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Article 10

Interfaith Marriage and Counseling Implications

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A sense of shared spirituality or faith can enhance a marriage. When joint religious activities have symbolic meaning, couples have increased marital satisfaction (Fiese & Tomcho, 2001). Gottman (1999) asserts that counselors should be aware of how couples' religious beliefs impact marriage. Spiritual convictions can affirm a relationship, help a couple bond through shared values and beliefs, and encourage participation in shared activities (Fiese & Tomcho).

Defining Interfaith Marriage

According to Joanides (2004), interfaith marriage is a marriage wherein the partners belong to different faith groups, such as a non-Christian married to a Greek Orthodox Christian.

Counselors need to be aware of what roles spirituality and faith have in the relationship of their clients. Eaton (1994) asserts counselors should be aware of the purpose of counseling interfaith couples:

Treatment requires dealing with family systems dynamics while educating the couple about the role of cultural difference in their relationship. The goal of treatment is to assist the couple to view their differences flexibly and use them to their advantage while they develop a blended culture that satisfies their individual and partnership needs, including the religious and spiritual. (p. 210)

However, Gottman elaborates that recognition of a couples' belief system is not enough, as simple "knowledge of shared beliefs is not adequate for understanding how they are used in the marriage on a day-to-day basis" (1999, p. 141).

Family of Origin and Marriage

Family of origin significantly impacts religious practices of couples; it is important to explore family of origin traditions and associated meaning and significance when discussing a couples' current religious perspectives (Fiese & Tomcho, 2001). Patsavos and Joanides (2000) assert that:

Intermarriages are richer, more complex marital systems due in large part to both partners' religious, cultural, and in some cases, racial differences. As such, the challenges these couples potentially face in their efforts to cultivate a religious environment in their homes tend to be greater in number and qualitatively different than the challenges that single faith, single cultural couples might typically encounter. (p. 218)

Counselors must be aware of the multitude of religious and cultural diversity issues they may see in counseling couples. Partners may have differing degrees of devoutness to their religious heritage. Gottman (1999) asserts:

Marriage is a new culture, reflecting the partners' unique ways of making this journey through life meaningful. To the extent that the couple can create shared meaning, the friendship is greatly enhanced, as is their ability to deal with conflict. (p.173)

Eaton (1994) avows effective counseling of interfaith couples involves assisting the couple in identifying how family issues are processed and distinguishing those issues from culturally based differences that become difficult only when they are rigidified in the relationship. A major goal of treatment is to assist the couple to regard their differences flexibly and use them to their advantage

while they develop a unique, blended culture. Couples may be anywhere on a spectrum from destructively emphasizing their difference in background to being unaware that difference is playing a role in their problems.

Differences couples experience must be addressed and “similarities between partners and differences between partners and their parents need to be emphasized in order to strengthen the couple bond and increase the boundaries between the couple and their parents” (Eaton, 1994, p. 211). Sherkat (2004) asserts couples possessing differing religious viewpoints may be affected in many arenas, including conflict with one’s spouse, domestic violence, divorce, and struggles regarding fertility. Lehrer and Chiswick (as cited in Lehrer, 1998) report the divorce rate for homogenous faith couples ranges from 13% to 27%; the divorce rate for heterogamous faith couples ranges from 24% to 42%. Sussman & Alexander (1999) also report a higher divorce rate among heterogamous faith couples.

The Process of Counseling versus the Content

Gottman (1999) asserts content of the issue is not as important as the process of how the issue is avoided or addressed. He contends that similarity is not a critical issue in determining the success or failure of a marriage; it is the perception of the differences that is the issue:

The formation of a marriage and a family involves the creation of a new culture that has never existed before. Even if the two people come from the same racial, ethnic, and geographic background, their families of origin will be very different, and so their union will inevitably involve the creation of a new world of meaning. (Gottman, 1999, p.109)

Eaton (1994) states that if an interfaith couple is able to discuss their religious differences and respect differing viewpoints and traditions, they are better able to make constructive use of their dissimilarities, and support “the partners’ development of their individual religious-spiritual practices and identities, while they create a new blended culture that expresses their goals and values” (p. 213).

