

PERSPECTIVES ON CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND CONFLICTS BETWEEN  
FINNISH AND ASIAN PARTNERS IN INTERCULTURAL MARRIAGES

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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>In this study, the topic of conflict communication in intercultural marriages, marital satisfaction, and third culture building is examined. Even though intercultural couples are identified to have stronger bonds, a unique sense of identity and reduced ethnocentricity, communication dysfunction, stress, and conflicts are still considered the most negative factors in a romantic relationship. This study aims to bring the topic of conflict communication in intercultural marriages into clear view. It includes three research questions: (1) How do people living in intercultural marriages describe the role of culture(s) in encountering conflicts?, (2) How do intercultural marital couples describe the communication strategies they implement in managing conflicts?, and (3) How do intercultural marital couples describe the role of third cultures (building) for their relationship?. To collect the data for analysis, six (6) participants, making up three (3) couples, were interviewed separately about their conflict communication and reconciliation strategies. The theory of Third Culture Building was utilized to investigate how Third Culture Building influences intercultural romantic relationships and has an impact on reconciling marital conflicts. The findings from this research highlight the role of practical help, open communication, empathy, patience and gratitude in reconciling intercultural couples’ marital conflicts.</p>	
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## 1. Introduction

Since the increase in the migration movement of the world's population, the amount of international marriages between cross-cultural individuals has been increasing (Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005; Frame, 2004). Even though intercultural couples are identified to have stronger bonds, unique sense of identity and reduced ethnocentricity, communication dysfunction, stress, and conflicts are still considered most negative factors in a romantic relationship (Foeman & Nance, 1999; Frame, 2004; Lee, 2006). Surprisingly, the study in an intimate intercultural relationship still remains limited because intercultural marriages are reported to difficult establish and maintain (Cools, 2006; Garcia, 2006).

As ethnic intermarriage may play an important role and force in the process of integration, family ties seem to be one of the most significant motives leading to decision making for settlement and migration in foreign countries. According to Heikkilä and Pikkarainen (2008, p.19), these motives could contribute to 60 - 65 percent of immigration decisions to settle and establish new lives in Finland. Obviously, intercultural marriage could be one of the most common reasons for family settlement (Heikkilä & Pikkarainen, 2008). For that reason, the cases of intercultural families in Finland has become a prominent topic for research (Heikkilä, 2011).

An intercultural couple is the term referring to those, who both did not share the same cultural background(s). Intercultural couples are considered different from monocultural couples, who are sharing the same cultural norms, belief system, and even the same linguistic background. As they, intercultural couples, are not familiar with the other's culture(s), they started learning from each other and their cultures, so that they would communicate better. Even though meeting people from other cultures are becoming the norm rather than the exception, Coole (2011) mentioned in her dissertation that, there have not been enough considerably prominent researches within the field, where the communication of intercultural

relationship is most discussed. Therefore, the context brings attention to the changing aspects of (cross-cultural) communication.

Finding a partner from a destination other than someone's original/ native country is no longer an extraordinary occurrence. Therefore, intercultural marital relationship is none of the unusual key terms. Throughout this study, the main key term is intercultural marriage, marital communication. The term "intercultural marriage" refers to the marital relationship, which involves spouses coming from more than one cultural background and sometimes, even more than one linguistic background(s) (Gonçalves, 2013). In the context of this study, intercultural marital couples were analysed to see how marital conflicts were managed within the intercultural marriages, which strategies were utilized to solve marital conflicts and to which extent the role of culture(s) and third culture building were involved in encountering conflicts. Moreover, the main chosen focus of this study is intercultural *married* couples instead of intercultural *unmarried* couples or intercultural *cohabited* couples. The reason for this selection was that the author would like to investigate, within intimate marriage, how intercultural married couples solve the problems of marital conflicts and cultural differences that often lead to marital dissolution. Therefore, the intercultural couples mentioned in this thesis study is regarded as *married* couples, unless they were specified differently. Also, since intercultural marriage may be more difficult and may require more effort to maintain, it is one of the study's aims to know what has kept the intercultural marriage working without using the divorce as the final dead-end solution.

Furthermore, people may have many reasons for migration. Some migrate to other countries other than their lands because of work or study. Some others meet partners coming from other countries and then decide to leave. Either of these reasons can usually lead to romantic relationships, and then marriages. Therefore, marriages could be regarded as the causes of migration but at the same time, it can be also the consequence of migration



(Heikkilä, 2011). Hence, intercultural marriages help build important bridges connecting cultures together (Lauth Bacas 2002; Kofman & Kraler 2006, 4; Robinson 2007, 493; Skrbiš 2008, 231). The cultural bridge, as it is the connection between two or more cultures, is a metaphor of the third culture. In this study, the main theoretical foundation was supported by Casmir and his third culture building's conception. Third culture building was the paradigm, which is first theorized by Casmir in 1997. The bridge, or the third culture, is the balanced interactive environment, where individuals from more than one culture would need to successfully survive (Casmir, 1997, p. 104). The third culture building, which is normally built by two or more cultures, can be seen as a natural-happening phenomenon, instead of an exceptional force for ultimate integration. Although Kim (2001, 2012) argued that a successful adaptation to a new culture(s) requires complete assimilation, the third culture building lies in itself a more realistic and approachable method of integration.

In this Master's thesis, the focus is to emphasize the intercultural marital relationships and the importance of effective conflict communication in such marriages. Therefore, it is supposed to fulfil the gap in these limited areas of intercultural marital and conflict communication, as well as strengthen the concept and intensify its importance. Despite the difficulties and challenges, cross-cultural marriage offers both a greater and wider combination of diversity, and more options on how life situations could be (Crippen & Brew 2007, p. 112). This research aims at answering the question of cultural influences on intercultural marriages and how intercultural marital conflicts are managed from the perspective of the third cultural building. Therefore, the research questions include the investigation of the role of cultures in encountering conflicts, the communication strategies in managing conflicts and the impact of joint culture on intercultural marriages.

Every day each people encounter many life situations, from easy to difficult ones. Soon with increasing frequency, international communication is no longer considered a

special occasion but a global phenomenon in this temporary world. Therefore, the situation has increased the number of intercultural marriages (Heikkilä, 2011). Although Finland is a small country in Europe, it has been receiving lots of people from other nations for many decades. These people came to Finland for many reasons, either for work, education, family ties or marriages. According to Statistics Finland (2018), it reached in total 76 626 intercultural couples and families in Finland starting from the 1990s until the end of the year 2018. However, intercultural marriages, which made of spouses coming from more than one culture, get a higher chance to end up in divorce in comparison to monocultural marriages, which refers to couples coming from the same culture(s). According to Lainiala & Säävälä (2013), intercultural married couples in Finland are likely to divorce at a rate from 3.5 to 4.7, while the monocultural couples are at a rate of 1.3. Therefore, it showed that intercultural families are undeniably more complicated and require more maintenance work.

For that reason, effective communication plays a key role in a marital relationship and directly influences couples' marital satisfaction. Effective communication helps couples be able to disclose themselves to each other, break down the barriers and learn about one another. Couples, who engaged often in communication, are more likely to understand one another better and feel closer to each other than those who do not. Meanwhile, distressed couples would engage more in avoidance communication, instead of constructive communication that functions relationships (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005). Therefore, intercultural couples need to rely on communication to solve many daily issues and face marital challenges.

For this thesis study, three(3) couples which made of a native Finnish and a foreign spouse were interviewed on their communication behaviours and conflict management habits. The data obtained from the data collection were then utilized to draw a conclusion about communication between intercultural couples on conflict issues. Although there are several

studies on this kind of topic about intercultural couples' communication and conflict issues in intercultural marriages, this study concentrated on Finnish-Asian couples living in Finland. Therefore, it is hoped to bring uniqueness to the study.

Furthermore, the reason for choosing Finnish-Asian couples was that firstly Finnish culture is considered quite a unique one, compared to other European culture(s). In other words, Finnish culture has its own value system and beliefs. Since this thesis is done in Finland and the main focus is Finnish culture, the word "Finnish" is widely used while mentioning the ethnicity of the couples. Secondly, "Asian" spouses in this study, on the other hand, refer to those who came from Asian countries such as China, Korea, Thailand, Vietnam, etc. Different from Finnish spouses, the selection for foreign spouses is larger, which could be one of any specific Asian countries and consider many Asian cultures as a whole as "Asian" culture(s). The reason for this selection was also to see a different varieties of marital interaction between Finnish and other ethnicities. Therefore, it would bring some diversity to this study. For that reason, the author hoped that this study may be a good starting point for those who wish to conduct related research on intercultural marital communication of those intercultural couples in Finland. Hence, future researches would lead to answer many more questions that this thesis study was not able to do.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Theory of Third Culture Building

As globalization has become a common worldwide term, trading between countries is no longer a burdensome task and traveling has become less troublesome. Therefore, it means that one is more likely to randomly meet other individuals from other parts of the world, join a partnership with foreign counterparts or be involved in an intercultural (or interethnic) marriage. Cross-cultural transitions open diverse opportunities for intercultural dialogue and information exchange in multicultural social contexts (Sobre-Denton, 2017).

In this study, the literature focuses on the theory of the Third Culture Building developed by Casmir (1978). The theory works as a framework, which helps investigate reactions of intercultural couples towards cultural differences, and observe how conflicts are managed. Although marriage is meant to connect two separate people (and their cultures) into one, it may also reveal the cultural differences, which in turn may be the root of various marital conflicts (Hopson, Hart & Bell, 2012). By noticing the notable shortcomings of the intercultural communication models of the 1960s and early 1970s, Casmir conceptualized another study focus and turned new direction for communication studies through his major theoretical contribution (Hopson, Hart & Bell, 2012). Instead of using communication as a manipulation power forcing one spouse to ultimately assimilate into the culture(s) of the another spouse, the third culture building encouraged individuals to create cooperative, productive, beneficial interactive environment, where both partners from separate cultures could be able to function in a way beneficial to all involved and all obtain advantageous outcomes (Casmir 1997, p.92).

#### *2.1.1 The history of Third Culture Building's theory*

Wenzel (2016) has stated that in intercultural relationships including bicultural marriages, members from different cultures have brought living experiences and schema into

relationships and created joint culture(s). Within that joint culture(s), each member contributes its cultural norms, negotiation of rules and goals, which helps build the dependence on one another. Also, Baxter (1987) commented, the joint culture(s) presents itself as a system of unique meanings (p. 262). It means that foundations and maintenance of the joint culture(s) only come from the members, which these cultures are uniquely theirs (Gaines & Brennan, 2001). That is why, an intercultural relationship is regarded as organic third culture(s), where each member could construct a mutual language and meanings via shared communication and identity (Baxter, 1987). According to Lee (2006), the third culture(s) performs a mutuality in constructing a mutual cultural environment and negotiating joint regulations through the communicative process.

The third-culture building is Fred Casmir's one of the most substantial theoretical contributions to communication study (Hopson, Hart & Bell, 2012). Casmir (1999) developed the third-culture building to emphasize the importance of intercultural relationships and its development as an ageless process of understanding and commitment. As being a prominent scholar in the field of communication study, Casmir realized certain limitations in several intercultural communication models of the 1960s and early 1970s (Hopson, Hart & Bell, 2012). By then, it was too many theories focusing on creating and examining cultural comparisons to collect a complete list of cultural attitudes, behaviours, norms, etc. He concluded, that this list of cultural assumptions was unavoidable and led to an extensive and sometimes inaccurate generalization about nationalities and nations. Moreover, despite the effort of collecting big amount of cultural understanding, the list hardly turns out to be detailed enough to explain all intercultural communication situations. (Hopson, Hart & Bell, 2012) Therefore, Casmir (1978) critiqued, that the earlier approaches restricted themselves to certain hypothetical points of view. Instead, scholars, he advised, should pay more attention to the lived situations, where intercultural communication actually happens, rather than

hypothesize situations, as hypothesis could not thoroughly cover all intercultural communication circumstances (Casmir, 1978).

Instead of using communication as a mean of taking advantage of persons in less powerful positions, Casmir (1999, p. 107) promoted to help intercultural individuals engage in cooperative, effective and egalitarian communication with others, to the extent that all obtain mutual communicative benefits. Casmir (1976, p.9) opposed the conception of using communication as a tool to influence people or to persuade someone to surrender in a relationship. On the contrary, he believed that effective intercultural communication should be understood as an effort to understand someone thoroughly and engage in a meaningful dialogue (Casmir & Asunción-Lande, 1989, p. 291). He conceptualized an intercultural model emphasizing a situational and supportive construction of a creative multicultural communicative system (Hopson, Hart & Bell, 2012). The new concept challenged scholars to rethink how intercultural communication should be viewed and applied, and examine whether cultures should integrate or destroy each other (Casmir & Asunción-Lande, 1989, p. 291). As a result of his thinking, Casmir (1978) proposed an interactive process of third-culture building, which assists intercultural people in building a communicative system as well as forming mutual identities within a new cultural context (Sobré, 2017).

However, marriage was not entailed only conflicts. In fact, to bond two individuals in a marriage, there were also similarities that they agreed on and maintain nurturing. Based on the similarities, couples could be more willing and more likely to maintain the bonds, which attached them from the beginning of the relationship. Moreover, conflicts were not necessarily resulted from intercultural differences or the impact of cultural backgrounds in marriage. Instead, it might be any other factors within the mutual life that caused conflicts. Therefore, it might not be fair or accurate to make a mere conclusion of the conflict's origins

based on a certain shallow amount of knowledge and evidence of marriages. As a matter of fact, certain kinds of conflicts may happen as well within monocultural marriages.

### *2.1.2 Critiquing the theory of Third Culture Building*

The theory of third culture building has been widely studied since it is first developed (Casmir, 1978, 1997). While some scholars supported the conception of the third-culture building (Evanoff, 2006; Broome, 1993), others have brought up critiques of its relevance in reality. For example, Kim (2001, 2005) viewed intercultural adaptation as an individual process, instead of an interdependent process of members' cultures as Casmir (1978) proposed. In her point of view, it is necessary to keep the focus on the individuals and their cultural adaptation even when talking about relationships. Compared to the view of Casmir (1978), Kim (2001, 2005) had almost opposite opinions about cultural adaptation. The following explained her views in more detail.

According to Kim (2001), cultural adaptation is a dynamic life-long process of multiple steps, which explains the individual self-organizing drive to establish and maintain the positively stable, reciprocal and functional interactions with the host environments. Through different stages of adaptation including deculturation, acculturation, and enculturation, Kim (2001, 2012) argued that complete assimilation into a new culture(s) is required to successfully reach the ultimate adaptation. According to Kim (2008), assimilation refers to the process, when an individual identity starts merging to those of the surrounding cultural identities. Assimilation is considered a state of the highest level of acculturation and deculturation, which is ideally expected to happen in theory (cf. Montalvo, 1991; van Oudenhoven & Eissess, 1998). Therefore, based on her idea, in an intercultural marriage, one spouse might require to wholly assimilate to his/her spouse's culture(s) during the relationship. This cultural assimilation may allow couples to cope with marital conflicts by reducing the presence of the second and third cultures within the marriage.

However, many scholars have asserted that Kim's argument may not be realistic and appropriate. They argued that it is theoretically impossible to completely assimilate into a new culture(s), which may mean that they have to neglect their own cultures. Newcomers may not accept, may not be able or may not want to proceed the complete assimilation. (Croucher, 2008; De La Garza & Ono, 2015; Kramer, 2003). During the sojourner experience, Evanoff (2006) stated that individuals choose either assimilate into host cultures or maintain their own rules while respecting those of the host-cultures. According to Berry (2003, p. 25), those, whose native cultures are obvious contrast with the host country, are less likely to accept new norms, and assimilate into host cultures. In Finland particularly, Somalis (whose culture(s) could be significant different from Finnish) and Russian (who are discriminated in Finland for their historical antagonism between Finland and Russia) are those, who may face the most difficult position to assimilate into Finnish culture than others (Liebkind and Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000, b, p. 464).

Tili and Baker (2015) stated in their study that, the intersection of cultural communication, marriage communication and conflict, communication still remained unfulfilled as this area has not caught enough attention from communication scholars. While Kim (2001, 2008) stated that newcomers should strongly involve themselves in learning new cultural knowledge and abandon their own cultural identities, Kramer (2000) supported the idea that newcomers could still keep cultural identities while enculturating others. Whereby, newcomers could choose as many ways as possible to adapt to new culture(s), which do not necessarily mean that one has to abandon his culture(s) during the adaptation as living in a foreign country, other than home, is itself such a difficult challenge (De La Garza and Ono, 2015).

However, marriage was not entailed only conflicts. In fact, to bond two individuals in a marriage, there were also similarities that they agreed on and maintain nurturing. Based on



the similarities, couples could be more willing and more likely to maintain the bonds, which attached them from the beginning of the relationship. Moreover, conflicts were not necessarily resulted from intercultural differences or the impact of cultural backgrounds in marriage. Instead, it might be any other factors within the mutual life that caused conflicts. Therefore, it might not be fair or accurate to make a mere conclusion of the conflict's origins based on a certain shallow amount of knowledge and evidence of marriages. As a matter of fact, certain kinds of conflicts may happen as well within monocultural marriages.

As this study concentrates on intercultural couples' engagement in mutual communication, it is relevant to observe communication as a constant process of creative exchange between each member, rather than looking too closely at each individual and their personal process of cultural adaptation. The theory of third culture building allows intercultural couples to 'reconfigure' their personal cultural identities with one another (Casmir, 1999; Shutter, 1993). Hence, it establishes a foundation of empathy, synthesis and shared development of standards for emergent mutual third culture(s), which aims at conciliating cultural differences (Shutter, 1993, p. 430).

### *2.1.3 Third Culture Building's theory in practice*

Returning to the concept of third culture building, several pieces of research have explored the topic from a variety of viewpoints, albeit sometimes using different terms to describe the same or a similar phenomenon. For example, Kramsch and Oryu (2016) argued that two original cultures could be blended and even superseded by a "hybrid identity". A hybrid identity for them is something that can be formed through a similar process as the one described in the theory of third culture building, referring that two original cultures could be blended and even superseded by a hybrid identity (Kramsch and Oryu, 2016). A hybrid identity can be formed through the process of third culture building, which particularly conceptualized the mutual space between members of two disparate cultures (Sobre-Denton,

2017). Whereby, the conception of third culture building describes “the construction of a mutually beneficial interactive environment in which individuals from two (or more) different cultures can function in a way beneficial to all involved” (Casmir, 1997, p. 92). In another word, the third culture building proposes an interactive environment of the mutual agreement through a negotiation process, which combines the essences of two or more cultures in order to create unique third culture(s) between them (Casmir, 1978).

