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### Intercultural Romantic Relationship Management

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#### Citation: Pilot Scholars Version (Modified MLA Style)

Traudt, Victoria A.L., "Intercultural Romantic Relationship Management" (2018). *Communication Studies Graduate Publications and Presentations*. 14.

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Victoria A.-L. Traudt

Intercultural Romantic Relationship Management

Organizational Communications Research Project

University of Portland

Fall 2018

Supervised by Alexa Dare, Ph.D.

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**Abstract**

This is a study of intercultural romantic relationships, studied through the theoretical lenses of Relational Dialectics theory and Social Identity theory. Supporting literature reveals patterns of integrating the use of Mark Knapp's Relational Development model, identity negotiation and the use of Intercultural Communication Competence. An analysis of interviews with six women who were/are involved in intercultural romantic relationships were interviewed in a one time interview that consisted of a series of open ended questions. This study analyzes how each couple manages conflicts in the relationship that emerge from differences in culture, revealing patterns of affirmation, cultural engagement, passivity and the use of constructive relationship strategies. These findings are useful for the study of intercultural couples, given that there is very little research conducted thus far.

**Keywords:** Intercultural relationships, romantic relationships, communication, culture, Intercultural communication competence (ICC), values

**Rationale**

I learned Spanish as I learned English, my favorite team is Mexico's International Soccer team, and every Christmas is filled with tamales that the whole family spent hours making. From this description one would assume I grew up in a Mexican household with two Mexican parents and a whole fiesta of family members following suit. The fiesta of family members following me everywhere is true, but I am actually the daughter to an intercultural couple. My mother is from Mexico, she moved to the states when she was 12 years old with her six siblings, but my father was born and raised in America .

The reason I was raised in a Mexican household is because my father was in love with the Mexican culture. He loved everything, from the food to the fiestas to the pueblos that filled the neighborhoods. When I was born, my father informed my mother that he wanted me to be raised with the ideologies from the Mexican culture. While I was raised with those ideologies, I still had the influence from my father's upbringing. Growing up, I was able to experience how my mother and father successfully negotiated their differences and effectively managed their conflicts, which made me curious to study how intercultural couples balance values and manage conflicts in their relationships.

Intercultural romantic relationships have been given a stereotype as unstable, not practical and very difficult to manage. An example of this in pop culture would be the recent wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. In order for her to marry into the royal family, she had to give up everything in her life and change the way she carried herself. Intercultural relationships are relationships in which both partners involved in the relationship come from different cultural backgrounds, bringing with them different views, beliefs and practices. While intercultural relationships come with several more bumps in the road than monocultural

relationships, these relationships are very unique and can be a wonderful source for research. According to several scholarly articles (Gaines & Brennan, 2001; Cools, 2005; Ting-Toomey, 1994) intercultural couples are on the rise. America is known as being a melting pot, which means that there are a plethora of different nationalities filling the borders of every state. Gaines et al. (2001) state in their article *Establishing and Maintaining Satisfaction in Multicultural Relationships* that, during the time they released this article, intercultural relationships constituted 50% of all marriages.

By looking at this subject, Mark Knapp's theory of Relational Development model, individuals will be able to better understand how intercultural relationships can thrive and succeed. Through relevant literature and proper analysis of data, studies such as this can help move the stereotype of intercultural relationships from negative to positive. With a shift of ideology, along with proper knowledge and communication competence, the success of intercultural romantic relationships can increase.

### **Literature Review**

In analyzing intercultural romantic relationships, there are a myriad of lenses that could describe one aspect of the relationship on why a certain couple functions as they do, or one portion of a theory that explains just how intercultural couples form as they do. In order to best explain how intercultural romantic relationships manage and navigate their differences the theoretical lenses to look through would be the Relational Dialectics Theory and the Social Identity Theory.

The theoretical lens I will be using is the Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT). This theory analyzes tensions during communication in a relationship. According to an article by Baxter and Braithwaite, they describe this theory as "a theory of the meaning-making between

relationship parties that emerges from the interplay of competing discourses” (Baxter et al., 2008, p. 349). For the sake of this article, discourse means the understood meaning behind the communication in a relationship that makes sense to those involved. The concept of open communication is key for the sense making part of the dialogue. This theory is important to my study in that it ties in with Knapp’s relationship model to help further explain why relationships develop as they do. This theory demonstrates that contradiction is important in relationships, and open communication is important for that contradiction. In other words, negotiation and conflict are important in a relationship, as openness and competence in communication are important for that conflict negotiation.

