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Intercultural romantic relationships: How is the love?

Abstract

Numbers of intercultural romantic relationships are rising in the Western part of the world. However, there remains paucity in empirical evidence on how cultural differences impact those in intercultural romantic relationships. This study was conducted using qualitative methodology and involved a culturally diverse sample of 28 individuals who participated in semi-structured interviews. Interview data was analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Results revealed that culture was conceptualised as meaningfully shaping the psycho-social-sexual-spiritual and existential aspects of relational functioning. It is highlighted that intercultural partners face challenges that are a combination of cultural, socioeconomic, and personal factors, which are compounded by changes across the lifespan. Findings facilitate a new way of understanding factors that enable effective functioning of relationships that unite multiple cultures, including support from extended family and wider community. Furthermore, effective communication, active engagement with each other's culture, and importance of attunement were identified as key to co-creating a third, intercultural reality within romantic relationships.

Intercultural romantic relationships: How is the love?

While precise components of what constitutes romantic love and intimacy vary across cultures around the world, the tendency to form intimate relationships with others is a cross-culturally universal phenomenon (Sorokowski et al., 2021). Therefore, it is not surprising that the Western part of the world is witnessing growing numbers of romantic unions that involve merging of different cultural backgrounds (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2000; Office for National Statistics, 2020). In this research, we conceptualise an intercultural relationship as a romantic union between people who self-identify as belonging to different national, racial, ethnic, language, and/or religious backgrounds.

Background literature

The topic of intercultural love and relationships is receiving increasing interest from psychology researchers and clinicians. A recent scoping review of literature on intercultural love and romantic relationships conceptualised that despite the growing interest, existing research on this topic is still scarce and there is a scope for more empirical exploration (Yurtaeva & Charura, 2024). Specifically, the review emphasised that there is a need for more culturally sensitive research that explores factors which impact on relational wellbeing of intercultural partners, including partners' personality characteristics, religious views, and different cultural perspectives on sexuality and intimacy.

Other literature focusses on the challenges of culturally defined gender roles, values, beliefs, adjustment challenges that can be brought on by having children, differences in expectations relating to emotional expression, financial (in)dependence, dominance, and the leading role in decision-making men and women within different cultures (Singh et al., 2020; Yurtaeva & Charura, 2024). Negotiation of gender roles can be further complicated by dependence of one partner on another who might be local to the host culture (Hoogenraad 2021), resulting in the shift in power to the representative of the majority culture, making the minority partner feel insecure or incompetent. Lacking language proficiency is another factor that can place one member of the relationship at a power disadvantage by preventing effective integration into the local community (Cools, 2006). Crippen and Brew, (2007) recognised that culture plays a valuable role in shaping attitudes towards childrearing practices for those who make the decision to have children. In line with this, partners can hold culture-specific beliefs about the matters of autonomy (Cools, 2006), how long they breastfeed for (Bhugun, 2017) or how they discipline their children (Bustamante et al., 2011), or whether to allow children to sleep in the same room with their parents. In combination, these various beliefs and attitudes can be difficult to negotiate and can disrupt already

existing strategies and coping mechanisms that were put in place by the partners (Crippen & Brew, 2007).

Culture-specific ways of experiencing and expressing emotions can pose another challenge for intercultural partners. One example of how this can manifest is culture-specific definitions of romantic love. A study by de Munck et al. (2011) found that Americans define love as altruism and friendship while Eastern Europeans refer to love through the lens of transience and unreality. Emotions are not only experienced but are also expressed in culture-specific ways. Some cultures favour reserved and indirect emotional expression while others prefer to communicate emotions directly and expressively (Karandashev, 2015). Findings suggesting that greater similarities in experience and expression of emotions are associated with greater intercultural relationship satisfaction serve as evidence of the pivotal role emotional processes play in intercultural relationship functioning (Fonseca et al., 2021). It is therefore clear from existing research that culture introduces an additional layer of complexities and challenges that intercultural partners face in their relationships. (For a more comprehensive scoping literature review on intercultural love and romantic relationships please see Yurtaeva and Charura (2024)).

Methodology

In adopting a social constructionist epistemology, we concured that there is no single 'reality' of how culture and cultural differences shape and influence experiences of being in a romantic relationship. We also recognise that such 'reality' cannot exist outside of the cultural and historic context and the language that is used to create this reality. Here, we refer to such factors as historic time (e.g., laws against interracial marriage; Givel, 2021), as well as dominant cultural and social discourses (such as for example, discourses around in-group dedication and importance of strong ties with the family of origin (McKenzie & Xiong, 2021). In the sections that follow, we outline how Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2022) allowed us to analyse our data and understand findings in line with the tenets of social constructionist framework.

