

## Leisure and Marital Satisfaction in Intercultural Marriages

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of cultural backgrounds of spouses on leisure (couple and individual) and marital satisfaction among Korean-American and East European-American married couples. In particular, the study examined challenges faced by intercultural unions that were related to their leisure engagements and the role of leisure in improving marital satisfaction. The data were collected with the use of in-depth one-on-one interviews. The results showed the importance of shared leisure time as a component of marital satisfaction among intercultural couples. Leisure allowed them to develop shared interests and provided opportunities for healthy communication and spending quality time together. Spouses faced unique problems in leisure related to differences in native languages, communication styles, and social behavior. They also employed a number of strategies to increase their marital satisfaction, including (a) restructuring leisure, (b) proactively using leisure to address potential marital problems, and (c) providing opportunities for positive seclusion.

**Keywords:** *Leisure, marital satisfaction, intercultural marriage*

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High divorce rates in the United States combined with the detrimental effects of unhappy marriage on the physical and mental health of spouses and children have led to an increased amount of research on marital satisfaction and marital stability (Amato, 2000; Booth & Amato, 2001; Cummings, Schermerhorn, Davies, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2006; Perrone, Webb, & Blalock, 2005). While there have been many attempts to both find causes of marital dysfunction and to propose solutions (Bartle-Haring, & Lal, 2010; Christensen, Atkins, Baucom, & Yi, 2010; Kim, 2010; Larson & Holman, 1994), the issue of relationship stability and satisfaction can hardly be considered resolved.

One of the factors found to play an important role in marriage is leisure. The existing research shows that leisure is related to marital satisfaction (Crawford, Houts, Huston, & George, 2002; Johnson, Zabriskie, & Hill, 2006), marital cohesion and adaptability, as well as family functioning (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001). It was suggested that by spending time together, family members bond, improve communication and learn to adapt to stressful situations (Johnson et al., 2006; Kelly, 1997; Shaw, 1997). Besides positive roles of leisure in marital life, research has also shown leisure may serve as a source of disagreements and tension. For example, in Oggins' (2003) study tension about leisure was the second most often reported reason for conflict in both African American and Euro-American couples, even exceeding disagreements related to children or family of origin. Only money was mentioned more frequently as the cause of conflict within the family.

Due to the social changes in the last half a century, the concepts of marriage and family have evolved drastically. Increased rates of cohabitation (Popenoe & Whitehead, 1999), single-parent households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), couples deciding to remain childless (Whitehead & Popenoe, 2008), and intercultural unions (Zhang & Van Hook, 2009) have redefined the landscape of marriage and family at the turn of the twenty first century. The typical family with two married parents of different sex who raise their children together often no longer represents the reality of many Americans.

Despite these social changes and increasing diversity of family structure, the majority of studies examining the relationship between leisure and marital satisfaction remain focused on the mainstream Anglo-American couples or do not account for the race/ethnicity/cultural background of participants (Crawford et al., 2002; Holman & Jacquart, 1988; Johnson et al., 2006). Leisure behavior of intercultural couples has attracted only scant attention among leisure researchers (Hibbler & Shinew, 2002).

According to Wang (2012), the number of interracial marriages in the U.S. has increased from 3.2% of all marriages in the 1980s to about 8.4% in 2010. In light of increased globalization trends, including growth of international travel and transnational networks, as well as the increased acceptance of interracial and intercultural unions<sup>1</sup> (Fu, 2008; Zhang & Van Hook, 2009), it is expected these marriages will become even more common in the future. Studies have shown interracial and intercultural marriages are often considered as more vulnerable to marital dissolution and face more challenges in everyday life than couples of the same background (Crippen & Brew, 2007; Forry, Leslie, & Letiecq, 2007; Gaines & Leaver, 2002; Kalmijn, de Graaf, & Janssen, 2005). Considering the rapidly increasing rates of interracial marriages in the U.S., as well as challenges they face, it is important to consider leisure among interracial

