



# In-Laws, Communication, and Other Frustrations: The Challenges of Intercultural Marriages

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## Abstract

Although intercultural marriages are increasing in number every year, there is still little research examining the unique aspects of these relationships. This paper reports results from two exploratory studies into the challenges individuals within intercultural marriages in the United States face and how they manage them. Study 1 (N = 93) explored the most reported challenges in intercultural marriages. Findings indicated these challenges included family, finances, communication, time spent together, and clashes in cultural expectations/traditions. Study 2 (N = 83) examined the consequences of such challenges, how couples managed them, and how these challenges affected their marriage satisfaction. Findings revealed the most identified consequences were arguing about challenges and the emotional toll associated with such arguments. Most couples developed effective ways to manage such challenges without reducing their marital satisfaction, except when challenges involved their in-laws. A discussion of these results is included, along with directions for future research.

## Keywords

intercultural marriages, relationship satisfaction, relational challenges

People from different cultures are interacting more than ever before, leading to an increase in intercultural marriages around the world (Hiew et al., 2016). Past research suggests over 21% of married-couple households have at least one foreign-born spouse (Larsen & Walters, 2013). More recent data also confirms an increase in intercultural marriages in the United States (U.S.). According to the Pew Research Center, 17% of newlyweds have married someone of a different race or ethnicity (Livingston & Brown, 2017). Despite the increase in such intercultural relationships, the study of such unions is



limited (Bustamante et al., 2011). The increase in intercultural marriages calls for a better understanding of the unique features such relationships involve.

All marriages involve challenges and the discovery of and conversation about differences. However, intercultural marriages have often involve additional challenges stemming from the need to reconcile conflicting expectations of two cultures, such as differing cultural norms, and views on extended family, religion, and child-rearing (Bustamante et al., 2011; Machette, 2019; Romano, 2008). For instance, couples may need to decide which religious holidays to celebrate, how to communicate expectations and negotiate their relational identity given their different cultural backgrounds, how to incorporate (or not) extended family into their family life, or which parenting styles to adopt. In addition, couples in intercultural marriages also face challenges outside of their relationship, such as expectations from family and friends, or societal norms, such as negative stereotypes, discrimination, or rejection (Stritof, 2020). Therefore, the union of individuals from two diverse cultures is bound to lead to conflicting expectations of the relationship (Bustamante et al., 2011). Thus, further investigation into these challenges is worthwhile.

There are, of course, benefits to intercultural marriages. For example, couples in intercultural relationships have been found to develop a stronger relational bond and sense of identity (Tili & Barker, 2015). We do not focus on benefits, though, in this research but rather contribute information on challenges faced by individuals in intercultural relationships and how they seek to manage such challenges, as well as the consequences these challenges have on their relationships. Such knowledge can be beneficial to individuals in intercultural relationships, as it can help partners alleviate the consequences of marital challenges and manage their relationships better. In what follows, we conceptualize key terms and offer details about the two cross-sectional exploratory studies we have conducted.

## Definitions of Key Terms

When studying intercultural marriages, it is paramount to define culture. We conceptualized culture as “shared practices and values between the people of a group” (Kaur & Noman, 2015, p. 1795). Culture is an omnipresent force that governs people’s behaviors (Liu et al., 2014). In this project, we used national culture as a proxy for an individual’s cultural background and examined culture from a social scientific standpoint, which means we believed it could influence romantic relationships behaviors (Campos & Kim, 2017; Hashimoto et al., 2012). Culture defines expectations for what relationships are, the purposes they serve, how individuals should interact within and maintain a relationship as well as outlines normative behaviors individuals should follow. This understanding highlights the impact of culture on intercultural marriages.

Second, it is important to explain how we conceptualized intercultural marriages for this project. An intercultural marriage was defined as “a union of two people from di-

verse cultures as well as different countries, which may also, but not necessarily, indicate differences in race or religion” (Romano, 2008, p. xvi). Thus, we studied individuals who were married to another person from a different national culture, which also means the partners likely had various degrees of differing cultural backgrounds and cultural values, beliefs, and behaviors. Next, we discuss what types of challenges such relationships usually encounter.