Study aims

The literature on intercultural love and relationships available to date demonstrates that existing research is limited in its scope and focus. The following research questions were therefore addressed in this study to expand what is known about functioning of intercultural romantic relationships:

RQ1: What role does culture play in functioning of intercultural romantic relationships?

RQ2: What factors facilitate and hinder functioning of intercultural romantic relationships?

RQ3: What is the place of language in communication, relational dynamics and emotional processing in intercultural romantic relationships?

Method

Participants

28 individuals were recruited for this study. Participants were recruited using a combination of snowball and criterion sampling – purposeful sampling techniques that are commonly used in qualitative research to select information-rich cases (Palinkas et al., 2015). All participants had a current or historic experience of being in an intercultural romantic relationship. Participants' age ranged between 23 and 78 years old and all intercultural relationships took place in the Western cultural context. Demographic characteristics of the sample, including participants' age, gender, cultural identity, languages spoken, and country where the relationship took place, can be found in Table 1. Participants were recruited by advertising the study through researchers' personal contacts, the UK Association for Family Therapy and Systemic Practice, The Pásalo Project, SIETAR UK, and other organisations involved in working with multicultural individuals and families. Notably, because our sources of recruitment involved professional bodies for therapists, some participants had experience of being in therapy thus offering a unique perspective resulting from having had such therapeutic encounters.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

To be eligible to take part, all participants had to self-identify as having a present or past experience of being in a relationship they describe as romantic with an individual representing different national, racial, ethnic, language, and/or religious backgrounds. Participating individuals should have had this relationship for the minimum of 6 months to ensure sufficient awareness of the impact of culture on their relationship.

Interviews and procedure

This study was approved by the ethics committee of York St John University (approval code: RECCOUN00026). The semi-structured interview questions were designed in a way that initiated a conversation about certain areas of experience without being overly directive. This was important because ethics itself is culturally located and each cultural group has its own understanding of research ethics (Marshall & Batten, 2004). As part of data collection, the first author met with each participant online for around one hour and asked

them questions of the semi-structured interview (see supplemental material for the interview schedule).

<center>*Data analysis*</center>

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

A six-phase approach to analysing the data was used following the guidelines proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). Following the suggestion of Braun and Clarke (2022), an account of how the six analytic stages were applied to the data is provided in the Table 2 in supplemental material.

<center>*Results*</center>

Overview of the findings

Overall, participants' accounts demonstrated that culture is an important dimension of life that meaningfully shapes and influences relational experiences and worldview(s). The breadth and depth of data that was derived from the sample was conceptualised into six themes as follows: (1) cultural differences in attitudes, beliefs and worldviews; (2) language differences and impaired communication; (3) familial and societal attitudes; (4) intersectionality between culture, sexuality, personality, socioeconomic and political factors; (5) facilitative factors and coping strategies; and (6) prior exposure to multiculturalism. A brief overview and a summary of all themes can be found in Table 1 and in supplemental material.

Table 1

A summary of themes

Theme	Subthemes (where applicable)	Description
1. Culture introduces an extra layer of differences in intercultural relationships.	• Impact of cultural differences in emotional expression. • Different cultural traditions and perceptions of marriage. • Impact of cultural differences on childrearing practices.	Cultural differences in values and beliefs in relation to emotional expression, perceptions of marriage and childrearing practices.
2. Language differences can lead to impaired communication.		Differences in native languages leading to general communicative impairment and preventing authentic experiencing and expression of emotions.
3. Familial and societal attitudes as a source of significant influence on relational wellbeing.	• Family as a positive influence of the relationship. • Family and society as a catalyst for conflict.	Family and society influence relational wellbeing by either positively engaging with the relationship or creating the ground for conflict.
4. The intersectionality between culture, sexuality, socioeconomic and political factors.		Culture is intertwined with other aspects of personal and social identity, such as sexuality, gender, socioeconomic and political factors, and historic time.
5. Strategies and characteristics that support functioning of intercultural relationships.	• Open-mindedness, curiosity, and flexibility in attitudes are at the centre of a successful relationship. • Communication is key to a successful intercultural relationship.	Strategies and characteristics that were perceived as facilitating relational wellbeing included open-mindedness and flexibility in attitudes, effective communication, importance of

	• Importance of attunement, adjustment, and maturity. • Make the effort to experience your partner's culture. • Centrality of retaining the aspects of one's own culture that matter most. • Importance of emphasising similarities.	attunement, efforts to experience partner's culture and emphasis on similarities.
6. Prior exposure to multiculturalism as a catalyst for entering into an intercultural romantic relationship.		Intercultural experience acquired by travel, professional and educational activity encouraged interest in becoming involved with someone from a different culture.

*Theme I: **Culture introduces an extra layer of differences in intercultural relationships.***

This theme depicted the view that cultural and ethnic backgrounds of romantic partners lead to the differences in attitudes, values and beliefs along the domains summarised below.

