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RESEARCH REPORT

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*Culture, Communication and Intimacy
in the Couple Relationship*

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Abstract

Title: Culture, Communication and Intimacy in the Couple Relationship.

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Keywords: culture, mixed couple, love, communication, language, intimacy, satisfaction.

This grade report deals with how the mixed couples have built their communicational and intimate space taking into account their different cultural backgrounds.

I conducted interviews with eight couples in Göteborg city and its suburbs during March and April 2000. Out of these eight interviews I have selectively chosen three to analyze and present in this paper.

I present also theoretical and empirical findings that support the idea about the influence of the culture in the frame of the couple relationship and more exhaustively in the process of Communication and Intimacy.

My main findings are the expression of feelings and thoughts in the frame of the couple relationship has a cultural component. Nonetheless, understanding the real meaning and dimension of these expressions require a long process. Communication is the way that they have to disclose their meanings and is the entrance door into their worlds. Thus, the language has an important part in their relation. Through the language they have the opportunity to transmit their symbols and meanings to the other person.

Although the members of the couples differ in their personal characteristics, they have similar perceptions about their relation in the aspects of Communication, Intimacy and Satisfaction. The similarities make it possible that they achieve an agreement showing respect and tolerance with their differences. They are aware that forming a couple is hard. Nonetheless, they are not afraid to face and solve conflicts.

Furthermore, despite their differences in cultural backgrounds, they share similar values that could be considered as universals. The process in which they have to accommodate their differences due to personality and culture is very complex. However, the distance is shorter because they share similar cosmovision of the world.

Hence, forming a stable couple between two persons with different cultural backgrounds is a difficult rather than an impossible task. The stories of these couples are an example of that.

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1. Introduction

As we know, all the changes in the current world, such as mass media, expand of Internet, openness and flexibility in the labor market determine that men and women have more contacts expanding from their private circles like family, friends or neighborhood to building up relationships around the world. In these days, more than in the past, the coexistence of different cultures is a reality. Thus, the researchers of different disciplines are advocated to study what happens when people from different cultures interchange their cultural backgrounds.

This kind of studies are especially interesting in Sweden, a country which in the last sixty years was transformed from an ethnically relatively homogeneous society into a broadly multi-ethnic one, with the affluence of immigrants from 160 nations.

What happens when a Swedish man or woman decides to get married with a foreign person? Let us see some statistical figures. At the beginning of 1981 there were nearly 1.7 million marriages. The total number of mixed marriages was nearly 8% of all marriages. That year, from the total of divorces; 19, 263, around 15.5% involved mixed marriages between Swedish and foreigners (Månsson, 1993)

Moreover, the total divorces that occurred in Sweden in 1997 was 20 550 , with 31 divorces between Swedes women and Latin American men and 28 divorces between Swedes man and Latin American woman, representing 0.15% and 0.13% respectively of the total of divorces.

It is statistically plausible that the mixed relationships are a more "crisis-inclined" cohabitation relationship than, for example, homogeneous relationships between Swedes or between immigrants from the same nation.

However, some persons still insist in getting married with someone that has a different cultural background. We might distinguish two main groups. One group is formed by persons that take this decision because they are in love, and the other is formed by persons guided for instrumental reasons such as getting the residence permit and job, living in a country more developed than the native one and so on

Several researches conducted in Sweden have demonstrated that the mixed couples with instrumental motives as the main part of the relation have less durable commitment that those based on mutual attraction and exclusiveness (Månson, 1993).

Nonetheless, in the present study I will analyze those couples with a long-term commitment trying to answer the following question. "Why it can be difficult to stay together in a mixed relationship?" (op.cit p.103)

In order to answers this question I have formulated a hypothesis. My hypothesis is that the members of mixed couples bring into their relationships several features specific to their cultural backgrounds. Because these features differ in many aspects it is though the processes of Communication and Intimacy that the members of the couple reveal their differences as a consequence of their different cultures. Thus, Intimacy and Communication are the mirrors in which different cultural traits are reflected in a clear way.