<sup>1</sup>An intercultural marriage is a marriage between two people from different (cultural) backgrounds. An interracial marriage is a marriage in which spouses are identified as belonging to different racial categories, including: American Indian, Asian, Black, White and Hispanic. International marriage is a marriage between two people who are citizens of different countries. A marriage may, although does not have to be considered intercultural, interracial, and international. All couples who participated in this study can be described as intercultural and international. Korean-American couples additionally can be described as interracial.

and intercultural unions. Consequently, the purpose of this study was to investigate the roles of leisure in marital satisfaction of intercultural couples. More specifically, this study examined 1) the challenges faced by intercultural couples that are related to their leisure engagements, 2) the roles of leisure in improving their marital satisfaction, and 3) the strategies used by couples to enhance marital satisfaction through leisure. The study explored both joint leisure behavior of couples and leisure behavior of individual spouses.

### Literature Review

The following review of literature will discuss previous research on marital satisfaction, including definition of marital satisfaction and factors that affect it. The role of leisure in marital satisfaction of spouses will also be discussed. The review will introduce challenges and advantages faced by spouses in intercultural marriages, and provide an overview of the limited research on leisure of intercultural couples.

#### Marital Satisfaction

Marital satisfaction is a continually evolving concept that has been discussed and redefined numerous times throughout history (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000). According to Craighead and Nemeroff (2001), marital satisfaction involves one's *subjective* evaluation of the relationship or the partner. For the purpose of this study we will employ Gelles' (1995) definition of marital satisfaction, according to which it is "an individual's subjective evaluation of the overall nature of marriage" (p. 232) that reflects the degree to which an individual's expectations toward marriage are present in his/her own marriage (Bahr, 1989; Gelles).

Subjectivity of the concept of marital satisfaction makes it difficult to identify a set of characteristics required of a spouse or the relationship for the marriage to be considered satisfactory. Despite this problem, a number of studies have attempted to identify characteristics of marital satisfaction. For instance, Rosen-Grandon, Myers, and Hattie (2004) listed love, loyalty, shared values, respect, forgiveness, romance, support, sexuality/intimacy, as well as open communication and agreement on expression of affection as important components of satisfactory marriage. Dew's research (2007, 2008, 2009) focused on differences in views on finance-related issues by spouses, while Lawrence et al. (2008) highlighted the role of mutual support in affecting quality of marital relationship.

There are several factors that reshaped the concept of marital satisfaction in recent decades. Among these factors were the evolving role of women in society and the increased acceptance of cohabitation (Helms, Walls, Crouter, & McHale, 2010; Popenoe & Whitehead, 1999) that allowed women to become more independent financially and socially. Due to these changes, spouses no longer perceive marriage as a union created for financial stability and successful upbringing of children (Popenoe & Whitehead; Smock, 2000), but rather as an "intimate relationship" (Popenoe & Whitehead, p. 4) in which sexual intimacy and close friendship are the most valued dimensions. Such changes in what is considered important in marriage redefine what are the most influential factors affecting marital satisfaction.

The evaluation of marriage as satisfactory may change not only because of the evolving social norms and expectations, but also along with various stages in marriage. For example, birth of children is one of the important stages in marriage often associated with decrease in marital satisfaction. It has been suggested children can have a negative effect on marital satisfaction during their years of upbringing (Hirschberger, Srivastava, Marsh, Cowan, & Cowan, 2009); however, after the children have launched, marital satisfaction usually increases.

