experience with different people and social customs. People involved in intercultural relationships must be willing to negotiate traditions and values with one another because there will likely be many differences in upbringing and backgrounds. It is important for intercultural couples to discuss their cultural differences and support those differences to better understand and maintain their relationship (Reiter & Gee, 2008). Intercultural couples who want to sustain their relationship long-term need to understand one another, which can be accomplished through satisfactory communication, and respect and participate in some of their partners' cultural traditions and customs. Intercultural couples will have to lose some of their original culture to make room for the new culture of their partner, which is a task couples have to be willing to take part in to maintain a healthy and balanced relationship.

The idea of gaining and losing pieces of culture relates to the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) as it signals to partners accommodating to one another. The CAT realizes people accommodate to show similarity (Giles & Williams, 1992) and accommodation is often a reciprocal act. When one partner shows accommodating tendencies, the other is likely to accommodate as well. As intercultural couples accommodate and converge towards one another they will make space for new cultural habits and traditions in place of the old. Intercultural couples who are able to accommodate one another and incorporate both cultures in their daily lives are likely have more successful relationships than couples who cannot. The overall goal is to communicate well together and attempt to accommodate one another in some way.

Sexual communication among intercultural couples has not been well-examined in the academic sphere. This study aimed to bring about a better understanding of how intercultural

couples talk about sex, especially when partners come from different cultures. Because research was conducted in Finland, all couples involved in this study contained one Finnish partner and one partner from any country other than Finland. The Finnish aspect of this study was quite interesting as Finns are typically seen as a quiet culture.

Relationship Communication

Good communication is a key factor in relationship satisfaction as poor communication relates to low levels of overall relationship satisfaction (Byers, 2005). Positive communication can help partners to negotiate and understand relationship expectations and assumptions; an intercultural relationship is more likely to occur and thrive when partners can agree on core values (Silva et al., 2012). The process of agreeing on values takes effort from both partners and means some differences will need to be accommodated to for mutual satisfaction and agreement. Cultural differences in an intercultural relationship can be mediated, discussed, and understood if couples are able to communicate about their relationship together.

Byers (2005) found communication satisfaction/dissatisfaction was related to relationship satisfaction/dissatisfaction. Byers' study surveyed participants two times over an 18-month time period and demonstrated relationships with good communication at month one continued to have relationship satisfaction at month 18 while relationships with poor communication at month one had less relationship satisfaction at month 18. The results indicated communication was at the heart of relationship satisfaction. Although communication is highly important in a relationship, there are other factors which can affect relationship satisfaction. Couples who do not have overly-satisfactory communication may still have relationship satisfaction if their sexual satisfaction is high (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005). Sexual satisfaction may be thought of as another

key factor in successful relationships. To obtain sexual satisfaction, sexual communication must take place.

Sexual Communication

Sexual communication involves the self-disclosure of desired and undesired sexual acts as well as sexual likes and dislikes to a romantic partner (Byers & Demmons, 1999). Sexual communication is involved in most all romantic relationships and “is important to the development and maintenance of satisfying sexual relationships” (MacNeil & Byers, 2005, p. 170). Many couples engage in sexual communication to express their frustration and/or satisfaction with one another which allows for adjustments to be made for future sexual encounters. Communication about sexual topics is important in romantic relationships as it aids in gaining consent, determining sexual desires, and can be a main factor in determining sexual and relationship well-being (Faulkner & Lannutti, 2010).

Sexual communication may take many forms and variations. Hess and Coffelt (2012) broke sexual language into three categories: vernacular/colloquial terms, clinical/medical terms, and euphemisms/agreed on terms or phrases. In their study of sexual communication among romantic partners, clinical/medical terms were used the least and vernacular terms and euphemisms were used fairly equally. Each couple had different language with which they used and were comfortable, signaling communication among couples is different and unique based on the individuals. This study also showed higher use of sexual terms was positively associated with sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction (Hess & Coffelt, 2012). There is an obvious link between sexual communication and sexual/relationship satisfaction, making sexual communication highly important in romantic relationships.

Most commonly, conversations about relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and any relationship/sexual issues are conducted in the bedroom and more specifically, in the bed (Faulkner & Lannutti, 2010). The previous statement hints at the fact that couples are most comfortable talking about sexual topics in places where sexual communication would be expected and best accepted, since most often sexual acts occur in the bedroom. Satisfactory sexual communication often leads to sexual satisfaction, of which many scholars have highlighted the importance in romantic relationships. Mark and Jozkowski (2013) found relationship satisfaction directly predicted sexual satisfaction, and sexual communication directly predicted sexual satisfaction for both men and women, signaling that there is a direct correlation between satisfaction and communication.

Sexual communication is essential to sexual satisfaction because “individuals who are direct about the sexual behaviors they enjoy are more likely to receive those behaviors and, therefore, more likely to be satisfied with their sexual encounters” (Theiss, 2011, p. 577). Litzinger and Gordon (2005), found sexual satisfaction was linked to relationship communication and vice versa, implying sexual communication plays a role in sexual satisfaction. Their study found, for both men and women, if relationship communication was already high, sexual satisfaction only increased relationship satisfaction a bit; if relationship communication was low, sexual satisfaction increased relationship satisfaction much more. The previous statement indicates sexual satisfaction is a bonus to already satisfactory relationships and an aid or mending tool for relationships where satisfactory communication is not as evident. Byers (2005) found individuals with high relationship satisfaction also reported high sexual satisfaction and individuals with low sexual satisfaction reported low relationship satisfaction. There is a distinct link between sexual communication, sexual satisfaction, and relationship

satisfaction, indicating a need for self-disclosure and sexual communication in romantic relationships.

Sexual Satisfaction

A key component of romantic relationship satisfaction is sexual satisfaction. Intimacy and the right to be happy are at the core of a solid-foundation relationship (Kellner, 2009). Couples have reported sexual satisfaction as one of the most important factors in marital satisfaction and functioning (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005). To obtain positive sexual outcomes in a relationship it is important partners discuss the activity itself including planning time, engaging one another, and building a shared meaning about sex (Hess & Coffelt, 2012). Gaining sexual satisfaction within a relationship is of great importance. The most obvious way to ensure sexual satisfaction is through open communication about sexual desires. Couples who discuss their sexual likes and dislikes are likely to be more sexually satisfied because their partner understands their wants (MacNeil & Byers, 2005) rather than having to guess about what is liked and disliked. This means open communication and assertion skills are highly important in a relationship, especially about sexual desires.

Communicative assertion skills are necessary in a relationship to enforce safe sex and express sexual desires (Troth & Peterson, 2000). Not only is communication needed to express sexual desires but also to share and bond with a partner on other relationship levels as well. Although sexual satisfaction may aid a relationship with poor communication, the most satisfying relationships are those that have satisfaction in their communication about sexual and nonsexual topics (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005).

Sex is an important part of a romantic relationship but sometimes it is difficult for partners to discuss. West (1999) purported sexuality and sex are frequently neglected topics of

conversation among families. If sex is not thoroughly discussed at home and the subject is surface-level in school or with peers, the topic may seem like a taboo. People with little experience speaking openly about sex may have difficulties when it comes time to discuss sex with a romantic partner. Expressing likes and dislikes with a partner may be difficult if one partner is uncomfortable with the subject. To have satisfying sexual experiences, both relationship partners need to be open to discussing sex. When both partners agree on mutually satisfying sexual acts, those acts are more likely to take place because they are seen as more desirable (Purine & Carey, 1997) and mutual satisfaction can occur. Sex and communication are common factors of satisfactory relationships.

Intercultural Relationships

An intercultural relationship may take many forms varying from cultural traditions and customs, to beliefs, values, religion, and race (Kellner, 2009). Intercultural dating is usually prominent in individuals who have experienced or been exposed to other cultures during their early life (Remennick, 2009). Successful relationships function when both partners can understand one another and when relationship standards are set and followed. Relationship satisfaction is directly related to what a partner's personal standards for a relationship should be, meaning, "discrepant standards between spouses might make achieving a mutually satisfying relationship challenging, and this might be a particular issue for intercultural couples" (Hiew, Halford, van de Vijver & Shuang, 2015, p. 816). Partners in intercultural relationships cannot maintain equal amounts of their old and new culture (Remennick, 2009), hence, adaptation and integration must occur at some level. In order to properly adapt and integrate into a romantic partner's culture and life, each partner must understand the basic cultural values important to one another.

Maintaining a personal, cultural identity is important, but learning the cultural scripts of an intercultural partner is also important (Silva et al., 2012) as it can aid in the process of communication. Becoming competent in a cultural script means learning a partner's mainstream and host society cultural differences, respecting cultural differences, and adopting key values and traditions into one's own life (Silva et al., 2012). People in intercultural relationships may see themselves as bicultural or multicultural because they adapt to their partner's culture (Bustamante et al., 2011) and thus, experience two culturally different worlds.

Intercultural couples have a higher chance of misunderstanding one another than intracultural couples (Bustamante et al., 2011) simply because their backgrounds differ and the culture each partner grew up in may be vastly different from one another. Negotiating assumptions and expectations is important for intercultural relationships in developing shared meaning on topics. When partners can agree on core values, an intercultural relationship is more likely to occur and sustain in the long-term (Silva et al., 2012). Silva et al., (2012) stated culture affects emotion and emotional expression, thus intercultural couples need to understand expression of feelings and emotions may not be similar and it will take patience and time to adapt to one another's preferences and find a medium emotional-ground together.

In a study of Russian immigrants married to native Israelis, Remennick (2009) found the Russian/Soviet partner's preferred to not speak about negative emotions and were often quite awkward in expressing themselves emotionally. This contrasted the Israeli partners, who were more accustomed to talking about their feelings and problems with one another. A simple issue like this, talking about negative feelings and emotions, can make a big difference when it comes to a relationship's satisfaction levels. If emotions are being hidden because of feelings of awkwardness, topics such as sexual issues may not be brought up and this could lead to less

sexual communication which leads to less sexual and relationship satisfaction. Although it may be uncomfortable for one partner to open up and discuss negative emotions which are not usually discussed in their culture, it must be done in order to accommodate to their partner and solve relationship issues. Intercultural couples need to realize there will be culture gaps in their relationship and if they want the relationship to be successful and not end in divorce, they will need to work to fill in those gaps (Remennick, 2009).

The heterogamy hypothesis, or heterogamy effect, states individuals in a heterogamous relationship (culturally dissimilar relationship) are more likely to divorce than those in a homogamous relationship (culturally similar relationship) (Kalmijn et al., 2005). In a study of the heterogamy effect, Kalmijn et al. (2005) found in Dutch individuals married to foreigners, the heterogamy effect appeared to be especially true for couples who have one Dutch partner and another partner who comes from a culture strongly dissimilar from that of the Dutch. The study showed mixed-nationality couples have double the chance of divorcing than intracultural couples. This was especially true for couples who came from radically different cultures. This leads to the belief that couples who come from similar cultures, for example a Finnish partner and a Swedish partner, would likely have less difficulties, differences, and a lower divorce probability than a couple with one Finnish partner and the other Kenyan, simply because Finland and Sweden are closer in geographical relation and share much of the same climate, holidays, religious beliefs, and customs than do Finland and Kenya.

Intercultural Relationships and Sexual Satisfaction

When it comes to intercultural couples and the topic of sexual satisfaction, this is a new area of study. Many studies have been done on intercultural relationships (Bustamante et al., 2011; Brummett & Steuber, 2015; Reiter & Gee, 2008; Silva et al., 2012; Kellner, 2009), as well as

numerous studies on sexual satisfaction (Byers & Demmons, 1999; Purine & Carey, 1997; MacNeil & Byers, 2005; Byers, 2005; Litzinger & Gordon, 2005; Hess & Coffelt, 2012) but combining the two areas is a rarity. For this reason, not much is known on the distinct habits and communication styles of intercultural couples when discussing the topic of sex. Intercultural couples face distinct difficulties in their relationships that differ from intracultural couples, meaning that not all research on sexual communication may apply to intercultural couples as there are specific relationships differences. Over the course of a relationship, intercultural couples are at a higher risk of experiencing adjustment issues (Silva et al., 2012) because their backgrounds differ and their ways of living may be difficult to change or adjust.