## Intercultural Marriage Challenges

Navigating differing cultural norms is a frequent challenge in intercultural marriages. For example, views of marriage could differ. Typically, the Western view of marriage is centered around the notion of love. Partners have the choice to select their mate and make decisions privately, as a couple (Campos & Kim, 2017; Schug et al., 2010). Additionally, Westerners are expected to loosen their attachments to their family once married, to develop their own family unit. Non-Western views of marriage are centered around collective responsibilities and loyalties. Marriage is often a communal allegiance with focus on the two families’ history and tradition (Schug et al., 2010). These differences in customs are often a source of destabilization within intercultural marriages (Bustamante et al., 2011; Machette, 2019). Relatives also have a strong influence on the marriage, too. In fact, intercultural couples often report significantly more problems with parents and extended relatives when compared to mono-cultural couples (Bustamante et al., 2011; Leung, 2021).

An additional challenging factor of intercultural relationships is religion. As with many aspects of culture, religion is often instilled in an individual at a young age (Bhugun, 2017). Yet, different from other aspects of culture, religion often dictates most other areas of life, such as attitudes about what is right and wrong, views on marriage and sex, and individuals’ philosophy of life itself (Romano, 2008). Thus, differences in religion may create conflict in intercultural couples. Yet another challenge in intercultural marriages is child rearing. Determining how to raise children in intercultural marriages has been described as complicated and emotionally volatile (Bhugun, 2017; Machette, 2019). Each parent may have concerns about what is best for their child, which is often tied to partners’ own cultural upbringing (Bustamante et al., 2011; Leung, 2021).

There is little research pertaining to challenges that intercultural couples face. Intercultural relationship challenges have typically been investigated through qualitative research (Romano, 2008; Tili & Barker, 2015). Through a series of qualitative interviews, Romano (2008), for instance, devised an account of nineteen of the most common issues that intercultural marriages face. These included differing values, food and drink, sex, and gender roles, among others (see Romano, 2008 for review). However, given the changing dynamic of intercultural relationships nowadays, the question is whether some of the challenges that modern day couple experience are the same as two decades; new challenges may have emerged. In addition, to our knowledge, there is no research that

examines how individuals manage these challenges in their relationships. Therefore, we seek to contribute to the literature on this topic through the two studies detailed next.

## Study 1

Compared to intercultural relationships, mono-cultural relationships have a long history of research in several academic fields including psychology, anthropology, and communication. Such research includes some examination of challenges within marriages. For instance, the Inventory of Marital Problems (IMS; Geiss & O'Leary, 1981) has been used in numerous studies examining various aspects of marriages and self-reported problems within marriages (e.g., Faure et al., 2022; Overall et al., 2022). However, similar attention has not been paid to intercultural marriages (or romantic relationships). Therefore, we focus specifically on identifying common challenges in intercultural marriages. We apply the IMS to an intercultural sample but also supplement the scale with open-ended data in an effort to capture possible challenges that the IMS may not cover given the time when it was developed and the mono-cultural focus of the scale development process. The overall guiding research question for this study was,

**RQ<sub>1</sub>:** *What are the most commonly reported challenges in intercultural marriages?*

## Method

### Participants

Participants in this study included 93 individuals living in the U.S. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 69 years old,  $M = 34.88$ ,  $SD = 9.73$ . There were 62 men and 31 women. Most participants identified as White ( $n = 61$ ), Black or African-American ( $n = 16$ ), or another ethnicity (e.g., Asian, Hispanic). Most participants reported they had earned a four-year degree ( $n = 50$ ) or a different type of degree (e.g., professional, two-year degree;  $n = 26$ ). Participants lived in various regions in the U.S., with most indicating the Atlantic region ( $n = 26$ ), the East Central region ( $n = 16$ ) or West South Central ( $n = 15$ ).

Only participants who were in an intercultural marriage were eligible to participate. The cultural background of the participants varied. Of the 93 respondents, 83 indicated their country of origin as the U.S., whereas the remaining ten indicated countries such as China ( $n = 2$ ), the Dominican Republic ( $n = 1$ ), Mexico ( $n = 1$ ), Nigeria ( $n = 1$ ), Japan ( $n = 1$ ), South Korea ( $n = 1$ ), Spain ( $n = 1$ ), Venezuela ( $n = 1$ ), and Yemen ( $n = 1$ ). Participants' spouses' country of origin was diverse, ranging from the United Kingdom or Mexico ( $n = 6$  for each) to India ( $n = 3$ ), the Philippines ( $n = 4$ ), Japan ( $n = 3$ ), Germany ( $n = 3$ ), or Haiti ( $n = 2$ ). Participants' relationship length ranged from one to 36 years ( $M = 8.72$ ,  $SD = 7.31$ ), whereas their marriage length ranged from one to 34 years ( $M = 6.61$ ,  $SD = 7.07$ ).