Moreover, according to Broome (1993, p. 104), the third culture is created when individuals from different cultural backgrounds form relationships and then combined identities within a new cultural context. This third culture plays the role of culture-as-nation-state and exists as a consequence of the deterritorialization of all cultural systems involved (Sobre-Denton, 2017). Many literature works of third culture conceptualized multiple cultural influences as a pragmatic environment for the establishment of the shared communicative construction, which emerges when individuals from other parts of the world communicate and interact for a particular mutual purpose (Adair, Tinsley, & Taylor 2006, p. 209). Hence, through these studies, the third culture is described as a shared communicative structure, which comprises team and task communication knowledge, and social standards as well as values stemmed from the traditional cultural belief system of one or more members (Adair, Tinsley, & Taylor 2006, p. 207).

Regarding the sojourners, the third culture plays as an alternative cultural context, in which multicultural dialogue takes place. Such an alternative context also helps them integrate social standards across cultures, which later serves to take control of multicultural relationships in many cross-cultural situations. (Evanoff, 2006, p. 422) Recently, many pieces of research have paid attention to the conception of the third culture, which influences sojourners’ social support needs to negotiate adaptation, then create a shared environment and impact their adaptation outcomes (Sobre-Denton, 2017). Therefore, new cultures

continue to exist in a negotiated space created by two (or more) interacting individuals, which are established through communicative language, social interactions and new creation of cultural hybrid customs (Adair, Tinsley, & Taylor 2006).

In an intimate relationship, third culture(s) are served as a conflict reconciliation in order to establish relational empathy (Broome, 1993). Based on Broome (1993), third culture(s) could be applied as a facilitation technique to prevent individuals from discordant cultures or from escalating negative reciprocity but allow them to experience outside of their cultural contexts and generate empathy for each other in intimate relationships. Until empathetic connection is established between each partner, it could lead to conflict resolution through communication and several related tasks (Broome, 1993). The next section of this chapter will disclose further researches on Third Culture Building's variations.

#### *2.1.4 Theory's discussion*

Although the third-culture building is widely used as a theoretical framework to interpret lived situations in cross-cultural transitions, the theory still remains limitations (Venable and Subanthore, 2005). Venable and Subanthore (2005) addressed that members of two different cultural backgrounds may pay an excessive amount of attention on creating a new fostering culture(s), where both cultural identities can be shared and nurtured, and forget the fact that the new culture is not an only culture that they are living in. Instead, Venable and Subanthore (2005) exposed that a third culture C, while is seen to be distinctive from culture A and B as an interference between two cultures, should be still considered a derivative of the two cultures, A and B. It means that in the creation of developing a third culture from culture A and B, members of these cultures, while constantly attempting to construct the third culture(s), are transcending their culture boundaries. The new cultural boundaries include not only the newly created culture but also the original ones. (Venable and Subanthore, 2005)

Therefore, it means that both individuals coming from culture A and B could be able to live together within the culture C without giving up their own cultures.

In addition to the third-culture literature, Broome (1993) added the importance of relational empathy creates a sense of emotional support when members from different cultures deal with differences in attitudes, religious backgrounds, perception, cultural values, communication styles, etc. Relational empathy is used to assist each party to cope with the stressors of the cultural transition as well as support them during a difficult time (Sobre-Denton, 2017). From Sobre-Denton (2017)'s point of view, she stated that the relational empathy is indeed the core philosophy of the third-culture building theory, which establishes a secure and fostering space for trial and error process of host cultural adaptation. In this way, the research of third-culture building and relational empathy has reached beyond the process that approached only conflict resolution, but towards a communicative process-based phenomenon, establishing not only a multi-culture but a meta-third culture (Sobre-Denton, 2017).

Furthermore, culture could be also viewed in many other perspectives. For example, in view of micro-culture, it was mentioned above as the "small culture" referring to the joint culture that exists in intercultural families and marriages. Nevertheless, on the perspectives of macro culture, it is regarded as the "large culture", which involves nationality/ethnicity or the multi-culture(s). According to Sobre-Denton (2017), multi-culture(s) refers to an extension of third-culture(s) in a more multi-faced perspective, where it presents a mixture of multiple cultures – not just only this common combination: culture A + culture B = culture C, but rather a wider combination: culture A + B + C + D (etc.) = culture Z. Meanwhile meta-third culture(s), based on Sobre-Denton (2017)'s study, indicates the situation, when a multi-culture Z, an interference between culture A, B, C, D, etc., engages with totally new host culture XZ. Thus, Sobre-Denton (2017) addressed that meta-third culture(s) could be

concerned as an external influencer in the process of cross-cultural adaptation as well as the constructive foundation of social support across cultural boundaries.

However, compared to the theory of the Third Culture Building, the meta-third culture is a more explicit version, which involves many cultures. Therefore, it may be considerably challenging to cope with so many cultural backgrounds and could be more difficult to create a mutual meta-third culture. In reality, meta-third culture(s) may appear often in international corporations and companies, which have plenty of international employees from many different cultural backgrounds. In this Master's study, the meta-third culture(s) are not regarded as the main focus because researching intercultural marriages may involve a smaller number of cultures, which meta-third culture is less likely to appear.

## 2.2 Managing conflicts in romantic relationship

### *Marital satisfaction*

According to Bradbury, Fincham and Beach (2000), the study of marital satisfaction has reached an enormous amount of highly qualified studies in many long decades. Particularly in the 1990s, the notion of marital satisfaction attracted extensive attention for different orientations and viewpoints on the subject (Bradbury, Fincham & Beach, 2000). The ground for the study of marital satisfaction rooted from its fundamental centrality in family and individual well-being (Stack & Eshleman, 1998), from criminal desistance and social benefits received from strong established marriages (Laub, Nagin & Sampson, 1998) and from the call for the supportive preventions for couples that attempt to prevent or alleviate marital/intimate relationship distress, divorces as well as mental health problems (Hahlweg, Markman, Thurmaier, Engl & Eckert, 1998; Baucom, Shoham, Mueser, Daiuto & Stickle, 1998).

According to Stone and Shackelford (2007), marital satisfaction is a reflection of a particular person's mental state of his or her marital situation. It reflects the benefits as well

as the cost of marriage to that person. Accordingly, the more a person receives physical and emotional benefits from marriage, the more he or she feels satisfied with the marriage and with the marriage partner. Similarly, the more one has to suffer from marital conflicts and unsolved problems, the less satisfied he or she is with the marriage and the marriage partner (Stone & Shackelford, 2007).

There are a variety of components, which could be employed in order to scale the quality of one's marital satisfaction. Stone and Shackelford (2007) listed five key elements and mechanisms of marital satisfaction revealing how marital satisfaction is perceived. They include cognition, physiology, interaction patterns, social support, and violence.

### *Cognition*

It is important for a particular person before marriage to know whether his or her future spouse's behaviour is supportive or destructive, costly or beneficial, thoughtful or detached (Stone & Shackelford, 2007). Spousal behaviour is perceived significantly more important to a successful marriage, than social status, income, family influence and the same. However, behaviour does get influenced by the daily events and circumstances, although difficult circumstances often help reveal one's personality. For example, a situation like after a heavy day at work, it is difficult for them to make dinner right away, is different from, they are lazy to take care of personal hygiene or health. Therefore, it is crucial to identify whether the spousal behaviour is rooted in his or her personality or is persuaded by external factors such as circumstances, season and daily events. (Stone & Shackelford, 2007)

In the case of marital satisfaction, performing negative (costly) behaviours to personal characteristics of one's spouse might be a prediction of marital deterioration coming in the future (Stone & Shackelford, 2007). These kinds of behaviours and interactions between spouses occurs more often in marital problem-solving discussions. Couples often rationalize, that their marital dissatisfaction comes from the other spouse's misbehaved personality,

psychopath or neurotic personality that they attract the attention of physical and emotional aggression into marriage (Stone & Shackelford, 2007). However, the way people interpret each other's behaviours actually reflects how satisfied they are with their marriage.

Regarding research on effect and marital satisfaction, some studies showed that negative affect/ behaviour is associated with the decrease in marital satisfaction, whereas in other research, negative affect has no relations or is even a result of the increase in marital satisfaction (Stone & Shackelford, 2007). Therefore, it needs more future clarification on how negative affect influences marital satisfaction. (Stone & Shackelford, 2007)

### *Physiology*

Based on Timmons, Margolin and Saxbe (2015), the social relationship works as a social regulator, which influences human's physiological systems via the sharing of resources and conservation of energy. Furthermore, according to social baseline theory (Beckes & Coan, 2011), humans are more metabolically influenced and their emotions are more easily regulated in social contexts than in individual contexts. This finding is supported by a study showing that the area of the brain associated with threats is less active when a particular person is well surrounded in the presence of others (Coan, Schaefer, & Davidson, 2006). In another research, dysregulation of physiological systems resulting from separation or loss could lead to the loss of regulators and, later, the symptoms of bereavement (e.g. changes in sleep cycle or appetite) (Field, 2012; Sbarra & Hazan, 2008; Hofer, 1984). As a whole, being connected to others is considered important to maintain and balance human biological autonomic homeostasis (Diamond, Hicks, & Otter-Henderson, 2008; Timmons, Margolin & Saxbe, 2015).

In the research of marital satisfaction, it is a relation between being married and physical well-being (Stone & Shackelford, 2007). Accordingly, married couples, who are more satisfied with their marriage, display greater synchrony among their physiological

systems, compared to those who are less satisfied. Hence, satisfied couples are more likely to maintain balanced and positive synchrony with each other's physiological systems, electrodermal (as known as electrical resistance of the skin) and heart-rate systems, which plays important role in sustaining greater durable physical health than unmarried and dissatisfied individuals. (Stone & Shackelford, 2007)

#### *Interaction patterns*

Behavioural patterns and daily interactions between husband and wife are the factors, which could determine how marital satisfaction is influenced (Stone & Shackelford, 2007). Those couples, who are well-learned how to treat each other by the time living together, are more satisfied with their marriages and know each other's cultural needs. However, the behavioural patterns, which are most associated with marital dissatisfaction, are the combination of the demand/ withdrawal. As marriage evolves numerous amount of engagement, these kinds of interaction patterns easily leads to marital crisis, detachment and potential dissolution. Therefore, the way couples treat each other has a strong connection to their level of marital satisfaction. ( Stone & Shackelford, 2007)

#### *Social support*

The amount of social support for each partner and for the relationship has an influence on the couple's satisfaction. Abundant positive support from family members and society implicates that, marriage is functioning well and that are supported. On the other hand, negative social support is somehow associated with the unhealthy operation of marital interactions within the family. Thus, a partner who receives positive social support contributes better to another spouse's marital satisfaction and vice versa. ( Stone & Shackelford, 2007)



### *Violence*

Undoubtedly physical violence should not be involved and present in a healthy and happy marriage. For that reason, persons, who engaged in physically or mentally abusive relationship, are more likely to feel dissatisfied with their marriages than those, who are not. Also, Perry, DiLillo and Peugh (2007) showed in their study that childhood maltreatment has a connection to lower marital satisfaction. In Briere and Rickards (2007)'s and Burns, Jackson and Harding (2010) 's studies, they found that those who experienced childhood emotional abuse are more likely to experience interpersonal conflict, adult emotion dysregulation and later marital dissatisfaction with their spouses. The violence can be presented in many forms and shapes. One of them is physical aggression happened relatively often in newly-wed marriage, which displays the fact that the connection between violence and marital satisfaction is not always as clear and straight forward as it is usually assumed. ( Stone & Shackelford, 2007)

According to the points listed above, marital satisfaction in a romantic relationship is influenced by many factors. In order to obtain marital satisfaction, couples need to deal and reach a mutual understanding of many issues such as mutual cognition, physiology, social support, violence issue in family and interaction patterns. Without any of these factors, it may cause conflicts and communication dysfunction in any marriages, including both monocultural and intercultural marriages. Therefore, it is important to take marital satisfaction and all the influencing elements into account when researching marital satisfaction related to the main study's phenomenon.

### 2.3 Relation between marital satisfaction and conflicts

Intimate relationships and marriage can be challenging but yet one of the most satisfying things that life may bring (Salazar, 2015). However, these relationships may lead to conflicts or marital dysfunction, when relational needs are barely managed or dissatisfied.

Marital dissolution often occurs when each member of the marital relationship fails to resolve relational conflicts appropriately and lets marital conflicts aggravate until they cannot be reconciled. (Salazar, 2015). The amount of negativity that happened in a marital relationship and that is exchanged between marital partners is considered an anticipation of marital dissatisfaction (Gottman, 1994; Kurdek, 1995) and relationship dissolution (Gottman, 1994).

The theme of conflict and negative communication in romantic relationships have been researched recently. Negative reciprocity is regarded as one of the most researched communication patterns in conflict study in marital and intimate relationships (Salazar, 2015). Negative reciprocity, in the viewpoint of Burman, Margolin, and John (1993, p. 29), refers to the tendency to reciprocate negatively between husband and wife. Negative reciprocity includes all kinds of destructive marital behaviours (Salazar, 2015). For example, complaints, criticism, non-verbal negative expressions, negative conflict engagement behaviours (happened in many women) or negative conflict withdrawals (happened in men) could be considered negative reciprocity (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006; Gottman, 1979).

Several previous studies have addressed the negative effects of negative reciprocity on marital/ relationship satisfaction (Faulkner, Davey & Davey, 2005). Accordingly, Rehman & Holtzworth-Munroe (2006) showed that negative behaviours, such as women resent and criticise their husbands/men and men display defensiveness, withdrawal, and passive interaction, influence detrimentally the quality of the relationship and marriage. In other researches, scholars noticed that negative explanations towards partner's behaviour (for example, coming home late, text messages' behaviours, etc.), which initiates conflicts could lead to a decline in marital satisfaction (Faulkner, et al., 2005; Fincham, 2003). However, it is said that the influence of marital conflicts may vary between males and females (Zhuang, Wong & Ng, 2014). Wanic and Kulik (2011) pointed out that, female spouses are more likely to be negatively influenced by marital and relational conflicts than men, because according to

Loving, Heffner, KiecoltGlaser, Glaser and Malarkey (2004), women are more sensitive about male partner's hostility, while men are not easily influenced by hostile characteristics from their female spouse.

In addition, few scholars have tried to access the influence of negative reciprocity on marital satisfaction (Salazar, 2015). A three-pharse laboratory study followed and compared the negative reciprocity between distressed couples and non-distressed couples and strangers by providing a discussion about hypothetical conflict. Whereby the study found evidence that negative reciprocity typically occurs in intimate relationships. Therefore, distressed couples present more negative reciprocity than non-distressed couples and strangers, which suggested to imply their marital dissatisfaction. (Birchler et al., 1975). The marital dissatisfaction and relationship distress could display the failure of third culture building between husbands and wives during the interaction. Surprisingly, negative reciprocity in the study is found not likely to happen between strangers. On this account, such negative communication is considered a distinctive feature of marital relationships, or intimate relationships generally, which distinguishes its kind from other relationship types. (Birchler et al., 1975)

#### 2.4 Intercultural marriages in Finland

Intercultural marriages include two spouses, which come from two different cultures. Finland has been a favoured resident place for many intercultural marital couples (Del Angel, 2018). Starting from the 1990s, According to Statistic Finland (2018), there were in total 76 626 intercultural couples and families in Finland at the end of the year 2017. In earlier statistics (Del Angel, 2018), there were 40 567 new intercultural marriages in 2016, which made almost 54% of all Finnish intercultural marriages. For that reason, it could be seen that the number of intercultural marriages and families in Finland has been increasing over time. That is why intercultural marriage can be an interesting topic for researching as its complexity is also growing by the time its density is increasing.

Compared to monocultural or monoethnic marriages, intercultural marriages are statistically at higher risk of ending up in a divorce. The divorce rate in marriages between two Finnish born natives was 1.3 (number of divorces over 100 marriages existing at the end of the previous year) in the year of 2009 (Lainiala & Säävälä, 2013). The rates of divorce in marriages between Finnish natives and foreign-born are relatively higher. Compared to same cultural marriages, couples consisting of Finnish man and non-native woman were likely to head to divorce at a rate of 3.5, and the rate of those between Finnish women and a non-native man was as high as 4.7 (Lainiala & Säävälä, 2013). According to newer records in 2013, the numbers of intercultural marriages leading to divorces, considering the cases of both Finnish born men and women, were collectively counted to be 1 921 cases in total (Official Statistics of Finland, 2014).

On the one hand, intercultural marriage seems to be a thorough and sustainable foundation for cultural migration by building strong bonds with the new environment through the native spouse's background and connection (Heikkilä, 2011). It means that, when a foreign-born is committed in marriage with a native-born person and established a new married life in the country where the native spouse lives, he/she obtains access to the networks of the native spouse concerning both social and personal lives. Therefore, it will become more accessible and easier to make new friends, adopt new living customs, learn the language and even find a job (Heikkilä, 2011). May the foreign spouse start to fall into the integration, the native spouse, in another direction, will also begin adopting some of the values and customs from the immigrant partner (Heikkilä, 2011).

On the other hand, there are cases where the immigrant spouse's integration, over some time, got constrained by the native spouse through a sequence of preventing and controlling efforts or inaccessible helpless support. In the study from Heikkilä (2011), she mentioned few examples, demonstrating unhappy cases where a native spouse may obstruct

the foreign spouse's integration by banning him/her from searching for employment or learning the official language of the host country. In some particular cases, the dominant spouse can also either take control over the income, which foreign spouse earned or prevent him/her from social communication with the host country (Heikkilä, 2011). More often, the vulnerability and terrible mistreatment of immigrant wives are the conclusions of various reasons. One of them was that; they faced the constant ignorance of their rights and accepted different cultural implementation of women's roles in families (Pikkarainen & Wilkman 2005, p. 24; Merali 2008, p. 282).