In a study by Bustamante et al. (2011), it was found intercultural couples use humor as a sort of coping mechanism for cultural differences in times of conflict. Humor can aid in discussing difficult or uncomfortable topics, like sex, but over time should be used less as communication skills develop and the topic becomes less of a taboo subject. If an intercultural couple has one member who grew up openly talking about sex and another who was discouraged from talking about sex, there will be difficulties in finding a common comfort zone between the two. Similarly, the view of sex and sexuality may differ from culture to culture; some may find sex to be an enjoyable activity that couples engage in while others may see it as a chore. Intercultural couples need to find a balance of communication when discussing important issues relevant to their relationship.

Sex is an important part of any romantic relationship. The importance of negotiating and disclosing sexual desires becomes more difficult when partners have different upbringings regarding sex and the way it is discussed. Intercultural couples are a prime example of couples who may struggle to negotiate desires because of cultural differences. Intercultural couples may

face many issues in their relationship, which is where the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) can aid in understanding one another.

Communication Accommodation Theory

The main premise of CAT is people communicate to share information and while doing so either accommodate (converge) or nonaccommodate (diverge). The CAT is used not simply to share information but to control and regulate interpersonal and intergroup relationships (Toma, 2014). CAT is a theory of communication competence as it focuses on people “knowing when and how to accommodate and showing willingness to do so to accomplish interaction goals” (Pitts & Harwood, 2015, pp. 92). The previous statement hints at the notion that accommodation and nonaccommodation are conscious acts in which humans have the ability to take part. This means the ability to accommodate is a choice and people can decide when to do so.

Convergence and divergence are at the heart of CAT. It is important to recognize both verbal and nonverbal behaviors may be converged or diverged towards. Convergence is when interlocutors try to decrease differences and adapt to each other whereas divergence is the emphasizing or increasing of style difference between communicators (Coupland & Giles, 1988). The CAT realizes miscommunication in convergence and accommodation may occur because of stereotypes, interactional style, and conversation expectations (Coupland & Giles, 1988). The possibility of miscommunication may be higher for intercultural communication because the use of stereotypes, preconceived judgements, and uncertainty may occur when forming and receiving messages about a culturally different person. Conversations need to be personally adapted because not everyone desires the same amount of accommodation.

In most cases, accommodating sends the message of ‘we are similar’, where nonaccommodating sends the message of ‘we are different’. Motivation to accommodate or not

can be based on the goal of the conversation (Hehl & McDonald, 2014). When the goal of the conversation is mutual understanding, showing respect, and showing similarity, accommodation is likely to happen and benefit both conversation partners. Accommodative skills, resources, and abilities are thought to be built and improved across a lifespan (Pitts & Harwood, 2015). Thus, a new romantic relationship should have more accommodation difficulties than an experienced relationship because an experienced couple will have more time to adjust and get used to their partner's communication and accommodation style.

Intercultural Accommodation

Accommodation is the goal in intercultural romantic relationships as it leads to less stress and more understanding of both partners. In a study by Reiter and Gee (2008), higher levels of cultural support were linked to lower levels of relationship distress. This suggests understanding and caring about a partner's culture can create a sense of comfort and reduce stress in an intercultural relationship. Both partners need to work towards accommodating one another to ensure a comfortable and understanding relationship is built despite cultural differences. Not all issues will be easy to discuss or agree upon, but attempting to accommodate and show respect builds relationship rapport and strengthens a couple's overall communication. Deciding how much accommodation is needed in a situation can be seen as a learned skill that can be developed over time, meaning a relationship just beginning may have more accommodation issues than a relationship that has already developed.

People's perceptions of each other change as a conversation takes place and accommodative or nonaccommodative behaviors occur (Giles et al., 2012). With this in mind, it is important to remember the way a message is decoded is based on how accommodative a sender is, and encoding is based on the same criteria as well as how accommodative a sender

wants to be perceived. Giles et al. (2012) found when police officers were judged as being more accommodative to drivers, drivers were in turn more accommodative to officers. When a driver did not accommodate, it was more likely an officer would not accommodate and vice versa. This signals accommodation and nonaccommodation are mutual acts and when one person is accommodated or not accommodated to the other will also want to accommodate or nonaccommodate as it makes for mutual communication. This is relevant information for intercultural couples because knowing when one partner accommodates or nonaccommodates the other will likely do the same is important in understanding discrepancies.

In an intercultural relationship, the more accommodative one partner is to begin with, the more positive the interaction should be because accommodation is mutual. People converge and accommodate to show that they like one-another and to show respect (Dorjee et al., 2011). Accommodating to a partner's needs in an intercultural relationship is crucial as it demonstrates cultural sensitivity, personal respect, and appreciation for differences. Intercultural couples who are good at accommodating their partners' needs will likely have more successful and satisfying relationships than those who do not accommodate one another.

The CAT emphasizes that people purposefully converge and accommodate in order to be seen as more similar and respected. This study utilizes the CAT to determine how intercultural couples converge and diverge when discussing sexual topics. The literature on sexual communication, intercultural couples, and the CAT leads one to believe intercultural couples who discuss sex in their relationship will engage in some sort of converging or diverging behavior. Now it is clear that good communication is the foundation of a relationship because overall relationship communication links to comfortability in sexual communication. Couples who can discuss their sexual wants and desires are more likely to receive pleasing sexual acts

because their partner understands their likes (Theiss, 2011). Although intercultural couples' opinions may differ on many subjects, for a successful relationship to bloom, open communication, especially on sexual topics, is necessary. Happy couples should be able to negotiate their values to create a shared value system with their culturally dissimilar partner. When intercultural couples agree on core values, the relationship is more likely to sustain in the long run. Intercultural couples will have to engage in some sort of converging or diverging behavior to demonstrate what is desired/undesired to their partner. It is likely that both partners will accommodate to some degree to demonstrate their similarity, show respect, and attempt to maintain relationship harmony (Dorjee et al., 2011). With the information provided in this literature review, it can be assumed intercultural couples want to accommodate one another to create a mutually positive relationship. Keeping in mind the CAT and the presented literature on intercultural couples, sexual communication, and relationship sexual satisfaction, the following research question is presented for the current study:

--what factors play a role in how intercultural couples discuss sex?

This study explores the topic of sexual communication between intercultural couples, along with their accommodation style and overall relationship satisfaction. The topic of sexual communication among intercultural couples has not been previously explored and therefore, there is an evident need for this study. With not much information on the specific subject in general, this study will provide new and distinct knowledge for this distinct group of people.

Method

Methodology

The participants for this study were intercultural couples with one partner coming from Finland. As was stated earlier, an intercultural relationship may be defined by numerous factors varying

from cultural traditions and customs, to beliefs, values, religion, country of origin, and race (Kellner, 2009). Of particular interest for this study was intercultural couples with a difference in country of origin. The research for this study was conducted in Finland, which is a part of the European Union; in the 28 EU countries, EU members have the right to move freely within EU borders. In 2013, 3.4 million people immigrated to an EU country with 1.2 million, or roughly one-third of those individuals coming from a different EU country (Eurostat, 2015). This signals that many immigrants are moving in and out of the European Union and roughly one-third of those immigrants are coming from different EU countries. Country does not always signal cultural differences, but in many situations different countries contain people who hold similar traditions, customs, and views on various topics. Culture spreads from generation to generation and is a learned meanings system that helps people to share an identity based on beliefs, values, norms, and behaviors (Bustamante et al., 2011). Growing up in a country surrounded by older generations who pass down their cultural identities to younger generations means people from different countries will hold different cultures. For these reasons, it is obvious diversity and cultural variation exists within the different countries of the European Union and beyond.

This study interviewed 9 intercultural couples. The primary location of the research was in central Finland. The main criteria for this study was that intercultural couples needed to: (1) have one partner from Finland and another partner from a country other than Finland, (2) be heterosexual, (3) both speak English. Of course, this study also searched for intercultural couples who were sexually active, which was implied by the nature of the research.

Finland was chosen as the constant culture in this study for two main reasons. The first reason is because the research was carried out at a Finnish university and thus, there is convenience in finding couples with one Finnish partner. Second, Finland is widely stereotyped

as valuing its “quiet” culture although that same culture is said to be liberated on the subject of sex. The idea of having a culture where people freely talk about sex but the people are thought of as quiet and shy is an interesting complex.

Participants

Participants included individuals who identified as being involved in an intercultural relationship where one partner was from Finland and the other was from any other country. Both partners spoke English and were in a heterosexual relationship. A total of 18 interviews, consisting of 9 couples, were conducted. Participants were found through postings on social media sites such as Facebook, a university listserv email, word-of-mouth, and referrals from other participants. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 39 ($M= 27.83$, $SD= 6.12$). 50% of the population was female ($N=9$) and 50% of the population was male ($N=9$) with 4 females from Finland and 5 from other countries (Kazakhstan (2), Philippines, Russia, and Bulgaria) and with 5 males from Finland and 4 from other countries (Poland, Lebanon, Ireland, and Mexico). The average length of the participant’s relationship was approximately 4 years ($M= 47.56$ months, $SD= 43.25$).

Procedure

Each partner in a couple was interviewed separately with the average interview lasting 26 minutes ($M= 26.28$, $SD=5.87$). 12 interviews were conducted face-to-face and 6 were conducted via Skype. Interview questions consisted of those which asked about relationship communication, sexual communication, accommodation styles, and sexual/relationship satisfaction. A tape recording device was used to record all interviews which were then later transcribed. In addition to the interview, participants also filled out a short follow-up survey consisting of 7 questions asking similar questions to the interview. The transcription from the interviews and the surveys were coded to search for themes. A thematic analysis was utilized to

analyze the transcriptions and a constant comparative method was used to analyze the survey responses with the interview responses. The researcher identified themes by reading through each transcript several times and searching for commonalities. The frequency and intensity of the topic were examined when considering what consisted of a recurring theme. To preserve confidentiality and anonymity, in the results and discussion portion of this research, any time a name is mentioned it is a pseudonyms.

To obtain demographic information, attached to the informed consent document were five brief questions asking age, sex, race, country of origin, and number of years with their partner. Table 1 highlights the demographic information of participants in this study. This study conducted semi-structured interviews with both couple members participating although at separate and private times. The semi-structured interviews allowed for both couple members to give their perception of the relationship without the other partner present. Relationship research tends to study one member of a couple dyad, leaving out information from the other partner; research is calling for information and responses from couples together (Hess & Coffelt, 2012), a call which this study answered. Because the topic of this research can be sensitive the interviews took place in a comfortable area, most often in a private room at a university's library. All interviews were conducted in English, and for this reason that limits this study to only intercultural couples who both spoke and understood the English language. Before the interviews began, general introductions occurred and an informed consent document describing the study's purpose was distributed and signed by each participant.

Table 1

Couple demographic information

Country of origin	Age	Race	Relationship length
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Finland / Bulgaria	26 / 25	White / White	60 months
Finland / Philippines	38 / 39	White / Asian	84 months
Finland / Kazakhstan	28 / 23	White / Asian	36 months
Finland / Russia	27 / 21	White / White	24 months
Finland / Kazakhstan	23 / 18	White / Asian	2 months
Ireland / Finland	37 / 35	White / White	144 months
Mexico / Finland	26 / 24	Asian / White	24 months
Poland / Finland	26 / 26	White / White	30 months
Lebanon / Finland	34 / 25	Arabic / White	24 months

Note: All data in this chart separated with “ / ” is male on the left side of the symbol and female on the right side of the symbol

Analysis

The analysis utilized in this study was theory driven, using CAT as the main construct. The interview and survey questions revolved around the CAT with many questions relating to, or searching for answers, which would guide participants to speak about their accommodative techniques while discussing sex. The interview questions, although revolving around the CAT, were open and general to give each participant the opportunity to discuss whatever they felt was important. There was a large amount of literature available on intercultural couples and sexual communication which helped to outline the interview questions. By keeping in mind the CAT and the literature on intercultural couples and sexual communication, the interview and survey questions were developed to encourage couples to discuss their sexual communication, their perceived intercultural differences or similarities, and their accommodativeness within their relationship. Because much literature suggests sexual communication leads to sexual satisfaction

(Byers, 2005) and sexual satisfaction leads to relationship satisfaction (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005), specific questions were asked relating to sexual and relational communication as well as sexual and relational satisfaction. While analyzing each interview transcript and survey, the CAT was kept in mind and codes and themes were searched for and identified based on the construct of CAT. While analyzing the transcripts the most common appearing words and phrases were searched for and then grouped into different themes. Each theme was then broken into smaller sub-themes to better describe what the major, overlaying theme entailed. After this was done, each subtheme was counted for amount of appearances in the transcripts. Each theme and subtheme was able to relate to the CAT as the theory can be seen in most all conversations and communicative interactions.