Impact of cultural differences in emotional expression. The first domain of differences manifested in the way in which participants' own emotions and those of their partners were perceived as being shaped by their belonging to a particular cultural background. Participants expressed that this could impair their ability to constructively manage conflict and can further lead to individuals in the relationship having different ways of expressing love for another person. All accounts appeared to centre around the dichotomy of emotional openness/expressivity and closeness/internalising attitude of emotional expression: an example of a quote relating to this theme is:

"...he's very expressive in conflict but it took him a lot of time to say exactly what was on his mind because although he's Mediterranean, he's from the north of his country. So, um, more similar to ..[names nationality] and ..[names nationality] people. So he would take a lot of time to tell me what was wrong." (P9)

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As can be seen in this quote, often, there was a reference to cultural differences leading to the escalation in conflicts. Some participants felt that differences in emotional expression introduced something "cold" and unaffectionate to the relationship.

Different cultural traditions and perceptions of marriage.

Another domain of differences was that of culture-specific wedding traditions and rituals alongside culture-rooted perceptions of the importance of marriage. Here, some participants reflected on the differences in cultural traditions surrounding wedding ceremony alongside cultural differences in whether the woman should change her surname when getting married:

"...we had a big argument, and it was just a few days before the wedding that he was shocked to find out that in Italy, we don't give up our last name when we get married, and for him this was taken for granted. And I look at him, like, excuse me, I mean, we don't do that." (P20)

Some participants referred to cultural rules in relation to co-habitation before marriage. One participant shared that they felt "guilty" because of co-sharing an apartment in the country where cohabitation for unmarried couples is prohibited by law:

"In [names Country], it is forbidden for people who are not married to live together...and we were living together in [City] but I was even asked, uh, by the police, when I was doing an interview for the residence permit...That influence...it's horrible. Because you really feel guilty that you are doing something that isn't right... ." (P21).

Impact of cultural differences on childrearing practices.

When describing experiences of raising children of intercultural families, participants made references not only to divergent attitudes towards the importance of academic achievement, but also relating to how culture influenced their perceptions of such concepts as 'freedom' and 'independence' when raising their children.

A number of participants struggled to maintain children's touch with their native culture, particularly when that participant's culture was not the majority culture. Some participants shared that their children refused to learn their native language which led to feelings of guilt due to not maintaining children's relationship with extended family. A representation of this concern is found in the extract below:

"So I have always felt kind of heavy to deal with the guilt of me having abandoned my culture. There is like nursery rhymes, food, language...I spend days and days not thinking Portuguese, not talking Portuguese, when I talk to my parents, my children don't want to engage. I find it difficult to mediate that interaction." (P7).

Theme II: **Language differences can lead to impaired communication.**

The vast majority of participants mentioned the impact of differences in native languages on their experiences of being in an intercultural romantic relationship. Participants expressed that translating from one language to another often leads to miscommunication because some words do not share the same meaning when translated to a different language. This is illustrated by the account below:

"I think, um, there can be some quite grave misunderstanding. Things get lost in translation… just the way he forms the English language or the way that he says things would not be the way that I would say them. And so I might misinterpret that in my head…(P5).

In addition to general misunderstandings, participants noted lacking emotional authenticity when expressing themselves in a different language. This meant that some did not feel the same level of intimacy when saying "I love you" in a different language and others experienced a sense of loss due to not being able to hear the sounds of their native language. Consider the following quote:

"His love language…so the important things he tells me emotionally, most of them are actually in Spanish." (P23).

Not speaking the partner's language was also described as leading to impaired relationships with extended family. This challenge is vividly demonstrated in the quote below:

"So after 11 years, he can't have a conversation with my father or with my mum." (P20).

Theme III: **Familial and societal attitudes as a source of significant influence on relational wellbeing.**

Family as a positive influence on the relationship.

The attitudes of family that were described as positive often involved the attitude of allowing the freedom to choose one's partner or a stance of a more active and positive involvement with the relationship. Some participants used the phrase such as "as long as they see me happy" (P24) to denote their family's attitude of respectful neutrality, giving partners the space and independence needed to make their choices and build a separate life. Some participants also mentioned the stance of a more active involvement of the family, saying that their parents and friends were "fascinated" (P20) by the culture of their partner, which often

had a positive influence of helping partners to "consolidate" (P9) their relationship by making them more confident in their choice of a romantic partner.

Family and society as a catalyst for conflict.