Moreover, determining a place of mutual residence is regarded as one of the most significant decisions when a couple thinks of marriage. Sometimes this kind of decision process is beyond the couple's reach, when the mutual life involves more than one party, such as children, in-laws, peers, community members (Crippen & Brew 2007, 108). Most important, financial guarantee, stated by Górný & Kepinska (2004, 355, 370), was considered to affect most significantly couple's decisions on where they should reside and children should be raised. Whereby couples are likely to settle in a country/places where the income can be generated to the greatest (Heikkilä, 2011). Also, the labour division in a marriage household, specifying whether should all the work be divided equally for each partner or, should one be active in the labour market and another stay home taking care of children, takes the key impact on this decision making process.

Consequently, it could be seen that intercultural and international marriages are undoubtedly more difficult to maintain, reinforce and empower than ethnic ones. Undeniably intercultural couples, in this research specifically looking at marriages consist of a Finnish native and an Asian spouse, are expected to cope with many obvious challenges as well as the unforeseen or untold ones. In fact, married couples are not only necessitated to make family decisions together as a team on a daily basis but also capable of disclosing to each other

emotionally without rejection. Hence, it doubtlessly requires more amount of effort, compassion, and understanding from both sides in order to avoid clashes and overcome both interpersonal challenges and cultural differences.

### 2.5 Understanding conflicts in intercultural relationships

Canary, Cupach, and Messman (1995) defined conflicts as disjointed, separate, isolated and chronic disagreements and relational problems (p.103). Despite being often viewed as troublesome or causing complications, conflicts may still bring positive sides to intimate relationships. Conflicts require marital couples to re-evaluate the state of marriage, drive each one to negotiate and discuss each other's desires, needs, hopes (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013a). However, if conflicts are poorly and incompletely managed, the unsolved and inextricable problems may ultimately lead to the marriage's dissolution, and possibly affect each spouse's physical, emotional, psychological and mental wellbeing (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013a).

According to the study of Salazar (2015), conflicts may vary from mild disagreement to severe physical violence. One study found that equality in marriage could reduce the severe level of physical abuse as well as the frequency of its presence in marriage (Coleman & Straus, 1986). In an intimate relationship such as marriage where one spouse is greatly dependent or places too much emphasis on the dominant spouse, they are more likely to experience violence and abuse, compared to a marriage, where both spouses are equally positioned (Coleman & Straus, 1986). Stets and Straus (1989) found that violence happens not only in marital relationships but also in pre-marital and cohabitating relationships.

Since conflicts seem to take a large toll on intimate relationship, it rises up the concern on whether third-culture building has the capacity to bring balance to the couples' lives and help them overcome light-to-severe relational conflicts. Especially when considering intercultural marital couples, in addition to so-called normal conflicts related to

living in a relationship, there may also be conflicts that are complicated by being situated by spouses' different values and face orientations (Tili & Barker, 2015). The more different the two cultural backgrounds of the spouses are, the more problematic and unresolvable conflicts can be. Therefore it is reasonable to expect that middle ground (third cultures) between them could help, where both spouses could agree on certain rules without giving up their cultural roots and live with each other without too much culture-related tension. As being an intercultural union, it may not be ready-made system or written guide of how conflicts and cultural differences are handled but totally up to their wishes on how they would want conflicts to be managed, in the case that none of any culture ideally is dominant over the other. Therefore, conflict management represents the significant strategies of establishing mutual understanding and the ability of solving problems to create a fundamental foundation of a relationship. Whether or not the third cultures are built successfully will affect the outcomes of those complex situations and conflicts in intercultural relationships. (Harjula, 2015.)

Conflicts, as it has been well and often mentioned throughout this study, is the key concept in this research. Although there is plenty of definitions for the word "conflict", the main focus of this study is on the perspectives of interpersonal conflicts, especially conflicts in marriages. According to Harjula (2015), couples who managed to stick to each other for a long time will have fewer conflicts than couples, who are still negotiating their third cultures. As more time spent together, they would experience the marital life and get chances to build their own ways of marital interpersonal communication, in which the way of handling and resolving marital problems may also be included (Harjula, 2015). In order to understand the influence of conflicts in intercultural marriages and the importance of third culture building in resolving conflicts, this research study will concentrate on these research questions:

RQ. 1: How do people living in intercultural marriages describe the role of culture(s) in encountering conflicts?

RQ. 2: How do intercultural marital couples describe the communication strategies they implement in managing conflicts?

RQ. 3: How do intercultural marital couples describe the role of third cultures (building) for their relationship?

In early studies of conflicts in interpersonal relationships, scholars have drawn attention to interpersonal relationship satisfaction and relational instability, such as divorce rates or breakups. A majority of those prototypical studies were based on the problem-solving paradigm. (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013b) During the research, the frequency of conflicts was also often investigated by scholars. However, the results of those studies mainly focused on the diverse conceptions of the causes of conflicts (Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995). Recently, the research interests have shifted. At the end of the 1990s, scholars concentrated on the comparison of satisfied and unsatisfied couples, while recently the longitudinal studies of conflict changes' examination in relational satisfaction and dissolution are more preferred (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013b).

According to Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2013a), studies about conflicts and interculturality are yet considered complicated because of its numerous layers of intricacy. A majority of previous literature on differences' management in intercultural relationships has greatly relied on the problem perspectives (Seshadri & Knudson-Martin, 2013). Therefore, a study in intercultural/ interracial relationships has re-undergone new trends to tackle the issue in other different angles and perspectives shifting the focus to the relational processes, which makes relationships work, rather than focusing on the causes of the relational problem (Seshadri & Knudson-Martin, 2013).



The literature on intercultural marital communication between Finnish and Asian spouses in Finland still remains limited. There are, however, similar themes available concentrating on the relationships between Finnish and Somalis spouses (Al-Sharmani, 2017). There are also studies looking at the relationship of Black-White couples (Seshadri & Knudson-Martin, 2013). Most of those studies emphasize the issues leading to relational conflicts and then the disputed issues as well as the couples' conflict resolution strategies, such as different opinions regarding approaching conflict resolution or attitudes towards conflicts (i.e. different conflict styles). Furthermore, in the discussion of intercultural marriages, both academic researchers and media have been known to highlight the topics of race, gender, ethnicity and religion (Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005; Al-Sharmani, 2017). According to Tili and Barker (2015)'s notes, we need more in-depth and more explicit studies in the future research of intercultural communication, which examine the process of third culture building and investigate its nature deeper and wider, as well as the communication process, which leads and contributes to its formation. Unfortunately, there are not yet many studies investigating relational conflicts under different contexts (Oetzel, Dhar, & Kirschbaum, 2007). Therefore, one of the main aims of this thesis study is to address the issues, which are mentioned by Tili and Barker (2015).

In this study, the phenomenon of intercultural marriages between Finnish and Asian spouses in Finland is taken into account. The study focuses on the presence of third culture(s) in resolving relational and possibly cultural conflicts. Even though there are cases where Finnish and Asian spouses met and established a marital relationship in a third country, which is neither spouses' homeland, this study is interested and more concentrated on circumstance occurring in Finland, which is the home country of the native Finnish spouses and the host country of the foreign spouses. In the situations where the Finnish culture is dominant over the foreign culture(s), Oetzel, Dhar and Kirschbaum (2007) and Tili and

Barker (2015) believed that the cultural and relational conflicts are more vivid and obvious; hence, it is more explicit to observe couples' conflict management and the potential existence of third culture(s) within marital relationship.

### 3. Methodology

This chapter gives an overview of the qualitative research method, which is mainly used in this master study. It addresses the methodological approaches and justifies the study's methodological choices. This chapter entails six sections: aims of the study, empirical context, semi-structured interviews as a method of inquiry, data collection, ethical considerations, and data analysis. This chapter gives an overview of the research methodology.

#### 3.1 Aims of the study

The main theme of this study, intercultural marital communication between Finnish and Asian spouses, will be studied and analysed through a qualitative research method. This chapter described the analysing structure and approach for the research. The research questions, which are regarded as the guidelines throughout this study, are as follows:

- (1) How do people living in Asian-Finnish intercultural marriages describe the role of culture(s) in encountering conflicts?
- (2) How do Asian-Finnish intercultural marital couples describe the communication strategies they implement in managing conflicts?
- (3) How do Asian-Finnish intercultural marital couples describe the role of the third culture (building) for their relationship?

The topic of marital communication between intercultural spouses has raised up many interesting questions. Since intercultural marriages somehow seem harder to maintain than their monocultural counterparts, it is worth investigating, how intercultural spouses experience and manage conflicts associated with intercultural marriage. According to Tili and Barker's (2015) study spouses in intercultural marriages are encouraged to go through different acculturative changes to gain not only personal growth but also building a unique marital identity with other spouses in intercultural marriages when two cultural traits are now

combined. In order to find the answers to those research questions, the actual interview contents were analysed.

The aims of this master study are to see how cultural differences are bridged and how new cultural identity within intercultural marriages are formed on a daily basis, as conflict management is still considered seriously under-researched area (Tili & Barker, 2015). Therefore, during the research, it is important to know, whether any of intercultural spouses feel the need to abandon their own culture(s) in the process of integrating into the other spouses' culture(s), whether or not it is a must for one of the mentioned spouses assimilate completely into the other's culture(s) within intercultural marriages. Or, whether or not there should be a balance point, where each spouse participates in constructing and sharing the mutual culture(s) but at the same time still remain each of their own cultures since birth.

### 3.2. Empirical context: intercultural romantic relationships in Finland

In Finland, marriages between individuals with different nationality, country of birth, language and cultural background have become more common in the past decades. According to the Official Statistics of Finland (2012), the percentage of marriages, made of one native language speaker (Finnish, Swedish or Sami) and a foreign language speaker was nearly 10 percent. Particularly in Helsinki areas, these kind marriages were more usual, at a rate of 12 percent in 2012, and marriages between Finnish and foreign nationals were made up of 15 percent of all marriages in Helsinki in 2011 (City of Helsinki Urban Facts 2012).



Figure 1. Intercultural marriages in Finland in 2016 (Del Angel, 2018)

In the early 1990s, more Finnish women were involved in intercultural marriages with foreigner citizens than men (Heikkilä, 2011). However, the situation has become reversed recently. In 2013 among 3 682 marriage contracts, there were 1 698 marriages between Finnish women and foreign men, and 1 984 marriages made of Finnish men and foreign wives (Official Statistics of Finland, 2015). In 2016, the total number of marriages between Finnish male and foreign-born female spouse/partners reached 40 567, which contributes to almost 54% of all Finnish intercultural intimate tie knots (Del Angel, 2018)

Regarding the following statistics at the end of 2016, there were 75 266 dual-cultural couples and families in Finland, of which 16 554 cases were dual-cultural families (Official Statistics of Finland, 2016a). An estimated half of the dual-cultural families were those with children. About one-third of intercultural families based in metropolitan areas of Finland and every fifth dual-cultural couple lives in Helsinki. The study includes collectively unmarried couples, registered partnerships, and marriages, where one spouse/partner was born in Finland. (Official Statistics of Finland, 2016a)

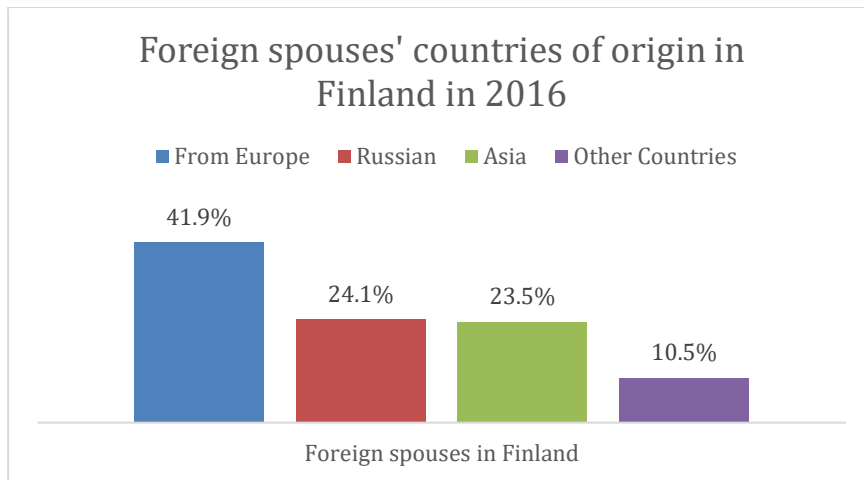


Figure 2. Foreign spouses' countries of origin in Finland in 2016 (Official statistic of Finland 2016a)

According to the Official Statistics of Finland (2016a), the majority of foreign spouses in intercultural marriages in Finland were from former Soviet Union countries (esp. Russia) and Sweden, Estonia and Thailand. Foreign male spouses, who were born abroad and have foreign citizenship, were abundantly born in Europe. The number of foreign spouses born in Europe at the end of the year 2016 reached 26 697, which made 66% of all foreign-born spouses in Finland. Russian and the former Soviet Union, by the year of 2016, got 9 762 spouses living in Finland while Sweden drew 8 511 spouses, and Estonia had 2 772 spouses. (Official Statistics of Finland, 2016a)

Over decades, the number of Asian born spouses involved in intercultural marriages with Finnish natives has increased rapidly. In 2003, the number of Finnish men living in Asia was under 3 000; however, by the year 2016, the number reached almost 9 500 (Del Angel, 2018). Among Asian countries, spouses coming from Thailand, China, Philippines, and Vietnam were considered as the most common cases in Finland, which accounted for 23% of all foreign wives in intercultural marriages with Finnish men in 2016 (Official Statistics of Finland, 2016a). Accordingly, the number of Thai female spouses was 4 832, while the Chinese accounted for 1 339, Vietnam 562, Philippines 1 098 ( Official Statistics of Finland, 2016a, 2016b; Del Angel, 2018). Compared to statistics in 2003, the contribution of wives

born in Asia, Africa, and North/South America has doubled (Del Angel, 2018). Meanwhile, the number of foreign husbands born in Asian countries in 2016 was considerably less when compared to the number of foreign wives born in Asian countries. More specifically, foreign men born in Asian countries, in marriages with Finnish women, most commonly come from Thailand, which accounted for only 183, and China, 167 (Del Angel, 2018; Official Statistics of Finland, 2016a).

### 3.3 Semi-structured interviews

As interview is used for this research's data collection method, interview was regarded most often used method to collect in-depth data. That's why it has been widely used in carrying out field studies (Jamshed, 2014, p. 87; Qu & Dumay, 2011, p. 238). For this reason, the semi-structured interviews were chosen as the data collection method because of many reasons. Qu and Dumay (2011, p. 246) addressed that the semi-structured interview entailed a sequence of predetermined and open-ended interview questions focusing on certain themes and topics. Furthermore, a semi-structured interview was considered a guided dialogue, which intended to collect in-depth information as well as personal insights and experience regarding the study topic.

Nevertheless, an interview was found to be the most suitable for this study, compared to other data collection methods, such as surveys, direct observation or online quizzes. In fact, focus groups and observation could be taken into consideration as well. However, the setting of observation would take much more time to collect and analyse the data. Moreover, it would involve more resources and supplies, which were not available at hand by the time this study was carried out. In addition, regarding the comparison between one-to-one interview and focus group, the one-to-one interview was more outweigh because of its in-depth information. The setting of the one-to-one interview was significantly more personal and private when discussing the intimate relational experience. Thoroughly the collected data

was promised to keep confidentially in order to protect participants' rights of their personal information. Since all intercultural spouses had a variety of personal insights and experiences in intercultural marriages, the semi-structured interview allowed them to reveal personal experiences about the research topic. Therefore, the researcher is allowed to obtain individual information as well as to draw an overview of the participants' perspectives on the research context. (Linnanen, 2018). Therefore, because of the possibility to collect data in more individual perspectives associated with the research topic, this method was chosen for this study.

Before the actual interview, the pilot interview was employed previously for this study due to the lack of research experience. According to Kvale (2007), a pilot interview allowed the author to unfold the interview's limitations and mistakes. Whereby, the author could use a pilot interview to be able to pre-test the interview questions, fix the questionnaire's inaccuracies as well as obtain some practical experiences prior to the real interview session. The pilot interviews were conducted successfully, resulting in several changes for a better questionnaire version after that. The old questionnaire design was rephrased and modified into a more suitable design with more accurate apprehension and interpretation. Eventually, the final interview form included in total 21 questions, which were sorted into three(3) main categories and three(3) sub-categories associated with three(3) research questions: the roles of cultures in encountering conflicts, spouses' strategies to manage conflicts and the roles of third culture(s) in intercultural marriages (See Appendix 1). During the interview, participants were encouraged to give their opinions and express freely in their own words in terms of their intercultural marital experiences. Meanwhile, the researcher investigated the conversation information and asked for more follow-up questions if necessary. The interview questions were not meant to lead participants to any conclusions but try to open different contexts, situations, and topics associated directly with their own



experiences in intercultural marriages, in order that these questions could help the participants to be easily relatable and open up comfortably towards the researcher.

The data for this research were collected mainly through face-to-face interviews from intercultural marital couples at different ages and at different stages of their marriages. Besides face-to-face interviews, a virtual interview via a telecommunication application, Skype, was employed to connect with a participant living far away. The data was collected from April 2019 until the beginning of May 2019.

### 3.4 Data collection

The participants were selected for this study according to certain criteria. The first requirement was, that participants must be intercultural marital couples living in Finland, which made of one Finnish and one Asian spouse. The key context was that the spouses do not come from the same cultural background. One ought to be from Finnish culture(s) and the other's native culture(s) ought to be from one of the Asian countries. Both spouses must live in Finland when the study was carried out. The number of years of marriage may vary depending on each couple. The aim was to interview and collect data from intercultural marital couples with different stages of marriage so that the data collection could be noticeably more fruitful due to the versatility of different marital experiences. Therefore, it was easier to observe different perspectives of intercultural marriages between Finnish and Asian spouses. Moreover, the author tried to find foreign spouses, who came from different Asian cultural backgrounds, in order to bring up the diversity to the study. Thence, the reflection of marital conflict and third cultures might appear more explicitly for observation and analysis.

Accordingly, three intercultural couples in a total of six individuals were invited to join in this study. The interviewee's ages arranged from 28 years old to 42 years old. Their relationships have continued from 4 years up to 8 years. Among them, there were two marital

relationships and one engaged cohabitation relationship, which also soon led to marriage. Eventually, six (6) interviews were carried out individually and anonymously at times and places agreed by both sides.