To analyze the data, thematic analysis and comparative content analysis was utilized. Coded statements from the interviews were compared to those on the surveys. Interviewing couples separately and then asking them to fill out a survey together produced interesting data with responses that matched one another. Most often, the main themes found from the interview transcripts were also the main themes found in the survey transcripts, demonstrating couples had a majority of the same beliefs and opinions about their relationship when asked about it privately and conjoined with their partner. The interview data proved to be much richer than the survey data as more information was collected and further elaboration of topics was achieved. Each transcript was read over several times to search for themes and in the end three major themes appeared as being most relevant. Although there were three major themes prevalent in this data set, other minor themes appeared which were not mentioned by as many participants as the major themes. The minor themes still have value in this research, although because they were not

mentioned by numerous participants it can be thought that the minor themes do not hold as much value as the major themes which were mentioned more often.

Results

After analyzing the data, three main themes emerged as prevalent. The first theme aligns well with the theory behind this research, CAT, as it is based on high amounts of open, positive communication and converging towards one another to ensure comfortability. The second theme revolves more around culture but also includes CAT as it is based on the idea of adapting to new cultures and cultural ideas as well as riding of stereotypes. The final theme presented in this research deals with accommodating to speak English together; all couples in this research spoke English although only one partner had English as their mother tongue. Each of these three themes revolves around communication accommodation and how intercultural couples adapt to one another. Table 2 shows the prevalence of each theme and the most common subthemes connected to each theme by highlighting the number of participants who mentioned the subtheme.

The research question was quite vague, and purposely so, for this research. It asked “what factors play a role in how intercultural couples discuss sex?” and aimed to discover what intercultural couples believed to be the most important aspects in their sexual communication. This question was answered through the three major themes found in this research. Each theme was compiled of subthemes. The subthemes are thought to fall under the main category of their corresponding theme; although not all subthemes were mentioned a large amount of times, each subtheme had at least five participants mention the topic in detail which gave ground for it to be included in the larger theme. In the description of results below, the word “participant” in

parenthesis refers to an individual interview whereas the word “couple” in parenthesis refers to a couple’s conjoined survey.

Table 2

Prevalence of themes

	frequency of subtheme
Open Communication	
Comfortability	18
Understanding	13
Intimacy	8
Respect	8
Cultural Differences	
Upbringing	10
Stereotypes	7
Religion	5
Speaking English	
Equality	8
Adjusting vocabulary	7

Open Communication

The idea of having open communication was something every participant mentioned as important in an intercultural relationship. The concept covers a variety of subthemes but the overriding theme of open communication was specifically mentioned as being important from all participants. Open communication meant different things to different participants with some mentioning speaking a lot, feeling comfortable, not hiding anything, and self-disclosing. The

most common subthemes associated with open communication consisted of comfortability, understanding, intimacy, and respect. Many of the intercultural couples felt as though open communication was the key to the relationship's success and without it there would be significant problems. Open communication allowed for the couples to discuss topics out in the open and adjust and accommodate to one another after knowing each other's views, which were likely rooted in their cultural upbringing and surrounding. Open communication was the way in which participants discussed their sexual wants, likes, and issues with one another. Through open communication the participants felt as though their partner could better understand their sexual personality which varied not only from culture to culture but also individual to individual.

Throughout each interview the concept of open communication came up several times. Although not all of the questions pertained to being open or having dialog in specific, many answers reverted back to using open communication with their partner as the key to solving problems in the relationship and negotiating values. Intercultural couples have a need for open communication because partners may have different ways of communicating, values, and beliefs which are rooted in cultural differences which need to be discussed. When it came to sexual matters, participants used open communication to get straight to the point and leave no room for confusion. For some couples, discussing sex was not something that came naturally in the beginning but after getting to know one another better and becoming involved in open communication on topics other than sex, the sexual communication became more comfortable. Some partners felt shy at first because their culture did not expose them to much sexual communication, but they accommodated to their partner who wanted to discuss sex and opened up to slowly begin the sexual self-disclosure process.

Comfortability

All 18 participants mentioned feeling comfortable in their communication, including sexual communication, with their partner. Being comfortable in the relationship, with each other, and in discussing sex were subjects the participants valued. Comfortability was by far the most popular subtheme in this research, which could be thought to mean that feeling comfortable in an intercultural, sexual relationship is the most valuable determinant of a successful relationship. The feeling of comfortability means participants felt as though their culture was understood and appreciated and they could discuss whatever they wanted. All participants felt comfortable discussing sex with their partner and most believed it brought them closer together as a couple. The couples could talk about intimate subjects, which at times could lead to the feeling of vulnerability; because the couples felt comfortable with one another it was easier for them to express their sexual likes and dislikes and be open with one another knowing there would be no judgement.

Many participants highlighted their satisfaction with their relationship's comfortability and thought of it as an aid in the overall relationship's success. The partners seemed to realize their mutual self-disclosure led to feelings of comfortability and content in one another's intercultural knowledge, and allowed for accommodation and adjustments in the relationship to take place. Feeling comfortable led to feeling accepted and happy in the relationship.

“I would say I am comfortable talking about all the topics and this is one of the main things that I love about our relationship. If you have this basis of talking about diverse things and feel comfortable talking about diverse things I think it makes it easier to talk about also your needs and about sexual life and to open up and say, ‘I don't like this’ or ‘I like this’ and so on.” (participant #2)

Becoming comfortable in a relationship is not something that happens overnight. Some partners discussed their feelings of discomfort in talking about sex in the beginning of the relationship, which often stemmed from coming from a culture where sex was not openly discussed. Accommodation occurred when partners discussed sexual matters when at first one partner may not have been comfortable with the topic.

“In the beginning you always feel a bit shy but then it gets more comfortable.”

(participant #12)

“Maybe we were a bit shy in the beginning but after you live together for such a long time you discuss everything” (participant #9).

As couples described becoming more comfortable with their relationship, sex seemed to be thought of as more of an everyday or mundane conversation rather than something that needed to be gently discussed. Partners who were accustomed to a culture that did not discuss sex were able to slowly open up to talk about sex more freely. The more comfortable a couple felt, the more it seemed as though they discussed sex as a regular, everyday type of topic. There did not seem to be a pattern in where or when couples discussed sex, simply that it popped up randomly in conversations.

“Talking about sex is more natural; it is not something that has to be summoned to come up. No, it is just something that comes up out in the open.” (participant #10).

“I feel like we have such a good harmony that we can talk about anything. We discuss sex like the same as picking out cereal.” (participant #18).

“Generally when we talk about these things it is natural, we don’t sit down and say, ‘so, how about this’. [Sex] is kind of embedded in other conversations.” (participant #17).

Some participants also felt as though their open communication and comfortability lead to happiness in their relationship. There were many aspects which aided in forming a lasting, successful, happy relationship, but comfortability in self, partner, culture, and communication seemed to play a large role.

“I think we are so happy because we are so comfortable with communication about everything, including sex.” (participant #16)

“We are happy but we could also have those talks (about sex) more often as they bring us closer together.” (couple #2)

Overall, comfortability in the relationship was the most important topic brought up by the participants. Every participant saw the need to feel comfortable not only in regular communication, but also in sexual communication. Sexual communication was not a topic that came easily to all participants, especially for those from cultures lacking sexual liberation, but through openly discussing sex with their partner it soon became a more comfortable topic.

Sexual communication was something all participants said they felt comfortable discussing in their relationship. Although some partners came from a culture where sex was not openly discussed previously in their lives, those partners were able to adapt to their culturally dissimilar partner and discuss sex more openly. One aspect that may aid in the feeling of comfortability is understanding. The feeling of being comfortable led to feelings of being understood in the relationship, which brought about higher levels of open communication.

Understanding

The subtheme of understanding was very important to many partners. Open communication often led to high levels of self-disclosure over the course of the relationship. Most of the couples in this study had been dating for several years and during that time there had been many

opportunities for self-disclosure, searching for clarity, and understanding one another. As couples began to understand the cultural similarities and dissimilarities of one another sexually and in general, it allowed the relationship to grow with both partners knowing they were accepted and understood by one another. Through understanding one another, partners could have more knowledge on what their partner liked or disliked and could better accommodate to their partner's desires. Sex and the way sex is discussed in other cultures can be very different meaning understanding one another was an important factor for these intercultural couples. Understanding one another also connected to knowing what each other wanted sexually. Over the course of the relationship, many partners came to understand one another so well that they did not discuss sex as often as in the beginning of their relationship simply because they understood what the other partner wanted from previous conversations and experiences together.

Although through understanding one another sometimes sexual communication declined, it was not necessarily a bad effect as it meant couples better understood their partners' wants. Most couples who said they do not discuss sex too often said they still felt comfortable enough to tell their partner if they wanted something different or new. Many couples felt satisfied with the sex they were currently having and therefore did not need to discuss it as much because they understood each other's wants and likes.

“Now after 4 years it has become more stable. We kind of know what we expect from each other and what we want. I think I know her very well and I know what she wants and what she doesn't want.” (participant #10)

“I would say we talked about [sex] in the beginning of the relationship when we were figuring everything out. So that's when it was a bit more constant topic. I guess we just

kind of know each other in a way so it doesn't feel that relevant anymore." (participant #3)

Some couples also discussed understanding one another in the way of accepting sex drive changes over time. Of the 9 couples interviewed, 4 had children, many of whom were still very young. Some of the conversations with these couples leaned towards talking about sex drive changing over time but still understanding and feeling happy with one another. In this sense, couple's understood they needed to accommodate to one another's sex drive. The concept of understanding a partner's wants and needs moved beyond simple sexual acts and towards understanding why a partner felt the way they did. After having children some of the women explained experiencing a drop in libido, which was something both partner members had to understand, be conscious of, and accept. Having children also meant more time needed to be delegated to actually planning the act of sex.

"Sex is an important topic. I think we are okay, of course at the moment we have gone through a bit of a dry spell, but I think it's okay." (participant #7)

"When our children are sleeping we will have alone time to discuss sex." (couple #4)

"Especially after giving birth it's not so often that we have the time [to have sex] and physically I was unavailable." (participant #9)

"When the kids were small we didn't talk about sex at all because it wasn't an integral part of who we were together. And now that they are bigger we talk about it more."

(participant #14)

Understanding was also highlighted as important in avoiding conflicts. Some couples found their communication to be quite open and at times misunderstandings took place simply because of cultural differences when clarification was needed. In situations like this, understanding was

used to ease tensions and help to solve problems. Misunderstandings may be quite common in intercultural relationships where values may differ, especially because if partners are communicating in a language which is not their mother tongue some ideas, words, and phrases might be difficult to understand at first. Understanding in this aspect played the role of giving clarification to topics when needed.

“You need to let it out and clarify, for example, some couples keep it all for themselves and don’t talk about [problems] and after a couple of years you explode and you say you can’t take it anymore.” (participant #2)

“I do think communication helps when you can be open because then you are not afraid that it could create from small problems something bigger if you don’t talk.” (participant #6)

“I have noticed if we don’t discuss sex it affects us because we become more irritable and we start fighting over small things more often and there is a very negative atmosphere.” (participant #9)

Understanding one another appeared to play a large role in intercultural couples’ relationships. When partners felt understood they felt as though their partner could appreciate their cultural background and differences which aided in feeling more connected to one another. Open communication helped aid couples to better understand one another which meant more self-disclosure and, likely, accommodation occurred in their relationships. In this study, the concept of understanding played a big part in how satisfied the couples were. When partners better understood not only their partner’s culture and differences but also wants and needs it was easier to fulfill those wants and needs. Most couples seemed to have a good understanding of what their partner wanted and did not want, which lead to better sexual satisfaction.

When asked how satisfied partners were with their sexual relationship, no partner said they were unsatisfied. The most popular answer was “satisfied” or “very satisfied”, which can be thought to link to how well partners understood each other and in how much open communication partners engaged. Linked to understanding is the idea of intimacy since intimacy occurs out of a mutual understanding and bonding with one another.

