

DIMITRA DOUMPIOTI PSYCHOLOGIST AND FAMILY THERAPIST

The good, bad and beautiful of cross-cultural couples

Relationships that cross cultural boundaries bring their own problems and joys

JOSEPH WILSON

● Psychologist and family therapist Dimitra Doumpiotti talks about cross-cultural relationships and the unique set of issues faced by couples of different nationalities and cultural backgrounds. Doumpiotti's own background is relevant to her work. Originally from Greece, and educated in Manchester and Barcelona, she has lived in Barcelona since 2000. She opened Hestia, a centre dedicated to psychology and well-being, in 2005. While providing therapy to the Catalan and Spanish community, Hestia also tends to the needs of the international community in Barcelona, particularly cross-cultural couples.

-Can you give us a profile of the typical cross-cultural couple in Barcelona?

They are couples composed of either a local and a foreigner or two foreigners who have decided to relocate here because of the lifestyle the city offers. Mainly they are young professionals who want to set up a life here or are in a transitional moment in their lives.

-When they come seeking counselling, do they express their problems as result of cultural differences?

No, they come because they are in pain. Their relationship is not working and they don't know what to do—just like a local couple in trouble. The cultural difference may or may not play a part in their problems, but it is a

part of their identity so we always bring it to the surface.

-What are the different issues which cross-cultural couples face that local ones don't?

Let's start with what is similar. Whenever a couple comes together, regardless of nationality, what is really happening is the coming together of two cultures, because each person has been brought up in different families with different ideas, ideals, political views, religious and educational backgrounds.

-So nationality is just another factor in the background of each couple?

Exactly, though it is an important one, as it encompasses very many aspects of the indi-

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vidual. Nevertheless, I think that cross-cultural couples sometimes make their cultural difference work in their favour. For example, when a problem arises they can say, "Oh, well, that's just a cultural difference and we can just accept it as such and move on," which is something that doesn't quite happen in a couple of the same nationality and culture.

-But isn't that an excuse, just chalking up a problem to "cultural difference"?

The point is that there are always conflicts in relationships

and the goal is how you recognise, surpass them or at least learn to live with them.

-So they're some advantages to a cross-cultural relationship?

It can work in your favour because there are always conflicts in couples and to say something is a misunderstanding may actually be a constructive way of dealing with it. It's not about a "flaw" in the person; it's about overcoming a cultural misunderstanding. And besides, I think due to globalisation it's actually easier to find someone with the characteristics we seek.

-So what's the catch?

Well, on the other hand, when there is a very stressful situation, the cultural differences can be a big problem because if there is already tension in a couple for whatever reason, there is a tendency to generalise and stereotype and say, "My way is the best way; you Brits don't know about family bonds, or you Mediterraneans cannot rationalise," and this results in a conflict of cultures which can be even more painful. So what can be something positive can also backfire. The "coming together" of the two families, the acceptance of "the other" may also be an especially delicate or problematic matter. Cross-cultural couples and their families need to be very flexible and understanding and this not always is the case.

-What other issues are unique to cross-cultural couples?

For the foreigner, there is a sense of being uprooted. One experiences what is called "la pérdida ambigua," the ambiguous loss, a sensation that when one is starting a life in a different culture, there is a loss of their own



Psychologist and family therapist Dimitra Doumpiotti

culture they are leaving behind. One has to grieve that loss and it is a mourning which never can be accepted 100%, and this may be very difficult for the local partner to truly understand. This ambiguous loss is usually felt even more with the decision to have children. Questions about how one wants to raise a child can weigh heavy. This moment, when one decides to establish a life in a foreign country, also provokes problems with the family one leaves back home. A lot of different issues surface at that time. For example, when one settles into the family structure of the local partner. Often feelings of being disloyal to one's own family and traditions come up.

-How do you treat these issues?

The first step is to retell the story of each person in the presence of the other, rebuild the very unique and special story each one has had and to become

conscious of the other's background, what happened when the other person was not there. Then we focus on what brought the couple together in the first place, highlighting what is positive and nurturing about the relationship. Also it is very important for them to decide what they want as a couple, how they envision their future, what values they want their children to have. This is process that would be good for all couples to go through, but for cross-cultural couples it is essential because it usually is more difficult for them to project themselves into the future.

-It sounds intimidating, do you believe overall it is more difficult for cross-cultural relationships?

No. They may be more complex, but that doesn't mean they are more problematic.

For more information: www.hestia.es, or write to info@hestia.es

Poble Sec locals reject mosque

CATALONIA TODAY

● Locals in the Barcelona neighbourhood of Poble Sec heckled the few residents and a Catholic priest who defended the right to build a new mosque in the district at a recent assembly of neighbours. The event drew 200 residents, a majority of whom agreed to block the construction of a 750m² Muslim prayer house at number 3, carrer Piquer. Arguing that the planned facility lacks proper conditions, such as ventilation or emergency exits, residents vehemently opposed

what would be one of the largest mosques in Spain. President of residents' association Unió de Veïns del Poble Sec, Jordi Bargalló, said "Poble Sec has filled its social quota with a drug treatment centre and a homeless shelter."

A small group led by a local priest was met with jeers, El Periódico reported, when the group disputed the community's protest citing article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees religious freedom.

Police bust metro pickpockets

AGENCIES

● A Barcelona judge sentenced five of the 18 alleged pickpockets arrested for robbing more than a thousand people in metro stations since 2005. The others were charged and then released.

The arrests were made after a week in which 550 people reported robberies in the underground. The detentions are the culmination of a six-month investigation of 35 suspects—most are Bosnian, 32 are women and three men, aged 18 to 30.

Normally when pickpockets are caught they are fined and then released, but an accumulation of such crimes (four minimum) could warrant a jail sentence. The subjects of the probe termed Operació T-10 were tried for illicit association and repeated offences of aggravated theft. Many of the crimes occurred at entrances to metro cars at stations used frequently by tourists such as Plaça Catalunya or Liceu. One method applied involved the assailant faking an



In the act at Arc de Triomf / Mossos

entry onto the car and then backing out, swiftly snatching the bag of a person behind them on their way.