Table 1. Couple demographic information

Country of origin (Male/Female)	Relationship length
Finland / Vietnam	5 years
Finland / Vietnam	4 years
Finland / Korea	8 years

Note: All data in this table separated with “/” refers male on the left side and female on the right side

#### *Interview procedure*

In *the first section* of the interview, participants were asked to give general information about themselves as well as brief information about their relationship. The goal of the first section was to have the first general idea of their stage of marriage and to know the circumstance they became united as one family. In *the second and third sections*, the focus has shifted into the daily interactions in the family, where both cultures are expected to be exposed and interact with each other. According to the research questions, *the second and third interview section* should be able to answer at least the first question and somehow see whether there is enough room to answer the second question. In *the fourth and fifth section*, the interview concentrated on the presence of conflicts happened between two spouses. In these sections, interviewees were asked to narrate a few dissent moments happened between them and their partners. Also, they were asked to describe how they have overcome the challenges or what kind of communication strategies they used to deal with conflicts. Therefore, the focal point of these sections was to be able to answer question two and

examine the question three: in what extend the role of third cultures could help couples handle conflicts. *The last section* examined whether conflicts may happen outside the marriages, for instance, relationship with in-laws, relatives, friend circles and communities. Hence, it was important to know, whether the third cultures appear also in those relationships as a communication tool to help resolve marriage-related conflicts (For a complete list of interview sections and questions, see Appendix 1.)

Each section of interview questions was prepared with supporting questions and instructions with the purpose to assist the interviewees' question comprehension as well as to avoid steering the interviewees' answers in any certain direction. When needed, supplementary neutral questions and examples were added during the interview process in order to assist the couple in understanding the initial questions. The primary aim was to encourage interviewees to share their practical examples of real-life marital situations and the reflection of their marriage circumstances. The longest interview duration was 2 hour 20 minutes. The shortest interview lasted 59 minutes.

Moreover, couples were interviewed separately at two different times and with the same questionnaire. The purpose of this interview strategy is to retrieve more personal insights into one's experience in intercultural marriages. The interview session was successful to collect in-depth information related to the topic. After the interview session, the amount of the data collected was sufficient to proceed with the next step of analysing. Therefore, the need for another session of interviewing couples together (as known as a focus group) was not enough remarkable. Based on the individual data, most aspects related to research questions were answered. That is why the couple-joint group interviews were not thereafter carried on.

Regarding the language utilized, interviews were conducted in both Vietnamese and English. Five (5) out of six (6) interviews were conducted in English. Vietnamese as the

native language was preferred by one Vietnamese participant. Meanwhile, English was mainly used in the interviews with other participants, who are Finnish, Vietnamese and Korean, because of the interviewer's limited knowledge of Finnish and Korean languages and another Vietnamese's willingness to use English as the official language. However, Finnish was still used at some parts of the interviews. All the sources in Vietnamese and Finnish were translated after transcription into a written form in English. The transcription includes 137 pages of transcribed text.

### 3.5 Ethical consideration

All research needs to adhere to the principles of research responsible conduct (Linnanen, 2018). Therefore, research is required to be ethically acceptable and reliable. Only if researchers have followed the ethical guidelines for proficient research practices, then the results can be credible. The ethical guidelines can be violated if researchers commit fabrication (e.g. displaying false results), plagiarism (e.g. steal someone's ideas and words without giving appropriate credit) or falsification (e.g. controlling research materials). (TENK, 2012.) Since this study contains confidential and sensitive information and data of the participants, it is obliged to follow the ethically responsible research principles authorized by the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity. To secure compliance with ethically responsible research principles, the author carefully took into consideration the ethical issues and adhered to the aforementioned principles throughout this study. This section will discuss in detail the main ethical issues associated with the data collection and analysis.

During the process of finding suitable participants and arranging interviews for this study, it was necessary to consider certain ethical issues such as consent information for scientific research. Before the actual interviews took place, a consent form was given to all participants to inform them of what to expect during and after the data collection. By signing, participants agreed to provide their information and personal stories for research and clearly

understood that their information would be used in the study. Participants were also informed that their answers during the interview would be recorded for transcription. The information of this study, such as the purpose of the study, research background, and research methods, was sent to participants beforehand.

Since the interview might request participants to reveal sensitive information, personal and intimate data, it was obliged to consider ways to protect participants' privacy. First of all, as the interview data exclusively belongs to this study and to the participants, the originally recorded data was deleted after the analysis. During the data analysis process, the collected data was saved in a responsible way, which means that only the author was allowed to access to the data. The contribution from participants was entirely voluntary. Therefore, participants were allowed to withdraw and retrieve all the data they gave out at any time. Fortunately, as the interviews were arranged well and nicely in advance, none of the participants decided to withdraw from the study.

According to Crow and Wiles (2008), it said that anonymity and confidentiality are regarded as the key principles in ethical research practices. Therefore, it is suggested that the data, which participants provided in the interviews, should not have any identifying values that may directly be linked to any of the involved participants (Crow & Wiles, 2008). To protect the participants' anonymity, the solution is to anonymize the participants' basic information (such as names, occupation, etc.) and avoid the possibility to track the participants' identity from the data provided in the study. Another reason why the personal information anonymity was encouraged to proceed in this study was that anonymity would increase the participants' willingness to share their personal insights and experiences in cross-cultural marriage more frankly and explicitly.

A pseudonym was given to each participant to protect their anonymity. Each participant was assigned several symbols for analysis.

- (1) Capital letters “A” and “F” are used to identify the nationality/area of origin of the interviewees. The “A” stands for Asian and “F” for Finnish.
- (2) The genders of the interviewees are marked by the small letter “m” meaning male, and “f” meaning female.
- (3) Couples are assigned numbers from 1 to 3

Table 2: Labels of interviewees

	<i>Female remarks</i>	<i>Male remarks</i>
<i>Couple #1</i>	1Af	1Fm
<i>Couple #2</i>	2Af	2Fm
<i>Couple #3</i>	3Af	3Fm

### 3.6 Data analysis

To analyse the data, content analysis was selected to be the data analysis method. This kind of research analysis method can be used in both quantitative and qualitative data (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007, p. 107). As its name explains, content analysis is a scientific tool for analysing the content of the communication, which has been used to study various areas, such as media processes, media effects and other areas of communication studies (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015; Ishiyama & Breuning, 2011, p. 490). Based on Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017, p. 94), content analysis is considered to help transform interview transcripts into a highly organized summary of key results.

Moreover, a content analysis allows researchers to analyse any written, verbal or visual communication messages as well as to conclude any valuable inferences from communication content by describing, classifying and/or making inferences systematically

about communication messages ( Cole 1988, as cited in Elo & Kyngäs, 2007, p. 107). Weber (1990, p. 9, as cited in Ishiyama & Breuning, 2011, p. 490) also described content analysis as a “research method that uses a set of procedures to make valid inferences from text”, even though texts are, to be noted, not the only content sources that can be analysed. Besides, content analysis could allow researchers to investigate the transcripts of oral communications. For that reason, it is selected to be the data analysis method for this study due to its strengths in systematizing data into categories and summarizing a large body of texts, which allows the researcher to draw conclusions.

The data analysis employed in this study is theory-driven, using the theory of third-culture building as the principal construct. The interview questions revolved around the third-culture building with many questions associated with, or searching for answers, which would guide participants to disclose how third-culture building has served as a conflict problem-solving strategy and a foundation of the common life between intercultural couples. The interview questions, even though they focused on the presence of the third-culture building in intercultural marriages, are open as well as general in order to give participant spaces and opportunities to discuss comfortably what they feel important in maintaining intercultural marital relationships. To design the structure of interview questions, there were generous sources of literature available in both English and Finnish on intercultural couples in Finland and conflict communication, which assisted well during the process of outlining interview questions’ design. By being mindful of the theory of third culture building and the literature on intercultural couples in Finland and conflict communication, the interview questions were built to motivate intercultural couples to discuss openly their accommodativeness within their relationships, their perceived cultural differences and similarities, and the communication strategies utilized to solve conflicts. Plenty of literature suggests that conflict management has great influence on marital satisfaction, which means that the increase or decrease in

negative reciprocity will affect directly the quality of marital relationships (Gottman, 1994; Kurdek, 1995; Salazar, 2015), some of the interview questions concentrated closely on the topic of conflict communication and its influence on marital satisfaction of intercultural marital couples. Whilst analysing the interviews' transcription, the most common desired words and phrases were collected and categorized into certain themes related to the topic. Inside each theme, there were also sub-themes, which then describe better what the primary, overlaying theme entailed. Throughout the data analysis journey, each main theme and sub-theme is supported with the appearance of transcripts. Therefore, each theme and sub-theme was able to reflect the presence of third culture building, which can be observed in most conversations and communicative interactions.

Furthermore, coded statements of participants were compared with each other. The fact that all participants were interviewed individually and asked the same question produced interesting yet enriched data with a great amount of background stories associated with each theme. Very often, each participant explained different circumstances related to each topic. Although the circumstances found from the interview transcripts were different, the main ideas behind them were matched between intercultural couples, demonstrating couples were at the same mindset, the same stage of beliefs and opinions about their relationships when they were asked privately. Each transcript was read several times in order to find the key themes and eventually there were four main themes found being most appealing and relevant. While four main discussing themes were selected in this data set, other additional themes also emerged for discussion, which were not considered the major themes but had added values in this research. For this study, these additional themes were still appreciated for their contribution, even though they were not mentioned by the major participants and did not hold much of the importance, compared to the major themes.



After data analysis, four major themes were found most relevant in this research. The first theme concentrates on the stage in marriage before the third culture happened, where couples first lived together and learned the culture(s) of each other. It is the stage, where a high amount of confusion, conflicts and dysfunction communication happened and caused conflicts between spouses. The second theme revolves around the construction of third cultures, in which the theory of third culture building is regarded as the centre theory behind this research. It highlights the communication strategies employed by participants in order to solve the marital conflicts. The final theme presents the prospect of marital satisfaction in intercultural marriages when the third culture has been established as the foundation in solving marital conflicts. Since the third culture building serves as the key theory throughout this research, each of these three major themes revolves around the presence of the theory and how intercultural couples adapt to the mutual life and to one another. The subthemes belong to the main theme category, in which their contents are corresponding with the theme topic. Despite the fact that not all subthemes are mentioned by a great amount of times and the number of participants, its significant meaning to this study allows it to be comprised of the associated theme.

Table 3. Frequency of themes

Prevalence of themes	
	Frequency of subtheme
<i>Major challenges in intercultural marriages</i>	
Lack of cultural understanding	6
Making assumption of each other's knowledge	4
Unreadiness for marriage and family life	2
Language inequality	4
<i>Couple strategies to manage marital conflicts</i>	
Practical help	4
Open communication	6
Empathy and Patience	6
Spouse's culture appreciation	6
<i>Presence of third culture in resolving conflicts</i>	
Language	6
Family closeness	4
Religion	2
<i>The influence of society and community</i>	
Family	4
Society and community	4
<i>Additional themes</i>	

## 4. Findings

In this chapter, the findings and interpretations of the empirical data are presented in order to answer the three research questions: (1) How do people living in Asian-Finnish intercultural marriages describe the role of culture(s) in encounter conflicts? (2) How do Asian-Finnish intercultural marital couples describe the communication strategies they implement in managing conflicts? (3) How do Asian-Finnish intercultural marital couples describe the role of the third culture (building) for their relationship?

### 4.1 Major challenges in intercultural couple relationship/ life

A high amount of conflicts was reported to occur in the first stage of marriage due to many incompatible reasons. At the first stage of marriage, intercultural couples faced the challenges of cultural unawareness and lack of knowledge between one another. Besides, interview participants also reported that the difference in the mental state concerning marriage and language inequality was challenging, which prevented them from adapting to mutual life and to each other. In the process of understanding marital conflict between intercultural couples, the theme covers a variety of subthemes to describe the most common challenges in intercultural marriage based on the participants' transcripts. The most emerging subthemes associated with the main topic of major challenges in intercultural marriage include lack of cultural understanding, assuming, unreadiness and language inequality.

#### *4.1.1 Lack of cultural understanding*

Many participants mentioned the lack of cultural awareness to be the most significant challenges that they faced, which several times caused confusion and dissatisfaction in marriage. Cultural understanding refers to the knowledge about one's cultural background such as customs, traditions, general behaviours and life-view/beliefs, etiquette, etc. When a group of people reaches a mutual understanding of each other's cultural background, it means that they have a general understanding of each's behaviour, beliefs and why they would do

these kinds of behaviours but not others. They would understand some general knowledge of each other's needs during the process of establishing relationships. On the other hand, shallow cultural understanding and sensitivity often led to a high level of stress and conflict in marriage as well as decrease the amount of self-disclosure between spouses over the course of the relationship. Most of the couples participated in the interview have experienced the cultural insensitivity in the mutual life with their spouses. In addition, by the time when the interviews were done, all participants have married and lived together for several years and during that time they had many opportunities facing the conflicts concerning cultural differences.

Cultural understanding is an important marriage, especially in intercultural marriage. It helps couples overcome the cultural barriers, which can tremendously affect the marital relationship in the early stage. Couples coming from different cultural backgrounds have different ways of doing things depending on the cultures of their up-bringing. The difference includes either superficially the taste of food, customs, celebrations, protocol or internally the cultural vision, values, norms, language, beliefs, and habits. It is more difficult to accept and adapt to the internal core values, which are deeply attached to one's hearts, than those superficial customs, which are easily compromised. Through understanding the cultural differences, couples could have more knowledge of what is important to their partner's cultures, their likes or dislikes and could better communicate with each other. Moreover, cultural understanding helps couples overcome their limitations on the knowledge of their partners. Cultural awareness and sensitivity bridge the cultural gap between couples and allow empathy to grow between them.

But now there are two different cultures and we don't understand anything about each other at the beginning. So in every single detail, whatever you do, you bother each other due to the different cultures (3Af)

Although cultural understanding was considered important by all of the participating couples, it seems difficult to achieve. Participants stated that they especially struggled to understand some of the core values, the kind of which have been developing since childhood. One of the participants shared that she was not able to explain to her boyfriend at the time why her way of doing things was different from his way. Since she had not questioned the norms herself, it confused her when her boyfriend found them unacceptable and started to oppose them. According to them, they had a relational conflict concerning cultural differences for a long period of time before it was finally solved a few years later:

For sure, if your mom in Asia tells that “hey, you have to protect yourself and be virgin until marriage”. Of course, you will never ask “why mom, why”. No, you’ve been like “okay, yeah, okay I’ll do that”. There is no “why?” (laugh) for sure. And I didn’t even think about that until I meet a westerner. It has never been my problem. Until I met him and then it was a problem. It was a back and forth fight....it was... Rather than that, we didn’t fight in any major thing. But that was the thing we fight the most. (1Af)

Concerning another aspect of cultures, another participant also expressed his confusion when he first experienced another religious custom from his wife. Yet his wife’s conduct and customs sounded and seemed interesting, they appeared to be very strange and bizarre to his understanding, which has been shaped by Finnish culture and society. He expressed the feeling that he was not sure how to view and deal with his wife’s cultural customs.

Yes, you know I don’t really understand, I don’t really....I’m not interested in the ancestor worship, when you have, you know, the altar and this thing. That’s not something I’m really interested in. I would feel weird to have it in our family, but the idea of keeping the family’s record is interesting, though I’m not sure I appreciate it. (2Fm)

Lack of cultural knowledge is highlighted as an emerging problem, which caused most relational conflicts between intercultural spouses. In daily situations, cultural insensitivity may raise great tension into marriage. Especially to those couples, who are from

different cultural backgrounds, they are more likely to experience cultural conflicts than those, who are from the same cultures.

#### *4.1.2 Making assumption of each other's knowledge*

Assuming and stereotyping one's minds and behaviours may be dangerous in marriage. It not necessarily happen only in intercultural marriages, where couples face a large amount of communication challenges. Assuming could also happen in all marriages.

Different cultural backgrounds may play a big role in how couples feel about one another, especially at the beginning of a relationship. Understanding partners' strengths and weaknesses and accepting who they are in marriage are considered very crucial and regarded as a firm foundation for happy and satisfied marriage.

The expectation is associated with the idea of relational certainty/security that one is looking for in a romantic relationship, e.g. marriage. It is of importance in predicting marital satisfaction. Expectations whether of the relationship or of his or her partner, which one has in his/her mind, can differ much concerning bias and accuracy. When the expectations come from biases, couples view their relationships and their partners through coloured glasses and may commit to false perspectives of both these. On the other hand, when one holds accurate expectations that are based on the real-life reality of their relationship, he or she may be quite clear and certain with the circumstances of where he/she and his/her spouse are standing and of what his/her spouse may bring to their mutual life. Accurate expectation often helps foster a sense of control, security, and predictability, while bias expectation may lead to a high level of distress, lack of self-control and relational conflict.

In intercultural marriage, couples are more likely to fall into false assumptions of their partner and the relationship. At the beginning of a marriage, couples did not have yet enough knowledge of their partners' daily life routines and behaviours as the marriage life may considered quite different from the dating period. When entering into mutual life as married

couples, they get more opportunities to observe one another in other perspectives. Any assumption associated with their country of origin or expected behaviour may elevate a high level of conflict during a relationship. For this study, the participant described that her false assumption of her husband's roles had left unnecessary marks on their relationship.

V: Most of the time you realized that at the beginning of the marriage, most of the time your guessing and the reality were quite different. So...

H: like we normally guessing and assuming?

V: yah yah yah assume, that is really dangerous, I can say. I've done quite many of this mistake.

H: Hm...that you assumed and cried?

V: uhm, I guess yah. (3Af)

Whenever we fight, it's harder. It's not mild like I just fight a little bit to win. But it's more like, I know that is your weak point, I'm going to hit you harder. Really, it's more like that, because we have the assumptions, that the other will do things as we think. Of course, you have certain assumptions, you thought you'd understand him or, he thought that he'd understand me. And we assume that we would do things as we did before. But sometimes it's true, sometimes it's not. So we still have some assumptions that sometimes affect our opinions about the other. (1Af)

Having a clear and realistic viewpoint of marital situation may be significantly important to intercultural couples particularly. It keeps them grounded in uncertain and insecure events in marriage. However, due to the limited knowledge of one another, couples are unable to have enough understanding of their spouses, which easily leads to communication dysfunction and relational conflicts.