The second theoretical lens I will be using is the Social Identity theory. This is the theory in which we manage our identity within a group setting or a relationship. According to the article Understanding Social Identity Theory, we go through three stages within a new relationship, “social categorization, social identification, and social comparison” (Chi, 2015). This theme discusses literature that highlights the importance of exploring each other’s culture within the relationship, and through that exploration couples can then navigate their culture along with their partner’s culture. They will also see which culture becomes the dominant one within the relationship, how they balance their identities with one another, along with being able to manage the differences within the relationship. Through relationship management, the concept of maintaining one’s cultural identity while integrating their partner’s identity is important in the negotiation of the relationship.

By looking at the literature through these theoretical lenses, several themes emerged that help to explain how intercultural individuals navigate differences in the beginning stages of their

relationship. These themes include Integrating, Identity Negotiation and Intercultural Communication Competence.

### *Integrating*

This theme of integrating appeared throughout two articles discussing Knapp's Relationship Model. This model is broken down into two branches describing relational maintenance: escalation and termination. There are five steps for escalation and five for termination. These portray the five phases a couple will experience during the development of their relationship, and the five phases in which the relationship dissolves. The five steps in which a couple comes together are Initiating, Experimenting, Intensifying, Integrating and Bonding. The five in which they fall apart are Differentiating, Circumscribing, Stagnating, Avoiding and Terminating. Knapp created this model to help simplify and explain the progression in which a couple will grow in their relationship from first impressions to the "I do's", along with the first signs of disconnect to terminating the relationship.

The Relational Development stage in which I will be examining my collected data from is the 4th stage, integrating. This is the stage where the couple is already established in the relationship, but "the people will start to make their relationship as much closer than before" (Communication Theory, 2014, p. 1). During this phase, couples will delve deeper in the relationship by sharing goals, values and beliefs with their partner, creating open communication within the relationship.

The first article that goes in to more depth about the Knapp Model is the article written by Avtgis, Anderson and West (1998) which explains each of the 10 steps within the model. This article states that the success behind the Knapp model is because it is straight forwards and very simple, leaving little to no room for misunderstanding or confusion. The article further gives a

comparison of other models by stating that the other models that have been loosely based off of Knapp's model do not come close in comparison (Avtgis et al., 1998, p. 281). The only downfall to the model is that "Knapp did not outline a deductive method for determining relationship stages" (Avtgis et al., 1998, p. 281). The study done in this article stems from that lack of knowledge. The authors set up a questionnaire to ask different focus groups a myriad of questions in order to help differentiate exactly what constituted each relationship stage. The goal was for their results to help differentiate what actions and feelings went with which stage of the model. Their findings concluded that there were overlaps within each of the stages, according to people's interpretations. Avtgis, Anderson and West wrote this article to pave the way for future discussion and further research on the Knapp Model and to help improve Knapp's Model (Avtgis et al., 1998, p. 285). Although the research conducted here is from a quantitative study, the premise that Knapp's stages have traits that overlap in each stage makes this theory perfect for a qualitative study.

A second article that pertains to this model is the article that uses Knapp's model as a lens to look at complaining in relationships. This article specifically looks at the third stage in the termination branch, stagnating. This is the stage where communication is limited as a result of interactions being imagined interactions, which is where each partner will predict what their partner will say, rather than actually going to confront and communicate with their partner (Hall et al., 2013, p. 53). This led the authors to conduct a study by asking 116 participants a series of questions that evaluated whether they used instrumental or non-instrumental complaint tactics in each stage of Knapp's model. Instrumental complaints are those that the receiver is able to change their actions, whereas they cannot change their actions for non-instrumental complaints. These complaints are "actually a relationship builder because it allows both parties to align



together” (Hall et al., 2013, p. 52). The results of the study were that the relationship stage was positively correlated with the use of instrumental complaints. Meaning that the higher in the escalation side a couple was, the higher their instrumental complaints were. Within the last three steps of the escalation side, Intensifying, Integrating and Bonding, the percentage rises from 14.3% to 53.8% (Hall et al., 2013, p. 56). This demonstrates higher levels of communication and navigation between the couples, which coincides with the the integrating phase in that couples must have open communication to navigate through the differences in sharing their values and beliefs.