With the intention to answer my question and test my hypothesis empirically, I decided to interview mixed couples living in a long-term relationship. Out of the eight interviews that I

made during March and April 2000, I have selected three to present in this paper. I have also used a series of four questionnaires in the topics of Communication, Intimacy and Satisfaction to facilitate the comprehension of these topics depending on how each member of the couple have experienced it.

Additionally, the first part of this thesis is based on theoretical and empirical findings that have supported my hypothesis.

To sum up my purpose

The purpose with this grade report is to explore how the members of the couple build-up their intimate and communicational space depending on the differences in their cultural backgrounds. I will also intend to explore if the culture exerts an influence in other areas of their marital and family life.

1.1 Methods

During a four-month -time period, eight couples with one of the members being Swedish and the other Latin American, allowed me to gather data using participant-observation methods, in-depth tape-recorded interviews, and informal conversations that occurred during my visits to their homes.

I also used a sequence of four questionnaires about different aspects concerning the couple relationship.

I took into account the strengths and weaknesses of these methods. Hence, according to the purpose of the present study, self-report measures -questionnaires and interviews- are optimum when the goal is to assess intimate information in the process that every person experiences when deciding to start a relationship and afterwards. Furthermore, people's reports about themselves work best for gathering information concerning feelings, perceptions, and expectations. Finally, behavioral observation, combined with self-reports, is the most effective way of assessing intimate behavior (Prager, 1995).

I used chain or snowball referrals to select a nonrandom sample of sixteen study participants, i.e. eight couples. As I was primarily interested in long-term relationships, I recruited study participants who had been engaged in their relations for at least three years. Other studies of couple relationships (Hatfield and Rapson, 1996) also used the three-year-relation criterion as an indicator of long-term relation. These couples have a rate of 10 years living together. The youngest couple had had a three-year relationship and the oldest couple a 17 year-one.

Most of my interviews and informal conversations were conducted in Spanish. Two couples were interviewed in English.

Before starting the process of gathering data I interviewed six persons: three Swedish and three Latin Americans. The aim of these interviews was to obtain a broader picture about the stereotypes within each culture (Swedish and Latin American) and the interactions between them. These persons had been interacting with both cultures for different reasons. Two Latin Americans had been engaged in relationships with Swedish counterparts and at the moment of the interviews they were divorced; two Swedish persons had lived in Latin countries while

doing their studies and/or work; and two persons were born in Latin countries but they had lived in Sweden most of their lives.

Hence, the information that they gave me was both very accurate and very valuable. I could address the research in two directions. One was the reading of cross-cultural researches and the other was the writing of the interview guide.

One of these informants has an active role into the Göteborg Latin Community. He gave me the phone numbers of some foreign persons that have been married with Swedish citizens. I contacted them by phone and I made a brief introduction explaining who I was, the objective of the present research, and my interest to have an interview with them. If they agreed, we scheduled an appointment.

In all cases I visited their homes and the interviews were conducted with both members of the couple. At the end of each interview I wanted to have a wide picture concerning different aspects: how they interacted; how they communicated their thoughts and feelings one to the other; to what extent one of them was willing to respond to the other's questions and whether they interrupted each other.

In conducting the interviews I used an interactive point of view. Several researches have demonstrated the importance of gathering information from observing relationships instead of individuals. Research has suggested that it may be necessary to assess both partners' opinion in order to understand their relationship (Minuchin, 1974; Hatfield, 1984; Prager, 1995).

The interview was divided into two parts. The first one concerned the collection of demographic data and the information regarding how the members of each couple met, what they do in their daily life, and their relation with the other members' relatives and friends. The second part was more specific about their relationship, their expectations when they decided to live together, how they show affection to each other, how they solve a conflict, how they arrive to a decision, and several questions concerning the influence of the culture in their relationship.

One important aspect -which I was aware of only at the end of the first interview- is related to the couple having a child. How the couple changes their patterns of interaction is often linked to the birth of the first child (Estrada, 1982). Although I did not consider this information being a relevant one, during the course of the interviews I realized that the specific couple interaction with their children is a way of transmitting cultural values into their family. Thus, I had to include some questions in the interview guide that allowed me to gather information about how the couple interacts with their children.