There was frequent mentioning of the family and society as being the major source of distress for intercultural partners. One of the main influences was in relation to the expectations that family imparted on the relationship and this was described as having a negative, often detrimental, impact on the relationship. Some participants said that they had not felt any influence of culture in their relationships until their parents got involved, with one participant describing her experience of being excluded from her partner's family:

"That's been really tricky... I went through an anger phase of, actually, this isn't okay, if my family was rejecting you, what would be seen as racism. So...how is that not the same here? And...not being accepted, because of the colour of my skin was quite an experience for me...we've had heated discussions about it, and he's been equally frustrated." (P14)

Theme IV: **The intersectionality between culture, sexuality, socioeconomic and political factors.**

Culture was almost never discussed as a separate entity that existed independently from other aspects of social identity, such as those of sexuality, gender, and socio-political factors. In their accounts, participants wondered if certain factors, for example, their sexuality or gender, occupied a position of primacy compared to their nationality, race, ethnicity, language, and/or religious background. For example, some participants stated that '*being gay'* was something that concerned them much more than being in a relationship with the representative of a different ethnicity.

"I think, being a gay couple...comes first in terms of people worrying, and then being in a multicultural couple comes second...And obviously, you know, I'm [age] now, so when I was young, it was illegal to be gay." (P25)

In addition to sexuality and sexual orientation, culture was further intertwined with matters such as immigration laws and having to obtain a visa to reside in the foreign country, which were often equated with the position of powerlessness and inferiority. One participant whose partner had a refugee status noted:

"...if we argue, I'm gonna be sad but that's it, but for him, it tends to be the end of the world...he tends to shut down and get really hurt...It's a power element because...I'm French and ... with his passport he can't go anywhere...I have more power in that sense." (P19)

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In addition to sexuality and socio-political factors, some participants shared that gender introduced certain expectations in relation to what is culturally expected from a man and a woman in the relationship. Some noted that culturally they expect that a man will occupy the position of dominance in relation to managing the finances. Others found that their male partners surprised them by giving a woman in the relationship more "freedom and independence" (P20) or by not allowing the woman to go outside alone during the dark hours.

*Theme V: **Strategies that support functioning of intercultural relationships.***

Open-mindedness, curiosity and flexibility in attitudes are at the centre of a successful relationship. When asked about qualities that were seen as playing a role in relational dynamics of intercultural partners, open-mindedness, curiosity, and flexibility were seen as necessary in making the relationship work:

"On the attitudes level, I think it's openness and curiosity, that enables the relationship in the first place… I have always been the person who welcomes someone to a table with friends, the newcomer." (P18)

Communication is key to a successful intercultural relationship.

Profound differences in attitudes, values and beliefs that culture brings to a romantic relationship, including the impact of communicating with one another using a foreign language, require partners to pay attention to the domain of interpersonal communication. This is examplified through following quote:

"To always talk about things, not to hide them. I mean, I think it's especially important for intercultural relations." (P13)

Importance of attunement, adjustment and maturity

Awareness of differences and effective communication appeared to enable participants to create a unique culture in their relationships. This meant that over the course of their relationships, participants deeply identified with the word '*intercultural*' and its emphasis on transcending cultural boundaries. This process required large amount of compromise and adaptation:

"I set up the table and he serves it [food] on the plate…Those parts that are individual to our cultures, we do separately…Each of us does their own thing so that we feel comfortable. And then we eventually meet somewhere in the middle." (P1)

There was an inherent process of finding the middle ground which required some to adopt or assimilate their partner's cultural ways of being:

"Throughout the years we became more similar…maybe one example I can give is my thought on attachment to my family and his attachment to his family. Maybe mine grew a bit stronger and he lessened a bit. Maybe as a compromise." (P26)

Integration of one another's cultural values and beliefs into a singular whole resulted in the third culture and enabled each partner to feel comfortable in their intercultural relationship:

"...we've been together for 13 years, and we've morphed issues into this song that we just know how to dance to." (P7)

In addition, when finding this middle ground, there appeared to be the need to retain those aspects of one's own culture that have especial importance for one's sense of self.

Centrality of retaining the aspects of one's own culture that matter most.

When thinking about the process of adaptation and change, participants were firm in their position in relation to maintaining a sense of authenticity in their intercultural relationship by not compromising the aspects of one's own culture, such as traditions, cultural artefacts, and habits that were most central to their own identity.

Importance of emphasising similarities

In offsetting the impact of cultural differences, the emphasis on similarities emerged as a helpful strategy for building the relationship and reconciling the differences. Participants noted that similarities that united them and their partners were most helpful at times of conflict, including similarities in the domains of religious views, spirituality, core values and goals, shared interests and aspects of personality and character.

Theme VI: **Prior exposure to multiculturalism as a catalyst for entering into an intercultural romantic relationship.**

Participants reflected on certain experiences that they were exposed to throughout their lives that were perceived as playing a facilitative role in entering into an intercultural romantic union. These experiences ranged from exposure to different cultures in the early years of life to those that took place through travel, working or education in the fields of multiculturalism and cultural diversity. For example, as noted in the quote below:

"...I was always exposed to my parents; you're having these, these kinds of conversations at home and, you know, injustice and minority people's rights..." (P24)

In addition to the developmental experiences related to interculturalism, participants also reflected on the value of their professional and educational background. Many found that education enhanced their awareness of the role sociocultural processes can play in shaping

worldviews and experiences of themselves and other people. Participants also recalled how exposure to different literature through their studies helped them to assimilate certain cultural practices and introduced the opportunity to have a direct encounter with their partner's culture.

