

*Intercultural parenting: A Discussion of Power Relations and Reverse
Acculturation*

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Abstract

In this article, a discussion of power relations and reverse acculturation, based on findings of a qualitative study that examined cultural differences in intercultural parenting and how intercultural parents negotiated their differences is presented. In-depth interviews were conducted with fourteen intercultural heterosexual couples/parents from different racial, ethnic and faith backgrounds. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data and understand the constructions of meanings of participants' experiences. The analysis identified four major themes describing the participants' experiences of intercultural parenting. In this article, I reflect on and discuss two of the themes that are relevant to academic literature: (1) power relations; and (2) reverse acculturation. Practical implications for therapists and counsellors working with intercultural parents/couples are also discussed.

Keywords: culture; intercultural couples; parenting; power; reverse acculturation; social constructionism.

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Introduction

Globalisation, the growth of immigration, social diversity, and advances in technology has prompted an increase in intercultural marriages and relationships in Australia, including interracial, interfaith and interethnic partnership (Owen, 2002; Luke & Carrington, 2000). Consequently, intercultural parenting experience is emerging as an important issue in the Australian society. The increase in intercultural parenting brings new dimensions to the dynamics of parenting which, although primarily interpreted as challenging, is also reported to be rewarding for intercultural couples and children.

As of March 2013, 26 percent of the total population of Australia were born overseas. About 17 percent of 4.28 million Australian couples were in an inter-marriage between overseas-born and Australian-born partners (ABS, 2013). Despite these statistics, there have been no published studies about how intercultural couples/parents raise their children in Australia. Only a few Australian studies (Andreoni & Fujimori, 1998; Papps et al., 1995; Sims & Omaji, 1999) have compared parenting between parents from the same cultural background in different ethnic groups, including African, Lebanese and Vietnamese parents. Another limitation identified by the researcher in the extant literature is a focus mainly on the psychosocial challenges and conflicts of intercultural relationships. There is very limited focus in the literature on the benefits and opportunities associated with intercultural relationships and parenting.. The intention in this article, therefore, is to focus on the positive transformations of intercultural relationships and parenting based on findings of a qualitative study on the experiences of intercultural parents in Australia (Bhugun, 2016, in press).

Perspectives on intercultural parenting

Challenges impacting on intercultural couples

Challenges occur in all relationships. However, the challenges are multiplied for intercultural couples because of cultural differences and societal assumptions regarding intercultural marriages and relationships (Bhugra & DeSilva, 2000; McFadden, 2001; Seshadri & Knudson-Martin, 2013). Common concerns in intercultural relationships are described as: values, gender, religion, childrearing, money, sexuality, social class, and language (Frame, 2004). Other factors that can impact on the success or failure of the intercultural relationship depend significantly on the internal and external environment of the couples, including ethnic, social, political and economic conditions (Rosenblatt, 2009).

Other challenges for intercultural couples are described as social attitudes, ranging from encouragement and acceptance, to hostility and intolerance (Bhugra & De Silva, 2000); non-acceptance from families and cultural groups, social ostracism, and problems of adjustment in communities (Kilian, 2001b; McFadden & Moore, 2001); families of origin (Hsu, 2001); barriers to communication (Romano, 2001); transition from dual individuality to a partnership (Adams, 2004); negotiating cultural variations regarding parenthood (Bustamante et al., 2011; Romano, 2001); and stressors that differ from same-culture couples (Bustamante et al., 2011; Falicov, 1995).

Most of the literature on intercultural relationships has focused on the deficit perspectives, that is, the challenges experienced by intercultural couples. There is a remarkable paucity of understanding about the successes, opportunities and benefits of intercultural relationships and parenting. In a comprehensive study of the experiences of intercultural couples (Romano, 2001), the researcher identified the rewards of their relationships, including: developing a deeper understanding of self; cultivating an international identity; providing their offspring a richer world; and a sense of belonging to the evolving multicultural world. This current study aimed to explore the experiences of intercultural couples and parents from strength-based perspectives. The next section addresses challenges for intercultural couples/parents over childrearing.

Conflicts and challenges over child rearing

Most couples face challenges in their relationship. However intercultural couples face additional challenges as a result of cultural conflicts over parenting (Bustamante et al., 2011; Keller, et al. 2004; Romano, 2001). Sources of conflict include the other's norms, values, religious beliefs, meanings and rituals (Perel, 2000; Romano, 2001); cultural and racial identity of children (Bratwidjaja, 2007); naming of children and the language they speak (Karis & Killian, 2009); educational goals, disciplinary styles, forms of parent-child relationships, and conflicting styles of parenting (Berg-Cross, 2001); different gender role expectations and division of household labour (Gupta, 2008); and roles and expectations of the extended family members (Karis & Killian, 2009).

