



Melting-pot marriages bridge cultural divide

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Jaclyn and Aditya Chaudhuri performing Indian marriage rituals. Image courtesy of gorigirl.com

Have you even attended a wedding and heard “I do” from the bride and “Kabool Hai”- which means the same in Urdu- from the groom?

Intercultural marriage has its promises and pitfalls. There are people who find common ground and trounce the cultural and religious barriers, leading to a happy life. However, high divorce rates are seen in intercultural marriages, according to a research by Ohio State University, so the relationships may need extra attention.

It is very important to have your eyes wide open and ask lots of questions when in such a relationship, says Jaclyn Chaudhuri, an analyst in the energy market. “Get an understanding of the religious expectations, culture, gender rules and even little things you think would not matter, matter the most.”

She started dating a Bengali boy during her undergraduate studies at DePaul University, Indiana. She says that while they were dating, they would share stories with one another about their experiences growing up in different cultures.

The key to successful inter-ethnic marriage may rely on greater flexibility. “You need to reflect on how flexible you would be both individually and as a couple,” Chaudhuri said.

They have now been married for three years and Jaclyn has her own blog, gorigirl.com, about her personal experiences and her research on a myriad issues involved in such relationships.

Tips for intercultural couples:

Families: Know the structure and communal values of your spouse’s family. Unlike western cultures where visiting family on certain occasions is acceptable, a foreign-born spouse might come from a family that has strong traditional ties, which may even obligate him/her to visit them often and even support the elderly financially.

Religion: It might not seem to affect you while you are just dating but you need to resolve this issue before wedding. Things such as dietary observance, religious holidays and in what religion to raise the child, need to be locked into seriously.

Where to live: Living in a foreign place might sound exciting but in reality you might not like it. Staying away from family, adapting to foreign language, dealing with in-laws can take a toll on the newlywed relationship.

Gender Roles: Do not assume that your foreign-born spouse who was impressed with your degree would like your working after marriage. If they are from a more-clearly defined family system with set rules, chances are, you have make career choices as per the system. So talk out those differences, no matter how much you love each other.

Tolerance: One’s religious and cultural obligations can lead you to see things a certain way. So you need to respect that and do not try to change or impose your beliefs on your spouse. It can complicate things and blow them out of proportion.

Wedding two cultures

Elizabeth Sloan, a licensed professional counselor who has been in private practice for 20 years, provides couples and families with counseling at Caring Couples, Happy Lives (www.CaringCouples.com).

“The reasons for having such a wedding ranges from growing up in a foreign country and having international perspective, wanting a spouse who’s different, exotic and foreign, to just the need to rebel against or reject their own cultural and family norms,” Sloan said.

She said a couple she came across married each other because they wanted to rebel against their own traditions.

“I had a couple where the man was from the Middle East and the woman had a traditional European background; they rejected the ways of life of each of their families, and each partner wanted to create a completely new way of living. After they were married, their families would not accept their partners, and the long-term anger and resentment led to stress on the couple’s relationship,” Sloan said.

Sometimes it’s love and commitment that helps a couple go the distance. Kate Mishra, a program analyst, was born and raised in Richmond, Virginia. She met the love of her life in India during one of her visits and has been married to a Brahmin man and a member of a priest cast for more than seven years.

“I was worried that my family and relatives would think that I was making an unwise decision, even though I had known him for a year before we got married. But it’s been so many years and we have a wonderful son together. We made it work,” Mishra said.

She said they have to constantly make the effort to sort out their differences to make it work.

“We both try very hard to be flexible and communicate so we can understand each other’s point of view” Mishra said. “Being a strict Hindu Brahmin he ignores people serving beef in my social circle and I visit his family in India every year by using up all my vacation time. It is all about bridging that gap.”

Culture and background shape individual thinking and indirectly influence the decisions that couples make every day, sometimes leading to conflict. What is normal in one culture might be considered rebellious in another.

“I had a couple where the wife came from a communal, traditional family in Asia, with traditional roles for husband and wife. In America she felt disoriented, unhappy and isolated. But when she acclimated to western culture, she wanted power and influence in decision-making like the women here, which was a shock to her spouse. The spouse was used to a traditional partner and this change lead to power struggle and fights,” Sloan said.

Internal factors can impact an intercultural relationship but the external family pressures can be worse.

“Couples should change their expectations and know that if their families are heartbroken because they had dreams for what their son or daughter in law would be like, it might take a long time for them to accept the marriage. Both spouses need to honor their feelings and be more tolerant. For the new spouse, trying to learn the customs of the other culture and adopting some of their values helps a lot,” Sloan said.

Jeffery Frank, a Clinical Social Worker at [District Therapy PLLC](#), said that, “Most couples in such marriages experience conflict between families. If their families have fixed ideas and a closed mind frame, it is very hard for the couple to cope with these situations.”

But Frank said the magical word to resolve this conflict is communication.

“What’s most important is to pick up these points and accept them. Be clear and talk to your spouse about your limitations and also try to acknowledge where the common ground exists,” Frank said. To face difficult conflicts is the best thing to do, as opposed to denying them and redirecting them into anger and resentment, which can complicate things later on, he added.

“A marriage can be successful if there is mutual respect, commitment to communicate problems even when you cannot solve them, and building a friendship,” Sloan said. She believes that happy couples, despite cultural differences, “choose to grow together.”

Statistics:

The number of native- and foreign-born people marrying outside their race fell from 27 to 20 percent for Hispanics and 42 to 33 percent for Asians from 1990 to 2000, according to Ohio State University sociologist Zhenchao Qian, who co-authored a study on the subject.

The growing number of Hispanic and Asian immigrants to the United States has led to more marriages within these groups, and fewer marriages between members of these groups and whites, the study cites.

But a more recent study analyzed 2006 data from the U.S. Census Bureau and constructed different marriage patterns among Asian Americans.

J.J. Huang and Dr. C.N. Le’s [Asian Nation Website](#) says the percentage of Asians who are intermarrying with whites has increased in recent decades, with the one exception of Japanese American wives.

It also finds that with the exception of U.S.-raised Korean women, all other Asian ethnic groups and husbands and wives are also more likely to marry another Asian.