## Procedures

A non-random convenience sample was solicited through Amazon Mechanical Turk's (MTurk) workers' pool by posting a human intelligence task (HIT). Recruitment was limited to those who were currently at least 18 years old, living in the U.S., and in an intercultural marriage. Eligibility was enforced both through MTurk settings and via disqualifying questions at the beginning of the study's online survey. Eligible participants were presented with consent information first. Those who consented completed open-ended questions, information about their relationship, and demographic information. The survey took, on average, approximately 10 minutes to complete and participants were compensated \$1.40. The research was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the authors' institution.

## Measures

**Marital Problems** – The IMP (Geiss & O'Leary, 1981) was used to assess the severity of each participant's self-reported marital problems (e.g., communication, sex, power-struggles). This scale contains 29 items presented on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not a problem* to 5 = *severe problem*). The scale's reliability was 0.98. The aggregate IMP (averaging all 29 items) yielded  $M = 1.61$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ .

**Biggest Challenge** – Participants were asked to indicate via an open-ended question the biggest challenge within their relationship.

## Results

To answer the study's research question, we examined the mean scores for each of the 29 IMP challenges and conducted a thematic analysis of the open-ended responses provided by participants describing the biggest challenge in their intercultural marriages.

We ranked the mean IMP scores in descending order (see Table 1) and conducted paired *t*-tests between adjacent means (e.g., family and money management; money management and communication, etc.) to check if differences between scores were significant. None of them were. Thus, although the scores could be ranked, the ranking differences were not significant.

**Table 1***Study 1 Inventory of Marital Problems Descriptive Statistics, Ranked*

<b>Challenge</b>	<b><i>M</i></b>	<b><i>SD</i></b>
Family	2.00	1.17
Money Management	1.92	1.09
Communication	1.91	1.03
Serious Personal Problems	1.75	1.12
Value Conflicts	1.70	1.08
Decision Making	1.68	0.92
Household Management	1.66	0.98
Power Struggles	1.66	1.04
Unrealistic Expectations	1.66	0.94
Jealousy	1.65	1.02
Children	1.62	1.02
Employment	1.61	1.03
Sex	1.60	1.03
Religious Difference	1.60	1.01
Role Conflict	1.58	0.93
Psychological Problems	1.57	1.04
Alcoholism	1.56	1.10
Recreation	1.56	0.93
Demonstration of Affection	1.56	1.09
Health Problems	1.56	1.08
Addictive Behavior	1.55	1.04
Conventionality	1.54	0.95
Personal Habits	1.53	0.94
Friends	1.52	0.96
Previous Marriage	1.51	1.04
Lack of Loving Feelings	1.49	1.02
Extramarital Affairs	1.43	0.96
Incest	1.35	0.97
Physical Abuse	1.33	0.90

Next, a modified version of constant comparative analysis (CCA; Charmaz, 2006) was conducted in three stages. First, data were isolated in a process of open coding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Open coding involved an iterative process of examining each line of data as a theme and comparing it to the second line of data, which was added to the existing themes, if similar, or developed into a new theme if it did not match existing themes (Kramer & Crespy, 2011). Second, axial coding was performed. During this process, the coded themes identified were sorted into related categories, a process that continued until conceptual saturation was achieved (Charmaz, 2006). Finally, categories were an-

alyzed to understand interrelationships between categories to assist in understanding how individuals managed their biggest challenge within their intercultural relationship (Charmaz, 2006).

Five major themes appeared in the responses: 1) family (i.e., dealing with in-laws and relatives), 2) finances (i.e., how to manage money), 3) communication (i.e., language barriers and differences in cultural styles of communication), 4) time spent together (i.e., not enough time to spend with one's partner), and 5) clashes in cultural expectations/traditions (i.e., different cultural expectations that influence married life).