Discussion

The overarching aim of this study was to explore the role of culture in relational functioning of intercultural romantic couples and relationships. Through the process of thematic analysis six themes were conceptualised and described with accompanying illustrations of participant quotes. The purpose of discussion is to position these themes in the context of wider literature in the field and to generate an analytic story that reflects the way culture is constructed in intercultural romantic relationships that exist in the modern Western cultural context.

Despite various challenges and barriers, a notable overall finding of this study is that intercultural romantic relationships were described as largely positive, and culture was relayed as playing a meaningful role in shaping relational functioning. This demonstrates that despite the challenges and complexities introduced by the cultural differences, intercultural partners in this study were able to achieve effective and fulfilling relationships. Indeed, sharing of cultures as part of an intercultural relationship was previously conceptualised to offer opportunities for personal growth and expansion (West et al., 2022). Our finding of intercultural romantic partners being generally satisfied in their relationships supports the recent evidence generated in the meta-analysis by Uhlich et al. (2021) that showed equivalence in the levels of satisfaction between intercultural and same-culture relationships.

Our first research question concerned the role that culture plays in shaping relational dynamics of intercultural couples and relationships. Cultural values and norms were found to be experienced as an additional layer of differences that partners felt needed to be reconciled to achieve effective relational functioning. The first domain of differences was cultural variation in emotional expression. This finding supports other existing research in the field of interculturalism and cultural diversity. For example, emotional display rules appear to vary between individualist and collectivist cultures with people in individualist cultures being more emotionally expressive than in collectivist cultures (Matsumoto et al., 2008). Another way in which differences in emotional expression can manifest is by creating the mismatch in ways in which love is communicated between partners (e.g., explicitly communicated

through long written love messages versus more subtle verbal or non-verbal expressions of "I love you"). In light of these findings, it was previously suggested that relational success in intercultural romantic relationships is determined by the similarity rather than difference in the way partners express their emotions (Fonseca et al., 2020). However, in light of our finding that confirms centrality of effective communication in addressing and negotiating cultural differences, it is likely that partners may be able to reconcile their differences in emotional expression by learning to talk about their experiences of emotions in an open dialogue and conversation with one another.

In addition, cultural differences were construed by our participants to influence perceived importance of marriage in their intercultural relationships. Cultural variation in marriage norms is well-documented, with different cultures having their own rules in relation to the age at which to get married and how to organise the marriage ceremony (Al-Zu'abi & Jagdish, 2008). Cultures further differ in relation to the importance of being in love when marrying somebody, with individualistic cultures valuing love as a prerequisite for marriage more than collectivistic cultures (Levine et al., 1995). Our findings add to this by showing cross-cultural variation in the perceived importance of the ritual of marriage as an important aspect of intercultural relationship functioning.

Another domain of cultural differences manifested as cross-cultural variation in parenting practices. Supporting other existing evidence, this was experienced as intercultural partners disagreeing about the values that need to be instilled in their children. Among these were differences in the amount of independence and self-expression, as well as different cultural perceptions of what constitutes good enough academic achievement. Cultural differences in parenting beliefs and practices are well recognised (Crippen & Brew, 2007; Remennick, 2009). In this study, many participants voiced experiences of feeling guilt resulting from being unable to ensure that their children maintained connection with their native cultures.

Another way in which culture was relayed to shape relational experiences was by the means of its intersection with other aspects of personal and social identity, such as sexuality, gender, social class, race, and immigration status. In this study, participants reflected on the importance of locating their intercultural relationships in the context of their sexuality, with those individuals who were in intercultural relationships that were also same-sex relationships reflecting on the primacy of sexuality over cultural diversity in relation to prejudiced and discriminatory views of others. As one participant put it, "being gay comes first" (P25). Where couples choose to shift their focus away from cultural differences

ontosome other aspect of their social identity (such as sexuality), this may be seen as a defence mechanism against their fears of being judged and criticised for being an intercultural relationship (Killian, 2012). The concern with an intersection between culture and sexuality was also previously discussed by Long (2003) who outlined that being lesbian and culturally diverse can compound and lead to the couple becoming easier targets of simultaneous racial and heterosexist oppression. It is however notable that similarity on one aspect of social identity, for example social class, may bring more balance to the relationship by overriding existing cultural differences (Singh, 2020).

