The Mystery of Cross-Cultural Relationships: Thinking Outside the Box

Romantic relationships always have plenty of mystery and challenges in them, but what happens when two people from different cultures engage in a romantic relationship together? How can people deal with the influences of different cultural backgrounds?

To begin with, it is helpful to understand that cross-cultural romantic relationships are not something radically different from same-culture romantic relationships. In a way all romantic relationships are cross-cultural, in that two individuals, each with their own personal cultures, are involved with each other. The basic dynamics of how a person handles differences with their significant other remain the same regardless of where each person is from. One Western man I met told me how he married a Japanese woman and five years later was divorced. He said cross-cultural marriages were too difficult, so he was going to go back to his home country, find a local woman, and get married again with a better chance of success. Then several years later I met him again in Japan. I was surprised and asked him what happened. He said that indeed he did go back to his home country, found a local woman, got married, and then five years later was divorced again. He then said, “Now I understand that all relationships are cross-cultural.”

Human beings are humans with basic similarities, but each person has their mysterious aspects and is a bit different from everybody else. Trying to integrate these mysteries and differences into a relationship is what makes any relationship cross-cultural. In cross-cultural relationships the mystery quotient increases and the differences can have more strength than in same culture relationships. A simple example is different native languages, which can result in more effort needed in communication. “What are you saying?” is often heard in cross-cultural households. Thus a common prescription for cross-cultural relationships is the need for more patience, effort, and trying to understand the other than in same-culture relationships (see endnote #1).

A common tendency that people everywhere often have in relationships regarding their differences is to try to change the other person to be more to their liking. I have observed this in the three countries where I am worked as a psychotherapist – the U.S., Japan, and Thailand. Trying to change another person usually doesn’t succeed and instead creates more problems. In a cross-cultural relationship, if one partner wants their partner to become more like a person from their own culture, they are embarking on a very difficult endeavor. Cultural psychology research indicates that the basis of a person’s world view is formed during their first fifteen or so years of their life, and the fundamentals of this world view don’t change much during a person’s life (see endnote # 2). This means that a person always has a part of themselves that expresses their native country. So, for example, born and bred in Australia means that a
part of such a person will always be Australian. Thus it is futile for a non-Australian partner to try to have their Australian partner to become less Australian in basic ways, like values and world view.

Rather than trying to change their partner, what each partner needs to do is to accept their other as they are and instead focus on meeting in their relationship. Their relationship is much more malleable to change, while the basis of a person – values, world view, character, temperament – is much less malleable. Each person needs to be themselves, accept their partner as they are, and then in this situation find a way to be together in relationship with their partner.

Visually each person being themselves and meeting in relationship looks like this:

![Diagram showing meeting in relationship](image)

How to meet in relationship in a healthy way is a big challenge. What does this look like practically? Because people are so wonderful and varied, there are many ways to do this. I will address a couple ways here that actually work together.

The first one is compromise, which means that the two people are in a dynamic relationship, each giving some, each receiving some. To be in relationship nobody gets all their wants and preferences fulfilled. Relationship is a back and forth, adjusting and asserting, always moving, yin and yang in Daoist terminology. Being able to do this in a healthy way is a basic part of all relationships. We all need to be able to accept influence from other people, as well as be able to influence others. This is the dynamic of relationship.

John Gottman (see endnote #3), a marriage relationship researcher, writes that when there is a conflict, the key to resolution is the willingness to compromise. He asserts that a person does this by searching through their partner’s request for something that they can relinquish (Gottman, p. 114). What a person can relinquish is that which is not so important to themselves.

Gottman (2000, p. 114) gives the example of a husband who infuriated his wife by working late when her mother was due to visit. Perhaps he could not compromise on how much he works, but he might have been able to switch his long days of work so he was available for the mother’s visit. He just needed the willingness to examine this.

While compromise is an integral part of daily life, there is also a big danger in compromise. That is when a person relin quishes something that is very important to
them. If both people do this, then meeting in relationship becomes meeting in the middle, with each person becoming half of what they were before. Rather than a compromise about something not so important, this is a compromise which results in each person being half of what they are, and leads to more problems.

When issues of fundamental importance arise in a relationship, Gottman (2000, p. 133) writes that both people need the motivation and willingness to explore the hidden issues that are causing the gridlock in the relationship. The key is to share with each other the significant personal dreams that each has for their life. He writes that “unrequited dreams are at the core of every gridlocked conflict” (p. 133).

Johan Galtung (see endnote #4) has written about a way of handling this situation that can be useful and practical. His conflict resolution approach is what he calls the “Transcend Method.” In this method he writes that that there are three solution possibilities that are the result of most conflict resolution attempts. The first two are the extremes of one partner or the other getting their way, getting all, and the other partner giving in, getting nothing. The third is in the middle between these two extremes, which is both partners compromising on something important, so each gets a half. All three of these solutions result in some kind of loss by one person or both.