These theme matched several of the top ten IMS quantitative challenges. Therefore, we derived the following top challenges by selecting common issues that appeared in both the IMS and participants' open-ended responses: 1) family issues, particularly with in-laws; 2) communication problems; 3) finances and their management; and 4) clashes in cultural values, expectations, or traditions, which we discuss below.

## Discussion

The goal of Study 1 was to identify the most reported challenges in intercultural marriages. Some of these challenges may exist in all marriages, regardless of cultural make-up. However, past literature illustrates the unique challenges that exist when two individuals from differing cultures marry. Although financial challenges, for example, may exist in both intracultural and intercultural marriages, cultural factors can affect how couples perceive and negotiate this challenge differently in the two types of relationships. Our study contributes several conclusions that help nuance the understanding of these issues in intercultural marriages.

Family challenges revealed issues such as coping with in-laws who are (too) involved in a couple's life. For example, one participant indicated their in-laws wanted to know everything that was happening in their marriage, which bothered the respondent. Thus, one issue with in-laws might stem from what is perceived to be an invasion of the couple's privacy. However, such privacy boundaries are culturally determined; what might seem intrusive in one culture is perceived as perfectly normal in another. Another challenge regarding in-laws was that respondents felt them disapproving of their marriage or different cultural background. Scholars have found that families are often reluctant to encourage the romantic relationships of individuals from different cultures (Bustamante et al., 2011). This leads to intercultural couples often facing increased conflict and a lack of support from extended family, creating increased strain on their relationship. Finally, relatives were another family challenge, which included either the lack of relatives that one partner could connect to or the issue of facing relatives as an intercultural couple. This aspect is important as lack of familial support has been found to lead to divorce, preempt the development of a marriage, affect the psychological health of a relationship, and increase stress around traditional celebrations and rituals (Bustamante et al., 2011; Campos & Kim, 2017). Thus, family challenges appear to be reflective of

cultural understandings of how individuals relate to and the role their (extended) families play in their marriages. Individualism and collectivism (Hofstede, 2001), for instance, are cultural dimensions that could explain these behaviors, including partners' differing expectations and enacted behaviors vis-à-vis family and their marriage.

A second major challenge pertained to communication problems. This included communication aspects that could occur in any relationship, such as not discussing problems right away and waiting until partners "blow up," but also specific intercultural issues, such as language barriers or cultural patterns of communication that differed between partners. For example, one participant indicated that their partner was raised in a culture where emotions were not openly expressed, which led to communication problems between them. Another indicated language as a barrier that led to misunderstandings. These answers highlight the influence that culture can have on communication in intercultural relationships. Culture influences the way individuals learn to communicate appropriately or what nonverbal behaviors mean and when they are appropriate. In fact, intercultural couples may find a lot of miscommunication comes from nonverbal behaviors (Liu et al., 2014). For example, one participant indicated that they were warm and extroverted, whereas their partner was more reserved and colder about showing affection. This could lead to nonverbal miscommunication, which continues to be a common issue for intercultural marriages (Romano, 2008).

Finances and the management of money represented another challenge reported by individuals in intercultural couples. For instance, participants talked about being able to provide for each other, manage expenses, or agree how to spend money. Discrepancies in how to manage finances are a hallmark of marital conflict (Nyman et al., 2013). Although common in many marriages, scholars have found that the view of household finances is largely cultural (Nyman et al., 2013). For instance, researchers found that, in Spain, couples most valued pooling their finances together (Díaz et al., 2007), whereas in Sweden, women placed a particular emphasis on financial independence (Nyman & Reinikainen, 2007). Thus, partners' approach to finances and money management could be influenced by their cultural values and background.

Finally, the results of this study suggest that differing values also posed challenges for intercultural marriages. Cultural values not only affect individuals on a societal level but also profoundly influence their views and expectations about the world around them, including their relationships. Cultural expectations can affect many aspects of a marriage. For example, one's religious views are often influenced by their culture (Bhugun, 2017). Participants mentioned several challenges that echo these arguments. For example, their different cultural backgrounds created challenges in their relationship as did differences in religion and different cultural values.

