Theoretical Considerations on Mixed Marriages

Previous anthropological and sociological research on cross-cultural marriages has generally been colored by a male bias, since it was conducted mainly by men. The experience was explained mainly using functionalist theories focusing on the rules governing marriage, rather than on the actual people involved in these marriages. This tendency in anthropological research on marriage to emphasize exchanges between social groups may be found even in some later anthropological work. Sociologists, on the other hand, have generally paid closest attention to household patterns as these are influenced by intermarriage; they, too, generally ignored the individual life histories of their subjects, seeking instead some more general, broadly applicable sociological patterns.

In addition to their emphasis on gender as one of the most basic structures of society, some feminist studies of marriage and the family since the middle of the 1970s also have differed in their focus on individuals, and how these individuals experienced life as a marriage partner and a member of a family. General models are then built around the diversity of these experiences.

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experiences—from the ground up rather than top-down. This study fits within this framework of research. It focuses on the lives of individuals while at the same time attempting to discover in these lives some larger patterns of cross-cultural interaction.

Methodology

In order to make life bearable and understandable, people create narratives for themselves, knitting them together into autobiographies. The ordering of individual life experiences is part of the discursive enterprise. This type of self-construction is not just a matter of memory and evaluation of past experiences. It is not in and of itself reality or a reflection of reality, but rather an attempt to take past experiences and rework them into a meaningful constructed reality. The life course then creates a framework of memory made up of birth, socialization, maturation, family, aging and death. These unifying narrative elements do not substitute for a homogenous identity, however. By the same token, these selected biographies differ from exclusively monocultural models of identity-building. The intercultural examples of identity building that were the subject of this study also have their common elements, however. The persons interviewed described common experiences, such as the adventure of encountering a new culture, the pangs of homesickness and grief over a lost culture, the difficulty of leading a double existence, and the rewards of serving in the role of a cultural intermediary.

These patterns span national and generational divides, as do descriptions of feeling torn between two cultures or tossed on an intercultural sea.

Recent scholarship has recognized the importance of individual immigrants’ impressions of the immigrant experience. Immigrants are by definition functioning interculturally. Obviously, they live in countries different from the one they grew up in and therefore have substituted a broader way of viewing the world for the monocultural one they

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7 Ibid., 5.

were born into, and this new world view involves a plurality of cultural connections. They have also more or less voluntarily chosen to live their lives straddling two cultures, borrowing from each and serving as cultural intermediaries between them.\(^9\)

In this new scholarship oral histories have played a major role, because the use of oral histories provides the researcher with the opportunity to explain history in the words of participants. More important, immigration theory is based on the idea of participants’ perceptions as a motivation for migration. Hence, there is often no substitute for the actual words of the persons involved.\(^10\)

Biographical, narrative interviews also offer an insight into the process of social construction and constitution.\(^11\) They provide a body of research material in which the process of individuation can be traced. In this sense, narrative biographical interviews can be characterized as expressions of the interchange between the individual and society. They also consist of collective memories, experiences and allegories of particular times and places. This work of remembering and explaining is an act of performance in the construction of an intelligible subject.\(^12\)

In keeping with this theory we were mainly interested in the individual life histories of our participants.\(^13\) The main intent of the research was not to create a biography of them that was factually accurate in all its details so much as to examine the way they evaluated their own lives in hindsight. This unconscious evaluation should be differentiated from the “official” story they had to tell. In the interviews, this unconscious evaluation was expressed in subtle ways, especially in what they emphasized about their lives and what they left unmentioned. How they divided their lives into stages and the relative importance they ascribed to each, what they spoke about at length and what they left unsaid, which order they told their stories in, the way they

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\(^10\) Virden, *Good-bye, Piccadilly*, 149.


\(^12\) Keller, Einleitung: Ein Leben in und zwischen verschiedenen Kulturen führen, 5.

\(^13\) We used quantitative data to the extent that such was available, but the collection of such data was not the main focus of this research, as it centered almost exclusively on qualitative social analysis. The same may be said for documentary material from official sources.
expressed themselves beyond the words themselves (tone of voice, speed of speaking, gestures, body language), and what conclusions they drew—all of these communicated things that their "official" stories did not. 14

The biographies of the participants were examined in various stages, which was related to the interview method itself. The interview technique involved a combination of a structured and unstructured approach. After a set of questions designed to get an overview of their lives and collect statistical data, they were asked to talk about their lives, including their childhood and youth. Of special interest were the questions of how the participants (women and men) described their own experiences as immigrants, how they defined themselves in connection with immigration and what observations they made about social conditions within the context of their own life histories. These questions are predicated on the assumption that they move within a bicultural space, and that they create a life for themselves that is not bound by national or ethnic identity. 15 Subsequently, they were asked specific questions dealing with the main topics of the investigation, including assimilation and acculturation.