In relation to the intersection between cultural and socio-political identities, participants in this study reflected on the position of powerlessness and inferiority associated with their legal status in the country of residence. Hoogenraad (2021) recognised that sponsoring one's partner's visa places the sponsoring partner in the position of power, with such legal terms as "sponsoring" and "dependant" perpetuating shift in couples' power dynamics. In our study, participants identified how this can give the partner with the sponsoring status more emotional security and confidence. At the same time, partners' emotional wellbeing is likely to be impacted by the changes in immigration laws. An example form the UK context is how recent changes in the income requirement for sponsoring partner visas, once introduced has begun to have the impact of reducing rather than promoting migration and families migrating together or joining a spouse already in the UK (Gower et al., 2025). Fears of not being able to earn enough to be allowed to sponsor one's partner may result in emotional strain within the entire family system and partners living in a constant state of threat and fear that their relationship may be strained or dissolved due to the powerful external forces in the form of government policies and immigration laws.

Lastly, the intersection between culture and gender was also evident in the present study. Culturally assigned gender roles were perceived to shape partners' attitudes towards finances, independence, and power. Some female participants voiced expectations that their male romantic partners take a leading role in managing finances and have the final word in matters concerning the relationship. Kellner (2009) supported these findings with the observation that clear differentiation in the rights and obligations ascribed to each sex is a characteristic of collectivist cultures with some intercultural couples wanting to liberate from traditional gender roles and others choosing the gender roles that are traditional to their cultures of origin. It is also important to note that when negotiating these dynamics, some intercultural partners can find it more challenging to voice and explore certain, usually more

stigmatised, social categories (such as those of 'race'), compared to the social categories of 'gender' or 'culture' (Ugazio et al., 2021).

The second research question posed in this study concerned the factors that facilitate and hinder functioning of intercultural romantic relationships. Here, the success and relational satisfaction of intercultural couplehood was found to be impacted by various macrosystemic factors. Despite growing in numbers, intercultural relationships are nonetheless a rare phenomenon and due to their relative novelty even in the more multicultural parts of the world, society positions intercultural unions in unhelpful discourses marked my judgement and prejudice. Challenges that are commonly experienced range from unhelpful remarks from family members who question partners' ability to learn a foreign language to others articulating their anger and blame towards the couple (Dervin, 2013; Molina et al., 2004). In this study, participants identified the pressure coming from their or their partner's families to conform to the norms of the local culture alongside having to face the judgement towards the norms of their own cultures. This made them feel excluded and under pressure. Similarly, Inman et al. (2011) identified that families can be concerned with cultural dilution of their children which can instigate the feeling of guilt and cause conflict during family gatherings. When the matter concerns intercultural same-sex relationships, families are found to blame the foreign partner for influencing the sexual orientation of their children (Long, 2003). Partners can also be blamed for their lack of loyalty to the family and ethnic group which may result in tension between one's partner and their family or community (Long, 2003). Often, intercultural partners' experiences of being marginalised vary as a function of their cultural background, with black-white couples suffering from hostility more than Chinese-Euro American couples (Rosenblatt & Stewart, 2004). When the partner from the dominant culture experiences racial prejudice due to their affiliation with someone from the minority group, this can be a novel experience for them that can hinder relational satisfaction (Long et al., 2003; Skowronski et al., 2014). Indeed, as summarised by the P14, "not being accepted, because of the colour of my skin was quite an experience for me". Yampolsky et al. (2020) found that hostility and rejection are likely to lead to the struggle to integrate one's cultural identity with their couple identity, leading to lower overall wellbeing and poorer relationship quality.

Among the factors that served a facilitative role were the strategies that partners used to offset their differences and to overcome the barriers associated with power imbalances and prejudiced attitudes. First, effective communication about each other's worldviews and experiences was seen as enabling the relationship even when there was very little shared

cultural ground. Open expression of cultural views was perceived as allowing each partner to know when to compromise to be able to join different cultures into a singular whole that one participant called a "song that we just know how to dance to" (P7). This co-creation of the new intercultural reality and identity as part of the intercultural union is an experience that commonly characterises relational dynamics of intercultural couples and relationships (Bustamante et al., 2011; Ruebelt et al., 2016).

The last category of factors that were relayed to positively influence relational functioning was exposure to cultural diversity acquired through the family of origin, international travel, or educational and professional activity. Participants in this study reflected on how hearing conversations about social justice in their family or receiving education in the field of cultural diversity led to the increase in their cultural empathy. Cultural empathy and curiosity are the qualities that are needed to form authentically non-discriminatory relationships with others that are based on the appreciation of another person's sociocultural context (Kellner, 2009).