Most individuals also parent the way they were parented (Santrock, 2007). As such, their parenting styles may be as a result of their cultural views about children and child-rearing practices (Frame, 2004). The conflicts can have serious negative implications for both intercultural couples and their children. Bradford et al. (2007) suggest that conflict in parental values can lead to emotional disturbance in children and diminished parenting.

Negotiation of intercultural parenting differences

Although most parents have conflicts over parenting styles and practices, intercultural parents have the additional task of negotiating parenting styles and practices. In their study on parenting ethnically mixed children, Caballero, Edwards and Puthussery (2008) found that parents dealt with ongoing challenges about their own differences, and their children's sense of identity and belonging, by moving away from understanding the problem as cultural differences, favouring a viewpoint shaped more by choice than ascription. They identified three approaches in the parents' description of bringing up their children: (1) an individual approach, where children's identity is not necessarily related to their particular backgrounds; (2) a mixed approach, where children's background is seen as a rooted and factual part of who they are; or (3) a single approach, where one aspect of children's background is given priority.

According to Ho (1990), the birth of a child reignites couple's childhood experiences and beliefs about parenting. In order to reconcile differences over parenting, intercultural couples used different strategies over childrearing: (1) the power rule where one partner assumes responsibility of all decisions; (2) sphere of influence rule,

where each partner assumes responsibility for different aspects of childrearing; and (3) inertia rule, an arrangement where both parents abdicate their childrearing responsibilities. These studies do not seem to explain why intercultural couples adopt these problem solving strategies. There is a need for further studies to understand why intercultural couples select these different problem solving strategies for conflict resolution over parenting.

Methodology

A qualitative research method was chosen for this study because it provides “thick description” of the phenomena (Geertz, 1973), and accurately represents the inner experience and meanings given by individuals to events within their social context (Minichiello et al., 2004; Paton, 2002). It blended well with the chosen social constructionist epistemology, which describes knowledge as an internally constructed phenomenon that is socially and culturally decided (Gergen, 1985). The social constructionist perspective enabled the researcher to challenge taken-for-granted reality of parenting styles and practices.

A purposive sampling strategy, including criterion and snowball methods was used to select participants for this study. Fourteen couples from various cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds from South-East Queensland participated in the study. Participants were aged between 28-67; married between 4-25 years; had between one and four children, aged between 6 months to 18 years old; education ranging from primary to post-graduate level; and self-identified cultural and ethnic backgrounds including Anglo-Australian, African, Asian, Indian, Arabic, Muslim, New Zealander, and Pacific Islanders. Fourteen semi-structured conjoint interviews were carried out with fourteen couples (28 participants). Consistent with qualitative research, the general data analysis strategy outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006) was used to code and understand meaning in complex data on the experiences of the intercultural parents. This resulted in ‘thick description’ of the parent’s practices in raising their children, which was very important for the notion of transferability, given the small size of the qualitative sample (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Discussion

Power Relations

Intercultural couples/parents adopt several strategies to resolve conflict and achieve a balance in how they manage their intercultural relationship and parenting experiences. However, some form of imbalance and dominance regarding power dynamics still prevail throughout all phases of intercultural couples’ experiences. In this study, power issues among participants were apparent in areas such as parenting practices, language and communication, gender and insider/outsider status.

From a social constructionist perspective power is seemingly present in all phases of intercultural relationship and parenting. According to Pare (1996) ‘power is seen as playing a central role in privileging some voices or stories while silencing others’ (p.5). In other words, power grants the privilege to have one’s truth prevail and establish knowledge supremacy over others. This interpretation of power concurs with participants’ narratives in this current study. Two participants were absolute in the

righteousness, supremacy and privilege about their own cultural 'truth' over that of their partner's cultural values, especially regarding parenting practices. For example, one participant in particular, from the majority host culture, believed that he was 'always right' and had the privilege of his own truth regarding sleeping patterns of children, referred to as 'sleep-cry', because of parenting experiences from his previous marriage and the way it is done in the western culture. Although, the participant referred to the privilege of truth from his cultural perspective, it can be also interpreted as a power issue from a gender and personality perspective. Power therefore plays a role in any form of negotiation where individuals strive to have their voices and stories heard.