Frequently in mixed marriages, the line between the "self" and "other" moves as the process of assimilation proceeds. To some degree or another, all couples experienced this process of assimilation, and if there is one thing our research and that of others makes clear, it is that this process is a complex and long process. Part of the difficulty in even discussing the question of assimilation is that scholars have yet to reach a consensus about what it even is precisely. The definitions of assimilation offered by scholars consist of changes over time in some combination of factors including family structures, religion, political affiliation, residence patterns, work, membership in ethnic organizations, and language retention, among others. 1 With all of these factors, there is a problem of measurement—what exactly constitutes assimilation, and how can one tell at what stage in the process and individual is? It is here that theoretical superstructures sometimes reach a breaking point. While they can help us to

14 All the interviews with the exception of one were video-recorded. The interviews lasted between one and three hours. Most of the people interviewed were recruited through the acquaintances of the persons working with the project. Efforts to recruit interviewees through the local media (newspapers in particular) was not very successful. It is striking that a large percentage of the persons contacted about doing an interview refused.
15 Ibid., 13
understand broad trends, concentration on them alone drives the individual experience with assimilation into the background. It is precisely for this reason that it is so important to motivate individual immigrant people to tell their own stories.

Results

The term "mixed" or "cross-cultural" marriage is applied to marriages contracted between two people who do not share the same nationality, language, religion, ethnicity, or other cultural characteristics. In a mixed marriage, the concept of the "other", which has played an important role in some feminist scholarly literature, is an especially useful analytical tool. To some degree, all relationships are characterized by a distinction between "self" and "other". Everyone defines him or herself by reference to others. You are you because you are not someone else. In feminist literature, the definition of self is tied closely to gender. In heterosexual relationships, gender becomes a sort of cultural divide in and of itself. In a mixed marriage, this gender-based notion of "otherness" is then compounded by a whole range of additional cultural differences. As a part of a mixed marriage, for example, your partner is not just an example of the "other" because he is male or female, but also because he or she is not from the same nationality, and this carries with it a number of complications in building a successful marriage. Such complications may not in the end, however, work out to have negative impact on the marriage.

By definition, people in mixed marriages have at their disposal a larger range of cultural possibilities in structuring their relationships than is typically the case for the parties to a more conventional marriage, whether it be regarding the division of household labor, methods of child-rearing, family traditions, language of communication, moral expectations, or even definitions of what it means to be male and female. Indeed, all mixed marriages are influenced

16 This is not to say, however, that a couple may not have at least some of these characteristics in common, only that they differ in at least one of them. Breger and Hill, Cross-Cultural Marriages, p. 7.


to at least some degree by different culturally determined expectations of the two partners and their relatives regarding such matters. The very fact that the partner appears at least somewhat exotic may have, by turns, an attractive or repulsive effect on the other partner, for example, depending on the circumstances.¹⁹

This is not to say that the partners in a mixed marriage are always fully conscious of the impact of cultural difference on their marriage. They may be adept at ignoring it altogether, or simply confounding individual personality differences with culturally determined ones. “That’s just the way he/she is” may be as far as a spouse goes in analyzing such differences.

If such cultural difference are explicitly recognized as such, however, they can actually become a source of strength in a marriage, because the potential for culturally-based conflict is then more likely to be addressed opening, sometimes in advance, by the couple. Cultural difference may thus at once be a source of conflict and strength. Sometimes, if partners are aware of the possibility for such conflict from the outset, they will set about negotiating its parameters to reduce its destructive potential.²⁰

This possibility for negotiating across cultural lines may be limited, however, if one partner joins the other in a community where traditional expectations regarding gender roles are particularly strong. It takes a well developed sense of self on the part of both partners to live your married life by different rules if everyone around you expects something else entirely. If an outsider marries into a group which sees its own ethnic identity tied up with adherence to particular traditional cultural norms, there can be precious little room for negotiation.²¹

Partners involved in mixed marriages may view these negotiations regarding cultural differences as either a possibility for personal growth and enrichment, or as a forfeiture or limitation of their own cultural identity. In marrying an Austrian woman, for example, it is not

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²⁰ This is an issue which must be viewed from the inside out—it is a matter of individual perception whether such differences exist and whether their presence is positive or negative. The researcher’s idea of what constitutes “difference” may not match that of his or her subject. Ibid., 19-20.

only necessary to accept the "otherness" of the partner, it also requires to adjust the personal social interaction to the existing family, social structures, mores and gender expectations of the culture of which she is a part. The required adjustments are generally greater on his part than her, though, of course, adjustment is required on her part as well to at least some extent. In mixed marriages generally, these difficulties are sometimes addressed by focusing on the "otherness" of the larger culture, rather than the "otherness" of the spouse. 22

When asked what motivated the women in mixed marriages to marry a foreigner in the first place, some of them emphasized that they found the right partner and that the fact that he happened to be a foreigner was only a secondary consideration. 23 This may explain how it was possible that many of them did not really know much about "his" culture before they married and that much of what they "knew" was incorrect. Sometimes, however, such women point to particular characteristics of men from their partner's culture that helped make him the "right" man. In the case of, for example, many women pointed out that they found black men more attentive and accessible than Austrian men. In this case, "otherness" served an attractive rather than repulsive function.

22 Irene Hardach-Pincke’s work on German-Japanese marriages demonstrated that the awareness of "otherness" depends on where the couple is in the life cycle and what their socio-economic position is. Over time, couples tend to see the differences between themselves in more highly individualized, rather than in cultural terms. If the two partners have had similar socialization and consequently have very similar values, despite coming from different cultural backgrounds, they may deny the existence of cultural differences altogether. See her *Interkulturelle Lebenswelten. Deutsch-japanische Ehen in Japan* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus Verlag, 1988).