#### *4.1.3 Unreadiness for marriage and family life*

As marriage is an exceptionally important social relation, it requires such a high level of interdependence and commitment between spouses. Because of its importance in one's emotional life, it has been considered the primary social relationship, through which one's belongingness needs can get fulfilled (Finkel, Hui, Carswell, & Larson, 2014). However,

people often vary in the extent to which they are committed to romantic. Therefore, in this research, the level of commitment is brought up to discussion by many participants.

Relationship readiness refers to the level of commitment, comfort, and willingness that one has in order to share and be close with his or her marriage mate. Relationship readiness plays an important role across any phases of relationship formation, which directly affects the relationship's quality and satisfaction. High readiness is associated with a high perceived sense of belongingness, while low readiness relates to the risk of change and loss of personal control. Regarding those who are readier for committed relationships such as marriage, they are more likely to engage in closeness with spouses in a romantic relationship and have more positive views about their spouses and the relationships than those who are less ready. Furthermore, those with higher relationship readiness are less likely to perceive conflict with personal and relational goals but anticipate more benefit of closeness with their partners in intimate relationships. With relationship readiness, couples are able to act in a way that facilitates the connection with their partners and their relationship continuation.

However, relationship readiness is often misunderstood with relationship avoidance, although they are relatively different in definition as well as function. Lack of readiness is not necessarily associated with intimacy and closeness undesirability. For example, one may at a certain period of time is not available for a committed relationship due to his concentration on professional life, which does not mean that he or she does not desire intimate relationships. In addition, the definition of unreadiness and fear of being single need to also be separated, because they are conceptually different in many ways. While unreadiness is associated closely with the sense of right timing, the fear of being single and alone does not have the same relations (Spielmann et al., 2013). Thus, it is reasonable to think of someone who is ready for an intimate relationship but yet completely at peace at the same time until she or he meets a suitable marriage mate.



In this study, one of the problems causing conflicts between marriage mates in intercultural marital relationships could be unreadiness. Couples, when they met each other at young ages, may be unlikely to be ready for marriage. According to the participant's narration, the spouse's unreadiness has prevented them from understanding each other and caused the communication dysfunction. Furthermore, unreadiness led to the low level of commitment between them, which, according to them, made the intimate relationship more difficult to prosper.

When you were young, you just think about the current situations, so you are more impatient and you're less thinking about long-term things. When you are young and you don't have any worries, it's like you don't worry about many things, that's a good thing at least at that moment. But then when you are not worrying, you may run into trouble because you didn't think about things beforehand. (1Fm)

Think back then I didn't even know myself that well. So, whenever things happen, I tend to withdraw. (1Af)

Relationship readiness plays important role in shaping relationship formation processes. Readiness allows couples to know initial relationship initiation before entering a relationship, the manner when in a relationship and to which degree the relationship will persist. However, those who have limited readiness may experience some degree of conflict due to the different mindset in shaping intimate relationships.

#### *4.1.4 Language inequality*

One of the problem-causing in intercultural marriage might be language inequality. Couples, who come from different linguistic backgrounds, may face the challenges to communicate in the third language that both spouses speak, or in one of the spouse's native language. Concerning a general case of two people from two different linguistic backgrounds wanting to communicate with each other, they may choose to not communicate directly, for example, communicate through mediators, or choose to get along with a low level of

understanding. In such an intimate relationship like marriage, couples, however, *must* reach a high level of mutual understanding, one way or another. Therefore, couples with limited knowledge of their chosen communicating language may face a big communication problem, which causes conflicts in daily interactions.

According to the demographic information of the interview participants, it can be seen that all couples involved in the study come from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Also, when asked, participants disclosed that they are not familiar with their spouse's language, which means that none of the participants are able to conduct a conversation with their spouses either in their native or their spouse's native language. Due to that fact, all participants have been using a third language as their communicating language.

Among all couples participated in the study, two couples addressed that they had no or limited problem with their community language due to the fact that both couples could communicate with their spouses in at least more than one language. Regarding the couple #1, they could communicate well in English and some amount in Japanese. Concerning couple #3, both spouses were able to communicate with each other in both English and Chinese. However, considering the couple #2, the husband spoke fluent Finnish and English, while the wife spoke Vietnamese and English, which means that they spoke to each other only in English. Although they have used English as the mutual communicating language, both spouses addressed the difficulties in expressing their minds and feelings in the third language, because the wife's English proficiency was somehow limited.

“There are some aspects of how Vietnamese people generally pronounce English. That sometimes makes it a bit difficult.” (2Fm)

“Actually, the most difficult thing is language, because to be honest, my English is not yet good. Firstly, in English, my pronunciation is still not correct. So sometimes he did not understand what I said.” (2Af)

Based on their interview answers, the language inequality rooted in the different accents, different levels of vocabulary and expressions. For example, concerning the husband (2Fm), he found difficult to understand his spouse's pronunciation as well as accent. He stated that at the beginning of their mutual life, it took him at least some moments to thoroughly understand what his spouse meant during her speech. Also, due to the language barrier, the wife (2Af) was not able to entirely explain her thinking and explain her cultural customs and beliefs when her husband asked her why people behaved this way, that way but no other way. In addition, she mentioned that she recognized her level of vocabulary was more limited than her husband. Therefore, in a situation when her husband used uncommon words or highly academic words while communicating with her, she was not able to understand the conversation comprehensively. Therefore, the husband (2Fm) mentioned that he could not get the cultural understanding, while the wife (2Af) also mentioned it was not easy at all for her to find the right words and expressions to explain her cultural information to her husband. In situations like these, the problems, which were not related to a cultural misunderstanding at all, might very easily cause cultural distress and miscommunication between spouses.

It is difficult to draw any firm conclusion merely based on the information collected from the interview. However, few general impressions can be viewed. It can be seen that the language barrier might be the reason, which caused miscommunication and conflicts between spouses. The topic of the language barrier is an interesting topic in intercultural marriages.

#### 4.2 Couple strategies to manage marital conflicts

The second question stated: how do Asian-Finnish intercultural marital couples describe the communication strategies they implement in managing conflicts? This study showed that intercultural marriages are no different from intracultural marriages in terms of conflict because marriage results from intimate relationships and regular interaction

frequency (Renalds, 2011). The following will describe how conflicts have happened and solved over time between intercultural couples. Moreover, findings also explain different tactics of solving marital conflicts.

#### *4.2.1 Practical help*

Living in an intercultural marriage entails contact with more than one culture and language on a daily basis. Concerning Finnish-Asian couples living in Finland, the Asian spouses may face more challenges during the integration into the Finnish community. The integration not only includes the surface knowledge of the host culture such as living style, etiquette, and language, but also the hidden understanding of cultures such as beliefs and assumptions, rules of conduct, family roles, gender roles, and others not to mentioned ( see figure 3). With limited knowledge, foreign spouses may have more difficulties to learn and adapt to Finnish culture. Therefore, the practical help provided by the native spouses, are necessary to their spouse's adaptation and integration.

Regarding the Finnish-Asian intercultural couples residing in Finland, the adaptation process and integration into Finnish society may cause foreign spouses some amount of distress. Due to the different cultures, lack of knowledge of the host country and social connections, the foreign spouses may undergo a sense of isolation, which may degrade their level of mental health and life quality. The decrease in life quality of either one of the spouses might directly affect the relationship quality and, therefore, may cause more conflicts between them. That is why the need for conflict management in intercultural marriages can be great.

To help the foreign spouse integrate into the host culture(s), any kind of practical help can be essential. It can be the help in learning the host country's language, dressing correctly in the host country's weather, information about the host country's culture(s), etc. Furthermore, in some marriages, some native spouses offer social support to help their

foreign marriage mates engage in the social life in the host county, such as introducing friends or looking for jobs, which also help facilitate the foreign spouses' integration.

Throughout the data collection, participants revealed how the foreign spouses were helped during the integration into Finnish society.

He teaches me how to dress. Put on my shoes. Put on my coat. Put on my hat and told me “you have wear that much, that much, like this and this and this on top of this. Today is raining, you have to wear this and this. Today is cold, you have to wear this and this. Today we do a bicycle, you have to ride this and this way. Otherwise, you will fall”. (1Af)

“My husband's English is very good, so when I tried to explain something, he also tried to help me find the right words” (2Af)

It can be seen that cultural adaptation and integration into a foreign land can be difficult for some people, depending on where they come from. In intercultural marriages, the foreign spouses may have more challenges than others during the adaptation because of their commitment to marriage with their spouses, who live in the host country. Thence, the practical help and support from the native spouses may remedy the situation and ease the potential conflicts.

#### *4.2.2 Open communication*

The conception of open communication has been mentioned many times in the interviews by most participants. It is considered one of the most important things that makes intimate romantic relationship work. Depending on actual situations, open communication can mean quite differently to different participants with some meaning either freely speaking, comfortable feeling, trouble-free self-disclosing or non-hiding.

The majority of intercultural couples agreed that open communication is the core of a relationship's success. Without open communication, there would be major communication problems and conflicts between them. Open communication allows marital couples to discuss series of relational topics together, solve potential conflict issues and adjust to one another

after acknowledging each other's needs and wishes. Moreover, open communication helps them understand each other's viewpoints, which have been rooted in cultural upbringing and the surrounding environment. Through open communication, couples may obtain a better understanding of each other not only from cultures to cultures but also individual to individual and learn the right interactions in marriage on a daily basis.

The most important thing is to openly talk to each other. Lots of discussions will help. Lots of discussion and conversation. No need to think about losing face, like if you say this thing, maybe you will lose your face, so maybe you would not want to say at all. My case was that I didn't know how to discuss it with my husband, so this was a problem. It is really important to tell others what you feel. Otherwise, it's very hard to know what you have in your mind or your emotions. Also, by using many questions you may be able to understand what your marriage mate is thinking. (3Af)

Discussion is very important. I think we both agree that we both agree that it's important for a couple to be able to talk and to share. There is no point to date a beautiful girl and you cannot talk with her. So the thing that keeps us around each other was that we were able to talk and share and express ourselves and be ridiculous in front of the other. (1Af)

I was actually listening to one relationship show that said like: always there's a conflict, like it's better to talk. If you are supposed to talk one hour, then you should talk about two. Talking too much is better than talking too little. (1Fm)

Throughout each interview with the intercultural couples in Finland, the concept of open communication mentioned numerous times. While some participants disclosed many positive situations when open communication took place in order to solve relational conflicts, some revealed situations that they fail to communicate openly with their spouses.

Communication failure is a great material, which led to the comparison between situations with and without open communication, to perceive the importance of open communication in intercultural marriage particularly. In this study, few participants unfolded that lack of open communication was the reason, which led to their first breakup (before marriage), and the situation of their relationship only changed when they eventually learned how to speak

openly to one another. Others unveiled that their poor communication with limited openness increased the level of distress and the amount of misunderstanding between them in the course of a relationship.

Before it's easier for him to say "I'm sorry", but there were also more things that he did not tell me, you know what I mean. That's why it was bad. And that's why we broke up because he had to do a lot and I think he had to hold a lot. But now when we both grow up, we learn that we can express ourselves more, so there are more times that [the partner's name] really tells me what he thinks. (1Af)

At that time, I just stopped saying. So I didn't say anything. So for him, it was very hard to know why I was angry and why I felt bad because he thinks he was wrong. He didn't do any wrong. But at that time why I didn't talk to him openly? Because I don't know how to explain. It was quite difficult for me and that I have very complicated emotions. (3Af)

Intercultural couples, especially those who have vowed to commit in marriage, may have a great need for open communication because each spouse may have different ways of communicating, beliefs and values, which need to bring up for discussion. No matter how long they have married to each other, either at the beginning of a marriage or after a long time in marriage, open communication may play important role in reconciling marital conflict, overcome each other's limitations and leaving no room for confusion between spouses. Therefore, in marriage couples are able to initiate the self-disclosure towards one another and adjust to each other.

However, it was doubting how much open communication had appeared in intercultural marriages, since "open communication" has been a common term nowadays. Furthermore, it was unknown whether being open about everything is a good thing or not in a relationship. Apparently, many question marks lied on between what couples said in this study's interviews and what they have actually done in their own marriage. Therefore, even though open communication is theoretically an essence of a happy marriage, there may be some variances of open communication lying between married couples in reality. That is

why, a matter of open communication in marriage, especially in an intercultural marriage, requires further researches in order to draw a better picture of communication in marriage.

#### *4.2.3 Empathy and patience*

Empathy and patience can often lead to a high level of understanding and self-disclosure between intercultural spouses. The concept of empathy and patience was also mentioned during the interview. All intercultural couples who participated in this study had been married for several years. During that time they had experienced situations where self-disclosure, seeking clarification and mutual understanding were needed to take place. When intercultural couples began to learn and accept the cultural similarities and differences of one another, it allowed the marriages to foster and mutual understanding to grow between them with the awareness that they were accepted and understood by each other.

The core purpose of empathy may be to understand one another and seek mutual understanding between one another. On that account, empathy might be seen as an inevitable element in inciting trust, openness, intimacy and relationship satisfaction in marriage. Consequently, empathy enables couples to comprehend their partner's inner experiences and thinking, which later leads to successful conversations and interactions. Therefore, effective communication may facilitate the emotional connection between spouses and provide necessary validation that both spouses need in marriage (Ickes & Simpson, 2001). The participants have also underlined the importance of empathy to understand and interact with marriage mates. Therefore, according to them, empathy helped them to communicate with their spouses better, prevent emotional resentment and understand one another better.

“Empathy. I’m more empathetic. Because I think I can understand him more, so I can explain why he does such a thing, although I might not agree with it, I can understand why he does that.” (1Af)

Regarding intercultural married couples particularly, being able to empathize and comprehend marriage mate's inner experiences and thinking can be evidence of true



connection and understanding. In order to reach a profound understanding of one's thoughts and emotions, it may need a great amount of patience. Patience allows couples to endure hardships in marriage and overcome relational challenges that come over time. Also, patience may help expand the extent of one's tolerance ability towards unexpected events in marriage such as conflicts. Often lack of patience leads to conflict intolerance, the unacceptability of spouse's personality and cultural differences, and reluctance to compromise in marriage. Whereby, lack of sufficient amount of patience may result in marital dissatisfaction and marital dissolution. In this study, many participants did not forget but emphasized the importance of patience in reconciling the intense conflict between them and their spouses as well as protecting their marriages.

I also feel lucky that he was quite patient and often he tried to start conversations first and tried to ask for the reason why I was angry or whether there was a problem with his behaviours. On that day, we conflicted in the evening and the next morning he carefully asked, so I could tell him what I did not agree with. Little by little, we tried to understand each other. (2Af)

“He patiently asked some questions that I needed to answer. So we gave me some time to thinking and then I, I can think about that later and then I can tell him. So it was like, little by little, we fix the problem together.” (3Af)

“And being patient. I think if any of you are not enough patient, then it's even harder to listen for example.” (3Fm)

The participants highlighted that with the help of empathy and patience, couples could have more knowledge of what their spouses liked and disliked so that they could gradually understand one another. Having empathy and patience towards each other was seen as being important for bridging a perceived cultural gap between spouses and avoiding potential conflicts that may escalate during a conversation. Over the course of a relationship, the participating couples told that they came to overcome their cultural limitations and strengthen the sense of empathy and patience between one another.

#### 4.2.4 Spouse's appreciation of one another's cultural background

One of the strategies to reconcile conflicts, which was mentioned by participants during the interview and has also been widely used in their marriages, was to remember the good cultural traits and kind acts that happened in the course of the relationship. Gratitude and appreciation often help couples overcome relational distress and restore positive thoughts and emotions towards each other.

Although challenges may be seen as strengthening the marital connection between partners, they might also be the reasons for marital conflicts and distress. That is why it was important that couples sometimes recalled good qualities of their spouses and the reasons why they chose their marriage mates. Then marital conflicts might not seem so serious as it seemed earlier when couples were filled with appreciation towards their spouses' cultures.

[the partner's name]'s parents and brother, in general, does not speak much. For instance [the partner's name] was back from one year of living abroad and they didn't even celebrate. They just like, make a bit better dinner with a wine that they regularly have on Friday night and nothing happened. It was a very quiet family but I was also okay with that quietness cause I can see the way they show love, it's very subtle. It's there but it's like subtle. (1Af)

I like the background of [the partner's name] that very talkative. I think it is a good thing. I think it is a good thing in life, that you are able to talk to so many people. It's good to talk a lot because I don't always talk so much, so it's good she talks. (1Fm)

They're very polite. It's one of the things that I think everyone notices it whoever goes to Korea, you will notice people are so polite. And they are well-mannered like they respect other people's property, even the common property, like the government's. For example, you won't see any graffiti on the walls or anywhere, people are not ruining the public property. They're well-behaved, even the young people. Yeah, those are amazing things. (3Fm)

It was interesting to observe that when it came to appreciating someone's cultural traits, the appreciation touched deeply and personally. Noticeably, many themes above discussed the influences of culture were presented at the level of national cultures such as

Vietnamese, Korean or Finnish cultures. However, when participants were asked what they appreciated the most from their spouse's cultures, the answers were more related to other matters of their lives or marriage life, rather than any national level of cultures. For example, in the first excerpt (1Af), the participants expressed that she was surprised at the low-key expression of love within her spouse's family, which might not necessarily represent any typical Finnish culture because each family might have different unique features and cultures. Moreover, second and third except, 1Fm's appreciation of his spouse's easy-going, social characteristics and 3Fm's appreciation of his wife's politeness and respect might not related to any typical kinds of people at the level of nations or cultures. In fact, those features were more connected with their personal preferences, which was interesting to know because, from the micro view, marriage was still considered a very personal and intimate relationship. Therefore, even though intercultural marriage associates with many matters of cultures and interpersonal interactions, it is still a particularly personal relationship.

In intercultural marriage, it was good to remind oneself of his or her spouse's good qualities and cultures, even though at times it might not always be possible to think positively about his or her spouses during the intense conflict. Gratitude prevents disagreement from escalating and transforming into intense conflicts. Furthermore, often giving and receiving appreciation help strengthen couples' connection, which eventually increases their marital satisfaction.