The final research question addressed the role of language in communication, relational experiences and emotional processing within intercultural relationships. With different cultures often leading to differences in native languages, participants constructed the reality of language differences in the relationship through the lens of multiple challenges. First of these was the general communicative impairment that resulted from struggling to clearly or authentically express one's thoughts, emotions and feelings in the non-native language. Dewaele and Salomidou (2017) referred to these as conceptual problems that can result from the non-equivalence of meaning when the word is translated to another language and when languages lack certain linguistic structures such as diminutives.

The developmental model of intercultural love and relationships

Having formed an understanding of the role cultural experiences play in relational functioning of intercultural romantic relationships, the following conceptualisation is proposed here to outline the developmental trajectory of intercultural love (see Figure 1). This conceptualisation was developed based on the wider research on developmental roots of adult romantic relationships (e.g., Bryant & Conger, 2002) which was combined with the findings of the present study to create a summary and a visual representation of the considerations and experiences that are relevant to relational functioning of intercultural romantic partners.

First, individual development begins in the family of origin with family members and children engaging in interactions that can have a long-lasting impact on the children's adult romantic relationships (Bryant & Conger, 2002; Hare et al., 2009). Here, such experiences as parental marital separation can lead to the formation of negative beliefs and assumptions about marriage and romantic love in children (Bryant & Conger, 2002). It is further widely recognised that childhood adversity, such as experiences of abuse and neglect in childhood, can increase the likelihood of adult problem behaviours (e.g., impulsivity, difficulty regulating emotions) that can have a negative influence on the quality of adult romantic relationships (Rokach & Clayton, 2023). Another way in which early interpersonal experiences can influence adult romantic relationships is by the means of shaping perceptions (internal working models) of oneself and other people leading to a secure or less secure stance towards romantic partners in adulthood (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Hare et al., 2009).

In this study we also found that certain early developmental experiences can have particular significance when it comes to shaping one's predisposition towards entering into intercultural romantic relationships in adulthood. One of such experiences is early exposure to cultural diversity through international travel, education, and conversations in the family about social justice and different cultures around the world. These experiences can create favourable attitudes towards diversity and difference and ultimately shape one's openness towards intercultural romantic relationships. Arguably, such experiences can promote open-mindedness, curiosity, and flexibility in attitudes that are needed to successfully engage in interactions with someone of another culture. As can be seen in Figure 1, once an intercultural romantic relationship has been formed and is going through its family life cycle, intercultural partners face a number of challenges and complexities which are a combination of cultural, sociopolitical, economic and personal challenges and use coping strategies to facilitate relational functioning. The experiences of intercultural partners are further embedded in layers of wider social context that Bronfenbrenner (1994) named the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Microsystem is the couple's most immediate surrounding environment which is for example made up of their workplace and extended family. Here, partners in the relationship can either be met with support and encouragement or can be tacking prejudice, othering and poor conditions of employment due to limited language skills. In their mesosystem which is defined as the interaction between various microsystems, couple's extended family can be interacting with their friendship circle and couple's children, once again resulting in acceptance or perhaps

struggle to form meaningful relationships due to little to no shared language or not understanding novel cultural traditions. In exosystem, intercultural partners would be impacted by the culture of the neighbourhood and wider society they live in which can be marked by high crime rates or general poverty of living conditions and struggling to improve their situation due to a limited social support system. In their macrosystem, a couple's relationship is exposed to the wider culture of the society they live in, as well as the immigration laws and political ideologies that can either favour or oppose intercultural marriages and migration. Finally, in their chronosystem, the time period within which the relationship is formed can have a significant impact on the success or even the possibility of this relationship being formed on the first place with laws against interracial marriages that existed in countries around the world until late 1960s (Givel, 2021). The potentiality of trauma throughout the life cycle can further disrupt and complicate successful coping and adaptation to these added challenges. We argue that the conceptualisation represented in Figure 1 could serve as a useful representational tool for Practitioner Psychologists and for those in intercultural romantic relationships to examine developmental experiences, strengths, resources, and challenges of intercultural couples and relationships with the view to engage in a culturally sensitive and collaborative formulation of these experiences.