It is worth noting that, on average, challenges were rated low in severity on the IMS. Nevertheless, such challenges can create problems for a relationship and should be addressed. We were interested in how intercultural couples manage such challenges and



the effects these challenges may have on their relationship. We sought to answer these questions in a subsequent study.

## Study 2

The management of marital problems has received a fair amount of attention from past scholars. One notable study found that the mismanagement of a variety of marital challenges predicted divorce up to twelve years in advance (Amato & Rogers, 1997). Thus, the management (or lack thereof) of relational issues can affect couples' relational satisfaction and even the viability of their marriage.

Most studies that examine marital problems have been conducted with mono-cultural couples. Yet, past research reveals that intercultural marriages face additional challenges compared to mono-cultural couples. Therefore, it is important to examine how intercultural couples manage such challenges. Thus, Study 2 was guided by the following research questions:

**RQ<sub>1</sub>:** *What consequences do common marital challenges have on intercultural marriages?*

**RQ<sub>2</sub>:** *How do individuals manage such challenges in their intercultural marriages?*

**RQ<sub>3</sub>:** *How do these challenges affect relationship satisfaction in intercultural marriages?*

## Method

### Participants

Participants in this study included 83 individuals living in the U.S., of whom 43 were male and 40 were female. Their age ranged from 21 to 71 years old,  $M = 37.40$ ,  $SD = 10.64$ . Most participants identified as White ( $n = 51$ ), followed by Asian ( $n = 18$ ), and other ethnicities ( $n = 14$ ). Most participants ( $n = 71$ ) indicated the U.S. as their country of nationality/cultural background, whereas the remaining indicated countries such as China ( $n = 3$ ), Ukraine ( $n = 2$ ), or the Philippines ( $n = 1$ ) and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines ( $n = 1$ ). Participants' spouses' county of nationality was diverse – Mexico ( $n = 10$ ), Russia ( $n = 4$ ), Brazil ( $n = 4$ ), or the United Kingdom ( $n = 3$ ). Participants lived in various regions of the U.S., with most indicating the Atlantic region ( $n = 32$ ), the South-Central region ( $n = 19$ ), or the East Central region ( $n = 10$ ).

Similar to Study 1, only participants involved in an intercultural marriage were eligible to participate in the study. Participants' relationship length ranged from two years to 35 years ( $M = 11.60$ ,  $SD = 10.64$ ), whereas their marriage length ranged from half a year to 34 years ( $M = 8.46$ ,  $SD = 7.75$ ).

## Procedures

As in Study 1, a non-random convenience sample was recruited through MTurk. Location was set to be U.S., and participants were also required to have a HIT approval rate for their previous work of at least 95% and to have completed at least 1,000 previous HITs. Recruitment was conducted in two steps. First, a HIT was posted asking participants to complete a brief survey that would determine if they were eligible to complete further studies. Those who were in intercultural marriages with partners from different countries of origins were eligible to see the recruitment for Study 2 and sign up to complete it. The online survey contained consent information first. Those who consented provided information about the biggest challenge in their relationship, then answered open-ended questions about the management of this challenge and its effect on their relational satisfaction. The survey took, on average, 5 minutes to complete and participants were compensated \$1.00 for their participation. The research was approved by the IRB at the authors' institution.

## Measures

**Biggest Challenge** — Participants were asked to choose via a multiple-choice question the biggest challenge within their marriage, with answer choices derived from Study 1 results, and an “other” option. Thirty-three participants indicated miscommunication, 23 indicated disagreements about how to handle finances, 13 indicated disagreements related to relatives or in-laws, eight indicated disagreements caused by cultural traditions or expectations, and another six indicated another challenge (e.g., household management, partner's anger issues).

**Open-Ended Questions** — Participants were asked several open-ended questions pertaining to 1) the consequences the selected challenge had on their relationship; 2) how they tried to manage this challenge; 3) what strategies they found to be the successful for dealing with the challenge; and 4) how the challenge identified affected their marital satisfaction (if at all).

## Results

The qualitative data provided by participants was subjected to a thematic analysis following the same approach and steps described for Study 1.