Similarity of Values and Impact on Marital Harmony

It is interesting to note that when couples belong to different faiths, differing magnitudes of detachment between them and their spouse's family are formed. This resulting detachment is especially pronounced when both spouses are strongly committed to their religious background; this is further exacerbated when couples have not given measured contemplation on how their spiritual divergence impacts their marital and family stability, functioning, and routines (Joanides, Mayhew, & Mamalakis, 2002). Couples functioning well minimize theological differences and focus upon those behaviors and ideas they have in common (Joanides et al.). Many interfaith couples regard religious differences as having a positive impact on them as individuals, couples, and families (Joanides, in press). Eaton (1994) also asserts that interfaith marriages can result in increased personal satisfaction and self-awareness, stating:

The ultimate advantage of a successful interfaith marriage lies in its ability to give the partners a broader range of options for action and meaning-making than those learned in the family of origin. Because automatic assumptions about meaning in life are less easy to maintain in an interfaith marriage, partners are more likely to consciously develop a sense of core values and purposes. The successful creation of a blended culture yields a richly supportive mix of ancient traditions and unique rituals and routines that express the beliefs and fill the needs of the couple. (p. 211)

Much research indicates similarity in values and faiths is necessary for marital stability and harmony (Chinitz & Brown, 2001). Lazerwitz (as cited in Chinitz & Brown) states religiously heterogeneous marriages result in increased marital happiness and decreased divorce rate. Other research indicates that interfaith marriages actually have a higher likelihood of ending in divorce than homogenous marriages, though the specific factors involved have not been delineated (Chinitz & Brown). It is noteworthy that the preponderance of research concerning the impact of religious

differences and marital satisfaction is concerned with major Christian denomination (Chinitz & Brown). Much less research is available concerning non-Christian denominations.

Gottman (1999) asserts similarity is a poor diviner of marital satisfaction or stability. Rather, it is about “process, about how partners relate to each other in their sharing of beliefs and interests” (Gottman, p. 22). Gottman asserts similarity does not make a good marriage; a couple may have similar values, hobbies, and interests, but if they treat each other with contempt and disdain, the marriage may be difficult. If couples treat each other with respect and accept their partners, the marriage may be stronger. “Similarity is a weak predictor because it does not tap the processes that matter in maintaining, or destroying, a marriage” (Gottman, p. 23). Gottman also states that more couples than not experience what he refers to as a “perpetual problem.” Gottman (p. 96) describes a perpetual problem as,

issues with no resolution that the couple has been dealing with for many years. Whatever the specific context of a perpetual problem, it will also include: basic difference in partners’ personalities, and (2) basic differences in needs that are central to their concepts of who they are as people.

Marriage counselors are obliged to equip themselves with clinical skills needed to help couples learn how to process communication difficulties, rather than simply form a solution to a particular problem. “For most perpetual conflicts in marriages, what matters is not the resolution of the conflict, because it will generally never get resolved, but the affect around which the conflict is not resolved” (Gottman, 1999, p. 96).

Couples who focus their attention on their philosophical, spiritual differences, rather than similarities, more often have persistent conflicts that have a bitter effect on marital stability and family welfare, as well as recurrent regret and frustration (Joanides et al., 2002). If religious differences and frustrations are not dealt with effectively, couples may begin to feel emotionally disconnected.

Couples may not possess the skills or awareness to consider

how religious issues impact their viewpoints. Falicov (as cited in Eaton, 1994, p. 211) states some interfaith couples are “unable to create a blended culture- relatedness, routines, and rituals – that fosters both the expression of their individuality and the resolution of conflicts.” McGoldrick and Preto (as cited in Eaton) elaborate, stating,

gender roles, parenting issues, religious expression, communication, problem solving, closeness and distance to friends and relatives, indeed an understanding of the purpose and meaning of marriage itself, may all be heavily influenced by religious-cultural difference and may contribute to conflict. (p. 211)

It is critical that couples with different faiths explore each others’ religious customs, values and beliefs. By not doing so, culture shock may result due to unfamiliarity with partners’ faith and cultural convictions and practices. This can lead to emotional isolation, and can hinder the balancing of the needs of the spouses, both as a couple and as individuals, as well as the nuclear and extended families (Joanides et al., 2002). The ability to establish functional, beneficial boundaries between a couple and their needs, and the needs of their families, communities, and other subsystems correlates with the degree of marital conflict, according to Joanides et al.

The Impact of Extended Family Support

Interfaith couples may encounter much negative pressure from their families, and possibly their respective religious organizations. The partner who lacks his or her partners’ family acceptance can be negatively impacted; he or she may have a decreased sense of well-being and feel like an outsider. This can cause discord between the couple. Covert alliances between a partner and his or her family that is not accepting of the partner can negatively impact the relationship of the engaged couple, and will likely inhibit future marital happiness (Joanides et al., 2002). This pressure can be subtle and intricate, or obvious. “Even if an individual does not personally care about the religious faith of a potential spouse, the opinions and actions of

parents, siblings, other kin, and friends can reduce the likelihood of marriage.” (Sherkat, 2004, p. 610).