### *Identity Negotiation*

A second theme that became prevalent in several articles was Identity Negotiation within intercultural relationships. This stems from individuals that are involved in an intercultural relationship having to negotiate how much of their own identity they are maintaining, and how much of their partner’s identity they are adapting to. An article written by Satoshi Moriizumi (2011) discusses identity negotiations within Japanese-American intercultural couples. Moriizumi describes that “the purpose of this study is to understand emergent identities and identity negotiation processes in relation to larger societal structures and ideologies...how these multiple cultural identities are shared, negotiated, contradicted, and transformed” (Moriizumi, 2011, p. 86). The study in this article consisted of Moriizumi interviewing five Japanese-American couples on how they negotiate their relationship with their identities. The study concluded that all five of the couples experienced identity negotiations during their relationship before and after having children. Before having children, it was personal identity negotiation by having to blend their identity with that of their partner. Once the families had children, it became an identity negotiation on how to culturally raise their children (Moriizumi, 2011, p. 101).

Adding on to the Moriizumi (2011) study, the study conducted by Torigoe and Chen (2007) interviewed nine intercultural couples that had been together for more than a year or were engaged. This examined how they navigate their identities together alone and in public, and which identity becomes the more dominant one. Torigoe et al. (2007) stated in their paper that “Since there is no intercultural relationship without power dynamics, and relationships emerge in the intersection of identities of partners, it is important to understand the intersecting cultural identities that are negotiated in intimate relationships” (Torigoe et al., 2007, p. 5). Through the study, they found that the dominant identity emerges “through internalization, and it constrains and enables people’s agency” (Torigoe et al., 2007, p. 25). The study concluded that the dominant ideology emerged through which culture felt less subjected to racism. Torigoe et al. stated that the place where ideologies converge is the point where they feel they are socially or ideologically constrained.

Through identity negotiation and finding out dominant ideologies also comes forming and maintaining personal identity. Brandi Lawless (2015) conducted a study in which she interviewed individuals from an organization called Transforming Poverty Partnerships. Through this study, she interviewed individuals about how they manage and perform their identities within their work environment and in their personal lives. Through the interviews, she concluded that “it is common discourse to recognize differences and move beyond those differences through modes of assimilation and dominance, rather than acknowledging the context(s) the produce difference and how to address them in a relationship” (Lawless, 2015, p. 290). This study demonstrates that within a relationship, individuals find a balance between forming a new identity and maintaining their own identity. This is done by finding the relationship between

language, interaction and societal ideologies (Lawless, 2015, p. 277). This coincides with Moriizumi's article on understanding the identity negotiation process (Moriizumi, 2011, p. 86).

Lastly, the study conducted by Seshardi and Knudson-Martin (2012), combines all of the aspects of identity negotiation to study how couples manage cultural differences within their relationship. Seshardi et al. conducted a study that observed how couples manage their conflicts while maintaining a strong and successful relationship. Within the study, they define the term race to signify physical race, whereas culture refers to meanings, beliefs and traditions (Seshardi et al., 2012, p. 43). Couples were then separated into four categories based on the answers given during the interview process: integrated, coexisting, singularly assimilated and unresolved. Integrated couples were those that melted their cultures together by celebrating each culture. Those in a coexisting relationship were those that respected the other's opinions, but keep their cultures separated. The individuals in a singularly assimilated relationship have chosen to solely live with the culture of one partner, while the other has faded into the background. The last is the unresolved relationships in which neither individual knows how to handle the difference of cultures which causes underlying conflicts in the relationship that are ignored (Seshardi et al., 2012, p. 48-49). Through these interviews, four relational strategies for managing differences emerged: creating a "we", framing differences, emotional maintenance and positioning. These four techniques are to help couples to move away from unresolved types of relationships in order to create a successful relationship in which each partner discusses their differences to create a co-constructed narrative in which they find emotional support from their partner within their relationship.

*Intercultural Communication Competence*

The final theme among the literature is the idea of Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC). ICC is generally known as the ability to effectively communication between cultures. In the study conducted by Dai and Chen (2015), they discuss the importance of ICC and interculturality among intercultural relationships. Interculturality is described in the study as it “provides multiple connections across cultures and enables culturally different individuals to relate, to negotiate, to transform, and to grow”(Dai et al., 2015, p. 103-104). According to the study, interculturality and communication competence are very important to intercultural communication in that interculturality helps to create a sense of reciprocity, which helps both individuals to feel a connection, thus giving their communicative interaction meaning. Along with creating a connection, it helps to broaden perspectives and enhance understanding, manage conflict, and enhance cultural creativity (Dai et al., 2015, p. 103-104).