In response to RQ1, which asked what consequences challenges in intercultural marriages had on the marriage itself, the main consequence of such challenges was *arguing about the issues* (i.e., fighting). Hand in hand with that (and what we can consider to be a second type of consequence), was the *emotional toll of quarreling*. Participants reported stress, hurt feelings, resentment, and animosity occurred. For example, a 47-year-old British female married to a U.S. individual who reported miscommunication as their biggest challenge, shared: “We argue over things that are meaningless because we are

not understanding each other.” This theme was consistent across all reported challenges. Thus, it was critical to understand how individuals within intercultural marriages managed these challenges.

The second research question pertained to the management of these challenges. We examined the questions that asked how individuals reported trying to deal with the challenge and what strategies they had found worked best. We also grouped management strategies based on the challenge reported, prior to discussing strategies applicable across challenges.

The main strategy to address miscommunication, the most frequent challenge indicated by participants, was for couples to *improve the clarity and preciseness of their communication*. Specific ways to enact this strategy included participants paraphrasing their partner’s statements to verify that they understood them correctly or relying on low-context communication. For example, a 28-year-old U.S. American male whose spouse was from Russia, wrote, “The best way to manage miscommunication is to have my spouse repeat back to me what I said. Not in a condescending way, but more of a reassuring way. I do the same for her too.” Or, as a 44-year-old U.S. American female with a spouse from the Netherlands indicated, “I clearly say what I mean and tell my husband to be clear and direct with me.” Thus, direct communication and active listening were key strategies for managing communication challenges.

Couples often attributed the communicative challenges in their relationship to differences in culture. Therefore, participants stated that they took *time to understand each other’s culture better* to understand why miscommunication occurred. A 35-year-old U.S. American male whose spouse was Chinese shared, “We decided on exploring each other’s cultural belief and learn from each other’s tradition.” The participant explained that, by better understanding their partner’s culture, they were able to understand differences in communication. By being aware of cultural differences in communication, participants reported being able to improve their management of miscommunication within their intercultural relationship.

An essential approach to managing miscommunication that participants reported they had found successful was to *adopt integrative strategies*—remaining calm, being empathetic, examining the issue from both perspectives. For example, a 25-year-old U.S. American male whose spouse was from Mexico explained, “I try to relax, remain calm, and understand that she is a person who doesn’t always understand where I’m coming from.” Similarly, a 38-year-old U.S. American male whose spouse was from Costa Rica mentioned, “Taking the time to listen to each other and allow each other to fully finish thoughts and feelings. Putting myself in her shoes to try and see how she might have taken my comment.” One other comment from a 27-year-old U.S. American woman married to a Chinese encapsulated the idea of integrative approaches perfectly—“find a mutual solution to the problem.”

For the second most frequent challenge, finances, participants reported two main strategies: *communication* and *budgeting*. Many participants reported that sitting down and talking about finances was the best strategy within their marriage. As stated by a 27-year-old U.S. American female whose spouse was from China, “We try to communicate as much as possible and be transparent about spending.” Similarly, a 33-year-old U.S. American male with a spouse from Mexico shared that they tried to have conversations about finances “in an objective manner.” As for budgeting, participants indicated that they “... have made budgets and spreadsheets tracking expenses and what amount of money goes where.” This was often in tandem with communication, as a 38-year-old U.S. American female whose spouse was from Cuba noted, “We try to communicate openly without getting upset. We try to come up with a budget that is a compromise to spending versus saving.” Or, “Do weekly check in meetings about finances and have monthly meetings to go through the budget,” as another indicated. By communicating their views on financial matters, couples then collaborated to create a budget. Participants also reported that once the budget was in place, they spoke openly about their household finances with their spouse.

The third most frequent challenge for individuals in intercultural marriages was dealing with family, particularly in-laws. Two major strategies emerged from participants’ responses: *avoidance* and *strategic preparation for family visits*. Most participants stated that they chose to avoid interactions with their in-laws due to the challenges that the latter presented to their marriage. For example, a 43-year-old U.S. American male whose spouse was from Cuba, noted, “I try to be unavailable for the larger family gatherings. Which is noticed and comments are always made to my wife about this.” Additionally, participants mentioned they scheduled work or trips during the time of family gatherings to ensure they would not need to interact with their in-laws. For instance, the same participant shared, “I’ve had to intentionally work overtime to escape from this situation.” The second approach was strategic preparation for family visits. Rather than completely avoiding extended family, participants planned how to deal with their in-laws. One example of this was provided by a 46-year-old U.S. American male married to a Chinese, who reported, “I have my mother-in-law focus on her grandchildren and have her do some ‘projects’ for me that takes up her time and concentration.” By refocusing their in-laws’ attention, this participant was able to manage the biggest challenge associated with their intercultural marriage.