Intimacy

The feeling of intimacy was mentioned by quite a few participants as it related to closeness in a relationship. Open communication was utilized to gain the feeling of intimacy for intercultural couples as it reduced uncertainty and helped partners understand and appreciate cultural differences. Intimacy in this context does not only relate to being physically intimate but also emotionally. Emotional intimacy appeared to be achieved by sharing common values and openly discussing personal subjects together. Sharing values was a concept in which open communication was utilized to achieve; intercultural couples could successfully merge their cultural values to create a sense of intimacy together. When couples could discuss a topic and accommodate to one another by showing similarity the relational intimacy appeared to increase.

Intimacy seemed to make partners feel as though their relationship was strong and they could share intimate details of their lives with one another. The feeling of intimacy in a romantic relationship seemed to help glue the partners together to feel more connected. This was highly important for intercultural couples where it seems as though many differences are apparent; finding similarities and engaging in intimacy helped these intercultural couples to feel more culturally similar. Some partners felt their relational intimacy helped them to feel more stable in their relationship.

“The sexual communication has been so good and it makes [the relationship] more deep and more intimate and so we can talk and know.” (participant #1)

“I do like bringing [sex] up and I think it does give the relationship some depth. Because it’s a really intimate topic so obviously when you bring it up you feel that you can talk to that person and it makes you feel closer.” (participant #3)

Sexual communication among some intercultural couples aided in the intimacy felt between some partners. Intimacy was something that many couples highlighted as important and one way of feeling intimate was through sexual communication. Sexual communication also helped to ensure that partners could satisfy one another sexually.

“I think it is very important that you talk about sex so that you know how to satisfy each other. If I would not have told him and we would not discuss it, how would he know?”
(participant # 8)

“It is not healthy to have no sexual anything. Maybe some relationships exist like that if both partners are okay with that, but for me I expect that both of us work together.”
(participant #10)

Intimacy played a role in both physical and emotional aspects of these intercultural couples’ relationships. Most couples seemed to understand their intimacy became something that was shared and not personal and thus, partners tried to accommodate to each other’s wants and needs not only sexually but also emotionally and in everyday life. This meant couples had to understand the culture of their partner in order to better understand why they felt/acted/spoke in a certain way. The intimate part of the relationship carried over into other parts of the relationship, like feeling comfortable and understanding one another, which all fit under the umbrella of open communication.

Intimacy in each partner's relationship was important to the overall satisfaction of the relationship. Intimacy likely could not exist without the concept of respect. These couples demonstrated to have respect for one another and each other's cultures which in turn lead to them feeling comfortable with being physically and emotionally intimate with one another.

Respect

The final subtheme under open communication is respect, which also played a large role in this study's intercultural couples' relationships. The feeling of respect is one which is needed for a relationship to truly thrive and succeed as respect is a core foundation of happiness. When partners feel respected in a relationship it means their opinions and values are understood, taken into consideration, and viewed equally. For intercultural couples, respect could be thought of as especially, if not more, important to a relationship because there are various cultural differences in traditions, values, and customs which need to be understood and valued. When intercultural couples are able to respect one another's opinions and values there is likely to be higher levels of comfortability and self-disclosure in the relationship.

Mutual respect in a romantic relationship makes way for open communication on all topics. Knowing that opinions will be respected and ideas will not be mocked is important when discussing sensitive topics, such as sex, especially when partners have differing backgrounds. Intercultural couples may be nervous to share their true opinions and thoughts because they are unsure of how their partner will perceive them. The feeling of respect helps intercultural couples to feel more comfortable in openly discussing sex. Couples show respect by converging towards one another to show understanding and valuing of opinions and ideas. When partners felt respected from one another it strengthened the relationship and created more opportunities for

self-disclosure and open communication in the future. Respect leads to being able to better understand and care for one another.

“I trust that she has understanding for my views, opinions, and needs, and she respects my opinion and if we need to find a solution we settle down and find a solution in the middle, in between.” (participant #2)

Having respect for one another also meant less feelings of uncertainty. Talking about sensitive subjects was easier knowing partners were respectful and valued one another’s needs and desires. Open communication could take place when partners felt as though they were not being judged for what they said or did, which aided in sexual and general communication.

“I don’t feel violated when I talk to him because he knows what is going on with me. I know that he will not judge me or laugh at me. You know, there are things that you want to know and something you think is funny, but he takes me seriously.” (participant # 8)

“We’ve always been able to talk openly and safely with each other without being challenged or attacked. It has helped our other communication as well.” (participant # 13)

In these interviews respect was also demonstrated by showing patience and understanding for one another. Couples understood that moods change and people change over time, and partners were able to accommodate for those changes. In respecting one another, partners understood that their relationship needed to be maintained by respecting and showing compassion for one another, even in difficult times like when arguing. Being respectful helped couples to figure out the reason behind their argument, whether it be cultural differences or something else, and solve their problems together. Respect remained to be a subtheme for when couples noticed differences in one another’s behavior and then attempted to converge towards their partner to make their situation better.

“There is a way of saying things in a nice way or a not-so-nice way. I try to say things the nice way but I don’t always succeed, I think that is the case for both of us.” (participant # 14)

“It gives you a liberating feeling that you can actually trust the other person and can talk to them about how you would or not like to do things.” (participant # 15)

“We think that we should cut each other more slack, especially when it comes to trusting that the other person has good intentions and is talking from a place of love and companionship.” (couple # 7)

In the end, respect played a role in how couples communicated. Partners who indicated they felt respected also indicated they respected their partner, signaling to the accommodative reciprocation of respecting one another. In respecting one another’s culture and background, there was a solid foundation built in each relationship. Respect is very important for intercultural couples because it is comforting to know that partners place value and worth on one another, especially when it breaks down to cultural values, traditions, and customs. Knowing that mutual respect is prevalent in a relationship makes it easier for couples to open up and discuss a variety of topics in their relationship, including sex.

Open communication in a relationship helped couples to feel comfortable, understand one another, feel intimate, and share respect. These are all important aspects to any relationship but may be even more important in an intercultural relationship where there are so many apparent differences. Different cultural backgrounds can play a large role in how couples feel about one another; understanding and accepting partners for who they are and what they bring to the table and not the stereotype associated with their culture is important for successful intercultural

relationships to thrive. For this research, some partners had to forget about previously known stereotypes and rewrite their own after meeting their partner.

Cultural Differences

Cultural differences is a theme which popped up quite often in this research. Cultural differences may consist of many aspects such as traditions, customs, beliefs, manners, religion, and much more. In this research, the main subthemes under cultural differences which the participants mentioned were upbringing, stereotypes, and religion. These subthemes were mentioned by many participants and seemed to play some role in how the partners viewed themselves, their partner, and their relationship. Cultural differences could be thought to be obvious when studying intercultural couples, although not always are there distinct differences especially when partners come from very similar, although different, cultures. For this research one partner always came from Finland making Finland the constant culture which all couples had in common. Out of the 9 other participants, 8 countries other than Finland were represented; some of those countries were very near Finland, either geographically or metaphorically (in their views and traditions) and others were very distant. Participants in this research either saw themselves or their partner as accommodating to a certain cultural style of communicating, which was usually being more open when open communication had not always been valued.

An interesting aspect of this research is most of the couples used their cultural differences to explain why things happened the way they did in their relationship. Some participants expressed a sort of shock as to how unlike the stereotypical person their partner was. Usually when a partner did not match the typical stereotypes associated with their country of origin, upbringing was mentioned as playing a large role in what effected that partner's personality and sociability with others.

Upbringing

Upbringing plays a large part in how an individual develops. In this research, upbringing was thought of as the reason for why people were who they were and why they acted the way they did. Culture could be rooted in upbringing, but the overall values and customs an individual held were thought to be most influenced by upbringing. This means a parent's culture was passed down to their children and whether that culture matched the country of origin's culture or not could be debatable. This subtheme was thought to be affected mainly by the family unit. Family plays a large role in how a person develops and what they learn as a child. Children are moldable and adapt to their surroundings to learn; as children grow with their family and friends their core values are instilled in them and become who they are as an adult.

Family appeared to be thought of as the biggest contributor in upbringing when looking at this research's participants. The family was highlighted as having either instilled desirable or not-so-desirable qualities in the participants. Good qualities were ones that allowed for high amounts of open communication and partner accommodation to occur; in essence, a good upbringing was thought of as creating open-mindedness.

“If you look at where he comes from, I realized when I met his friends, I was like, ‘oh my goodness’, his mother is awesome and she raised him and his brother so well.”

(participant #1)

“He always had more of that direct way of communicating whereas in my family, when growing up, we didn't really communicate that directly. No conflicts.” (participant #3)

“He knows I came from a conservative culture. And then I need to adjust because he came from a more open culture. So I need to tell him, ‘I came from a conservative culture and there are things I cannot express’. He is patient with me.” (participant # 8)

The qualities which were not valued as highly were those that did not lead to as open of communication. Some of these were described as being from a culture which was shy, quiet, or simply not wanting to follow in their parent's footsteps. In this sense, partner's realized when upbringing did not always have the most positive effect on one another and partners tried to accommodate their communication to a more open style.

"My parents never talked about things so I didn't want that to be me." (participant #15)

"If sex is something you shouldn't be doing then it is embarrassing and you can't really talk about it. Anything to do with your body or physicality is just something that you keep completely to yourself. In Finland it is like everyone is naked in the sauna together. It is a lot more natural for me to talk about my body and its functions and how it feels."
(participant #13)

"The main problem is again something to do with my upbringing. Because I was raised by a single mom and my aunt, quite often I am trying to be good and to be liked."
(participant #5)

"When I was growing up in the 80s sex was something that was never discussed. My parents would never discuss sex ever with each other or me or in general."
(participant#13)

In terms of accommodating, some partners realized their upbringing was not a good fit for who they now were as a person, and attempted to change their beliefs to be more like their partners. In essence, some cultural upbringings had to be changed or modified.

"I decided that maybe it was okay to let some things and ideas go. They were things that were holding back my life." (participant #18)

Upbringing appeared to be a main factor in how participants viewed themselves and their partner. Partners usually found their upbringing to be a good thing or something that could have been improved. For the partners who could have had an improvement, it seemed they tried to converge more towards their partner's way of communication, especially on sexual topics, because they found it to be better in the long-run.

Cultural upbringing definitely was highlighted as the most prevalent topic in cultural differences as it determined how a person developed into adulthood. The main influence on upbringing was the family, with social circles and outside culture playing a role as well. Although upbringing seemed to play the biggest role under the theme of cultural differences, stereotypes also had an effect on some participants.

Stereotypes

Stereotypes were brought up by many participants; the main ideas going along with stereotypes were whether or not a partner matched their country's stereotypes. The Finnish stereotype was brought up the most, as was to be expected since the constant culture in this research was Finnish culture. Finnish and non-Finnish partners brought up the "quiet" Finn myth quite often, although more often than not it was to justify how a partner or self did not fit that stereotype.

Some partners attributed their communication style to their cultural stereotype rather than their upbringing, although this was often mentioned as a joke to poke fun at the way in which someone converged towards their cultural stereotype at times and diverged towards their partner's at other times. The idea of the silent Finn came up quite often; many participants used the myth in describing themselves or their partner, either as following or straying away from the stereotype.

“Finns are really a little bit like, you know, space in the elevator, space in everything, not much into detail, they really need time to know you and stuff to actually be more intimate with you. Riitta is only just *a little bit* Finnish. She is very outgoing and not like a stereotypical Finn.” (participant #4)

“It’s a joke between us that I’m a Finn and I do Finnish talks and Finnish things. Like, whenever he says something romantic I’m always saying something super funny, practical, or casual and he’s like, ‘don’t be such a Finn’.” (participant #1)

Other cultural stereotypes were also brought up, other than Finnish stereotypes. Partners often felt as though their country’s stereotype did not fully justify their communication style but that it did play some part in determining how each partner communicated.

“I think that coming from the Irish culture he’s not, he doesn’t maybe even know what he likes or wants. His needs are not so pronounced as mine would be.” (participant #13)

“We do come from a little bit of different cultural backgrounds and maybe I’m a little more liberal minded Irish person but I can see in certain things maybe I would still be affected by that closed-off culture.” (participant #14)

“Culture is starkly different between Finland and Kazakhstan. In traditions and sex, there are big differences but I think we think about it in a similar way.” (participant #17)

Stereotypes were mostly seen as something that could be worked around; they were something that existed but were not permanent or true for everyone. Some participants did still feel as though stereotypes had an effect on their relationship, even while knowing the cultural stereotypes attached to their culture were not always true.