Personal development of each partner as well as individual traits of spouses (physical and mental health, substance abuse, personality), their family of origin, and sociocultural characteristics (age at marriage, education, income, occupation, class, race, and gender) (Homish, Leonard, Kozlowski, & Cornelius, 2009; Larson & Holman, 1994; Whisman, Uebelacker, & Weinstock, 2004) have also been shown to influence spouses' interaction and satisfaction with marriage. Larson and Holman also listed homogamy (similarity in socioeconomic backgrounds, religious affiliation, values and beliefs), interactional history (acquaintance, cohabitation, premarital sex, premarital pregnancy), and interactional processes (communication, conflict, and consensus building) as influencing marital satisfaction. Considering the possibility of heightened differences in values and beliefs, socialization processes, and communication practices among intercultural couples, one may expect their marital satisfaction to face additional challenges.

The assertion that relationships between spouses of different cultural backgrounds might be more challenging seemed to be confirmed by Gaines and Leaver (2002), who claimed "In the United States, approximately two-thirds of *interracial* marriages and one-half of *intra*racial marriages end in divorce" (as cited in Gaines, Gurung, Lin, & Pouli, 2006, p. 177). Differences in values and worldviews, early childhood socialization of spouses (Crippen & Brew, 2007; Forry et al., 2007; Kalmijn et al., 2005), perceptions of gender roles and religion (Forry et al.; Kalmijn et al.), subpar socioeconomic resources (Forry et al.; Hohmann-Marriott & Amato, 2008), as well as racism and prejudicial attitudes on the part of the broader society (Crippen & Brew; Forry et al.; Zebroski, 1999) were often mentioned as issues that may affect marital satisfaction in intercultural marriages.

Some researchers have argued international marriages may face additional challenges due to the foreign origin of one of the spouses. Studies have shown, for instance, immigrant spouses have to deal with the negative effects of poor language skills and limited knowledge of the law, fear of deportation, social isolation, and post-arrival cultural shock, which all can negatively impact their marital satisfaction (Anderson, 1993; Narayan, 1995). On many occasions, immigrant spouses also have to cope with the financial, legal, and psychological dependency on their partners (Anderson; Narayan), as well as with differences in marital expectations (Chin, 1994). Such high level of dependency may lead to domestic violence and abuse in international marriages and often stereotypical views of foreign-born wives as uneducated and at the mercy of their husbands (Anderson; Chin; Narayan; Simons, 2001).

Other research has pointed out, however, despite those additional challenges, intercultural unions may in fact be stronger than those among people of the same race, ethnicity, or country of origin. For instance, Hibbler and Shinew (2002) highlighted the role of mutual support needed in order to deal with discrimination in strengthening interracial marriages. Troy, Lewis-Simth, and Laurenceau's (2006) study reported interracial couples resolved conflict situations similarly to their intraracial counterparts. Moreover, they were even more satisfied with their relationships than couples of the same race. According to McNamara, Tempenis, and Walton (1999), marital satisfaction among interracial couples was increased by the spouses' belief they could learn from each other due to their different cultural backgrounds.

### **Leisure and Marital Satisfaction**

Leisure has been shown to play an important role in affecting the quality of marriage. In one of the early studies on the topic of marital satisfaction and leisure, Orthner (1975) identified three types of couple leisure (individual, parallel, and joint), defined by the level of interaction between spouses, and found joint leisure activities were positively correlated with marital satisfaction. On the other hand, individual activities negatively affected marital satisfaction, while

the effect of parallel activities varied with the stages of marriage and with gender. More recent studies, however, have shown the relationship between the types of leisure activities and marital satisfaction is not always unequivocal. According to Crawford et al. (2002), the companionship in leisure does not always positively affect satisfaction with marriage since it depends on how much each of the partners likes a particular activity. Baldwin, Ellis, and Baldwin (1999) found individual leisure is not always associated with marital distress either. Their study indicated when individual leisure of one spouse was supported by the other spouse, satisfaction with marriage did not decrease. Researchers have also claimed it is not an activity itself but rather an attitude toward and perceptions of the activity that affect marital satisfaction (Crawford et al.; Holman & Jacquart, 1988; Johnson et al., 2006). Holman and Jacquart have shown the relationship between marital satisfaction and leisure depends on the quality (particularly, the level of interaction) and not the quantity of time spent together. Johnson et al. also found satisfaction with shared leisure was positively correlated with general marital satisfaction of a couple. This was particularly true for core leisure activities, defined as activities that are common, home-based, cheaper, more easily accessible, and done on a regular basis, such as watching TV or reading (Kelly, 1999; Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001). The ability of spouses to adjust their leisure to specific circumstances and changes in family structure were important factors that influenced marital satisfaction.