Cottrell (1990) found that intercultural couples tend to conform to the cultural practices of the dominant host culture. Seto and Cavallaro (2007) also found that the place of residence impacts on couples' power distribution in a relationship. The findings of this study support Cottrell and Seto and Cavallaro's arguments. In this study, immigrant partners perceived themselves mostly as 'outsiders' because they live in the host country and therefore the need to conform mostly to the host culture. In the context of intercultural relationships, the concept of 'outsider status' refers to the partner who migrates to the host country and lives in the partner's home country. Most of the immigrant partners experienced power imbalance, from living in the host partner's country, being isolated from their relatives, lack of extended family support, loss of their culture, and experiencing language and communication problems. One immigrant participant gave up on some aspects of her cultural values and traditional recreational activities for her children in order to minimise conflict with her host partner, who was adamant about his values. The host participants experienced insider status power dynamics from belonging to the majority population and race, speaking the majority language and having an overall knowledge of the Australian society and culture.

However, some participants also felt a sense of power from immersion in the host culture and 'belongingness' from being married to the host partner. Interestingly, this study revealed that some majority host partners in intercultural relationships can also feel the minority status phenomenon. For example, one participant felt completely ignored when his wife's extended family members were visiting and completely immersed themselves in their homeland language and traditional practices. Another participant from the majority host culture felt the same when she was visiting her husband's native country and all his relatives spoke in their local ethnic language. She felt powerless and lonely. Two other host partners described how they were the subjects of racism, rejection and ignored in the social arena because of their marriage to minority ethnic partners in Australia.

Romano (1998) stated that language barriers can create misunderstandings between intercultural couples. The findings in this study concur with Romano's suggestions. Power regarding language was manifested when some participants tried to control their partner's behaviour or thoughts. It was clear that there was a complex interaction between power and language. Two participants stated that language barriers made it difficult for them to win a plausible argument with their host partners as the latter overpowered them with the command of the language, which eventually led to frustration, emotional distress and unhappiness. Another participant found it difficult to communicate properly with her children in her first language because the children

have assimilated in the host culture and do not want to talk their mother's language. All the participants encouraged their children to learn or speak some of the immigrant partner's language so that they can communicate with their extended families and members of the ethnic minority community.

Communication style was another parallel challenge entwined with language problems. Power is most of the time present during communications with each other even if it is not necessarily evident. The intercultural partner with the most power often determined the communication pattern in the relationship. The relationship between communication and power in intercultural relationships is not often explored in the literature. In this current study, some participants had problems with their partner's communication styles which led to major misunderstanding, arguments, withdrawals and unhappiness. For example, one immigrant partner in particular, resorted to his cultural ways of dealing with problems such as silence, withdrawal, time, and thought processes, whereas his host partner wanted immediate answers and dealing with problems straightaway, thus imposing a western 'individualist' cultural value on the minority immigrant. Hall (1976) refers to this style of communication as 'high context' and 'low context' cultures which denotes inherent cultural differences between societies.

High-context and low-context communication refers to how much individuals rely on things other than words to communicate a message. According to Hall (1976), high-context cultures prefer harmony and consensus, are less governed by reason than intuition and feelings and words are not so important as context which might include the sender's tone of voice, facial expression, gestures and postures. Many things are left unsaid, letting the culture explain. Low-context cultures, on the other hand, are ones in which information is explicitly stated in the communication, explanations are expected when statements or events are not clear and meanings are not internalised by individuals but are derived from the situation or event. Hall's expression of high-context and low-context cultures clearly reflects the communication styles of participants in this study.

However, power is not always a one-directional process but is dynamic. I suggest that the exercise of power in this context can be perceived from a reverse or reciprocal perspective. The minority ethnic partner, in relation to the situation explained above, could also be exercising power over his or her partner by resorting to silence and withdrawal in the communication process. This phenomenon is yet to be explored. A full examination of the context of power regarding communication styles in intercultural relationship is beyond the scope of this study and can be the subject for further research.

Keller (2009) suggests that there is a clear power differentiation in collectivist cultures as women are defined by their allegiance to men, rather than their independent accomplishments and that gender roles are more rigid with a high degree of differentiation in the rights and obligations between males and females. This study confirms Keller's findings and goes further by revealing that power dynamics go beyond male influences in collective societies. Power dynamics also exist in intercultural relationships among men from individualistic cultures in the host society. For example, all the female participants stated that their husbands, irrespective of their cultural backgrounds, exercised more power than them regarding discipline and

socialisation processes of the children. One participant also associated gender power to males from the individualistic culture as an attribute of religious values, and described how she submitted to her husband's lack of understanding of her culture because of their common religious values where the man is regarded as the 'higher authority'.