Another form of Intercultural Communication Competence is the idea of openness. Reiter and Gee (2008) conducted a study with 370 college students to find how being open about each other’s culture within the relationship effects the success and relational distress. After evaluating the results of the the present study, the results “indicated that, when compared to intracultural relationships, individuals in intercultural relationships were more likely to report conflict related to cultural differences. However, individuals in intercultural relationships were more likely to indicate that discussion of these differences helped promote relationship growth” (Reiter et al. 2008, p. 553). While the intercultural couples did display higher results of culture differences creating conflicts, they did report that when they were open to one another and discussed their cultural differences they showed a reduction in relational distress and an increase of growth within the relationship. Openness within the relationship helped lead to competent communication, thus resulting in intercultural harmony (Dai et al., 2015, p. 109).

Competent communication and openness help to create satisfaction within the relationship. Two articles by Cools (2005) and Gains and Brennan (2001) discuss the satisfaction intercultural couples experience in their relationship and how to achieve and maintain that satisfaction. Reiter and Gee (2008) briefly touched on satisfaction by stating that increased levels of open communication about culture within the relationship was associated with satisfaction. Expanding on this, Cools (2005) states that those in intercultural relationships experience satisfaction because they are aware of the differences each brings to the relationship, so they know how to maintain satisfaction. She goes on to further state that

“Finally it is stated that throughout the development and maintenance of multicultural relationships, satisfaction is created and sustained to the extent that relationship partners are open to personal growth via their association with a partner who contributes to their growth, in part due to being from a different culture. Studies on intercultural couples reveal that they happen to be more complicated, because both partners come to the relationship equipped with a different set of rules; different values, habits, and viewpoints, different ways of relating to one another, and different ways of resolving their differences” (Cools, 2005, p. 7).

Gaines and Brennan (2001), which was used to support Cools (2005) article, further expand on satisfaction within the relationship. Gaines et al. describe in their article that the satisfaction in an intercultural relationship comes from openness with each other through communication, leading to personal and relational growth (Gaines et al., 2001, p. 238). Through communication, each couple appreciates their partners differences, leading away from unhealthy, unresolved relationships (Seshardi et al., 2012, p. 49). While there has been the stereotype about intercultural relationships being unstable and unsatisfying, Gaines et al. find them to be the

opposite. They attribute satisfaction in these relationships due to the fact that the combining of the two cultures within the relationship creates a new culture that is specific to that couple (Gaines et al., 2001, p. 237). No other couple functions like them, making them unique.

Lastly in ICC, Ting-Toomey (1994) discusses in her article interpersonal conflict within intercultural relationships. Ting-Toomey (1994) defines interpersonal conflict as “the implicit or explicit verbal and /or nonverbal struggling process within, between, or among two or more interdependent parties when they perceive incompatible conflict bases, processes, and/or outcomes in the course of their personal relationship development process” (Ting-Toomey, 1994, p.48). She goes on to further discuss that it is important for ICC to understand intercultural intimate conflict. This is particularly important because by being capable of understanding how different cultures handle conflict, individuals in those relationships will, in turn be able to effectively manage conflictive situations in their personal relationships, thus creating satisfaction within the relationship.

### **Research Questions**

For my research study, I am posing the questions

*RQ1: How do intercultural couples navigate differences and balance their cultural identities in their romantic relationship as it develops?*

*RQ2: By looking through the 4th stage of Mark Knapp's Relational Development Model integrating, how do intercultural couples balance their values with those of their partners?*

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this research is to examine how intercultural romantic relationships navigate cultural differences during the initial phases of their relationship. Interviews were conducted to study how they work through their conflicts as the relationship developed, paying

attention to which culture became the dominant one in the relationship, and if that effected how the conflict was managed.

In order to achieve this, I conducted a semi-structured, informal interview with 6 different women who are/had been involved in an intercultural relationship that was significant in their life. The length of the relationships varied from one year to 24 years being the longest relationship. Two of the women are still currently in their relationships, while the other four reflected on an intercultural relationship that was significant to them. Each participant was asked to participate in a one-time 20-45 minute interview which consisted of a set series of open ended questions, along with other questions that either flowed into the conversation or were asked in order to gain clarification. The interviews consisted of the individual sitting across the table to talk or were interviewed through a FaceTime call. Personal information and the names of individuals are not included in the presented data. Each individual has been given a pseudonym in place of their actual names (Appendix A). Along with this, any names that were mentioned in their interviews have been abbreviated to the first letter of their name for confidentiality. The six women I interviewed were: Jenny, Jessica, Lauren, Martha, Remmy and Theresa.

Jenny is a 23 year old American woman who is currently in England working towards her Master of Arts in Communication. She lived in America with her mother until she left for graduate school in 2017 to be closer to her father. She was involved in an intercultural relationship with her boyfriend who came from a Mexican culture. They were together for a little over a year, but ended their relationship three years ago.