#### 4.3 Presence of Third Cultures in resolving conflicts

According to the participants, during the course of a relationship, they learned about each other and adjusted themselves to the mutually married life. During this process of accommodating to one another, couples were eventually creating third culture(s), which both can comfortably share together without giving up anyone's cultures. Within the third culture(s), it might allow both partners to win in marriage, even though they may come from

different cultural backgrounds. There were several ways in which joint third cultures could manifest in the participants' accounts. Over the next paragraphs, I will go through each of these in turn.

#### *4.3.1 Language*

A common language can be seen as one of the most fundamental existence of third cultures. Concerning intercultural couples from different cultural and language backgrounds, it is important to have a common language for communication. Through daily interactions, they are not only sharing a language but also creating connections, living atmosphere, ground information and regulations, and customized traditions, which both feel comfortable living with. Choosing the common language for communication is not done only between spouses but within the family (with children, for example).

The couples reported using the third language to bridge their cultural gap and resolve relational conflicts. According to their experiences, the third language played the role in problem-solving rather than generate more relational conflicts within their relationship. These findings has been in line with Coole (2011)'s discovery, that third language allows couples to behave harmoniously and reduce unnecessary conflicts. Quite often, couples chose English as their third language, even though English may not be any of the spouses' native language. One couple in the interview, who both speak Chinese and English as their third languages, stated that according to where they stay, they would choose the third language accordingly. According to them, the third language was also meant not only to speak with one another but also to communicate with social circles.

yeah at the same time we only speak Chinese. Almost 100%. And later on, I realize, he has many friends. They all spoke in English and actually my husband, his strong language is English. So I realize that I need to study English (3Af)

In many cases, couples explained that the third language was widely used as a communication tool, which allowed couples to share deep thoughts and solve many marital conflicts. For example, according to participants, the third language played an important role in connecting them and their spouses. Through communication in the third language, they were able to conduct intimate conversations about marriage and relationship development. However, it left a certain amount of complications in the language as the third language may not be the native language of any spouses. Due to that fact, the participants stated that the third language often caused some amount of misunderstanding at the beginning of their marriage.

Even though you might understand some words, you speak the same language and both understand each other, but you're missing the point, you're completely misunderstanding the information." (3Fm)

When you add the aspect of not speaking in either one's mother tongue, we have been communicating in a third language. So that adds another, of course, layer for expressing your emotions in another language. Make it even harder to communicate, to understand one's real meaning." (3Fm)

In addition, in intercultural marriages, the third language is the communication tool connecting family members. For example, the third language was conducted between husband, wife and children. Moreover, the third language was also used to communicate with in-law parents, who also come from other linguistic backgrounds. In this study, the third language referred not only to the verbal language but also the nonverbal body language, when mentioning the common communication ground in the family. Therefore, participants did not forget to emphasize the importance of body language in communicating with the family's members. Most often, some participants mentioned that even though they did not be able to speak the language of their in-laws, they were particularly able to understand each other thanks to the help of universal body language.

#### 4.3.2 *Family closeness*

In this study, the third culture building was also showed in the family's daily routines and interaction. The adjustment to mutual life from both parties, the foreign spouse and the native family, explained well how a new third culture was built in order to make all family members feel comfortable while living together. By adjusting and accommodating to mutual life, both foreign spouse and native family members only learned to live with one another but also facilitated the acceptance and connection in the family. For that reason, mutual life allowed them to find similarities in each other and relate them as one family.

To explore the family's connection as one of the existence of third culture building, interview participants were asked many times to describe their relationship with the native families in this study. According to their experiences, they stated that even though their spouses and they were not from the same cultural backgrounds, there were still some similarities in each other, which related them together. Therefore, they found themselves less estranged living with their spouse and with the in-laws. When the acceptance and adjustment were established in the family, the mutual life became easier for both sides.

The more I live here in Finland with [the partner's name]'s family, I see similarities. Before I would assume that Westerners don't have as much as close family ties. But after living in with [the partner's name]'s family long enough, I realized that they do. They do care and they do have that kind of ties, it's just more stereotypes you don't think they have (1Af)

Moreover, family ties are also important between parents and children, especially regarding intercultural families. In general, it is unlikely that children in intercultural families have only one cultural identity either from father's or mother's side. For that reason, participants stated that they would try their best to keep their future children inherited the cultures from both parents and connected with cultural origins from them. For example, cultural origins include connections with grand parents and relatives as well as the knowledge of cultural customs and languages. In that way, they emphasized that the second generation

from intercultural families would not lose the cultural background, which would inherit from parents. The majority of interview participants agreed that having more than one cultural background is one of their advantage of being intercultural families, rather than a disadvantage.

I want my kids to know, I don't want them to be completely Finnish, because as I said, I appreciate Finnish culture but if they're too Finnish, I will be sad at the same time because it's nice to have both. (1Af)

That we would keep our language. That is important. From language, they also can keep the family ties the grandparents. My parents would want to talk to their grandchildren. So they should at least understand some basic Vietnamese and [the partner's name] really support that. He thinks that it is an advantage for people to be in a bilingual family, so why not, why to lose that. (1Af)

In addition, the language in this situation is again regarded as a communication tool to facilitate the development of third culture building, which appeared in the form of family ties/closeness. The family closeness in intercultural marriage would allow tying each member together as a whole family since their connection has been built stronger over time. The more years they have spent in marriages, the more secure and firm the family closeness would become. Thence, it became a strong element, which effectively tied intercultural spouses together regardless of the cultural differences and challenges they might face.

#### *4.3.3 Religion*

In this study, the importance of religion has arisen as an interesting element in intercultural marriages. Due to the cultural and custom differences, it may affect greatly how one would trust and marry someone from different cultural backgrounds. The cultural differences in the worst scenario can be enormous problems causing endless conflict in intercultural marriages. Furthermore, besides cultural difference problem, the difference in core belief system could be one of the things that may not appear at the beginning of

marriage but arise few years later between spouses. For that reason, the difference in the core belief system, e.g. religion, could lead to divorce in intercultural marriages.

When being asked about religious and belief system related matters, the participants described having relatively similar orientations. When their interview answers were compared to each other, the findings were comparably similar between each couple. It means that couples had sort of the same idea about certain matters such as family construction, religious belief and not to mention.

Most participants did not regard religion as a very important element in marriage. Most couples did not have the same religious background. Despite that fact, they had relatively similar beliefs about religion. For example, the majority of native spouses from Finland acknowledged themselves as Christians but had, at the time of this study, lost the relationship with their religion. Moreover, because of their high education, they stated that they preferred the explanation of science to the explanation of human existence from the Bible. Meanwhile, most Asian spouses disclosed that they came from non-religious or folk-religious families. It means that they either believed in a certain god(s) or did not believe in any forms of god's existence at all. According to their experiences, they did not have major problems or conflicts between each other concerning religious differences.

I think it's easy for us because we are both not religious, so we don't really care that much. We don't care that much about religion. (1Fm)

On the other hand, one couple had a strong religious view in both their personal and marital life. One participant (3Af) stated that she considered religion to be the core of her marital relationship with her husband. She explained religion is the factor, which made her decide who would be her marriage mate and believe how the relationship would be conducted. Furthermore, different from other couples, she described that whenever she had conflicts with her husband, it was clear to her that her husband wanted to take care of her and



she needed to listen to him. Moreover, she stated that her husband should be regarded as the head of the family and should take the lead in the family. Therefore, it was important for her to follow her husband's lead according to her husband's wills and also God's wills about marriage. Based on her experiences, her husband and she had conflicts at the beginning of their marriage. According to her, she tried to follow the bible's lesson about marriage and listen to her husband. After that, she recognized her husband's will to take care of her and solve her problems. After many years in marriage, she described that nowadays, they haven't had major problems or problems which could not be solved between them.

For me, this religion thing is the most important. Because of this religious background, we could unit together and we can fully trust each other. Because of it, our marriage is not two of our unity together. We have another god is a the third party. So three unity together. So not two-person relationship anymore. If I hurt him, so I also hurt God. That's why this is a more sacred relationship. (3Af)

H: "if he's coming from another religion, probably you would not marry?"  
 V: "uhm...yeah. Also, our parents will not agree because they can't. How they can believe this person? Because we have this belief, so I trust my husband that he will not do secret drugs and drunk and this and that. In god's viewpoint, this is all dirty things. So this also protect our marriage, I think"  
 (3Af)

Moreover, she also stated that before entering into marriage, she and her, at that point of time, fiancée were obliged to conduct pre-marriage education requested by her in-laws and provided by the congregation they belonged to. So according to her, she was fairly clear with the role she needed to play in the family and know some solutions when conflicts happened between them. In addition, she explained the bible and its wisdom have allowed her and her husband to accept that they were not perfect humans. For that reason, it was easier for them to forgive each other's flaws and mistakes.

"Because of these principles, we also always forgive each other, we try to forgive each other more and show love. Basically, I think all this, from these

principles and we're learning from the bible. So for me, this is priority, priority." (3Af)

In general, the similarity in religious views is considered important to minimize the conflict in intercultural marriages. The couple, who have the same religious views, were less likely to argue about religion. However, couples, who come from a different religious backgrounds, may find it difficult to share religious viewpoints or discuss religion with their spouses. Hence, religion may or may not be one of the factors causing conflicts in intercultural marriages.

#### 4.4 The influence of society and community

The surrounding society or community could have a great influence on intercultural married couples. For example, the acceptance from family, support from friends and relatives may affect indirectly the couple's relationship satisfaction. If an intercultural couple receives much support from friends and family, they may be less likely to have major conflicts between one another in terms of their community. On another hand, if the couple is more isolated by their community, thence they are more likely to feel discouraged about their relationship and more likely to conflict from time to time. However, having too much help and support also can cause unnecessary conflicts between spouses. The following sections would explain more about the influence of society and the community in greater detail.

##### *4.4.1 Family and relatives*

Participants were asked, how family and relatives have influenced them in continuing their relationship, whether or not their families has an effect on their relationship and if there is, how they dealt with the family's challenges. Most participants answered that they had almost no or minor problems with their families. According to their experiences, most of the time their families have supported them from the beginning of their marriage. Some disclosed that their in-law's family did not make any objection towards their relationship, even though

they and their in-laws did not know each other well. Some even explained that families have given them great support to overcome their relational conflicts and problems at certain times. Others stated that because of their good relationship with their in-law families, they were able to reconcile the relationship after a long breakup.

“So [the partner’s name]’s dad is super positive...so they do little things, like “oh if you want to go to the sports centre, I’m going to pay that”. And then I’m like “I don’t have shoes”. “Okay, go buy shoes”. So he sponsored for my shoes and then sports. And they bought my eyeglasses, and then [the partner’s name]’s mom went shopping for bras with me (laugh). In mid-2015, dad even said, “if you cannot afford the school in [a place]. No worries, we can help you pay for that”. He said, “if you cannot afford that, or if your parents cannot help, no worries we can help you to pay for that.” (1Af)

On the other hand, the influence of family may intervene in the relationship of marital couples. For example, one participant (3Af) described how her habits and behaviours with her parents discouraged the husband from being a family’s leader. Due to her frequently asking her parents for life advice and solutions for most problems instead of her husband, it made her husband feel confused and misunderstood, as if she distrusted his capability as the head of their family. According to her, at that point in time, if she had to choose whose advice she should listen to, she was more likely to stick to her parents’ opinion. For this reason, it made the conflicts between her and her husband become worse. Therefore, the misunderstanding between them increased. Just as she described, it took her some time and many lessons to finally change her communication habits and set reasonable boundaries with her parents in order to protect her marriage and learn to lean on her husband.

“ I have a very strong relationship with my parents and my family. That’s why I mentioned it could be good but also it could be bad because a too strong relationship is always not that easy or not good. For example, at the beginning of our marriage, I always asked my parents. Almost every week I called my parents. I gave them so much information about my marriage, about what happened and what kind of things were going on, because of their curiosity to know if we were doing good or not. But this, I think, is too much. My husband was confused, who was my protector, him or my parents. So several times I

noticed my husband feels bad about that. So I talked less with my parents and didn't ask them for our personal things, our marriage and also they respected.”  
(3Af)

In general, it could be seen that the family's opinions may have a great influence on couples. Depending on situations, it is difficult to see whether the opinions and supports influence positively or negatively in couples' marriage lives. As a whole, too much or too little of family support can be considered harmful to the development and continuity of one's marriage. Therefore, balancing the amount of family support and an influence in marital life is regarded as the key answer for conflict management with families.

#### *4.4.2 Society and community*

The majority of the interviewees stated that their friends' and community's opinions had influence on their relationship to a certain extent. According to their experiences, the community's opinions did not totally take control over their relationships with their spouses. Instead, at certain moments it either encouraged them for a bright future or discourage them from continuing the relationships. Therefore, concerning intercultural marriages, the community's influence may make either a positive or negative impact on couples' relationship quality.

Regarding the negative influence from the friend circle and the community, some participants described that community tried to use social norms to separate them from time to time. Due to the uncertainty towards foreigners, society, as they described, were not used to see foreigners, especially someone's foreign spouse. Therefore, at the time they were not willing to support or, even accept the relationship or the existence of the foreign spouses. Furthermore, couples also reported that the influence of society at times caused unwanted conflicts resulted from uncommon behaviours against the social norms. Consequently, these unwanted conflicts unexpectedly ruined their relationship. Hence, based on their experiences,

it took them an effort to unlearn people's opinions and relearn what to take in and what to discard from the surrounding environment.

“He didn't drive motorbike for one year and a half. No, almost one year. I always have to drive. And you know in Vietnam in a masculine culture, when the women drive the guy, it looks wrong. And all of the friends asked me “hey why don't your boyfriend drive you?”. And I'm like, I don't know, he doesn't drive. So everyone was making fun of me. And I'm still annoyed at him”(1Af)

“Now I have to drive him when we are in Vietnam, but I don't complain anymore because I know that he can drive, you know.” (1Af)

On the other hand, society and the surroundings may have a great positive impact on how intercultural marriage was viewed. For example, some participants expressed gladness when the friend circle had positive opinions towards their spouses and supported their relationship. As a result, according to them, the social support gave them more hope to look for in the future and strength to overcome relational challenges. In addition, other participants stated when friends and community accepted them as couples, they were more likely to receive more help and support from friends and family after that. Eventually, it helped their mentality stay stronger and the relationship, as a result, remains healthy and balanced. Hence, in their opinions, the acceptance and support from society and friends were relatively important on a daily basis.

“One thing I like about her is that [the partner's name] is very good to bring out with my friends. Everybody enjoys her company and I feel it's like...as a man, I think it may be not the right thing to say but like, you feel proud to have a pretty and nice girlfriend so that I think it's an important thing as well. Like if you have a girlfriend that everybody likes, you feel, as a boyfriend, you feel very good.” (1Fm)

In short, it can be seen that the community might have an influence on intercultural marriages in a certain extent. Depending on the nature of each relationship, the behaviour from society towards couples might vary. The social impact on intercultural couples might be positive or negative, which therefore influenced the intercultural couples' experience

accordingly. Based on interviewees' experiences in Finland, society indirectly influenced their marriages on a daily basis.

#### 4.5 Additional themes

Besides the three major themes mentioned in the section of methodology, there were two additional subthemes, misunderstandings attributed to gender and the prospect of marital satisfaction, which appeared to be relevant to this study. Due to the fact that these two additional themes were not mentioned often during the interview, they were not significantly qualified to be one of the main themes. Moreover, the content of two additional themes was not directly related to the study's main focus, in spite of their considerable meaning to a general audience. Therefore, they remained in this study as additional minor themes.

##### *4.5.1 Misunderstanding between genders*

The idea of misunderstanding between genders appeared to be prominent throughout the discussion with participants. Often participants mentioned that conflicts resulted from the different ways of thinking between women and men. The idea of gender differences emerged when, based on participants' interviews, the conflicts were not related to cultural problems nor interpersonal interaction problem but the different needs from opposite genders. For example, as being a head of a family, husbands may need the feeling of being the family leader. Meanwhile, a wife may need also the feeling of being protected, instead of being threatened, in marriage. These are the mere general examples, that couples may experience in marriage. The following paragraph will analyse deeper the meaning of gender differences in intercultural marriages, based on interviews' findings.

In marriage, both sexes may have certain needs, which eventually might suppose to support each other. However, if the needs get misperceived and unfulfilled, couples may face different obstacles causing misunderstanding between spouses. According to participants, the misunderstanding prevented them from achieving what they needed from marriages and from

providing the accurate relational needs for their partners in marriages. When the needs were unfulfilled, they started to feel unsatisfied, which led to negotiation or even conflicts. At this point, conflicts happened when the relational negotiation was not successfully agreed.

"Many women expect men to understand without the need to speak out loud. So, I think I requested or expected him understood me without saying. But it was wrong from the start." (3Af)

Furthermore, they stated that gender misunderstanding increased the gap between husbands and wives, when they had specific expectations for one another in terms of gender roles in a family and did not know how to communicate or negotiate these expectations between each other. For example, the participant (1Af) reported that as coming from a more masculine cultural background, she expected her spouse to be a "strong man". According to her, she meant that she expected from her spouse the ability to do the role of most men, such as protecting family, doing most technical/repairing works, taking care of family financial and the like. Howsoever, she would feel conflicted if her spouse at certain times did not be able to show these traits.

You know, in Vietnam the guys have to drive the girl, it's more of the thing that [the partner's name] didn't try. I also think that he didn't try and then I got annoyed at him. In another way, he has adapted very well (into my culture and my family) but anything else, some little thing that he doesn't, then I'm like "you didn't do that". More like that...yeah" (1Af)

In another situation, the gender's roles could be also appeared most obviously, when the participant (1Af) explained the reason behind why her spouse was chosen. According to her, it was important for her that her spouse could display masculine traits to her, such as the ability to provide security and support for the family. As long as she noticed those traits from her spouse, she would not have any conflicts with him regarding gender roles in the family. In addition, their relationship was once discontinued because of the vague appearance of gender characteristics from her spouse. To her, gender role was one of the important elements, which led the family according to gender ability. Therefore, the unclear appearance

of masculine traits from her spouse had made her feel unsafe and nervous concerning mutual family life. Even after a long breakup, the gender characteristics were still something important to her, which allowed her to determine whether or not the relationship between them should be still continued.