“The stereotypes affect the way we interpret each other’s words even.” (participant #13)

“Nobody ever asked me about sex before. So, it’s really nice to have a foreigner husband. From experience, it worked for me.” (participant #8)

Stereotypes were prevalent in this research, although many participants realized stereotypes were just that—something which was not grounded in fact but rather a joke which gets unjustly applied to an entire population. Most participants put more weight on upbringing in determining their own and their partner’s communication style, although some participants did place some weight on stereotypes. Of course, sometimes stereotypes fit some members of a population, which could be true in this research as well, especially when a quiet Finnish partner was present, but most often when a partner brought up a certain stereotype it was used in the context of a joke rather than a serious tone.

Stereotypes did not carry a major role in the overall theme of cultural differences, but many participants did mention stereotypes as playing some factor in the way communication took place because it affected perception. It was often thought that if a partner did or did not match their cultural stereotype it likely was related to how the person was raised. Another subtheme that goes along with stereotypes is religion, as a partner’s religion demonstrated to effect sexual communication styles.

Religion

The subtheme of religion was not a topic that came up extremely often in the interviews, although when it did come up (5 times) it was a strong topic which carried a lot of sentiment and justification for communication style. For the previous reason, religion is included under the theme of cultural differences since it played a large role in some participant’s relationships. Religion can also be classified as a type of intercultural factor. Intercultural couples can be defined by many factors; this research decided to highlight country of origin as intercultural

although there are also studies which highlight religion as intercultural. Both are correct which is most likely why religion came up as a topic in some interviews.

In the interviews where religion did come up, it was often seen as something that was engraved in the mind and created differences between others. Some participants expressed fear of another religion and their practices.

“For 6 months I was kind of waiting that he would somehow turn out to be this awful Muslim guy who will take me back to Lebanon or something.” (participant #1)

Not all participants feared a religious stereotype in their partner, but rather felt as though religion was something instilled into their own mind and it effected the way they communicated and lived life.

“Although I am not religious, [religion] was something that was pumped in my mind. Coming from a conservative and strict culture, in the beginning sex was a taboo for me, especially sex before marriage, that’s a sin.” (participant #18)

“In his culture, there is this Catholic religion and the presence of it is restricting.” (participant #13)

“We were a very Catholic country. I was 13 in 1992 and that is when condoms were legalized. That just gives you some idea, sex just was not discussed ever, it just wasn’t.” (participant #14)

Religion was also a factor that effected when to get married. One participant mentioned how there were cultural differences in when marriage should happen, especially after having a baby, which related to coming from a predominantly Orthodox Christian nation.

“Now that we have a baby, in Russia there is the idea of a shotgun wedding like, ‘okay, I got pregnant, now we need to get married immediately,’ which is something people in Finland and people in Europe generally don’t do.” (participant #11)

When looking at the previous examples, it is seen that some sort of accommodation had to take place by partners in order to find middle ground. Some partners felt themselves straying away from religion or the stereotypes associated with religion and moved towards the same beliefs and ideas which their partner held. Religion played a bigger role for couples who seemed to come from countries where sex was discussed very differently. The Finnish culture had open sex education in school and was thought to have liberated its children into becoming sexual beings. Not all of the Finnish partner’s romantic partners grew up in such a sexually liberating nation.

For those partners who did not talk about sex as often while growing up, several factors came into play. Upbringing was the most prevalent factor in how comfortable a partner was in discussing sex. Stereotypes also played a role in how partners felt about themselves and one another and how accommodating each partner was. Finally, religion played a role for some couples because the ideas associated with some religions were thought of as restricting and not allowing for open sexual communication. Cultural differences were very prominent among this set of 9 intercultural couples, as was expected since there are numerous countries and cultures represented in this data. Another theme which appeared in this data set was speaking English, which can also be thought of as a type of cultural difference.

Speaking English

Speaking English is the final major theme in this data set. English was the main language of communication for all couples interviewed, likely because English is a large lingua franca in international schools and businesses in today’s world. All of the couples met while at least one

partner was traveling, working, or studying abroad in a different country. All of the couples met and began speaking English together because it was their common language. This brings up an interesting complex because most all of the participants speak together in English although their mother tongue is not English. This meant different things to different participants as some found speaking English to be natural and easy while others thought it would be nicer to speak one of the partners' mother tongues as the relationship's language of communication.

Having the relationship language as English was not something any participant mentioned as a barrier to the relationship, although sometimes it was thought that speaking the native language would be easier. Some partners felt as though English was easy to communicate in as partners had to be direct in their communication and there was no beating around the bush. Other partners felt as though English was sometimes difficult because some partners lacked in vocabulary or understanding. The subtheme of feeling equal came up for some participants as English was the language which either made partners feel equal or unequal. Speaking English together was a type of accommodation all partners had to make in their relationship as well as a type of cultural difference; all of the couples had different native languages and had to work to speak a common language together in their relationship.

Equality

The subtheme of equality was prevalent for some partners as it determined how fair the relationship felt to each individual. Equality was related to who spoke English better, who knew more words, and who felt comfortable speaking English. This is uniquely an intercultural couple issue; speaking a language outside of the mother tongue and ensuring equality in the relationship were important to intercultural couples in this research. Because English was most often not a couple's mother tongue, the level of English each partner spoke was very important to how each

individual felt in the relationship. The feeling of being at an advantage or disadvantage was something that partners did not want as they expressed a desire for equality in the relationship.

Feeling equal in the relationship meant sometimes partners converged towards each other and spoke in ways which they were comfortable. This did not always mean everything was obviously communicated to outsiders, but speaking in a way in which each partner could understand one another was the goal. Some partners liked speaking in English as they felt it was simply natural to their relationship.

“I think very strongly that we have our own language. It’s not like we speak English, we speak Maria and Kamal, so I don’t know, we have this circle of us instead of trying to be you or me.” (participant #1)

“Communicating in the mother tongue surly is something, it’s different, it won’t happen between us though. I’ll never be so perfect in Finnish, it’s so difficult. But, to be honest, it would be a little bit weird to communicate with Maria at a certain point in time. We met, we started talking in English.” (participant #2)

“I like speaking English, it is easy for me and we are more equal when we both speak English so I think English is better. I find it good because I see the tables would turn if we switched to Finnish.” (participant #13)

Some partners described a want for their partner to learn their mother tongue, but it was not something which was crucial to the relationship. Learning the mother tongue of their partner could be seen as culturally sensitive and appreciative, but most couples were content with English for now. Since English was the language in which all the relationships began, English came naturally to all the couples. There were still some partners who had a desire for their partner to understand their mother tongue, which could be out of a desire for their partner to have

a better understanding of their culture. This desire could also be seen as an accommodative gesture which would bring the couple closer together.

“As long as we live in Finland it would be a good thing if she was able to speak Finnish. I don’t want to pressure her.” (participant #7)

“Communicating [sexual] things in a language which is not your first language can sometimes be hard. I hope that she would be motivated to study Finnish, I have even told her I would like her to study Finnish.” (participant #17)

There was one partner who had English as his mother tongue which he felt put him at an advantage in the relationship because he could communicate in the language most natural to him.

“I’ve always been able to communicate things in my native language and for Kristiina she hasn’t. So, I guess that has put me at a significant advantage.” (participant #14)

Overall, the feeling of being equal in the relationship was what most partners strived for. In learning a bit of one another’s mother tongues there was convergence towards seeming more similar and showing interest in the other and one another’s culture. All couples continued to have English as their relationship language with most stating it was because they met each other and got to know one another in that language so there was no point in switching now.

Feeling equal in the relationship was important, especially when speaking English and discussing sexual topics with one another. Equality meant both partners could understand and appreciate the others’ words and make sense of their conversations together. Another important aspect to speaking English together was adjusting vocabulary to ensure clarity and understanding.

Adjusting vocabulary

The subtheme of adjusting vocabulary came up in a few interviews and was a way of accommodating to a partner to ensure understanding. Adjusting vocabulary consisted of choosing words that the partner would likely understand, or basically keeping conversations simple to avoid misunderstandings. Some partners expressed the need to have words or phrases clarified, which was not an issue but rather a way of engaging in open communication to ensure misunderstandings did not take place. This was a very accommodating subtheme as the other partner was kept in mind when adjusting vocabulary. Changing vocabulary to match what a partner could understand was the goal of adjusting speaking; partners seemed to want to accommodate to ensure understanding and mutual agreement when discussing topics.

Adjusting vocabulary to use words and phrases partners understood was common among partners especially since English was usually not either partner's mother tongue. When discussing subjects, especially sexual topics, it was important to ensure communication was clear and there were no misunderstandings in what was happening. This often times meant words and phrases needed to be explained or rephrased to ensure understanding because language and word choice can be important when speaking with culturally dissimilar others who may use different words or may have different meanings associated with words or phrases.

"I'm not perfect in English, he's not perfect in English but I had to teach him all the normal words like day-to-day life feelings kind of words. He was really good in business English so we just kind of had this way to let it out and then explain it." (participant #1)

"I miss sometimes, like critical words or some proper words to describe the situation."
(participant #2)

“In the beginning I think it was a bit difficult because English is our second or third language and it was a bachelor’s degree and I was on my second year so my English was quite poor at that time.” (participant #10)

Partners also highlighted how being clear was important. This seemed to mean using vocabulary both partners knew and understood and asking for clarity if needed.

“We can communicate but sometimes we just have to be really clear about what we mean. Sometimes there are words that I just don’t know what they are in English. And sometimes I need to ask him to explain words to me.” (participant#15)

“Sometimes when you are expressing [sexual] things, even the vocabulary may be difficult to get those things out or whatever. I think that may put an extra strain on her if we are in conflict or something.” (participant #14)

Overall, partners adjusted their vocabulary when they needed to in order to converge towards their partner and attempt to clarify situations. The goal of adjusting vocabulary was to ensure mutual understanding and to demonstrate equality in speaking English together in the relationship. By accommodating the word choices to fit what each partner could understand, partners felt more equal in their intercultural relationship.

The three themes highlighted here are the most prevalent themes throughout this data. Open communication was the most popular theme with the subthemes of comfortability, understanding, intimacy, and respect being popular topics. When couples felt as though their relationship could utilize open communication, the subthemes appeared to be prominent in their relationship which led to better communication and sexual satisfaction. When couples were asked how satisfied they were with the amounts of sexual communication they were had, most all answers were “satisfied” or “very satisfied”. Those same partners giving those answers also

stated they felt sexually satisfied in their relationship; many partners attributed their sexual satisfaction and their relational satisfaction to the amounts of open communication and sexual communication apparent in the relationship. Of the few partners who said their relationship could use more sexual communication, these partners still indicated they were satisfied sexually but if their sexual communication increased their sexual satisfaction would likely increase as well. The second most prominent theme was cultural differences with the subthemes of upbringing, stereotypes, and religion. Cultural differences attributed to how couples saw themselves and their partner. Upbringing was seen as playing a large role in how a partner acted, felt, and valued things in their adult life. Stereotypes were mentioned and highlighted how partners perceived themselves or their partner in light of cultural myths. Most partners believed stereotypes to be visible but not necessarily apply to their partner or themselves. Religion also played a role in how partners viewed their relationship and the expectations they had. Some partners felt their religious upbringing held them back in certain aspects of communication, especially on topics of sexual communication. In these situations, these partners needed to accommodate to their partner to more openly discuss sex and other sensitive subjects. Religion also played a role as a stereotype which was usually rid of after getting to know the individual. The final theme of speaking English was also important to this data. The subthemes of equality and adjusting vocabulary were the two most popular components of speaking English as an intercultural couple. Because most all of the participants did not speak English as their native language it was important that partners worked together to feel equal in their communication together. This meant sharing feelings and creating comfortable conversations with one another. Another way of doing this was by adjusting vocabulary to accommodate a partner. To ensure understanding and ease of communication, vocabulary was often adjusted to suit the conversations needs. The three

themes of open communication, cultural differences, and speaking English are the main components which played a role in how intercultural couples discussed sex together. These three themes are used to highlight how intercultural couples are able to navigate the topic of sex and discuss it openly in their relationships.