Jessica is a 39 year old Chamorro woman who moved to Washington from Guam 15 years ago. She is currently married to her husband who identifies himself as American. She is the Seahawks' number one fan, while her husband is the Dallas Cowboy's number one fan, so tensions can get a little high once football season starts. In her interview, she said they have been happily together for the past 14 years.

Lauren, who is roommates with Jenny, is a 23 year old woman who identifies herself as American. Lauren moved with Jenny to England in 2017 to be closer to her boyfriend and his family. While in college, she met her boyfriend who was born and raised in an Irish culture. Her and her boyfriend have been together for over three years.

Martha is a 71 year old immigrant woman from Mexico. She first met her American husband when they worked for the same company in Los Angeles. She said that they were best friends for 13 years before he proposed to her. They were married for 20 years before he passed away in 2006.

Remmy is a 64 year old immigrant woman from Mexico. She is a 1st grade teacher and a mother to twins who just started college. She was involved in an intercultural relationship with an American man that was 23 years older than her. Her and her boyfriend were together for 24 years before they split up.

Theresa is a 23 year old recent college graduate from Guam. After graduation, she decided to stay in the United States rather than returning to Guam. She was involved in an intercultural relationship to her ex-boyfriend that identifies his culture as American. They were together for one and a half years before breaking up due to him graduating and moving away.

## **Findings**



The questions guiding my analysis were: How do intercultural couples navigate differences and balance their cultural identities in their romantic relationship as it develops? And By looking through the 4th stage of Mark Knapp's Relational Development Model 'integrating', how do intercultural couples balance their values with those of their partners? After analyzing the six interviews, the patterns that arose from each relationship were the concepts of open communication and understanding each other's culture. In each interview, all the women expressed that conflicts in their relationships emerged from a lack of competent communication about cultural differences, which is a lack of interculturality. An example of this was when Remmy said "As much as he loved me, he didn't want to compromise his life with something that he didn't want just because I wanted. So eventually that's what broke us up". Although each individual displayed different communication methods for navigating through their cultural differences, the overarching patterns found among the six interviewees showed the same patterns found in the supporting literature: finding a balance for their values and beliefs, negotiating their identities with one another when making decisions, and having/ showing reciprocity in understanding each other's culture. They each delineated that their intercultural relationship consisted of finding a balance between their identity with that of their partners, having a high level of communication competence and being able to integrate both of their cultures into the relationship. The four themes that emerged from the interviews that showed how these couples navigated their differences and balanced their values were: (a) engaging with their partner's culture and vice versa, (b) affirmation in the dialogue, engaging with their partner's culture and vice versa, (c) recognizing how passivity in communication is harmful to the relationship, and (d) learning to manage the relationship through relationship

strategies. The four themes build off of one another. Positive relationship strategies include willingly engaging in your partner's culture, having open dialogue in what each wants out of the relationship, and recognizing the harmful communication tactics each engages in.

### *Cultural Engagement*

The first theme that emerged from my findings was cultural engagement. Cultural engagement can be summed up as working through the differences in the relationship in order to acclimate to their partner's culture. Through analyzing the data that fit into this theme, the two main points that emerged were working through cultural differences and acclimating to the culture. Acclimating to their partner's culture was key in being able to fully engage with them. Terms such as adapting to, finding/focussing on similarities and normalizing were all apart of acclimating. An example of this was when Jenny was talking about her boyfriend's family, she said, "I think it just took some patience learning how he operated and how his family operated. It took a little bit for me to get used to how involved his family was and in his life and in his decisions but after I kind of got used to it, it was no longer a problem for us." She discussed earlier in her interview that her family did not place a high value on relying on family or spending time with them, whereas his culture did place high value on that. As opposed to Jenny and her boyfriend, when I interviewed Remmy, she said that "...whenever I had things to do with the family, traditions in my family, he wouldn't oppose to them, even if they took time away from him and I. He wouldn't oppose to them because he also grew up with them". She explained to me that her boyfriend at the time did not have close ties with his immediate family, but he was raised with strong family values. She also went into explaining that because

of the fact that he had those values engrained in him, they were able to focus on that similarity which helped them to acclimate to each other's cultures easier.

Along with acclimating, working through the cultural differences while trying to engage with their partner's culture was a main point. For the interview that I conducted with Lauren, she said that

"...because I'm American I'm not used to the drinking culture, like when I go over to his family events: one, I'm not used to the whole close nit family orientation thing cuz thats not how my family does, so it adds, I suppose a unique adaptation, so I have to get used to that. In the sense of like how close the family is, and how involved they all are with each other's affairs."