One of the reasons why I choose [the partner's name] again now was because I know that he can be a man (laughed). One of the big uncertainties before was whether or not he can be a strong man. I wasn't sure his career point, his plan. I wasn't sure back then. I wanted from a man to have a clear career goal, to be strong, to be able to take care of the family. And I wasn't sure back then if he can do that. But after this break period, I see that better in him." (1Af)

To summarize, gender roles in marriage was also one of the problems, which were seen as causing conflicts between husbands and wives. It was mentioned a few times in the data by the participants that the problems in terms of gender issues were time-consuming and complicated to understand. Since they were not able to understand each other's gender roles in the family, it was difficult for them to appreciate one another's contributions. Also, gender differences often led to behavioural difference in inquiring for relational need fulfilment or showing love to one another. For that reason, marital dissatisfaction might happen frequently.

#### *4.5.2 The prospect of marital satisfaction in intercultural marriages*

As one of the additional questions during the interview, participants were asked what were their strategies for intercultural couples to cope with conflicts. Conflicts could result from cultural differences or from interpersonal clashes. These questions were meant to investigate the sources that they viewed as causing conflicts and affecting the couples' marital satisfaction. Also, after asking a sequence of interview questions, these final questions required participants to conclude their conflict management strategies to handle disagreements and conflicts in marriages.

According to participants, the cultural difference and cultural misunderstanding were still regarded as the most difficult challenges in intercultural marriages. They reported that the difference in culture(s) such as customs, language, and behavioural manners was one of



the prominent causes of conflicts, which could directly link to cultural differences. The cultural differences often led to cultural misunderstanding. For that reason, many participants expressed the important urge for cultural communication and understanding between spouses in order to avoid and reconcile conflicts. However, in a certain extent, language capability may not always a cause of cultural differences. Language, as a part of a culture, is also utilized as a social tool to help people communicate with others. Therefore, when studying conflicts in intercultural marriages, it is important to realize that cultural differences could be a major factor leading to conflicts but it may not be always the case.

Furthermore, according to their experiences in intercultural marriages, they also emphasized the importance of cultural integration, which directly referred to the foreign spouses' needs to master the host country's basic cultural norms. This meant that the more foreign spouses integrated into Finnish society, the more freedom they will get in marriages as well as the less dependent they needed to be to their native spouses in most matters concerning Finnish culture and culturally behavioural manners. Once the cultural understanding could be established and agreed by both spouses, the chance of happening potential conflicts could be eliminated.

There are a lot of Asian who, even though, they have lived a long time in Finland, they have not at all integrated to the system, which means that they will have just Asian friends and the only Western link is their boyfriends or husbands. So in that sense, it also can create troubles. So that's why, I told you before that [the partner's name] needs to do, like get integrated into the system of Finland. (1Fm)

Although the urge for cultural integration sounded hopeful and optimistic because it helped to eliminate cultural conflicts in marriages. However, learning and accepting another culture different from one's own native cultures was yet a difficult mission as it depended greatly on people's willingness for adjustment. Besides, the cultural adaptation should not result from only one party but come from both parties in marriages. If the effort for

adaptation was from only either wives or husbands in most cases, it might lead to more marital stress, conflicts and maybe even marital dissolution. For that reason, it was important that both husbands and wives were willing to adapt to each other and to the host environment, where they both were living in.

If you are too Asian in Finland, it might be trouble. Or if you are too Finnish in Asia, it also may be trouble. That will create a lot of conflicts. And in those couples that I see here in here in Finland, I would say that Finnish guy, usually the guy doesn't understand as much about Asia as they should, in my opinion. I think a lot of Finns who has an Asian girlfriend or Asian wife here in Finland have not lived in Asia. They may visit sometimes but they haven't lived in Asia. So I think in that sense their understanding about those is, maybe, a bit shallow. So I think that would be, maybe, my advice more to the guys. Or, maybe there are some women as well who have an Asian boyfriend or husband. So really knowing about the country and culture will help in the relationship. (1Fm)

Since the cultural misunderstanding was one of the common problems that often happened in intercultural marriages, it came up to the questions of what were the right strategies or attitude to help couples and individuals approach intercultural marriages safely. Participants were asked to give opinions if they had got the opportunity to talk with their younger selves or to other intercultural young couples about intercultural marriages. The answers have brought up many interesting points of view. For example, most female participants emphasized the importance of open communication and mind sharing in marriages because in the past they were not able to open up and share their wishes in marriages. Meanwhile, the majority of the male participants highlighted the profound understanding of the spouse's cultures, due to the fact that the lack of cultural understanding was the problematic cause of conflicts in intercultural marriages. Furthermore, not many native spouses had an insightful understanding of the foreign spouses' cultures, which led to more conflicts in marriages.

When you really don't know the culture, you are fascinated by everything. Then you meet someone and then you start a relationship. At first, it might be

like, everything is very good, but there are also so many problems that come up later. Lots of these relationships have the basic communication problem firstly and not understanding the culture in both ways. So my advice always is, do not start a relationship, do not start dating someone before you understand. Wait a couple of years at least for you to understand the culture, to understand the people, so you can make a better choice. It's better and easier to have a relationship later on these years. I would say it is a higher success rate for having a good relationship, or a long-lasting relationships. (3Fm)

To summarize, the findings showed that it took many lessons and trials to gain a successful marital relationship between intercultural spouses, according to participants' experiences. The most common advice for prosperous intercultural marriages was open communication and cultural understanding. Open communication allowed couples to share expectations in marriages, while cultural understanding helped improve the mutual understanding between spouses and harmony in marriages. Therefore, intercultural marriages might be harmonized and marital conflicts could be avoided.

## 5. Discussion

The results from this data collection are broad yet unique because they merged the topic of conflict communication with the phenomenon of intercultural relationships in Finland. Looking at these two distinct levels, the data collected from this research correlates with previous research about conflict communication and intercultural couples. As the data is researched under the third cultural building's scope, it showed that the correlation between previous studies on the subject and participants' experiences during the interviews seemed to be similar and show a liking to one another. Eventually, the deliberately open research questions produced data in line with previous studies on two subject areas, which resulted in the uniqueness of this research.

### 5.1. Relationship maintenance behaviours

Maintaining a successful and satisfying intimate relationship never seems easy. It requires lots of hard work, trials and sometimes sacrifices from both parties of intercultural couples in order to retain happy marriages. In this study, the relationship maintenance behaviours between Finnish-Asian's intercultural couples are discussed to discover the essence of daily marital interactions, which maintained the continuity of relationship satisfaction in intercultural marriages.

Throughout the research and interview, it is found that marital satisfaction resulted from many factors. From the data, marital satisfaction could come from the strong will to adjust to one another, the perceived understanding of the spouse's host culture, willingness to change behaviours according to situations, to provide practical help, to retain empathy, and patience, open communication, etc. Among those positive influences, open communication, practical help, empathy and patience were seen most prominently as they were mentioned many times by interviewees. According to their experiences, by being patient and empathized with one another's difficulties along with giving practical help and open up to

each other in daily interaction, they couples be able to hold on to marriage as well as support each other in marriage. For that reason, the themes of open communication, practical help, empathy, and patience will be discussed more in detail.

### *5.1.1 Open communication*

Throughout this research, open communication was regarded as the most important element in conflict reconciliation and satisfactory marital relationships. Many previous studies have emphasized the importance of communication in relationship satisfaction (Byers & Demmons, 1999) as well as the importance of conflict communication in conflict management (Tili and Baker, 2015). Intercultural couples need open communication to exchanges personal thinking, wishes in marriages, cultural practices/customs as well as ways of thinking.

In this study, participants often revealed that open communication allowed them to understand each other, enhancing intimacy in both physical and emotional interactions, and build deep respect for each other. These factors were considered significant to intercultural couples because through open communication, a deep understanding of one another could be established and lead to stronger feelings of closeness. Through self-disclosure and open communication, couples eventually found themselves converging towards one another and were more willing to create a comfortable living atmosphere together. Therefore, the existence of third culture building helps intercultural couples build a marital relationship on solid ground and reconcile conflicts.

While creating a mutual third culture for each other, couples gradually agreed on certain ground regulations to maintain the continuity of their interpersonal relationships, which is what the third culture building purposely demonstrate Casmir (1976, 1999). For that reason, many participants disclosed that open communication has been the key communication strategy for a successful marriage. Especially, in many situations, open

communication helps intercultural couples understand the motives behind every action/reaction. Therefore, they could communicate better according to one another's needs, which led to a better understanding of each other's wishes and more feelings of closeness. Many previous studies reinforced the significance of open communication to be at the core of satisfied intercultural relationships (Byers & Demmons, 1999; Reiter & Gee, 2008).

#### *5.1.2. Practical help*

The result showed that intercultural couples were able to give each other necessary practical help, which in times either one of them would need help from the other spouse. When practical support could fulfil couples' needs in marriage, it means that their marital satisfaction could also increase accordingly. This result also correlated with previous studies mentioned in the literature research about marital satisfaction that the more rewards couples reaped from marriage, the more satisfied they may feel in marriage (Stone & Shackelford, 2007).

From the view of relational maintenance, practical support means offering advice, providing support and giving reassurance (Messman, Canary & Hause, 2000). In the study of opposite-sex relationships, it is found that practical support is considered one of the most common relational maintenance behaviours, according to Messman et al. (2000) Moreover, the conception of practical support has also appeared as the maintenance behaviour of assurances and advice in Stafford (2003)'s study. More specifically, the study of relational support as maintenance behaviours has always been consistent with the general conception of social support, which serves as a shield from difficult life events (Noller, Feeney, & Peterson, 2001).

However, in the perspectives of an intimate relationship, practical support has received less attention for deeper study than the study of general social support, even though it is considered particularly important in relational adjustment for such intimate relationships

like marriages (Sarason & Sarason, 2001; Gaines & Agnew, 2003; Acitelli, 1996). Therefore, this study gives an extension in the field of practical support in marital relationships.

Furthermore, besides the practical support for daily interactions, the support for spouse's religious beliefs and practices were also discussed in this study as relational maintenance behaviours in order to examine how cultural supports and religious support are linked to marital satisfaction, commitment, and relational longevity. According to previous studies, cultural and religious support increased correspondingly with the marital satisfaction, which means that the more cultural and religious support they were given in marriages from both parties, the more couples felt satisfied with their marriages (Reiter and Gee, 2008). For that reason, they are regarded as positive relational maintenance in intercultural marital relationships in this study.

### *5.1.3. Empathy and patience*

In this study, empathy and patience were considered important relationship maintenance behaviours. They were mentioned many times during the interviews and played significant roles in facilitating open communication and reconciling marital conflicts. According to the previous studies, marital satisfaction also relied significantly on the extent of empathy and patience that couples had for each other in marriages (Rogers, 1957; Davis & Oathout, 1987). In according to Rogers (1958) empathy referred to the ability to perceive others' inner experiences as one's own experiences.

Based on the result, it is found that empathy and patience have helped couples overcome their own drawbacks and be open to adjustment and communication. As the meaning of empathy and patience is to look forward to understanding others' experiences and feelings, they allow fostering mutual trust, openness, and closeness in relationships (Barnes, 2014; Coplan, 2011; Devoldre et al., 2010; Ickes, 2001). Therefore, they are considered the core elements of successful intimate relationships (Ickes & Simpson, 2001). Previous studies

about empathy and patience in romantic relationships showed to correspond with the result achieved from this study.

Furthermore, the result also matched with the earlier study of marital satisfaction mentioned earlier in the literature review. Therefore, according to the result, empathy and patience helped facilitate constructive behaviours and adjustments such as providing guidance for successful interactions and communication, validation and encourage emotional connection (Ickes & Simpson, 2001; Stone & Shackelford, 2007). Concerning marital satisfaction, these behavioural qualities had a significant influence on couples' cognition and conflict management in marriage. For that reason, despite the different cultural backgrounds, intercultural couples are able to create connections and initiate emotional support and understanding (Blasko, 2016). In short, without the ability to understand the cognitive and affective viewpoints of one's spouse, a couple would be unlikely to learn about one another and reconcile marital conflicts (Blasko, 2016).

Even though the main focus of this study is to study the communication between intercultural spouses, the findings somehow seem to match well with other types of marriages, e.g. monocultural marriage. For example, any kind of marriage, either intercultural or monocultural marriage, still require good relationship maintenance behaviours, open communication, practical help, empathy, and patience. Therefore, what may bring uniqueness to intercultural marriage and to this study of communication in intercultural marriage is the influence of culture and the unique third culture that intercultural couples, during the course of a relationship, have created. For that reason, the next coming sections would analyse deeper the meaning of the third culture in an intercultural marriage as well as the influence of cultural differences and cultural communication.



## 5.2. Cultural differences and communication

Cultural differences could be seen as the major problem in intercultural marriages, which most intercultural couples face in their marriage in spite of how long they have married each other. Also, cultural differences influenced the degree of couples' marital satisfaction and affect how they would view themselves and their partners (Schmit, 2016). Especially concerning cultural differences, those couples who receive more cultural support in marriage are more likely to have less relationship distress (Reiter & Gee, 2008). That is why, in order to maintain and protect the relationship, couples are encouraged to support each other's cultures. However, the extent of cultural support still depends greatly on couples and on many factors.

In the discussion of cultural differences, it is difficult to say how much of support that each spouse should give and receive in marriages because it depends on the differences in cultures. Easy to say, couples who have bigger cultural differences are likely to need more time for learning and adapting. Moreover, couples who have more positive thinking about each other's cultures are more likely to give more cultural support. Also, they may become more open to accepting their spouses' cultural practices. Furthermore, the length of marriages could also affect significantly couples' cultural acceptance. It means that couples who have just married to each other may have more cultural conflicts rather than cultural support. The couples in this research have experienced, according to their interview reports, marital conflicts related to their cultural differences. Little by little they learned the better way to support each other culturally and overcome conflicts. In addition, they also said that at the beginning it was difficult for most of them to discuss each other's cultures and cultural practices because they were not sure if the other spouse would be able to understand and accept them. Many participants highlighted that over time the cultural difficulties became easier to solve and they also became easier to have similar feelings and thinking as their

spouse did. In this case, it can be explained in the previous studies that, over time couples have lost some parts of their old cultures and gained a bit of their spouse's new cultures, which led to the creation of new shared cultures (Bustamante et al., 2011). Therefore, even though cultural differences could be difficult at first, it may not yet consider negative influence on intercultural marriages.

Regarding the matter of culture in an intercultural marriage, culture is a life-time journey starting from birth until one dies. Culture started from family and kept changing over life-time as one kept learning new ideas and customs from the temporary environment. Differences in upbringing often lead to differences between cultures, which could be noted easily by participants. Often participants noted that the way they treat and were treated in a family influenced greatly on their interpersonal development. For example, those who lived in collective families, where most things were approached and solved by more than one person, are more likely to treat their marital issues in the same way until they decide to change to new ways. On the other hand, those who are used to make own decisions and solve things individually without any interfere from other family members would not appreciate other people's opinions during their problem-solving process regarding marital issues, if they believe that this is the best way for them to solve problems. For that reason, greatly depending on the family's upbringing styles, intercultural couples may face many cultural challenges when dealing with marital issues. Therefore, it means that adjustment is needed significantly to help couples adjust themselves to the differences and overcome those challenges.

Furthermore, concerning cultural stereotypes, it found that at the beginning, couples had certain stereotypes towards each other's cultures. Surprisingly, many participants said that not all of the stereotypes they had were true. In fact, stereotypes do not always apply to all people from a given country. One example of this is the gender's stereotypes. Many

participants have joked several times that their spouses were not manly enough or got surprised that their spouse also had emotional moments and weak points, which they did not expect or anticipate beforehand. Moreover, one of the very common mistakes was that many female participants at the beginning of marriage expected their spouse's understanding and mind-reading them without their actual self-disclosing. Later on, this expectation has led to their dissatisfaction in marriage, which, as they reported, happened unnecessarily.

This research highlighted the importance of language communication in intercultural relationships. In this study, all participants were not able to speak any of the spouses' native languages. Instead, they have used a third language as a communication language. Not all the romantic intercultural relationships use English as their common language of communication. However, throughout this study, all participants were able to communicate in English through the course of relationships. Especially, one couple could even communicate fluently in Chinese (both were not native Chinese). In this study, participants disclosed that speaking another language other than mother tongues was one of the inevitable features of their marriages.

In addition, according to the findings, it was disclosed that during the course of a marriage, couples learned to improve their language and communication competence to the point that they both could understand each other. Furthermore, they learned to become language-wise by producing and improvise a mixed and creative language that fitted their communication style well. For example, at the beginning of their marriages, participants shared that they often faced miscommunication due to the different levels in the third language's communication (in this case, English). Therefore, it took them time to learn and adjust the language communication in order that both spouses could understand each other comprehensively. Continuously adjusting to the third way of language communication correlated with previous studies, which refers to the fact that communicators need to enhance

their language skills to comprehensively communicate with others (Seidlhofer, 2009). One of the solutions that couples used to communicate better is to adjusting their vocabulary and simplify the sentences. Hence, they could show a sense of likeliness and understanding for one another.

### 5.3. The meaning of Third Culture Building in intercultural marriages

One of the main aims of this study is to investigate the role of third culture building in reconciling interculturality marital conflicts. In this study, the focus was intercultural married couples in Finland and the theoretical background derived from the Casmir's study of third culture building. According to the result, while adjusting to each other, intercultural couples successfully created third cultures, where they could comfortably reside in. Therefore, mutual third culture(s) in intercultural marriage would be in need in order that each spouse could share these cultures together without the urge to give up any of their native cultures.