Minor Themes

Along with the three major themes, there were also two minor themes which appeared in the transcripts. Because these two minor themes were not brought up often they are not considered to be major themes, but they are still important although they were only apparent for a few couples. The two minor themes prevalent in this research were jokes and scheduling. Jokes were utilized by few couples when discussing sex as a way of easing comfortability about the topic. Unlike jokes about stereotypes, which was mentioned under the theme of cultural differences, jokes in this manner refers to joking while talking about sex because it is more comfortable than seriously talking about sex. Three participants said they utilized jokes to start a sexual conversation or ease tension in a sexual conversation.

“In joke form I feel completely comfortable. Sometimes I think that I do that a bit too much.” (Participant #5)

“Even in more serious conversations about sex, we are joking about it all the time.”
(Participant #3)

These results could suggest more open communication is needed to ensure the feeling of comfortability in the relationship; this could also signal the partners who mentioned utilizing jokes are not yet fully comfortable with their sexual communication and need to talk more with their partner to feel more secure. On the other hand, this could also signal that a partner is comfortable when discussing sex but prefers using jokes to lighten the mood. Partners who came

from cultures where sex was not openly discussed typically needed more time to open up to the idea of discussing sex with a romantic partner, which could be why jokes were used.

The second minor theme was scheduling. Scheduling was most often mentioned by participants who had children, and referred to needing to discuss planning sexual activities around certain people or times. Scheduling sex was thought of as a hassle although necessary for couples who had busy schedules and still wanted an active sex life in their relationship. Some participants found the idea of scheduling to be odd because their culture did not discuss the act of planning sex like an activity or chore. Of the four participants who mentioned scheduling sexual activities, it was often thought of as necessary but tiresome.

“It is often very difficult when the baby is awake and you really cannot do anything. If we don’t plan [sex] and talk about it, it turns out that it is never a good time to have sex.”

(Participant #9)

“[Sex] feels so scheduled sometimes. He lives with his grandparents and his brother and his brother’s wife, so it’s not like we can just start having sex in the middle of the day when we want to. There is pressure, like, ‘now we have this two-hour time and we need to have sex’.” (Participant #3)

Scheduling sex was something these participants had to do in order to find a good time to have sex while dealing with other commitments or people. Like with the joke factor, scheduling sex was difficult for some partners who came from a culture where sex was not openly discussed.

The practice of discussing sex over time typically helped culturally dissimilar partners to open up and be more engaged and ready to discuss sex in future conversations.

Discussion

The results from this data are quite unique as they combine the topic of sexual communication with the subject of intercultural couples. On two separate levels, the data from this research aligns with previous research about intercultural couples and about sexual communication. When looking at this data through the CAT scope, it confirms and extends what is already known on the subject in that participants converged to seem more similar and show liking for one another. The intentionally open research question produced data in line with previous research about sexual communication and intercultural couples, although this study was unique in combining the two areas.

Open communication subthemes

This research found open communication to be the most important factor in satisfactory relationships. Previous studies have highlighted communication as the key to relationship satisfaction (Byers & Demmons, 1999) and sexual communication as the key to sexual satisfaction (Byers, 2005). Intercultural couples need open communication to clarify their individual beliefs, cultural backgrounds/practices, and ways of thinking. Participants in this study found their open communication led to understanding of one another, comfortability in the relationship, intimacy of physical and emotional nature, and respect for one another; all of the previously mentioned subthemes are important for intercultural couples because through open communication about one another a deeper understanding could come about which resulted in stronger/more feelings of closeness. The previous factors were benefits the couples took away from self-disclosing and openly communicating with each other. Partners found themselves converging towards one another and attempting to create a comfortable atmosphere to build the relationship on solid ground. In accommodating to one another, the partners successfully regulated their interpersonal relationships, which is what the CAT aims to demonstrate (Toma,

2014). Many participants themselves declared open communication as the most important factor in their relationship and said communication was the key to a successful relationship. In particular, these intercultural couples needed open communication to help discover the reason behind why their partner acted/thought the way they did. The same principles were given to sexual communication as couples believed talking about sex led to a better understanding of what each partner wanted and more feelings of closeness. The previous statements have been reiterated in numerous studies where communication has been found to be at the core of a satisfactory relationship, and sexual communication at the core of a satisfactory sexual relationship (Byers & Demmons, 1999; Reiter & Gee, 2008; Theiss, 2011; Mark & Jozkowski, 2013; Hall, 2016). In general, open communication for intercultural couples was seen as the best way of navigating through their differences and similarities together. Many couples grew up in different atmospheres and cultures, and the only way to determine what each partner was thinking and feeling was by discussing topics out in the open.

Discussion of comfortability

Comfortability in the relationship was a common subtheme in this research. Participants put emphasis on the importance of feeling comfortable together which meant open communication could take place. The concepts of feeling comfortable and engaging in open communication go hand-in-hand because the two must develop together. As comfortability increased so did open communication and vice versa. When participants felt comfortable in their relationship topics like sex did not seem to be awkward or out of place. Many couples discussed their sexual communication as something that would come up out of the blue; sex was not something which had to be planned to be discussed but was rather a subject that came up sporadically in daily

conversation, similar to asking “what would you like for breakfast?” This means there was ease in discussing sex over time because partners felt comfortable with one another.

Sex did not always demonstrate to be a topic all participants were comfortable discussing in the beginning of their relationship. Some partners who came from a culture where sex was not openly discussed had to work through their shyness to accommodate to their partner’s want for sexual communication. Participants who lacked in sexual experience may have also felt shy in discussing sex simply because a lack of experience with sexual behavior could hinder a partner’s ability to discuss sexual desires (Parker & Ivanov, 2012). Some partners likely did not know what they wanted because they had no experience in discussing sex before. When partners went into their relationship with little to no previous sexual knowledge it was up to the other partner to fill in the gaps. The cultural gaps in discussing sex with a partner had to be negotiated to create a comfortable environment for both partners.

Once a comfortable environment was built, it seemed as though all topics could be laid on the table for discussion. The feeling of comfortability lead to high amounts of open communication where partners felt as though they could share whatever they liked without being judged. When partners felt comfortable with one another it often also meant there was understanding of one another on a personal level.

Discussion of understanding

The topic of understanding one another was highly prevalent in this data. Couples engaged in open communication with one another to create a better understanding of who the other person was, something which was of special importance for intercultural partners where uncertainty of a different other was quite high in the beginning. Partners who felt understood also felt more able to openly communicate because they knew their partner would respect and value their opinion.

For intercultural couples, when differences were apparent, understanding was used to demonstrate the accommodativeness of the other. Intercultural couples cannot agree on all topics, especially sexual topics, but by showing understanding through listening and softening of the voice partners felt more able to openly communicate. This was especially true for couples where one partner was not as comfortable or familiar with talking about sex. When a partner mentioned they were brought up in a conservative culture or they had no experience in discussing sex openly, the other partner accommodated by easing into the topic and attempting to make it a more comfortable situation knowing their partner was shy on this subject. This created comfortability which led to the shy partner becoming more open in future conversations about sexual topics.

Some participants highlighted coming from a conservative culture where sex was not openly discussed and was thought of as a taboo subject. Others expressed their concerns of how family members would feel if word got out about their sexual actions. This is in line with previous research documenting how in some cultures sex is not only an individual/couple act, but also a family/society act (Tang et al., 2013). Partners who grew up not discussing sex often accommodated by listening to their partner's views and eventually talking about sex more often, knowing it was something their partner desired. Not always did every participant want to discuss sex as often as their partner but there was a give-and-take about how much sexual communication would occur in the relationship. Similar to other research, participants who were shy to discuss sex in the beginning moved past those shy tendencies with practice and were able to become more open after previous sexual discussions (Cleary et al., 2002). Over time, participants had an understanding of who their culturally dissimilar partner was and what they wanted meaning sometimes sexual communication was not necessary.

For couples who had been together long periods of time (3+ years), sexual communication seemed to dwindle down over the years. In the beginning of the relationship, many couples discussed sex quite often but the amount lowered as they felt they understood one another's likes and dislikes. This is consistent with previous research about sexual communication over time (Byers & Demmons, 1999). Even for an intercultural couple where more cultural differences may be apparent, especially on sexual topics, each partner comes to understand one another sexually throughout the course of a relationship meaning less sexual communication may be needed. Overall, understanding of a partner's wants were beneficial to the couples in this research as it led to an overall understanding of the relationship in general, which led to higher levels of intimacy.

Discussion of intimacy

Participants in this study put an emphasis on physical and emotional intimacy within their relationship. Being intimate with one another was a part of open communication which brought the couple closer together. Many couples felt as though their open communication allowed for intimacy to take place because it created a comfortable environment where both partners felt understood by one another. The feeling of intimacy may be especially important for intercultural couples because it means there is a shared meaning of the value of the relationship. Intercultural couples often times have differences in beliefs, values, and norms (Bustamante et al., 2011) and thus, intimacy means couples feel connected to their partner regardless of their differences. Intercultural couples achieved intimacy after comfortability and a sense or understanding of one another's culture was secured.

Physical intimacy was one topic from which sexual communication was thought to benefit. Discussing sexual desires led to feelings of emotional intimacy which often led to the act

of intimacy. This was important for intercultural partners because desired sexual acts can vary from culture to culture and, more importantly, individual to individual. Participants noted when sex was discussed more often, sex happened more often. This effect happened in the opposite way as well; when sex was not discussed as often, sex was not had as often. This finding highlights that sexual communication leads to more sexual activities. Past research has emphasized high sexual communication as leading to high sexual satisfaction (MacNeil & Byers, 2005) which may be because sexual communication leads to sexual activity in a relationship. Thinking about a pleasant topic often leads to the desire to partake in said topic which could be why sexual communication often led to sexual activity.

Some participants felt as though their sexual communication gave the relationship more depth which led to stronger feelings of intimacy. Feeling intimate with a partner usually meant the subthemes of comfortability and understanding were also apparent in the relationship. Overall, the feeling of intimacy was often accompanied by the feeling of overall relationship satisfaction. Intimacy with a partner would not have been as likely if the relationship lacked in respect during open communication.

Discussion of respect

Respect was also a common theme in this data as couples felt as though when their partners respected them and their opinions there was more opportunity to share information and engage in open communication. Participants felt freer to engage in conversations about whatever they desired when they knew their partner would not judge them and would respect their conversations together. It is highly important for intercultural couples to feel respected because their difference in backgrounds can lead to differences in opinions; when a partner knows their opinion is respected it is easier for them to openly discuss all topics, including sexual matters.

Couples were able to maintain their personal identity and their couple identity through respecting one another's core values and not judging one another. Since culture can affect emotional expression, comfortability of topics, and values (Silva et al., 2012), it is important for intercultural couples to feel respected when sharing their opinion with one another.

When discussing sex, respect was an important topic. Partners who felt respected felt as though they could say whatever came to their mind and they knew their partner would not judge or laugh at them. The previous point is especially true for intercultural partners who grew up in different environments where sex was discussed and taught differently; feeling respected meant more open communication could occur. Participants were better able to discuss their sexual likes and desires knowing their opinions were valued and respected. Having respect in the relationship meant open communication could flow more easily with no doubt or uncertainty in one another. Respect can be seen as something which intercultural couples accommodate to; with varying backgrounds and traditions, if one partner knows their culture is respected a similar effect will likely be placed on their partners' culture.

Participants felt respected when their partner could understand their wants and desires, determine the sexual relationship's wellbeing, and not feel violated by their partner. The previous feelings align with previous research on the importance of comfortability in discussing sexual topics (Faulkner & Lannutti, 2010). In intercultural relationships, engaging in open communication to gain respect is one of the most important factors to maintaining a happy and successful relationship.

Open communication proved to be an important factor to intercultural couples, especially when discussing sex. Conversations about likes, dislikes, feelings, and desires all helped for the couples to feel more comfortable with one another. There was an emphasis on comfortability

which went hand-in-hand with open communication. As partners felt understood, they also felt as though they could share anything with their partner and no topic was off limits. Sexual communication especially developed when intercultural partners felt emotionally and physically intimate with their partner. The feeling of intimacy likely linked to respect as couples felt they were not being judged by their partner. The overriding theme of open communication is important for intercultural couples as it aids in figuring out and navigating through cultural differences together.