She was discussing her and her boyfriend's relationship when they visited his family in Ireland for the first time. I truly love this quote because it mainly discusses working through the cultural differences, but it also slightly touches on her having to acclimate to his culture so drastically.

She further goes on to discuss in her interview that another main cultural difference she noticed between the two of them was his sense of humor. She explained that the Irish have a unique sense of humor, and stated that "As soon as you're not lost and you can follow along, you start to really appreciate their humor."

### *Affirmation*

The second theme that emerged from this study, which builds off of cultural engagement, was the theme of affirmation in dialogue. This was filled with patterns of communication where the women explained that either they or their partners established what expectations each has for the relationship based off of their values through open and direct

communication. This was demonstrated when they were reflecting on the differences in values between them and their partner's. Values and traditions are very important and vary from culture to culture. For example, Theresa was explaining that in a Chamorro culture during Christmas, traditions revolve around prayer and foods specific to that culture, whereas in American culture, that is not the case. This pattern of affirmation was apparent when Theresa recounted telling her ex boyfriend that she was definite in standing firm to her traditions. "Theres certain things I wont give up I can say for a fact. Religion is one that I'm not giving it up....That's the religion that I have, it's the religion that I grew up with and that's not changing". Another example of this can be seen when Remmy described the instance when her ex boyfriend stood firm in his decisions which stemmed from his values and beliefs,

"But he has always been a very strong minded, strong willed man that didn't give in easily. You know like me wanting to get married, he didn't just say 'alright pacify her lets get married, alright pacify her lets have a child'. That's not what he wanted in life and he wasn't going to compromise. That's not what he wanted in life and he wasn't going to compromise. As much as he loved me, he didn't want to compromise his life with something that he didn't want just because I wanted. So eventually that's what broke us up".

Throughout each interview, the women disclosed that there was a level of setting definitive ground rules on values and traditions that one person in the relationship was not willing to compromise on. Theresa summed it up perfectly in her interview with establishing her values and beliefs through open and direct communication when she said "But like, things that are

very deeply rooted, like ideological beliefs, I'm not gonna change that. Like I can change my address, that's already big enough for me. It's about half and half."

### *Passivity*

The third theme, passivity in communication was created from where the women were describing the non constructive communication patterns either they fell into in their relationships, or their partners did. The majority of these showed signs of settling in the relationship, avoidance and acting stubborn. For settling in the relationship, the majority of the quotes that fit this example demonstrated one partner simply agreeing to what the other wanted without putting up much of a fight. When I asked Remmy about what differences there were in her relationship, she said

"His friends because most of his friends, if not all had children my age, so it was hard for me to really live my life because I was always doing things with his friends. So it was always things their age group would do. You know, even if we went on vacation, his friends children would go off and do stuff that I thought, "oh, I wish I could go off with them" but I had to stay with Marty and his friends".

When she was describing the differences in their relationship, she described that the majority of the destructive patterns of communication they fell into were either from settling for what the other wanted, or simply avoiding the problem all together.

Couples engaged in avoidance strategies more so than patterns of settling or stubbornness. In the example above with Remmy and her ex boyfriend, when they would get into disagreements, she said that

“He would leave if it was the office, or if it was at his house I would leave, and then a few hours later he would call me and invite me to dinner or to lunch or whatever and he would bring me a nice present or he would give me a credit card to go shopping and this was his way of pacifying and defusing the situation. Sometimes he would even do it right as we were in the argument or the discussion. He would just say “you know you need some time by yourself here” and he would give me money or a credit card and say “here go shopping” and he would go play golf and I would go shopping. And that was the end of it. Until I would again start thinking about it and getting emotional and saying this is what I want. And it was like that for years”.

In her case, they engaged in patterns of avoidance and acting non-confrontational in the situation. Another example of this was when Theresa was explaining how she handled her disputes in her relationship. She outlined that her way of dealing with the conflictive situations was “I could just walk away. I could go to my room, I could go to work, I could go to class...if I keep on dealing with this I’m just gonna go crazy, so I’d just rather not”. Along with these patterns of avoidance and acting non-confrontational, the women described that other patterns of harmful communication they found themselves in were giving in, giving up and simply stepping around the problem. For the interviews of Jenny, Jessica, Lauren, Martha, and Remmy, they more so alluded to what problematic communicative patterns they had. For Theresa, she illustrated in great deal what negative communication patterns she engaged in. For example, she said that “On some level, it was just easier. I’m confrontational and I like things my way but at the same time I can’t be bothered. You know sometimes I just don’t wanna give a shit. I don’t fucking care, like this is not worth the fight”.