This study also revealed another important finding, wherein male partners from the collective society experienced role reversals in the individualistic host culture. Some participants described how they lost power when, contrary to the gender values they experienced in their homeland, had to cook, wash and put women's clothes on the clothes line. The gender power was compromised in order to sustain a healthy relationship. The findings also revealed that those male partners from the collectivist culture reverted to their traditional gender roles and expectations when they returned to their homeland.

Reverse Acculturation/Enculturation

In a study of Korean immigrants in America, Kim & Park (2009) reported that Korean immigrants are reverting to what they termed 'reverse acculturation' that is, introducing the heritage culture to the host nation. Miller (2010) refers to enculturation as adopting attributes of the host culture and retaining those of the heritage culture. Both these dynamics of reverse acculturation and enculturation were apparent in the findings of this current study. The findings on reverse acculturation reported by Kim & Park (2009) and this present study bring a different perspective to Berry's (1997) and current acculturation theory (Cleveland & Laroche, 2007) that acculturation is unidirectional and that immigrants eventually relinquish their heritage culture and adapt to the host country's culture and values. Whilst this theory may be true for some immigrants, defined within contextual realities, such as running away from war torn countries and political and religious persecutions, it does not necessarily apply to migrants who immigrate to different regions of the world because of the effects of globalisation and a plural metropolitan society. The findings of this current study support the proposition. Participants from the minority ethnic group engaged in both reverse acculturation as well as enculturation processes by reinforcing their cultural heritage in the relationships and parenting practices. This was amply demonstrated in multiple domains, such as family values, language, identity, food, values and goals, behaviours, cultural knowledge and social affiliation and activities. Two particular participants also went back to their heritage country for couple of years, in the early stages of their parenting process, to inculcate and immerse their children in their heritage culture because they did not like the western way of raising children. This is a phenomenon which is beyond the scope of this study and needs further exploration and study as a discrete phenomenon.

This study also revealed another dimension of acculturation which can be termed as 'reciprocal acculturation', thus expanding the existing theoretical framework of acculturation. In the context of intercultural relationships and parenting, reciprocal acculturation can be defined as a process, wherein partners from the majority ethnic culture surrender to the positive cultural practices of the minority ethnic partner. Five participants from the majority host culture preferred and adopted their migrant partner's cultural processes. Diaspora communities were also considered as an important mechanism to sustain cultural ties with the heritage culture and local

members of the relevant minority ethnic communities (Bhatia & Ram, 2009). Diaspora communities are currently matters of debate and concerns in the public and political arena in Australia and other countries embracing multiculturalism, but this should not deter from the positive contributions it makes to society in general and particularly in the context of intercultural dynamics (Chan, 2013).

Recent shifts in the global culture, towards a more cosmopolitan culture, also reinforce the concept of reverse and reciprocal acculturation/enculturation. As the participants in this study described, the willingness on their part to embrace aspects of other cultures, enhanced their lifestyle and opportunities in both the heritage and host culture.

The debates over parenting styles have been well documented over the years, with consensus, mostly in the western and individualist cultures, for the authoritative style of parenting (Beaumrind, 1967; 1971), which emphasises responsiveness alongside demandingness. On the other hand, and as described in the literature review, most collective cultures, especially Asian, African and Middle-eastern cultures, embrace and justify authoritarian parenting. However, there seems to be a shift towards an authoritative parenting style in the Australian context, among intergenerational parents and some new migrants. In this current study, in the context of intercultural parenting, participants from the African culture were found to be practising a mix of authoritative and hierarchical style of parenting. Lindahl & Malik (1999) differentiated between authoritarian and hierarchical parenting styles in that the latter does not necessarily imply unresponsiveness in the way that authoritarian parenting style does. They suggested that hierarchical parenting styles promote respect for elders, parents and authorities and strong intra-familial boundaries.