Cultural differences subthemes

Cultural differences played a role in how the participants in this research viewed themselves and their partner. All couples in this data set had partners who came from different countries (one Finnish partner, one partner from another country). Three main subthemes of upbringing, stereotypes, and religion were the most prevalent findings from how intercultural couples viewed themselves and one another. Higher levels of cultural support have been linked to lower levels of relationship distress (Reiter & Gee, 2008) and thus, intercultural couples must support one another's cultures in order for their relationship to thrive. The couples in this research were able to identify their main cultural differences and work together to find a common ground. The couples usually accommodated towards the partner who wished to discuss sex more openly than to the partner who was less vocal on the subject. Overall, cultural differences played a large role, but did not seem to negatively affect these participants as many of the participants highlighted feeling culturally similar to their partner over time. This is a very likely occurrence as research shows over time intercultural couples lose a bit of their old culture and gain a bit of their partner's new culture to create a shared culture together (Bustamante et al., 2011). In the beginning of a relationship cultural differences may be something partners had to work through

but after getting to know one another the differences started to seem smaller and the similarities larger.

Discussion of cultural upbringing

A difference in upbringing was one of the main cultural differences noted by participants in this study. Many participants noted that family likely influenced the way an individual developed. For this research, that meant family influenced how open to discussing sexual matters a partner was. For couples who came from more conservative families where sex was not openly discussed, their sexual communication was not as open, at least in the beginning, as those partners who grew up in an atmosphere where family could openly discuss sex with one another. One aspect of this subtheme was that for many Finnish partners sex education was introduced when they were children and it displayed sex and sexual health as natural topics. Not all partners from outside of Finland had sex so openly discussed with them which meant different upbringings led to different levels of comfort with sexual topics.

Some partners noted they felt their upbringing poorly prepared them to have sexual conversations because it was something they never had to do before. Partners who did not have family and friends discuss sex with them while growing up often felt a bit uncomfortable with the topic at first as it was new and seemed like something that did not need to be discussed. This finding is in line with previous research based on adolescent and parent discussion of sex and the discomfort of the topic later in life (Cleary et al., 2002). Because all partners varied in their upbringing from culture to culture, this meant some sort of accommodation was necessary in order to reach a medium ground of comfortability in discussing sex. All participants who at first were uncomfortable discussing sex had to accommodate to their more open partner to become involved in sexual discussions. Once a baseline comfortability was established, many

participants remembered back to their upbringing and mentioned how it was not as liberating as their current stand with sexual communication. Previous research has highlighted practice in sexual communication leads to easier sexual discussions with partners in the future (Cleary et al., 2002). Partners whose cultural upbringing involved very little sexual discussions seemed to struggle more than partners who were exposed to more sexual discussions in their upbringing.

Upbringing in different countries often led to differences in communication styles, although not always. Sex and sexuality were sometimes a topic which families and friends neglected to talk about, which previous research has highlighted (West, 1999). Some nations appeared to have similar views on sex or sexual communication as Finland which typically made sexual conversations easier to have since both partners had fairly equal comfortability styles. Another aspect of cultural differences which affected couples in this research was the prevalence of stereotypes in the relationship.

Discussion of stereotypes

Cultural stereotypes in this data's intercultural relationships were most prominent in the beginning of the relationship when partners were still getting to know one another. A reason for this could be that before partners fully got to know each other, the only ideas they may have about another country and the people from that country may exist in the form of stereotypes. Although most couples in this research no longer had major issues with stereotypes or insecurities in who their partner was, cultural stereotypes still were mentioned as playing a role in how partner's viewed themselves and their partner.

Most couples in this research were able to realize cultural stereotypes were not always true and did not need to be applied to all persons from a given country. One example of this is the Finnish silence stereotype. Many couples joked about their partner not being a typical Finn

and some of the Finnish partners joked about their own communication habits with the outline of the joke relating to following Finnish cultural rules. These are examples of how there is a self-replicating nature attached to the silent Finn myth, which makes it difficult to rid of (Olbertz-Siitonen & Siitonen, 2015). Stereotypes were also placed onto other cultures in this study as well. Religious and national stereotypes were used to describe why a partner acted or communicated the way they did, although like with the Finnish silence myth, most often stereotypes were mentioned in the form of a joke.

Sometimes partners attributed their communication style as fitting their country's stereotype and not as heavily weighted on their upbringing. Some partners believed their country stereotype fit them, but of course that is bound to happen with such large populations and different people living in said population. A subtheme that went along with stereotypes was religion as religious stereotypes played a role in how partners were seen at times.

Discussion of religion

Religion played a role in how some participants viewed their partner and what they expected from them. In general, religion was not a subtheme brought up overly often, but when it was mentioned it carried a lot of weight. Religious background was something that was mentioned as an uncertainty which could relate to how partners felt in a relationship and what their core values were. All participants who discussed religion went on to say their views of religion or their partner's perceived religion changed after engaging in open communication with one another. Many of the religious views and ideas which were brought up were uncertainties in the relationship which led to a need for more communication. Sometimes religion appeared as something which held back sexual interaction and/or sexual communication.

Partners who expressed a religious upbringing often said it correlated with either not talking about sex or discussing sex as something which was a sin. A change in communication style or belief needed to occur for these partners in order to discuss sex openly with their romantic partner. Partners who accommodated to discussing sex more openly were able to find benefits in losing the sexually repressed side of their communication in order to gain more sexual liberation. Of course, sexual liberation is not something all individuals strive for but for in this data set, participants enjoyed being able to freely discuss their sexual wants and desires with their partner. Although religion played a small role in some relationships, it was as easy hurdle to jump over as many of the participants now described themselves as not religions or not very religious.

Cultural differences were apparent for many of these intercultural couples as their different upbringings, cultural stereotypes, and religious differences led to differences in communication styles and perceptions of one another. Through accommodating one another and being involved in open communication, intercultural couples in this research were able to meet on middle-ground to discuss their core values and beliefs as well as intimate subjects such as sex. Without discussing cultural differences it would be highly unlikely for an intercultural relationship to survive because both partners would not understand the reasons behind a partner's actions. Previous research has highlighted the importance of discussing cultural differences as it brings about mutual understanding in a relationship (Reiter & Gee, 2008). Without mutual understanding and respect in a relationship, topics like sex would be more difficult to discuss and could be avoided in general. In intercultural relationships, respect and understanding are needed, especially when partners' mother tongues are not being spoken.

Speaking English subthemes

The final major theme of this research highlighted speaking English in intercultural relationships. Not all intercultural relationships utilize English as the mode of communication, but all of the participants in this study met and continued to speak in English through the course of their relationship. English is one of the most popular languages in the world as many study, work, and travel programs are held in English. In this research, all couples had knowledge of the English language before meeting one another and so all partners knew at least enough English to engage in a romantic relationship. Some partners may have changed over time though, as different languages sometimes bring out different personalities. Speaking different languages may make individuals feel as though their self changes with the language, creating different worlds in different languages (Ożańska-Ponikwia, 2012). In this research, participants highlighted how speaking in a mother tongue was quite unique to speaking English, although almost none of the couples believed they wanted to or would ever use their mother tongue to communicate as a couple. For these couples where all partners other than one spoke English as a second or third language, English was used in whatever way they wanted to create and build a shared meaning together.

At times, language may seem like a boundary although in this study all participants appeared to like speaking English together with the most common reason being simply that they met and began their relationship in English. While speaking English with one another, partners had to be willing and able to accommodate to ensure equality and mutual understanding of vocabulary could take place. Continually accommodating speech in an intercultural relationship matches with previous research which highlights speakers must continually modify and fine-tune their language and speaking to effectively communicate with others (Seidlhofer, 2009). The main reason partners accommodated was to create a sense of equality in their relationship and the

main way partners accommodated their language was by adjusting their vocabulary. Partners had to accommodate to one another to show a sense of likeness and equality as a way of creating an equal playing field.

Discussion of equality

One of the main reasons for accommodating in speaking English was to create a sense of equality in the relationship. It was important for these intercultural couples to feel equal in their relationship because this allowed for freedom of opinion without judgement to take place. More open communication could occur when partners understood the level of English each partner had and how much each individual needed to accommodate their speech to be best understood.

Accommodating language to ensure equality is a unique process of intercultural couples which helps to ensure the relationship continues on a successful path. Participants in this study wanted to demonstrate similarity and one way of doing so was by having an equality in the level of English that was spoken. Some participants were so used to speaking English, speaking in their mother tongue became more difficult. After practicing and using English in daily life the language seemed to come more naturally than the mother tongue. Since different personalities can be displayed in different languages, the values and culture associated with one language could be thought to change more easily when speaking another language. In this sense, intercultural couples must understand that language and cultural are closely related and the way intercultural couples speak together helps to form part of their new culture together.

Many participants had little to no problem accommodating to discussing sex in English, even if it was something not openly discussed in their mother tongue. Children develop cultural and social values through their mother tongue which is then later carried into their adult life (Yazici, Ilter, & Glover, 2010), but if the mother tongue is not being spoken it could be assumed

that values and culture can more easily change based on language. Thus, talking about sex may have been easier for partners to discuss in English if it was a taboo subject in the mother tongue. Equality was not the only way partners accommodated while speaking English as many partners adjusted their vocabulary as well.

Discussion of adjusting vocabulary

Some partners lacked certain English vocabulary, especially when it came to sexual matters which created a need for partners to adjust their words to more simple and clear vocabulary. Partners often accommodated their words or phrases to be ones they knew their partner would understand. When discussing personal topics like sex, it was important for each partner to be understood and to understand the other. Even when a partner did not understand, the couple's felt comfortable enough to ask for clarification or new word choices to enhance understanding. All couples felt comfortable discussing sex with their partner likely because their partners understood and respected them and could likely accommodate to their English language needs. Intercultural couples also could build their new culture together while speaking English and choosing to include the topic of sex meant the relationship could flourish in that area.

Speaking English did not always appear as a hardship in the relationship, even though accommodation needed to happen on an almost constant basis; partners always had to be aware of their own English language skills and those of their partner. In an intercultural relationship it is important to understand the comfortability of speaking the relationship's language as it determines the breadth and depth of topics covered. When partners in this research felt comfortable with one another and understood the level of English of the other partner, it was easier to determine what could be talked about in the relationship. Sometimes partners had to

stick to simple conversations to ensure understanding but as language skills developed more in-depth conversations could happen and more diverse topics could emerge.

Overall, speaking English was a theme several participants mentioned as it dealt with how accommodating each partner was and how comfortable each partner could feel in discussing sex together. Sexual communication was one topic where new vocabulary had to be learned to increase mutual understanding in conversations. The previous statement is something which is especially apparent for intercultural couples where the relationship's language is one or both of the partner's second or third languages; learning sexual vocabulary is something which intercultural couples must actively seek knowledge because it was likely not a taught or practiced skill before. Partners in this research strived for equality in their conversations as it led to an overall feeling of comfort, especially when discussing sex. The more comfortable partners felt in speaking English, the more sexual communication could occur. Speaking English together did not prove to be a barrier in any of these intercultural relationships although it did increase the need for accommodation while speaking.

Discussion conclusion

In general, intercultural couples appear to discuss sex in a similar manner to intracultural couples, although with added difficulties. Open communication is thought of as necessary to keep a healthy relationship functioning and give satisfaction to both partners. One way open communication aids intercultural partners is by allowing for customs, beliefs, values, and traditions to be shared and understood by both partners. Through further understanding one another couples are able to feel more comfortable, intimate, and respected in their relationship. Although cultural differences are apparent among intercultural couples, through open communication and accommodation to one another, couples are able to negotiate their values and

share a culture together. Even while speaking a language which is not both partners' mother tongue, couples can still engage in meaningful conversations about sexual topics. Speaking English together in a relationship became natural to most couples as they met and developed their relationship in English. Overall, intercultural couples accommodated to one another to discuss their sexual likes which helped to increase sexual satisfaction in the relationship in general. Couples who openly communicated and accommodated to one another on sexual topics were very sexually satisfied. Couples who had more sexual communication also reported high sexual satisfaction which aligns with previous research on sexual communication leading to sexual satisfaction (MacNeil & Byers, 2005). Intercultural couples demonstrated to discuss sex in whatever way each couple felt comfortable; as long as both partners felt respected and understood, both partners were willing to accommodate to one another and create their own shared meaning through sexual communication.