The final pattern that made up the non-constructive communication tactics was stubbornness. This was comprised of patterns of blocking and acting uncompromisable in situations. An example of acting uncompromisable was when Remmy was describing what her ex boyfriend would do when they would get into arguments, as mentioned above. Another example of this taken from the interview of Remmy when she said that “As much as he loved me, he didn’t want to compromise his life with something that he didn’t want just because I wanted. So eventually that’s what broke us up”.

### *Relationship Strategy*

Lastly, the main theme found among the interviews was examining different constructive relationship strategies the women discussed, which is a culmination of cultural engagement, affirmation in the dialogue and recognizing the passivity in the communication. These relationship strategies were comprised of patterns of navigating, sacrificing understanding, respect, collaboration and compromising.

One of my favorite examples of a constructive relationship was from Jessica’s interview when she was talking about her husband and their communication. She said

“So our communication has to be really open and really honest. And it’s not about the really big things, it’s about the little details. I’m irritated at work, he’s one of the first people I want to know. And he gives me feedback on when he has a bad day at work or when he has a good day. It’s just, every day we have something new to talk to each other about, and if you don’t then your communication skills need a little kick. Get that ball rolling”.

I love this example because Jessica was very open about her communication patterns with her husband. She further goes on to say that

“It’s all about being open minded and having that. The communication is really big with having different cultures. If you’re going to be in a relationship being open minded and having that communication open, if something is really uncomfortable for you or you don’t really understand it, then that communication is key for your understanding. I think that even if you have all the love in the world and you don’t communicate, it’s not going to work.”

The idea of open and collaborative communication was a common theme among all six interviews. When reflecting on her relationship with her late husband, Martha said how the main value they held in their relationship was open and honest communication. She said

“I think that what we had was the communication we had. That we talked. We didn’t let things, I don’t want to talk about it, and you just get angry at each other. So we resolved our conflicts in that manner. Talking and coming to an agreement. Never ever going to bed upset with each other. Because that’s the worst thing. I think it was based on our friendship that we had and the trust and respect and love that we had for each other”.

Along with open and honest communication, another strategy that was found among the interviews was respect for one another and respect for each other’s culture. Lauren, who is currently in a relationship with her Irish boyfriend said “I think it is important to remember that one culture isn’t right above another culture. It’s just like different and being more understanding of either one”. This, along with how Jessica was talking about her



communication with her husband, is one of my favorite quotes from the interviews. She emphasized throughout her interview how important collaborating and assimilating into each other's culture is for there to be good communication.

### **Discussion**

The four themes found in the study, cultural engagement, affirmation in dialogue, passivity in communication and constructive relationship strategies, relate back to the themes found in the theories and the relevant literature. Relational Dialectics theory analyzes tensions during the communication in a relationship (Baxter et al., 2008, p. 349). My findings from affirmation and passivity in dialogue tie in with this theory by demonstrating how they handle tensions during their communication. An example from the findings was when Theresa was describing in several instances how there were certain values she held that she would not budge on, but there were other's that she would compromise on. Social Identity theory studies how we manage our identity within the relationship (Chi, 2015). The findings from cultural engagement, passivity in communication and relationship strategies demonstrate how their identity plays into their relationship by looking through this theory. Examples of this were found throughout the findings, for example when Lauren was describing the nature of her experience with her boyfriend's Irish family. She wove in her cultural identity with how different her boyfriend's culture was, and how she learned to assimilate to differences.

All four themes tie into the three literature themes because I interviewed all six women by taking Mark Knapp's model into account, they cannot manage a relationship without implementing their identity and learning to combine it with that of their partner's, and the only way in which intercultural couples can have open and constructive communication is through

the notion of being able to relate, to negotiate, to transform, and to grow with their partner (Dai et al., 2015, p. 103-104). For integrating, the way in which the women balanced their values with those of their partner's was apparent through the interview. The issue that I did see arise from my findings coincided with Avtgis et al. article where they outlined that there was overlap between the different phases of Knapp's stages of development (Avtgis et al., 1998, p. 285). I recognized some traits that fell under either intensifying, bonding, or even from stages that fell under the Coming Apart stages such as differentiating or avoiding from the interviews. The reason for this was due to the fact that some of the women I interviewed had broken up with the partner they were talking about, and some were married in their relationship.