Figure 1

Developmental model of intercultural love and romantic relationships
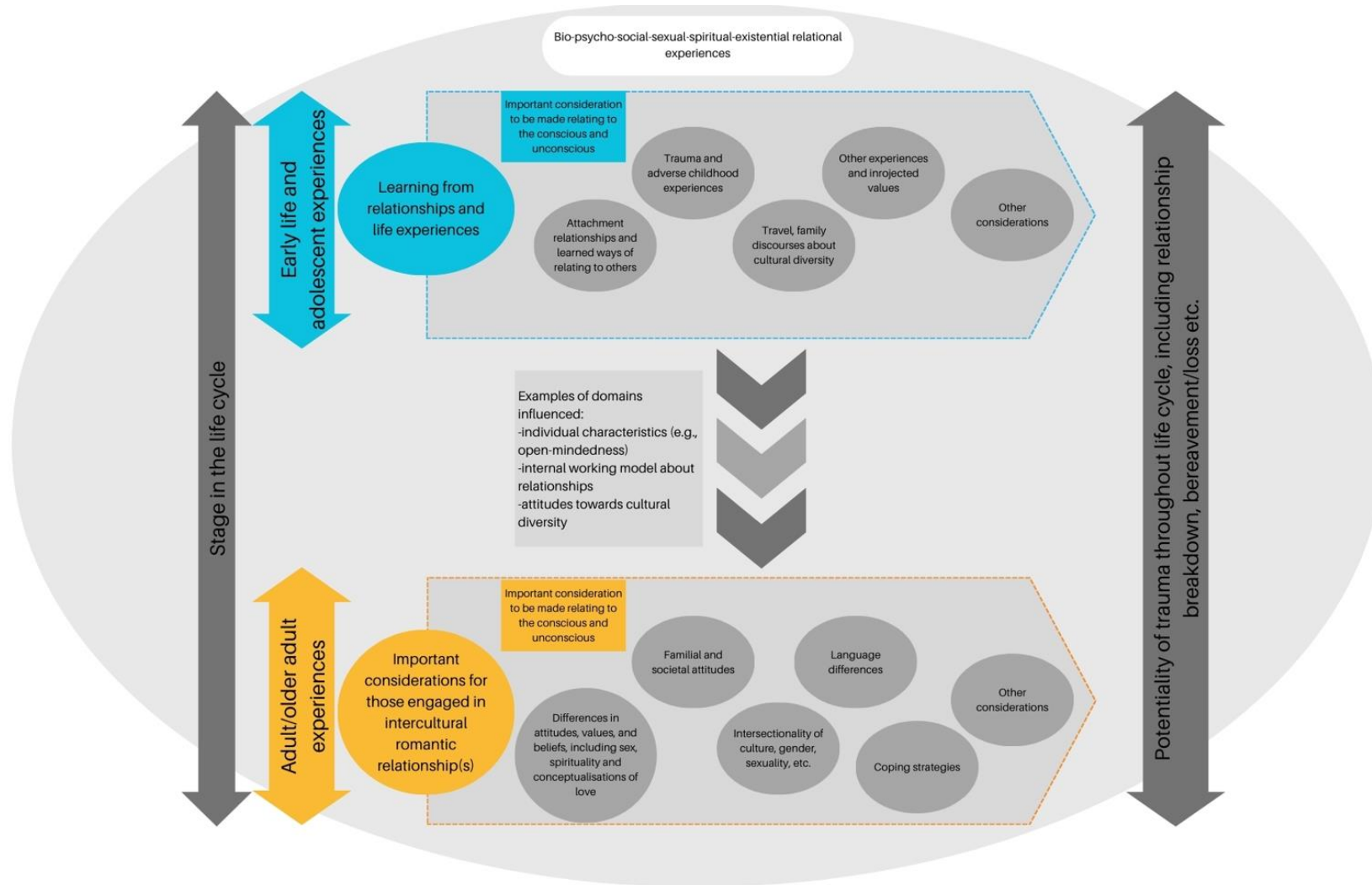
Limitations and future directions

When considering wider theoretical and practical implications of this research, it is important that the reader is aware of a number of its limitations. The Western cultural context within which this study was conducted is multiculturally diverse and this diversity can increase acceptance of cultural minorities. Therefore, our findings cannot be made internationally generalisable because experiences of cultural diversity might differ when partners reside in countries with lower rates of immigration and less accepting attitudes towards these types of relationships. The generalisability of our findings is also likely affected by the fact that many of our participants were recruited through professional networks for therapists and therefore have had prior exposure to individual or relationship therapy. These experiences may have made them more psychologically minded and aware of the impact of culture on their relationships thus making them more adept and navigating these differences in their relationships. At the same time, our participant sample may be skewed towards those individuals who experienced difficulties in their relationships and needed professional help to navigate their challenges.

To address the above limitations, more studies are needed that include other cultural combinations of romantic partners as well as include those couples and relationships that exist outside of the Western cultural value system and those who did not have any prior exposure to therapy. Further, it might be informative to continue to use standardised data collection methods to minimise the impact of subjective meaning-making on the findings. Examples of this type of research include studies that use statistical methods to compare intercultural and same-culture relationships on a range of outcomes (for example, relationship satisfaction) that are assessed by standardised measures such as questionnaires (Reiter & Gee, 2008).

More research is also needed to test the theoretical conclusions that are drawn as part of the developmental model of intercultural love and relationships proposed in this study. We acknowledge that whilst retrospective accounts are common in romantic relationship research, these can be biased due to recall biases and current circumstances of participants. Despite these limitations, we assert the novel contributions of this qualitative study on the role of culture in relational functioning of intercultural romantic couples and relationships.

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