Conclusion

This research aimed to answer the research question of how intercultural couples discuss sex with the implication of this question being that intercultural and intracultural couples discuss sex differently. The question was answered in depth through the semi-structured interviews and surveys filled out by 18 participants. The current research adds to previous research on sexual communication, intercultural couples, and Communication Accommodation Theory. This research had findings in line with many previous studies and also found new information regarding sexual communication among intercultural partners. Specifically, this research provided information on the obstacles intercultural couples may face when discussing sex and how those obstacles are figured out through accommodation. Participant's responses provided data which revolved around three main themes-- open communication, cultural differences, and

speaking English—which led to results in how intercultural couples accommodate when discussing sexual communication. Overall, intercultural couples discuss sex quite similarly to intracultural couples but there are added factors which intercultural couples must take into account when having these conversations, which is how the two differ. Like much other research suggests, open communication was the most important factor to creating a satisfactory relationship (Byers, 2005). As couples engaged in open communication there were feelings of comfortability, understanding, intimacy, and respect which aided in making the overall relationship stronger and more satisfactory. This research utilized intercultural couples where the constant variable was having one partner from Finland. This factor created valuable data in how participants discussed their communication, especially sexual communication, when cultural differences were apparent. Finland is a country stereotyped as being silent although sexually liberated; this interesting mix provided data which demonstrated how couples perceived one another and each other's cultures through stereotypes. Many couples mentioned their own or their partner's upbringing, national stereotypes, and religion as being main factors in what contributed to cultural differences in their relationship. Cultural differences were popular topics among intercultural couples as values, beliefs, and traditions needed to be openly discussed and understood for the relationship to thrive. This matches with previous research suggesting intercultural couples need to show cultural support to one another to create an open and welcoming atmosphere (Silva et al., 2012). Another unique aspect for intercultural couples was speaking English together; all couples in this research had to accommodate their speech to fit what their partner could understand meaning English was the main mode of communication. Language closely relates to culture as often times culture is learned through and embedded in language. Intercultural couples in this research needed to understand one another on a personal

level when discussing sex because culture can be hidden in all ideas and/or conversations. Ideas perceived as good in one culture may be bad in another therefore, when speaking English is it important to understand culture and language to avoid misunderstandings (Mahmoud, 2015). In this research, couples needed to engage in open communication to understand cultural differences to ensure meanings were understood while speaking English together.

The most important findings from this research evolved in the three major themes and nine subthemes present in the data. Having open communication was the most popular theme as all participants believed open communication allowed for more communication and higher relational satisfaction in the long run. This is consistent with previous research highlighting communication as the key to relationship satisfaction (Byers, 2005). This finding is significant because it highlights the subthemes present within the theme. Open communication led to the feeling of comfortability which made partners more able to talk to one another. Understanding each other also created more open communication as it led to openly discussing topics while knowing their partner would not judge them. This brought about feelings of intimacy, emotional and physical, which couples believed made them feel closer and more inclined to share information with one another. Finally, feeling respected while communicating was another big component of what caused sexual communication because when couples felt respected they felt more open to discussing more sensitive or private topics.

Examining cultural differences was also an important topic as it helped to describe the differences couples felt in their relationship, why those differences were perceived the way they were, and how partners accommodated towards one another. Upbringing was thought of as the most important cultural factor in how values and opinions were formed. Upbringing also effected the way partners interpreted the amount of sexual communication each partner wanted and was

comfortable with in a relationship. Partners whose families, friends, and culture in general did not discuss sex often were usually more reserved when discussing sex in the beginning of their relationship. This finding aligns with previous research on cultural effects from family and society in sexual upbringing (West, 1999; Cleary et al., 2002; Kellner, 2009). In cases where couples had one partner who was not as comfortable as the other in discussing sex, the more comfortable partner eased into sexual discussions to make the other feel more comfortable. In this research, the less comfortable partner always ended up accommodating to their more open partner and discussed sex openly with their partner, although in some situations it took time to open up in the beginning.

An interesting finding of this research was that all couples spoke English together, and most preferred English in their relationship to their mother tongue. For this research intercultural couples were defined as those who came from different countries. Because of this, all couples had met while at least one partner was studying, working, or traveling abroad. English was the mode of communication likely because it is seen as the world's lingua franca (Mahmoud, 2015). Couples had to accommodate their communication to ensure that each partner felt equal in the relationship and that vocabulary was understandable for each partner. Many couples did not want to change their relationship communication to that of their mother tongue because they believed they had developed and changed their speaking to each other so well there was no need for a change in language to make the relationship better. This finding is consistent with previous research on English as a second language as speakers accommodate to one another by creating an established vocabulary and language together (Seidlhofer, 2009).

This research is beneficial to a wide audience. Because there are several factors at play in this study, many fields may utilize this research in some manner. Research on sexual

communication can benefit from this study as the findings support previous research on sexual communication. Like previous research suggests, sexual communication leads to sexual satisfaction because communication about likes and dislikes leads to more partner knowledge and understanding (MacNeil & Byers, 2005). This research adds to previous studies which highlight sexual communication as a key component in sexual satisfaction. Another area where this research could be used is in examining intercultural couples. This research provided data on how intercultural couples discussed sex together and the subthemes brought interesting information into light. Couples needed to discuss their upbringings, stereotypes, and religious ideas for better understanding of one another to take place. Previous research has highlighted the importance of negotiating values and discussing cultural differences to ensure mutual understanding and relationship success (Silva et al., 2012). This research adds to previous research and also brings about the concept of speaking English instead of a mother tongue together. This study also demonstrates how the Communication Accommodation Theory is utilized in a romantic relationship. Couples always wanted to converge towards one another on the topic of sexual communication because it led to feelings of comfortability, understanding, and closeness. Previous research involving the CAT highlights that individuals converge for just those reasons: feelings of comfortability and showing similarity (Hehl & McDonald, 2014). The motivation for partners to converge was to create more comfortability in the relationship and please one another, which is what the CAT emphasizes as reasons for accommodation.

This research was unique in many ways, one of which was bringing the topic of sexual communication and intercultural couples together. Previous research has not been well-developed on the specific communication in which intercultural couples engage while discussing sex. This is a new area of research and this study helps to open the door for future studies by

giving a base of information on the way intercultural couples discuss sex. Because intercultural couples face distinct differences from intracultural couples, it should be assumed that conversations about sex are also different. The topic of sex is an intimate subject and this research demonstrated that added factors, such as cultural differences and speaking English, play a role in how couples discuss sex together. The use of Communication Accommodation Theory was quite fitting for this research as many couples had to accommodate in their communication to feel understood, comfortable, and respected together.

There were many positive aspects of this research. One aspect is the variation in age. There was a 21 year difference between the youngest and oldest participants in this data. Many times, research tends to focus around college campuses which results in a narrow age range of participants. This research was able to reach outside of the college campus and interview participants with various ages. Although more age range could have been achieved for more diversity in the data, this was a good starting place. Another good aspect of this research was the fact it took place through interviews. Many studies on sexual communication take place through surveys or in an impersonal form. The fact that face-to-face interviews occurred allowed for in-depth conversations and better understanding of how intercultural couples discussed sex. This research also answered the call of previous research suggesting interviewing couples together (Hess & Coffelt, 2012). In much previous research on sexual communication, one partner member was interviewed or surveyed which left out valuable information from the other partner. This research interviewed both members of a couple which allowed for a better understanding of each relationship. An additional benefit of this research is that it utilized participants from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Finland was the constant culture but outside of Finland 8 other nations were represented in this data which allowed for diversity in the results. The final benefit

of this research was the gender balance; 9 women and 9 men provided data for this research creating an equal mix for the genders. This allowed for the research to consider both men and women in the data provided.

Although this research contained many positive aspects, there were some limitations as well. First, the research was conducted in English which, by default, meant that both partners had to speak English to partake in the interviews and the survey. Although this was a necessity for participating in the study, participants freely brought up speaking English in their relationship when they found it to be a topic of relevance during the interviews. Consequently, this research left out participants where individuals could not speak English. For this reason, the data may be lacking information from couples who speak languages other than English together. Intercultural partners where the couple speaks one or both of the partners' mother tongue may have different experiences in their relationship, something which this research could not expand upon. Another limitation is that participants who volunteered to take part in this research could be thought to already feel comfortable discussing sex. Sexual communication is not something all couples want to discuss, especially with an outsider in the relationship. This study realizes that participants were likely open to discussing sex and felt sexually liberated in general because they willingly volunteered to take part in the research. This research leaves out individuals who may not feel as comfortable openly discussing sex. Individuals who are not as comfortable discussing sex openly with others, and possibly in their relationship as well, were left out of this research by not volunteering to be interviewed, meaning the results leaned towards positive, open communication between couples who were already openly communicate with one another. Even with these few limitations, this study still adds to the quality research already available.

This study gives a good baseline knowledge of sexual communication among intercultural couples with which future researchers can continue. This study found intercultural couples utilize open communication, with the main components of that communication being comfortability, understanding, intimacy, and respect, to discuss their sexual lives together. It was important that couples felt this way because at times their cultural differences played a role in how communication was viewed. Cultural differences, including upbringing, stereotypes, and religion, played a role in how couples communicated, in general, and how couples communicated about sex. Future research could dig deeper into how cultural differences affect partners' perceptions of one another. Examining newly formed intercultural relationships compared with older intercultural relationships could be one way of identifying how strongly cultural differences affect partners' perceptions. This could be done through a qualitative or quantitative data collection process. Interviews in this data did give participants the opportunity to speak freely about whatever came to their mind, which is one benefit of the qualitative approach is determining how sex is discussed. Future research should also consider examining how not speaking the mother tongue affects intercultural relationships. More information on how partners accommodate their language to one another is needed for relationships where English, or any other language which is not the mother tongue, is spoken. A final suggestion for future research would be to utilize interviews with both partners together. This study is one of few which interviewed both members in a couple. By interviewing both partners in a couple both partners were able to give their version of their communication together which allowed for richer data. Since this study was the first of its kind, combining intercultural couples and sexual communication, more research in this specific subject could be done. There is now a broad

knowledge of how intercultural couples go about discussing sex but more research could add to this topic to give it more depth and a higher level of understanding.

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Interview Questions

1. How long have you been together with your partner?
2. How did you two meet?
3. How would you describe your communication with each other (open to topics/reserved)?
4. Do you feel comfortable discussing sexual topics with your partner?
5. Who usually brings up sexual topics or issues in your relationship?
6. How often do you talk about your sexual wants and desires with your partner?
7. How satisfied do you feel with your sexual relationship?
8. When talking about sex, does one partner usually lead the conversation?
9. Do you ever disagree on sexual topics? If so, how do you compromise or come to a conclusion?
10. Do you think you and your partner are equally comfortable discussing sexual desires?
11. Does one of you have to adjust your communication to make the other partner feel more comfortable?
12. When you discuss sexual topics, do you think both of your opinions are considered equally?
13. Do you feel as though one of you is more accommodating when talking about sex?
14. Do you feel as though your opinions and feelings are respected when discussing sex?
15. How do you think your sexual communication affects your relationship?
16. Are you happy with the amounts of sexual communication you have together?
17. Do you have anything else you would like me to know about your relationship?
18. Do you have any questions for me?

Survey Questions

Please answer the following questions together with your partner. **Be as detailed as possible.**
Please return this survey via email within **two days of your interview.** Thank you.

1. Name (male): _____

Name (female): _____

2. How often do you discuss sex together? Are there specific times/places/patterns?

3. Who usually brings up sexual topics/issues in your relationship and how?

4. Is one of you more accommodating when talking about sex? Who and how so?

Informed Consent

I have read the attached document explaining the study and I agree to participate. I acknowledge that my participation in this study is voluntary and I can withdraw at any time.

Printed Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Pseudonym: _____

By signing above, I consent to participate and be interviewed for this study.

Please fill out this brief survey. The information will be used to discuss demographic information in the study:

Age: _____

Sex: _____

Race: _____

Country of origin: _____

of years with your partner: _____

This interview will be recorded using a tape recording device. Your signature below indicates your consent to being tape-recorded.

Signature: _____

If you would like a copy of the results from this study, please provide your email address:

Thank you for your participation,

Baylei Schmit
Master's Degree Student at JYU
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