Identity Negotiation was prevalent throughout all the interviews. How each couple negotiated their identity with that of their partner was apparent in how they engaged with the other culture, how they set ground rules for what they expected out of the relationship, how they handled conflict and avoidance, and how they collaborated and navigated through those problems. From the literature, the quote that related to my findings the most was "it is common discourse to recognize differences and move beyond those differences through modes of assimilation and dominance, rather than acknowledging the context(s) that produce difference and how to address them in a relationship" (Lawless, 2015, p. 290). This was demonstrated when Theresa stated, "some people who thrive off of the differences... I kind of find it easier to like build a foundation off of the similarities."

Lastly, the theme among my literature that I found most prevalent in my findings was the concept of interculturality, found from Intercultural Communication Competence. Interculturality derives respect, understanding, acknowledging and negotiating. It derives being

able to recognize and work through the differences, even if that means having to accommodate or give in to the situation. Intercultural Communication Competence is coupled with the idea of open communication (Dai et al., 2015, p. 103-104). At the end of each interview, I asked each of the women if there was anything they felt that intercultural couples needed to work on more in their relationship than monocultural couples (Appendix B). From each interview, I obtained the answers of respect, honesty, understanding, and open communication. In order to keep that level of open understanding, there can not be patterns of avoidance, complacency, being stubborn or settling in a situation. Passivity demonstrates a lack of cultural competence. However, recognizing the non-constructive patterns of communication and learning to negotiate through the differences creates open communication and understanding.

Through asking the final question and getting the input from the women I interviewed, they described that problems in relationships that intercultural couples have to deal with are problems that monocultural couples must face as well. All couples must navigate their differences, assimilate to each other's life styles and be definitive in what values they have. So how is this data specific for only intercultural couples? Intercultural couples have all those conflicts to navigate through, with several extra road blocks. Each individual has their own set of values and beliefs that they were raised with, but as Jessica stated in her interview, "I think it's a little bit easier for a Chamorro to understand another Chamorro because they grew up with the same values... A lot of the times, the traditions...You know, it's easier for us to relate to someone who has grown up in that kind of culture". Individuals who are in intercultural relationships have, in many cases, drastic differences between their cultures, thus, their values and belief systems are drastically different. Learning to navigate through their differences and

balance their cultural identities with their partner's while also maintaining their own identity is difficult. As the six women stated, you have to be willing to be open minded to compromise through open communication, in order to understand and adapt to the different cultural changes brought to the relationship (Appendix B).

## **Conclusion**

### *Limitations*

Several limitations emerged throughout the execution of this study. At the beginning of the study, the idea was for me to conduct roughly 10 interviews on intercultural couples who were considered to be within the 4th stage of Mark Knapp's relationship model between the ages of 20 to 45. Due to lack of participants that fit the specific criteria, I was only able to interview six women with a large age range. This created limitations in that only three ethnicities were represented, and only one gender was represented in the study. If this study were to be conducted over a longer time span, information that would be beneficial to observe would be to create a wider scope to bring in more data, thus creating a stronger analysis. Furthermore, interviewing more ethnicities from both genders would produce more data that could be utilized to compare and contrast between ethnicities and genders.

Intercultural couples are increasing in commonality with little research conducted on them. Throughout this research conducted, traits of open communication in interculturality and cultural engagement demonstrate how couples involved in these relationships navigate through their differences. Learning to find a balance in both cultural identities as the relationship develops is created through assimilating to the other culture, recognizing destructive communication strategies such as avoidance, and collaborating their values

together through stating what they expect and what they are willing to give in the relationship.

The six women I interviewed offered information that took the gathered literature and, with the use of the theoretical tools of Relational Dialectics theory, Social Identity theory and Knapp's Relational Development model, were able to shed light on how intercultural couples navigate their differences and balance their cultural identities in their romantic relationship as it develops.

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**Appendix**

Appendix A

Interviewee	Pseudonym	Culture	Partner Culture	Past or Current	Years Together
JAB	Jenny	American	Mexican	Past	1 year
JB	Jessica	Chamorro	American	Current	14 years
LY	Lauren	American	Irish	Current	3 years
MT	Martha	Mexican	German	Past	18 years
RT	Remmy	Mexican	American	Past	24 years
TM	Theresa	Chamorro	American	Past	1.5 years

Appendix B

Interviewee	Is there anything intercultural couples need to work on more than monocultural couples?
JAB	Be understanding and willing to learn
JB	Be open minded and have open communication
LY	Be understanding
MT	Have open communication and respect
RT	Compromise through open communication
TM	Be understanding and willing to adapt