Finally, another challenge identified pertained to clashes in cultural expectations and traditions. The most common strategy identified for managing such challenges was *adaptability*. For example, a 35-year-old U.S. American male with a spouse from South Africa revealed,

It takes adaptation and understanding that everyone’s cultural heritage is peculiar to them and accepting rather than criticizing is important to ensure a good marital life. I took effort to successfully

learn some of my partners culture in combination with mine. Willingness to bend some belief also is an important factor to manage the challenge.

This participant's response highlights how adaptability can help manage differing cultural expectations. An important part of participants' adaptability was their willingness to communicate their cultural differences with their partner. As a 36-year-old Chinese male whose spouse was from Peru shared,

I try to be more vocal and express myself better, try to break out of the mold and understand her perspective more and express myself more openly to her, making sure that nothing is left to interpenetration and representing the wrong expression.

Both participants offer examples of how being adaptable allows intercultural couples to gain a better understanding of their differences. Specifically, by being open-minded and communicating about their differences, respondents believed they were able to improve how they managed these cultural differences.

Finally, the third research question asked about the effect that challenges had on individuals' marital satisfaction. Most participants indicated that their challenges did not negatively affect their relationships. Instead, they reported that, even though they had to face such challenges, they were satisfied with their relationships. For example, a 35-year-old U.S. American male with a spouse from South Africa stated,

It's been overall interesting as a marriage without issues sounds boring. The fun part of being misunderstood and reconciling helps in understanding ourselves better. I get to see life from her views and vice versa. We get to build our norm and decide the kind of culture we agree to instill in our children. Overall, I'm satisfied with the marriage.

Other participants reported similar views, stating that they saw these challenges as opportunities to grow as a couple. In fact, many participants reported that their challenges brought them closer together. There were exceptions to these findings, however. Participants who reported in-laws as their biggest challenge shared that their marital satisfaction had been affected negatively by this challenge. As a 46-year-old U.S. American male whose spouse was from China shared,

At times my wife will take it out on me, and I don't blame her at all. It's difficult to have been married for so long and yet not quite feel that you have been accepted. It has and continues to put a strain of the relationship.

This statement encapsulates sentiments expressed by other participants. Many reported that the challenges they faced regarding their in-laws created a divide within their marriage. Specifically, the analysis revealed that in-laws challenges often resulted in one spouse feeling that they needed to choose between their family and their spouse. Additionally, some participants also mentioned feeling that they came second to their in-laws; for instance, a 50-year-old U.S. American male participant whose spouse was from the Philippines shared, “My wife is genuine and works very hard herself but seems to put her family first and me second which can hurt my feelings a lot.” Such statements highlight the stark difference in consequences of challenges that involve in-laws compared to other frequently reported challenges within intercultural marriages.

## Discussion

Study 2 explored the consequences of frequently reported challenges, how couples manage these challenges, as well as how these challenges affect individuals’ satisfaction in intercultural marriages. Across the most frequent challenges, arguing (in the sense of quarreling or fighting about the issue) was the most common consequence. Arguing is omnipresent in all relationships (Hample, 2018). Thus, it is not surprising that intercultural couples also argue. The complex influences of culture on their relationships likely lead to incompatibilities and conflict. However, many individuals also reported that they had developed useful ways to manage the most frequent challenges in their relationships. Thus, arguing can be used to resolve incompatibilities, problem-solve, or even learn more about the other person (Cionea et al., 2017). It would be useful to know more via future research about the role of arguing in the management of intercultural marriages.

There were numerous strategies that individuals relied on to manage their biggest challenges in their intercultural marriages. The most commonly mentioned strategy revolved around being open minded and willing to communicate. By doing so, individuals were able to better understand the situation and, in many cases, the cultural effects at play. While self-discovery and adaptation are necessary in any relationship, our findings suggest that these aspects may be even more necessary for intercultural married couples.