Despite the strong indication that leisure plays an important role in shaping marital satisfaction, little is known about the role of leisure in the quality of intercultural unions. Hibbler and Shinew's (2002) study is one of the rare examples of research that investigated leisure patterns of interracial couples. They found that couples in which one spouse was African-American and another one was European-American often felt socially excluded during work and family events due to discrimination and rejection from their relatives and colleagues. Excessive starrng on the part of other recreationists also negatively affected their leisure engagements. Hibbler and Shinew described strategies used by interracial couples to facilitate positive leisure experiences such as conducting extensive preliminary research before engaging in couple leisure, seeking recommendations regarding racism-free spaces, and even development of preferences for more solitary types of leisure.

Considering the increasing share of intercultural marriages in contemporary society, as well as their enhanced vulnerability in many aspects of life, this study was intended to examine the relationship between leisure (both joint and individual) and marital satisfaction in intercultural unions. Specifically, we explored factors that negatively influenced leisure engagements and marital satisfaction among intercultural couples, the positive roles of leisure in enhancing marital satisfaction, and strategies used by couples to enhance marital satisfaction through leisure.

## Methods

The majority of previous research on marital satisfaction and leisure employed quantitative methods (Johnson et al., 2006; Ward et al., 2009). However, since our study was exploratory in nature and conducted among a population that was not thoroughly examined before (intercultural couples), we believed a different approach to the examination of meaning and experiences of leisure was needed. Thus, in order to explore how intercultural couples perceived and experienced leisure and to understand the roles of leisure in their marital satisfaction, a qualitative description methodology was employed (Sandelowski, 2000). Since the goal of this project was to understand the reality from the perspective of the couples who were interviewed, we wanted to avoid placing data into previously known frames of the existing theories. Rather, our goal was to present the reality from the perspective of the participants.

## Participants

Study participants included 12 intercultural married couples. Six Korean and six Eastern European wives and their 12 European American husbands took part in the study. The couples that included wives from different countries and husbands who are American citizens were specifically recruited in order to present a more homogeneous sample (compared to a sample where all of the spouses are of different cultural backgrounds). While these couples could be described as intercultural, international, and interracial (in case of Korean-American couples) and could face challenges associated with each of these dimensions, in this study we will mainly focus on cultural dimensions of their identity and some dimensions of their international status.

Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants. Potential participants were initially approached through the existing contacts of the researchers, as well as through local churches and Korean-owned businesses. Four Korean-American couples were recruited in a medium-size Midwestern college town and two Korean-American couples were recruited in a large city in the Midwest. Four Eastern European-American couples resided in small towns in a mid-southern state; one couple was from a southern state and one from a southwestern state.