At the end of the first part of the interview I gave them four questionnaires that I picked-up when I met them the second time. They had to answer the questions by themselves, without the help of the other person. Only after they had finished to fill the questionnaires they could see the answers of his/her mate and compare it if they wanted. The questionnaires were concerned with the following issues; Satisfaction, Intimacy, Affective Communication, and Regulative/Informative Communication.

Moreover, each questionnaire has a graphic expression. The purpose of those graphics is to have a better visualization of their answers. Thus, it is easier to compare the results by topics and couple.

These questionnaires were used in previous researches (Pérez, 1997; Aja, 1994; Deriché, 1992). They are valuable instruments in studies about couple relations and have proved highly reliability.

Each questionnaire is divided into different categories; hence, each item corresponds to one of these categories. For a better comprehension of each questionnaire and each category I will present a brief concept as a theoretical reference. The same concepts were used for analyzing the information that the couples gave me.

I used four questionnaires to measure the frequency with which the couples used to disclose different topics. These questionnaires are related to the three functions of the communicational process.

Affective communication represents the capacity to disclose the one's own experiences and feelings to the other person and to be receptive regarding the experiences and feelings of the other person.

Regulative communication refers to the way we exert influence over the behavior of the other person. It concerns the type of messages related with resolving conflicts, making decisions, reaching an agreement, and so forth (Andrieva, 1980).

The first questionnaire is designed in order to explore these functions of the communicational process. Half of the items are related to the affective communication and the other half to the regulative communication.

Informative communication concerns the diversity of different topics that the partners may disclose in a verbal interchange (op.cit, 1980).

The second questionnaire measures this function during the communicational process. The selected topics are: Work-Studies, Economy, Relations with relatives and friends, Hobbies, Sexuality, Politic, and Personal issues.

The third questionnaire is concerned with Intimacy. For the purpose of this study we understand **Intimacy** as a process in which people attempt to get close to one another and to explore similarities (and differences) related to their behavior, feelings and thinking (Hatfield, 1984 p.208).

The items in this questionnaire are divided into the following categories.

Affective Intimacy. This includes the disclosure of emotions and feelings into the couple (Pérez op.cit 1997; Aja op.cit 1994; Deriché op.cit 1992).

Leisure time. This is an indicator about the frequency with which the couple plans how to spend their leisure time; it also concerns whether they have the same interests and if they enjoy the same activities (Chelune, Robison & Kommor, 1984 p.30).

Interaction. It is an indicator about the frequency of their interaction in order to do something together in their daily life (op.cit, 1984).

Relations with relatives and friends (Boundaries). It investigates the frequency with which they interact with other persons (op.cit, 1984).

Sexuality. It is an indicator of one particular kind of interaction as an expression of affectiveness in the relationship (Hatfield, 1988; Sternberg, 1988).

The fourth questionnaire is related to the **Satisfaction** that the members of the couple experience in their relationship. We defined this aspect as a way in which the couple perceives the mutual fulfillment of their needs as individuals in the relationship (Pérez op.cit; Aja op.cit; Deriché op.cit).

The questionnaire is divided into the following categories.

Affective communication: the same conception as in the questionnaire about communication.

Characteristics of the other person: It investigates how satisfied they are with the personal characteristics of their mates.

Regulative communication: The same conception as in the questionnaire about communication.

Sexuality: The same conception as in the questionnaire about Intimacy.

Interaction: The same conception as in the questionnaire about Intimacy.

Additionally, according to the purpose of the present study we will refer to the concept of **couple relationship** as a system in terms of interaction where the character of the interactions is due to the personal traits that each individual expresses in a particular manner. In the understanding of the couple, sometimes the focus is set on the interactions itself, in other times on how the individuals express themselves and the meaning of his/her relation with the other.

The combination of the interviews with the questionnaires allowed us to draw conclusions about the way in which the couples exchange information and create an intimate space in the relationship. We can also suggest some explanation about the role of communication as a process in which the couples interchange and appropriate the culture of each other, and finally we can understand the areas of the relationship where the couples with different cultural backgrounds have their main misunderstandings and conflicts.

The goal of this study is not to arrive at a set of universal generalizations, predictions, or propositions regarding the influence of the cultural background in the couple relationship, but rather to elucidate the dynamics of such relations. The study's findings and analyses complement and enhance those based on survey and demographic research.