Discussions amongst couples with religious differences should occur prior to the marriage (Joanides et al., 2002). Topics may include steps that can be taken to establish a sense of equilibrium between their needs as individuals, as couples, with their respective families, and their faith community (Joanides et al.). Ideology and perspectives may change. Open, positive exchange of ideas throughout marriage can lead to increased intimacy and appreciation between couples. Willingness to make compromises, using humor to deflect conflict, being fair with one’s partner, and the continued freedom to choose and pursue one’s values and beliefs in a safe, accepting relationship throughout developmental changes, can enhance marriage. Carter and McGoldrick (as cited in Joanides, in press) contend such changes include career advancement, having children, raising families, and aging. These tasks must be negotiated and settled; having differing life viewpoints due to religious ideology can either hinder or enhance attempts for positive resolution, depending upon room allowed for change and acceptance within the marriage.

Raising Children in a Religiously Diverse Family

One particularly challenging area for couples with religious differences is raising children. Previously buried religious differences may surface when making decisions about the religious upbringing of children (Eaton, 1994; Lehrer, 1998). Peterson and Remsen (as cited in Eaton, 1994) state religious differences are not inherently a problem in raising children, providing the parents are able to reach agreement regarding how to incorporate religiosity into the lives of their children. Those couples wherein one partner is not highly affiliated with his or her religion appear to have less difficulty establishing religious, spiritual routines for their children. Children of interfaith marriages are most often raised in the religious tradition of the mother (Chinitz & Brown, 2001). However Joanides et al. (2002) assert that,

parents with equally high levels of religious and cultural attachments were the most likely to describe lingering

disappointments and/or conflicts related to their efforts to help their children acquire a religious and ethnic identity. Parental disagreement and conflict was most pervasive when these couples failed to discuss and resolve issues relating to their children's baptism and continued religious development.

Family, friends and religious organizations may pressure couples when they are deciding how to raise their children within a religious context, and "these religiously intermarried couples frequently face negative reactions and a lack of understanding from family and friends, and disagreements concerning religious aspects of family life and their children's upbringing" (Gleckman & Streicher, as cited in Horowitz, 1999, p. 304).

Implications for Counselors

Marriage counselors must be self-aware in order to provide effective services. Biases and stereotypes can interfere with providing effectual services and may actually harm clients. Counselors need to be comfortable with their personal religious orientation and cultural heritage. Counselors should not assume that they truly understand the religious perspective of their clients simply because they share the same faith. Individual perspective is different due to family of origin and personal history (Eaton, 1994). Counselors can be effective regardless of their religious orientation if they focus on assisting clients explore the process of their communication rather than simply discussing the content (Gottman, 1999).

Marriage counselors must consider systemic variables. Reframing of problems helps couples gain new perspectives and better problem-solving abilities. Reframing "takes a situation and lifts it out of its old context, set of rules, and places it in a new context, set of rules, that defines it equally well" (Becvar & Becvar, 2003, p. 297). Counselors must bear in mind that, when using reframing, they must present the context in a manner and format accepted by clients. One simple example of reframing using a mere word to alter one's subjective experience is to help a client define a struggle as a "challenge" or "opportunity for growth" rather than a "problem."

Paradoxical intention is also often used by marriage counselors. It helps to change the “meaning of a situation and [opens] up new behavioral alternatives” (Becvar & Becvar, 2003, p. 298). If a counselor gives permission to a couple to argue, and to not like each other, it is possible that this permission frees the couple to feel badly toward each other, and alleviates feelings of anxiety and guilt about these negative feelings. Ironically, the negative feelings may subsequently subside and fighting may decrease (Becvar & Becvar).

Marriage counselors would be well-served to approach marriage counseling within a communications paradigm that concerns itself with repetitive patterns of interaction (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). Counselors need to help couples identify current issues, and assist them in focusing on the here-and-now. Couples need to learn about the issues and behaviors that undermine a marriage. Counselors should review Gottman’s (1999) material on the four behaviors which are corrosive to marital relationships and impede positive communication when discussing and exploring issues, including religious differences. In addition to identifying negative communication patterns, Gottman advocates that couples need to learn positive actions they can undertake to help minimize risk of relapsing into old patterns. Counselors are in a position to educate, promote positive change, and provide couples with the opportunity to evaluate their relationships and make positive changes, regardless of their differences.

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