In two separate studies on African migrant families in Australia, Renzaho (2011) and Sims & Omajee (1995) found that reconciling the parenting style of their home country with what is accepted practice in Australia is a struggle for many African and Arab speaking migrant families. They explained that 'African families come from a culture based on authoritarian parenting style that centres on collective family, respect for elders, corporal punishment and interdependence' (p.1). This current study, which includes the parenting experiences of some participants who are migrants from Africa, reveals an evolving perspective on their parenting styles because of the intercultural parenting dynamic. The African participants in this study were keen to make their relationship work and as such have adopted some strategies, including flexibility, compromise and negotiating their parenting styles. In the context of intercultural parenting, within Australia, it appears that African participants have shifted from an authoritarian to a combined hierarchical and authoritative parenting style.

Four out of five participants from Asian cultures have shifted from their parents' styles of authoritarian parenting to the authoritative parenting style. It is important to note here that all the Asian participants were female and therefore gender considerations in the way they were parented may have also influenced this shift. There was no evidence in the data to support the gender consideration argument. According to the participants, the reason for the shift in their parenting style was based on (1) dislike of their parenting experiences from their parent's authoritarian parenting style, particularly regarding discipline and educational expectations. The participants described that their parents were never happy with their study results and

demanded better performances, thus making them feel sad, inadequate and lacking in confidence; (2) lack of communication about children's feelings. According to one participant, Japanese parents never say their children are the best; and (3) exposure to other styles of parenting where children seem to be happier. As one participant described, in the Chinese culture parents speak to kids like a leader or the worker as opposed to Australians who speak to children on the same level. This is an interesting phenomenon revealing current and emerging changing attitudes about parenting styles among Asian communities in the Australian context.

The findings of this current study challenge current thinking about parenting in the collectivist culture. The assumption is that the collectivist culture embraces and promotes authoritarian parenting style. This assumption, as revealed in studies by Chao (1994, 2000) bears substance in Asian homogenous collectivist societies, but may not be entirely relevant to members of the collectivist society who have migrated to other western countries. The assumption is also challenged following another study (Cheah et al, 2009) in which immigrant Chinese mothers of pre-schoolers strongly endorsed the authoritative parenting style which predicted increased children's behavioural/attention regulation abilities. This current study adds to the debate about assumptions regarding authoritarian parenting based on the findings of parenting within an intercultural context and a western society. Similar to the African context mentioned above, this study reveals an equally evolving perspective on the parenting styles among immigrant Asian participants, because of the intercultural parenting dynamics. The Asian participants in the intercultural relationships were equally keen to make their relationship work and as such have adopted some strategies, including flexibility, compromise and negotiating their parenting styles. In the context of intercultural parenting, within Australia, it appeared that the Asian participants have shifted from an authoritarian to authoritative parenting style.

The findings of this study also challenge the assumption that parents parent the way they were parented (Santrock, 2007; Tanaka et al, 2009). This was not fully demonstrated in all the parenting experiences described by the participants. Asian participants in particular, did not like the way they were parented and as a result shifted from their parent's authoritarian parenting style to an authoritative parenting styles. The shift in parenting style appeared to have been influenced by the contextual and ecological environment they lived in and experiences of different parenting styles.

Conclusion

Analysis of the couples'/parents' narratives generated rich descriptions of how intercultural couple/parents constructed meaning of their intercultural parenting experiences. Although the findings cannot be generalised, it has the potential of transferability to similar contexts. There was no denial that intercultural couples experienced similar parenting challenges as homogenous couples, but their challenges were exacerbated because of the cultural differences. However, all the participants were keen to make their experiences a positive one by negotiating, compromising, respecting and accommodating each other's parenting style and practices. In this study, some parents put aside their cultural or personal differences and focussed instead on what is best for their children and the family. This parenting style can be termed as 'selfless parenting'.

The experiences of intercultural couples/parents are also influenced by other systemic, ecological and contextual factors such as the environment, gender, socio-economic status, extended family, friends, diasporic communities, religion, and individual/personality traits. Whilst parents endeavour to harmonise their parenting and relationship experiences from an internal perspective, the external influences, which are usually based on stereotypes and lack of cultural literacy, are beyond their control.

Counsellors and therapists would benefit from exploring and understanding power dynamics in intercultural contexts so that they can help their clients negotiate power relations in relational and parenting dynamics. Counsellors can also help clients to focus on and appreciate the positive experiences of reverse acculturation as sources of strengths in the context of intercultural relationship and parenting dynamics. The helping professions also need to show cultural sensitivity and respect when dealing with intercultural couples and families. Hopefully this exploratory study serves as an insight that can be transferred to other similar context, and be a useful platform for further studies into this growing phenomenon on the experiences of intercultural parenting, in order to help current and future intercultural couples, parents and practitioners in the family domain.

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