Galtung writes that for a solution in which both partners are happy and at peace, a fourth way is necessary. The basis of this way is a “both/and” approach. This is a way that focuses on including the basic needs of both people, a solution that works for both people. The key factor in doing this is to shift the perspective of each person, thereby opening the people to new possibilities. In other words, the situation needs to be viewed in a different manner. The perspective of the couple needs to be changed, not the needs of each person. Visually “both/and” looks like this (Galtung, 2004, p. ix):

![Diagram](image-url)
Galtung (2004, pp. 6-45) gives several examples from his own experience of working in conflict resolution. One is a story of how he and his wife decided to build a cottage in the garden of their house for visitors. It was going to be small, so how to use the space became an issue in their discussions. His wife wanted to have a wardrobe (closet) in the room, but he insisted that this would take up too much space. All attempts at compromise left both people unsatisfied. Finally a third person suggested instead of using two dimensions of the space (the width and length of the floor space), they could use all three dimensions of the space (the vertical walls plus the floor space).

This third person said, “Use the walls. Put the cupboards close to the ceiling for shirts and blouses, for socks and underwear; with some iron rods to hang the hangers on for dresses and jackets and things of that kind” (Galtung, 2004, p. 25).

By changing their perspective from a two-dimensional based perspective to one based on three dimensions, the issue was viewed in a new way that resulted in the needs of both people being satisfied and neither losing. A "both/and" solution was found.

There are two keys to this process of finding a new perspective: first, to focus on and share the basic needs and personal dreams of both people, and second, try to see the situation in ways that haven’t been considered already. This is not so easy to do. However, they need to be patient, don’t give up, and use whatever resources they have to try to see the issue from a new and inclusive perspective. Galtung and his wife consulted with a friend. This friend looked at the proposed cottage differently than Galtung and his wife. From a different perspective the friend quickly saw a solution.

Couples, by the nature of their situation being two individuals, tend to perceive couple issues from a two-dimensional perspective – the perspective of each person. A person’s perspective is based in their individuality, what they have learned in life regarding conflict resolution, and their habitual ways of handling relationship situations. Cultural learning is important here, because each culture around the world has their own approach to negotiating conflicts of interest (see endnote #5).

What can easily happen is that couples end up in an “I vs. My Partner” situation. This can lead to various problems, including fighting and the sense that any solution will require some kind of loss. It is like the situation in the American poet Robert Frost’s poem, “The Road Not Taken” (see endnote #6). When a person is going along a road and comes to a fork in this road, which way does a person choose to go? If they take the right fork, they lose what is on the left fork. And if they take the left fork, they lose what is on the right fork. This is a dilemma that many couples get stuck in.

What is needed to resolve this dilemma is that cross-cultural couples need to “think outside of the box.” This is an American metaphor that means thinking outside of one’s learned and habitual ways of thinking. Thinking outside the box transcends the dual perspectives of mine and my partner’s. If a couple searches for a new perspective, one that is "both/and," a solution can appear in which both partners needs are met. A
couple can examine what are their basic needs and how can the situation be viewed differently. If a couple can do this, then they can meet in their relationship without losing an important part of themselves.

Are you ready to try to think outside the box? Jon Kabat-Zinn (see endnote #7) gives a nice, simple example of this. Try to do this exercise without reading the following explanation of the solution. This can be the beginning of your training in learning to think outside the box!

Exercise

The problem is as follows: Below is an arrangement of nine dots. You are to connect up all the dots by making four straight lines without lifting your pencil and without retracing along any line. Before you continue to read, try to solve this puzzle yourself for five or ten minutes if you don't already know the answer.

What invariably happens with most people is that they start out in one corner and draw three lines around the square, and then the light dawns! One of the dots will be left out this way.

The solution is on the next page
The Solution

The solution lies in extending the lines you draw beyond the imaginary square that the dots make. The problem as stated does not prevent you from going outside the dots, but the “normal” tendency is to see the nine-dot square pattern as the field of the problem rather than seeing the dots in the context of the paper and recognizing that the field of the problem is the whole surface that contains the dots.

The problem of the nine dots teaches us that we may have to expand beyond our habitual ways of seeing and thinking and acting in order to solve or resolve certain kinds of problems. This is even more needed in cross-cultural relationships. If we don’t do this kind of expansion, our attempts to identify and solve our problems will usually be thwarted by our own prejudices and preconceptions. They can come to dominate our lives and our relationships. Then, too often, we forget that we have created these boundaries ourselves. Consequently we get stuck and feel we can’t get beyond them.

Conclusion

The mysteries of cross-cultural relationships demand that cross-cultural couples become more creative. They need to accept their partner as they are, look to meet in their relationship, and step out of their habitual ways of handling relationship challenges. When partners are able to do this, then usually, in my experience, they settle into a comfortable and satisfying way of life.

Cross-cultural couples are actually in the forefront of the future of human beings. As the world becomes smaller, cross-cultural interactions increase. The world more and more needs cross-cultural couples who are adept at expanding their perceptual
horizons. Cross-cultural couples are a microcosm for what is needed in the contemporary world today.

Endnotes