Lastly, most challenges in intercultural marriages did not have a negative effect on individuals’ marital satisfaction, but rather the challenge itself and its eventual resolution made the participants feel closer to their partner. However, challenges related to in-laws appear to have damaging effects, often making individuals feel as if they needed to choose between their spouse or their family, or feeling less important to their spouse compared to their in-laws. One explanation for why this challenge is more difficult to manage is the idea of filial piety—the expectation and obligation of the younger family members to be respectful, grateful, and obedient to their elders (Campos & Kim, 2017). In this study, most respondents were born in the U.S. and had spouses from other countries and cultures. It is feasible that at least some of their spouses viewed filial piety as their duty in relation to their parents, which is something the American-born respondents

did not. For example, many participants noted that they avoided their in-laws to avoid unsolicited advice. Others mentioned that they perceived their in-laws as not respecting the privacy of their marriage. The description of filial piety would also explain why individuals reported their spouse being unable to confront the problematic parents. Some participants noted that their spouse was afraid of their own parents, making it seem that there could not be any resolution to this challenge in their intercultural marriage.

## **General Discussion, Limitations, and Directions for Future Research**

The results of the two exploratory studies we have conducted not only highlight the most frequent challenges that partners in intercultural marriages face, but also outline the consequences of such challenges and their management, which adds important contributions to intercultural and interpersonal communication literatures. First, beyond identifying the most frequent challenges, these studies also explored common ways of managing each of these challenges and revealed how these challenges affected satisfaction in intercultural marriages. To our knowledge, this is a new endeavor with important practical applications.

Specifically, four of the five challenges identified were consistently managed by keeping an open mind and focusing on better communication. Participants reported these strategies helped them not only overcome challenges but also feel closer and more satisfied in their relationships. Thus, couples in intercultural marriages should invest in learning more about each other's cultures, particularly in the beginning of their relationships. In addition, in several cases reported in this study, challenges were the result of cultural differences regarding expectations for the relationship. Thus, it may be particularly helpful for intercultural partners to learn how to discuss their expectations openly. Marital therapists, counselors, or clergy could stress the importance of discussing culture and the need to learn how to navigate cultural differences constructively. Furthermore, intercultural training and a better understanding of effective intercultural communication could be useful for intercultural couples. Individuals in intercultural marriages could deliberately cultivate their intercultural communication competence to learn how to navigate communication challenges more effectively. Thus, easily accessible resources about communication in intercultural relationships would be helpful. Finally, these findings may be useful for other intercultural couples who are navigating similar challenges. Sharing others' experiences highlights the existence and frequency of such challenges, potentially offering individuals in intercultural marriages knowledge and coping mechanisms for working through challenges such as the one we have identified in these studies.

The main limitation of both studies is their sample size. Although we were able to capture diverse viewpoints via mostly qualitative data, the samples were still modest

in size although adequate given their qualitative focus. This is a known challenge for researchers recruiting couples who are in an intercultural marriage, which is perhaps why such studies are rather scarce. A second limitation is that our sample in both studies was composed of individuals born mostly in the U.S., who had married partners from other cultures. Thus, it would be fair to qualify our findings as not necessarily applicable to all intercultural couples but more so to U.S. American—other culture couples. A third limitation is that no data was collected regarding additional marital characteristics such as the presence and (if applicable) age of children or whether partners had been married before. Such data would offer further insight into the nuanced challenges associated with intercultural marriages at varying stages of their relationship life cycle. Finally, our open-ended questions permitted only a limited amount of detail to be written about the challenges explored and their management. Future research could rely on semi-structured interviews to explore each of these challenges in depth and better capture the voice and experiences of partners in intercultural marriages. In addition, interviews with both partners in an intercultural marriage could further contribute to a more nuanced understanding of individuals' perceptions.

Finally, an important observation about the challenges we have identified, and the strategies uncovered for their management, is that couples in mono-cultural marriages could face several of the same issues. While some challenges are clearly intercultural in nature (e.g., clashes of cultural expectations and traditions), others could feasibly be an issue in any marriage (e.g., financial challenges). Therefore, future research ought to conduct comparative studies of challenges and their management in mono-cultural and intercultural couples. This possibility does not diminish the value of our findings but rather calls for more research that can help situate the unique challenges that intercultural couples face and understand how culture influences their relationships.

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