

Intermarriage: What Marriage Educators Should Know

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The rate of divorce for first marriages is slightly higher for interracial couples than it is for couples that marry within their race.¹ Many interracial and interethnic couples attend marriage/relationship education (MRE) workshops because they experience relationship challenges that are related to their racial/ethnic background. People/families from different parts of the world can have diverse opinions on gender and family roles, acceptable relationships with friends, childrearing practices, money values, and emotional expressiveness, among others. While all couples have issues to negotiate, interracial couples may exhibit more differences and a wider spectrum of expectations. The purpose of this Tip Sheet is to give marriage educators a foundation for understanding the unique experiences, as well as potential stressors, faced by interracial couples and offer tips for addressing them in class.

It is important to note that in the context of this Tip Sheet, the terms interracial and interethnic are used interchangeably. An individual's *race* is determined by phenotypic characteristics such as skin color, hair type and other physical features. Racial categories are controversial since they rely on biological differences and society tends to over-generalize the characteristics of each race. An individual's *ethnicity* refers to his or her subscription to the customs and traditions of his or her heritage, including race, culture

and religion. One might embrace multiple ethnicities concurrently, and emphasize one over the other at different points during his or her lifetime.

The following tips can help marriage educators better understand and serve interracial couples.

1. Attempt to Strengthen Familial Relationships

Interracial couples can feel strain from family members who disapprove of their decision to marry. Relationships with the partner's own parents, in-laws and other relatives might be strained due to a number of reasons, including an extended family's perceived sense of cultural, racial, or religious rejection. If a partner's family opposes the match based on race, it can be difficult to maintain a healthy marriage without



a support network. Studies show that those who have immigrated more recently prefer that younger generations marry within their own culture.

Practitioners should provide the couple with coping strategies for attending family events or gatherings with friends. This can be done by teaching conflict resolution strategies through role playing. Encouraging couples to communicate their relationship expectations with family members, and the couple's mutual respect for each other's heritage, can help partners to reconcile any misunderstandings and strengthen the couple's support system. Some families, however, may never accept the couple. In this case, MRE workshops may need to address the grief and loss associated with this situation and the effect it has on the couple relationship.

2. Societal Disapproval

Despite political and societal advancements, racism is still an issue in America. In fact, it was not until the 1967 Supreme Court ruling of *Loving v. Virginia* when anti-miscegenation laws were deemed unconstitutional. Many interracial couples continue

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to feel the stress of society's negative perceptions of their pairing. In particular, racism directed toward interracial couples could put a unique stress on the partner who may not have experienced race-based discrimination before getting married. Also, the discrimination the couple might have faced because of their intermarriage could make one or both partners wary of the prospect of having children, which may further strain the relationship.

Each person should be encouraged to express understanding and support for their partner's experiences with discrimination. Practitioners can have individuals analyze any negative experiences they have had, how it has affected them as individuals and how it may have impacted their relationships. Each partner may complete exercises that teach empathy and support for their partner's individual struggles with discrimination.

3. Address cultural expectations and roles

Each partner has his or her own expectations in a relationship. An individual will have general beliefs about how relationships should be and about what each partner's role is in the relationship. These beliefs are often influenced by his or her racial and ethnic heritage and level of acculturation. Further, gender roles vary immensely among cultures so if expectations are not well articulated, the relationship could be

strained. Skills for negotiating these expectations must be learned.

Providing couples with communication opportunities and tools to understand each other's perspective and expectations is essential. Create awareness through experiential learning activities by having them analyze the roles that culture, ethnicity and religion played in their upbringings and ultimately the establishment of their values and priorities. Then, have partners assess to what degree they still maintain this framework and how it applies to their relationship today. Practitioners in premarital counseling and practitioners who are working with couples in any stage of their relationships can have each individual identify his or her expectations as they relate to his or her own ethnicity.

Another component is teaching forgiveness. Often, one individual in the couple has culturally based notions of what family life and romantic relationships "should" be. Because one partner may not meet the other's expectations, resentment may build up. Thus, one may need to forgive the other for not being able to deliver on these notions.

For a couple of mixed backgrounds, deciding how to raise child(ren) can be challenging and may strain the relationship. Issues such as parenting style, choice of religion, and child care arrangements are among many that need to be negotiated as they relate to cultural or racial identities.

4. Address the unique considerations posed by raising multiracial children

For a couple of mixed backgrounds, deciding how to raise child(ren) can be challenging and may strain the relationship. Issues such as parenting style, choice of religion, and child care arrangements are among many that need to be negotiated as they relate to cultural or racial identities. Further complicating matters, biracial or multiracial children may decide to identify with only one of the parent's races, or neither. Parents may not be prepared to adequately address the child's choice of racial identity and this can cause conflict in the relationship.

Practitioners may choose to address the topics of differing parenting styles and expectations as they relate to culture as well as discuss strategies that best support a child's process of racial/ethnic identification. In addition, grief and loss issues will need to be addressed by the individual whose racial/ethnic identity was not chosen, as this can lead to resentment of the other partner.

5. Address communication barriers

Even when couples share a common language, often there are still communication barriers rooted in different cultures or faiths. Ways of speaking or communicating thoughts and emotions vary by culture. They are not solely defined by language. Practitioners should be aware of such nuances.

Each individual has his or her own tradition and cultural practice that may differ from the norms of his or her partner's culture. For example, an individual may have both religious and cultural reasons for

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avoiding certain forms of public expressions of affection, including touching. This, however, may cause conflict because his or her partner may negatively perceive this as a lack of affection when, in fact, it is a cultural trait. Exercises exploring both communication styles and the concepts of negative and positive perceptions are important. Discourage partners from scrutinizing or imposing any views that are culturally insensitive to one another or each other's family. Skills and exercises that teach respect and understanding of cultural differences are necessary.

Practitioners must be sensitive to the cultural nuances that can ultimately cause conflict within intermarriages. Incorporating experiential exercises into your program that address perceptions, expectations, and mutual understanding will offer excellent opportunities for self-awareness and provide the necessary skills to navigate through the unique circumstances interracial couples face.

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¹ Bramlet, M. D. & Mosher, W. D. (July 2002). Cohabitation, marriage, divorce, and remarriage in the United States. Vital and Health Statistics, Series 23, No. 22. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. Retrieved March 23, 2009 from http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_23/sr23_022.pdf.