Consequently, all participants who were at first uncomfortable facing cultural conflicts are able to discuss openly marital issues during the adjusting process. As long as the middle ground of comfortability is established, many participants disclosed that their communication and adjustment at this current moment in marriage were different from the past, as they learned day-by-day how to approach and treat each other. This finding coordinated with the previous studies about marital satisfaction and third culture building in a way that the third culture(s)' creation has a great influence on the couple's adaption outcomes and affect directly the extent of couples' marital satisfaction (Sobre-Denton, 2017). Once third cultures are successfully built, couples would have enough knowledge and understanding to overcome marital conflicts, along with cultural acceptance (Broome, 1993; Stone & Shackelford, 2007)

Furthermore, time is one of the important factors affecting the forming of third culture building. According to Casmir (1993), the third culture(s) are built after a sequence of many short-term events. Regarding intercultural marriages, short-term events include the beginning

of marriages, holidays and work periods, children's time, etc. Throughout those events, couples may be able to communicate and exchange thoughts with one another, which leads to better understanding. According to the findings of this study, it also showed that over time and several events happened in marriage, participated couples were capable of successfully creating third cultures, which were formed by their unique values. However, the theoretical background only serves as a directive force and should not be considered absolute truth. Because the theory of third culture building still remains certain limitations, it may only apply to the case of intercultural marriages to a certain extent. Firstly, theoretical literature solely offers a general overview of the phenomenal problem, which, in this study, should be merely taken into consideration as reference. Secondly, the theory of third culture building first studied by Casmir faced few critiques in the academy's field. Whereby, according to Shutter (1993) have argued that Casmir's paradigm lack the incentives for the development of the third culture building in a romantic relationship. Furthermore, Kim (2001, 2005) stated that the theory of third culture building missed the individual focus as intercultural adaptation is, besides the interdependent process of all members creating a mutual third culture(s), also a personal cultural adaptation in terms of cultural penetration.

In this study, language is also regarded as one of the representatives of third culture building in intercultural romantic relationships. According to the results, couples have successfully adjusted their languages until they could comfortably communicate in the chosen third language. The third language could also be very distinctive to each couple because it is characterized by many factors. For example, from the data collection, it is found that the third language is a mix of more than one official language, as all participants could speak more than one language. More specifically, according to the results of this study, the third language could be a mix of English and Chinese; English and Vietnamese; English, Finnish, Vietnamese and Japanese. This showed that married couples have tried best to

communicate with one another by mixing and filling the missing gaps of language's limitations with other capable languages. Therefore, the third language allowed couples to communicate better and understand better. In terms of intercultural marital conflicts, the third language serves as a communication tool to help couples exchange thoughts and emotions more effectively than other forms of language. However, the third language may not help reconcile conflicts, because conflict management may still depend on many other factors such as tones of voice, attitude, use of words, etc. Therefore, the third culture building, as a whole, may not solve the marital problems but could significantly help couples avoid marital conflicts and prevent conflicts from provoking by increasing the extent of mutual understanding between intercultural couples.

#### 5.4. Limitations of the study

Although this study has provided extended knowledge of Finn-Asian intercultural married couples in Finland, the study still has certain limitations. First of all, during the data collection process, it is found that the set of interview questionnaires was not well-prepared and still required more modification. Even though the interview questionnaire was many times under review and tested during the pilot interview, its implication was still under question. For example, one of the most common received feedback was that some of the questionnaires were difficult to understand. According to the participants, the study's topic could be quite complex and many terms were too abstract or too academic to most general people. Therefore, it is recommended many times during the interviews that there should be few versions of questionnaires or few explanations for each question or for the most complicated questions so that they could be more understandable. If participants understood thoroughly the questions, it would be also much easier for them to open up and share related information. What is more, when the set of questions is easily approachable, it would help enrich the data set and collect more information regarding the topic theme of the study.

Besides, it is also important to keep in mind that during the whole interview session, participants provided their observation, explanation, and comments about their marriage and how they had coped with marital conflicts. In fact, it did not necessarily mean that their answers were truly what they have done in behaving with their spouses or solving marital conflicts. Therefore, the interviews may only give an insight of couples' experiences but not their actual relationship practices. For that reason, it may be better to keep a neutral and objective view of the findings and expect that there could be still variations.

Furthermore, during the data collection, interviewees were invited with informal messages via social networks. Although it did not cause any problem and all needed participants were successfully invited, the author still thought that it would be more appropriate if a formal cover letter of the research study, which included the study aims, methods, etc. was sent through emails, instead of informal messages via social networks. Therefore, it would make the invitation and the interview more official. In addition, during the interviewing period, few participants asked to read the interview questions prior to the interview sessions because they would like to prepare for the answers. After conducting the interviews, the author realized that the answers from those, who have read the questions and prepared well for the interview, were surprisingly more comprehensive and thorough, compared to the answers from those who did not read the questions beforehand. For that reason, it revealed one of the drawbacks of this study, that the author did not recognize the advantage of sending those interview questions to participants prior to the actual interview. In fact, the author initially believed that the interview unpreparedness may help bring up good conversation and interesting data as well as emotions and expressions. However, the results showed the opposite outcome. Hence, for future research, it is worth noticing the importance of interviewees' readiness and sending them information regarding interviews and interview questions beforehand.

Moreover, one of the problems which happened often during the data collection is the language disadvantages of both interviewers and participants. Due to the difference in language levels, it has been challenging to obtain and analyse the data. Since the interviews were conducted also in a language other than any of the interviewer and participants' mother tongues, it was inevitable to have language barriers and difficulties in the data collection process. Thence, it means that in a certain extent, the information retrieved from participants might be vague and unclear as well as inexplicit. In addition, this study was not able to investigate answers from those who have earlier divorced with their intercultural spouses. Or, the study was also not able to arrange interviews with other interculturally diverse couples, for example, Finnish women and Asian men, in order to obtain more diverse and more profound insights about intercultural marriages and communication. If those issues listed above were possibly anticipated in advance, the quality of this study could be more enhanced and thorough.

Last but not least, concerning the data collection and data analysis, the findings of this study still have certain limitations. Practically the interview questionnaire should be neutral, open and should contain no orientation to any certain directions. Instead, the set of interview questions might be biased and oriented to the topic of national culture and national culture differences appearing in intercultural marriages. On one hand, it could clearly show that this study focused on marital interactions on the national culture level, to see how intercultural couples cope with each other's cultural differences and conflicts. However, throughout this research study, it is discovered that culture is a very broad term. One individual may have many kinds of culture, as same as marriage. In marriage, there could be many reasons causing conflicts, not necessarily resulted from national cultural backgrounds. In fact, cultural conflicts can even result from problems, which have no connection with cultural differences, for example, language barrier. Therefore, based on mere information about cultural



differences it is not enough to generalize or simplify one's behaviours in marriage. That is why it requires extra attention while carrying out scientific research in order to maintain the objectivity and neutrality of a research study.

## 6. Conclusions

This research aimed at answering the research questions of how intercultural marital couples encountered conflicts and tried to manage marital conflicts with the implication of these questions being that intercultural married couples may communicate differently depending on their cultural backgrounds. The questions strived to get profound answers through the semi-structured interviews and with the qualitative research methodology. The data was provided and fulfilled by three intercultural couples living in Finland, made of six participants in total. This research intended to fill the gap in previous studies on intercultural couples, marital conflict management in intercultural marriages and Theory of Third Culture Building. According to the result, the study has found many research points, which correlated with several previous studies about intercultural marriages and communication, as well as much new information about marital conflict and communication in intercultural marriages. More specifically, this study provided information about the communication challenges and obstacles that couples may face while encountering conflicts and managing conflicts. According to the data retrieved from the in-depth interviews, it showed that the communication issues in intercultural marriages involved these three main themes: relationship maintenance behaviours, cultural differences and communication and the role of the third culture(s) in reconciling marital conflicts. In general, how intercultural couples discuss conflicts and reconcile relationships may somewhat correlate to how intracultural couples manage and reconcile marital conflicts, concerning marital conflict management. However, due to the conflict differences, intercultural couples may remain to have some additional obstacles while encountering conflicts.

Based on previous studies as well as the findings, the relationship maintenance behaviours protect the intimate relationship, keep it in good maintenance and level of intimate continuity (Dindia and Canary, 1993). As a whole, relationship maintenance

behaviours may keep sustaining the desired relationship's characteristics, for example, commitment, practical help, and supports for each other's, love, self-sacrifice, empathy, patience, etc. Also, the relationship maintenance behaviours may give both spouses enough space to repair, endure and develop the relationship during hardships and difficulties.

Therefore, relationship maintenance behaviours could serve as tools to maintain and could restore the intimate relationship as how couples would like it to be. The theme of relationship maintenance behaviour added a valuable point to the research's data set on how couples deal with marital stress and conflicts when both spouses were not practicing the same cultural customs. In this study, the most important relationship maintenance behaviours, which were noted by participants, were open communication, practical help, empathy, and patience. Open communication could allow couples to communicate better and enhance the level of marital satisfaction in the long term. This corresponds with the previous studies about the close correlation between communication and relational satisfaction (Byers, 2005). Open communication, therefore, could lead to a better understanding between couples, which may allow them to create empathy for one another and then become more patient to each other during the course of marriages. This finding confirmed the reliability of previous studies stating that empathy and patience help foster couples' understanding, trust and emotional connection between them (Ickes & Simpson, 2001; Stone & Shackelford, 2007; Blasko, 2016). Last but not least, as couples establish a firm trust and are capable of understanding each other, it may encourage them to give culturally support and provide practical helps to one another in order to create a harmonized and satisfied marriage life (Reiter and Gee, 2008).

Moreover, this study mentioned the impact of cultural differences on intercultural marriages and communication. Whereby, different cultural customs affect how couples communicate with each other as couples from different cultural backgrounds could have

different ways of communication in terms of marital issues. In general, different cultures apparently could appear in couples' cultural practices in daily interactions, from childhood upbringing and in language use. The difference in mindset and cultural communication could cause several conflicts during the course of a marriage and may require couples to learn and adjust themselves in order that both spouses are able to support each other. Therefore, it matched with earlier studies proposing that intercultural couples may need to give cultural support to one another so as to establish a trusting and welcoming atmosphere (Silva et al., 2012). Since this study is related to intercultural couples, it is important to examine the impact of cultural differences in order to outline the cultural conflicts that couples faced and their communication strategies to cope with conflicts. Cultures have rooted in people's childhood and upbringing time, even though during the lifetime cultures may change according to the environment. Childhood and upbringing seemed to influence the way spouses formed their values and beliefs, and help interpret other's cultures. That is why it may not be impossible but yet difficult to change one's cultures. When two individuals from different cultural backgrounds start married life, couples may need to adjust their cultures in order to establish a balance point, where no one would get hurt by the other's cultural beliefs and practices. Last but not least, another finding in this study is that intercultural couples faced difficulties in using the third language to communicate. Even though both spouses understood at least one common language, they still experienced conflicts due to the different language levels and different expressions in the language. Therefore, in order to reconcile conflicts and protect the relationship, couples have adjusted their ways of using languages until the point that both could reach mutual understanding. However, none of the participants shared that they could be able to communicate with their spouses either their mother tongue or in their spouse's native language. Hence, this corresponded with previous studies that

common language use and vocabulary are established in order to form a comfortable environment for communication (Seidlhofer, 2009).

Throughout this research, the presence of third culture building has emerged. Third Culture Building appeared in the ways how intercultural couples discussed and coped with marital conflicts. Third Culture Building was also presented as a tool to solve the marital conflicts and restore mutual communication. Like previous studies suggest, the Third Culture Building studied by Casmir (1999) enhances marital communication, which later on enhances marital satisfaction as good communication leads to better knowledge and understanding in marriage (Sobre-Denton, 2017). This study combined two research orientation of Third Culture Building and intercultural marital conflicts. As marriage is such an intimate relationship, it may require deep knowledge and understanding from both spouses regardless of language barriers or cultural differences. Therefore, the Third Culture Building could be used to serve as a tool, which prevents marital conflicts by increasing the knowledge and understanding between intercultural spouses. As intercultural marriages have become more common nowadays, it showed that more scholar literature dedicated to intercultural marriage framework are available with several guidelines and concerns. Thence, studying the communication of intercultural Finnish-Asian couples in Finland could narrow down the study road and brought a unique approach to this study but yet still join the research study of intercultural marriages and communication.

This study has various positive factors, which allowed to obtain desired findings and results. One of them is finding couples with different marriage lengths. The number of years in marriages might indicate that they might have more experience in interacting with their spouses, which are precious to this study. Also, couples with different lengths in marriages might have different kinds of communication stories in marriage. For example, in this study, those couples, who have been married for a long time, were able to provide very profound

answers and thoughts about many deep matters regarding marriage life. Meanwhile, those, who have been recently married, were more likely to give current issues. For this reason, it was possible to collect enriched sources of information for this study. Besides, face-to-face interviews were utilized in this research in order to obtain in-depth conversations and a more personal understanding of how couples managed marital conflicts through communication. Therefore, it allowed understanding each couple's relationship in more personal perspectives. An additional benefit of this study, which needs to be added, is the couple's cultural backgrounds. Since couples are from different cultural backgrounds, their marital conflicts could emerge more obviously and distinctively. Besides Finland as the constant culture, other cultures were also involved in this study, which is Vietnamese and Korean. Hence, the diversity of participants' cultures allowed enriching the collected data for this research.

Despite the positive aspects, this study still remained limitations. First of all, during the data collection process, the set of interviewed questions was not enough well-prepared. Therefore, the questions were not thoroughly comprehended by both interviewer and participants. Secondly, there were language barriers during the interviews between the couples and between interviewer and participants. Consequently, most of the interviews needed to be conducted in more than one languages and even so, there was sometimes miscommunication and misunderstanding between one another during the interview session. This issue made the data more complex to analyse. Furthermore, during interviews, at times when sensitive topics were touched, participants refused to give answers on those topics. Therefore, in these situations, it was difficult to obtain in-depth information from certain topics, which touched deeply the marital conflict matters. For that reason, ethical consideration is important to take into consideration particularly in this study.

This study may provide good knowledge and database of conflict communication in intercultural marriages, in which future research could continue. Regarding the possible

future research topics, few options for researches about intercultural marriages and communication are recommended. For example, throughout the study, the author found that the topic of religion in intercultural marriages may be uncommon and yet complex. Also, the matter of religion, whether marriages are established under one or more religions, could bring to public attention because undoubtedly, religious differences could draw a lot of issues to intercultural couples including conflicts. Besides cultural differences, conflicts could be caused by several other factors. Religion difference could be one of the causes. Whereby, it would be interesting to know how religions would affect intercultural marriages and to which extent it would influence intercultural couples' marital satisfaction. Therefore, it would be possible to estimate the correlation between religion and intercultural marriages.

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## **APPENDIX 1: Interview Structure**

More specific questions with cursive font are asked only when the respondent have had difficulties to answer the main question.

**A. General information:** *Would you introduce yourself and your basic information about your relationship with your girlfriend? Where did you meet? When did you started the relationship? How long have you been together?*

1. How long have you lived in Finland?
2. Do you intend to stay in Finland permanently? Or do you have other options for choosing a country of residence?
3. What languages do you speak daily?

### **B. Culture at home:**

2. What do you consider the best aspects of your culture? Please explain why.
3. What do you consider the best aspects of your spouse's culture? Please explain why.
4. Does one spouse's culture appear in your home more often than the other?
5. What cultural traditions or aspects would you like to see more in your common life? Why?
6. What cultural traditions or aspects would you not want to see in your common life? Why?
7. How would you describe your family/home culture at the moment?

### **C. Between each other:**

1. Does being in an intercultural marriage bring difficulties into your life? If yes, please explain how.

2. What are the benefits/advantages of being in an intercultural marriage in your opinion?

**D. Encountering conflicts:**

1. Are both of you be able to discuss conflicts and difficulties together?
  - i. If yes, please explain how both of you did it
  - ii. If not, please explain why it is difficult for both of you to discuss openly?
2. Think about one specific time when you and your spouse had a disagreement or conflict:
  - i. What happened?
  - ii. How did each of you react to to the disagreement/conflict?
  - iii. How did you eventually solve the disagreement/conflict?
3. Is the way you solve disagreement/conflicts now different from the early times?
  - i. If yes, what is your current way to solve disagreement now?
  - ii. How has it changed, compared to the past?
4. Think about a time when both of you failed to solve a disagreement/conflict:
  - i. Why did you fail to solve the disagreement/ conflict?
  - ii. If you could have a chance to redo it, what would you do differently?
5. Has your way of solving disagreements/conflicts changed over time? How?

**E. Parenthood and life-view:** *open-ended questions about your life-view as a head of your family. I would love to discuss with you, certain topics about how would you like your family to be?*

1. Do you have any fundamental disagreement as an intercultural family?

Themes:

- Raising children

- Gender roles (task for men and women). Who will earn money, who will need to stay home (if needed) and take care of family

- Household chores

- Money. How would you use and distribute the share of money for family?

- Cultural adaptation process of the foreign spouse. How would you as a native spouse help your wife/husband learn and adapt to Finnish culture?

- Family help. Do you get any family help after getting a child?

- Religious point of view

- Food/drink

- Choice of language

How would you discuss them together?

2. Do you intend to follow some religious rituals if you give birth to a child?

3. What kind of advice would you give to young couples in a similar situation?

4. How do you see your relationship in general?

**F. Influence of community, parent, relatives:**

1. Does both of your family accept the intercultural relationship?

i. If no, what are the reasons for rejection of intercultural relationship?

ii. If yes, how do they react towards your relationship with a foreign partner?

2. How does your community and family's opinion affect your relationship?

**APPENDIX 2: Original data excerpts in Vietnamese**

- 1) “Thực ra thì, khó khăn nhất chính là ngôn ngữ, bởi thực ra nói thẳng ra thì cái phân, cái tiếng anh của mình nó vẫn chưa hẳn là tốt. Thứ nhất là tiếng anh của mình, bản thân cái phát âm của mình í, cái phát âm...nó vẫn chưa chuẩn. Nhiều khi ông ấy không hiểu” (2Af) (page 53, excerpt #2)
  
- 2) “Được cái là ông chồng tiếng anh rất là tốt, nên là lúc mà mình khi mà mình cố gắng mình tìm hiểu ra thì ông ấy cũng giúp mình tìm ra cái, đúng cái từ để mà giải nghĩa được.” (2Af) (page 55, excerpt #2)
  
- 3) “Đây thì thường thì, nói thật là mình cũng cảm thấy may mắn là ông ấy là người cũng khá là...kiên nhẫn, mà, và thường thì bao giờ ông ấy cũng là người cố gắng bắt chuyê trước và cố gắng hỏi là lý do vì sao mà mình câu như thế, hoặc là có vấn đề gì về cách hành xử của ông ấy không. Thì bọn mình hôm đấy là câu buổi tối và sáng hôm sau thì bọn mình...thì ông ấy cũng...gọi là hỏi hỏi làm một tí, thì mình cũng nói ra là là, có một số việc là mình không đồng ý như vậy. Thì...nói chung là nói dần dần thì cũng cố gắng hiểu nhau.” (2Af) (page 59, excerpt #1)