The ages of the Korean wives ranged from 31 years to 69 years and those of their husbands from 28 years to 69 years. The occupations of the Korean participants varied. The Korean wives' employment included a freelance painter, a freelance web programmer, a graduate student, a businesswoman, a college professor, and a part-time baby sitter. Their husbands' employment included instructors, an engineer, a graduate student, a research technician, and a businessman. Two couples did not have children, and the others had between one and three children (per couple). At the time of the study, Korean wives had been married from 4 to 50 years and had been living in the U.S. between 8 and 47 years. All of the husbands were born and raised in the U.S. One of the husbands lived in Korea for about three years before moving to the U.S. with his wife. Five out of the six Korean wives came to the U.S. to study, and only one of them came as a wife of the American citizen. The ages of the Eastern European wives were between 32 years and 54 years and those of their American husbands were between 34 years and 51 years. The East European wives' employment included work as an English teacher, a software engineer, an employee of a computer company, and an administrative assistant. Two of the women were housewives. Husbands were employed as an IT specialist, a graduate student, a medical physicist, instrumentation technician, immigration specialist, and refinerist (construction). Two of the couples had a child each who lived with them, and the other four either had no children or had children from previous marriages who did not live with them. At the time of the interviews, Eastern European-American couples had been married between 1 and 10 years, and the wives had been living in the U.S. between 2 and 15 years. All of their husbands were born and raised in the U.S. One of the husbands lived in Russia for about two years before moving to the U.S. with his wife. Three of the Eastern European wives came to the U.S. for reasons not related to marriage (work, education, extended family), and three of them came specifically as wives of the U.S. Citizens.

One of the Korean-American spouses and four of the Eastern European-American spouses had been previously married. Five Korean-American couples met at a college and one couple met at a church. Three of the Eastern European-American couples met through Internet dating websites, one couple met while working at the same company, one couple met while attending the same college, and one met through the husband's mother. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for all participants.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Twenty-four interviews were conducted between April and July 2009. All spouses were interviewed separately. Twelve of the interviews were conducted face-to-face and 12 over the phone. English, Korean, and Russian languages were used during the interviews depending on the participants' preference. All of the researchers involved in this project were female, and two were of the same ethnic background as the wives interviewed in this study (Ukrainian and Korean). This helped to establish contacts with potential participants, to improve rapport, and to conduct interviews in the native languages of the women (in cases when it was preferred). Although none of the researchers were married to an individual of different cultural background, they were foreign born, which made the issues related to cultural differences relevant to their identities. All of the face-to-face interviews were conducted in locations convenient for the participants, including the respondents' residence, office/work place, a lobby of a gym, and a coffee shop. Interviews lasted from 30 to 60 minutes and followed a semistructured format. Participants were asked 19 general open-ended questions regarding their leisure patterns, satisfaction with leisure, and marital satisfaction. Among the interview questions were (a) what do you do in your leisure time, (b) do you participate in leisure with or without your spouse, (c) did your leisure change after you moved to the U.S. (wives only), (d) does your leisure lead to some conflict situations in your marriage, and (e) what types of activities are the most satisfying to you? The questions about marital satisfaction were adapted from Orthner (1975) and included (a) how happy has your marriage been for you? (b) if you had another chance would you marry the same person again? and (c) do you think your spouse in general is happy with your marriage? Respondents were also asked about their age, employment, place of birth, ethnic background, length of stay in the U.S., number of years they were married, number and age of children, and how many times they were married. The participants were also asked how they met their spouse and how long they knew each other before marriage.

To increase trustworthiness of the study, all interviews were recorded with the participants' permission (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Notes were taken during the interviews and short summaries were written at the end of each interview. The data were transcribed and translated into English immediately after each interview by two of the researchers fluent in Russian and Korean. The translations were reviewed by other researchers whose native languages were Russian or Korean. For the member check, interview transcripts were also sent to the participants whose contact information was available (three Korean-American and three East European-American couples) for verification and feedback. Two Korean-American and two East European-American couples responded with approval or by providing additional information, which was incorporated in the findings of the study. While the gender and ethnic background of the researchers had a positive effect on the ability to recruit, develop rapport and interview the participants, it could also have introduced some biases during the data collection and analysis stage of the study. To minimize these limitations, the transcripts were cross-checked by other researchers of opposite gender and different ethnic backgrounds than people who took part in the interviews.

The data analysis began after the first interview had been transcribed and continued for the duration of the study. The transcripts were analyzed using diagramming technique (Charmaz, 2006) of constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Each researcher first categorized the data independently creating visual layout of the categories with the goal of developing main themes. During the following stage of data analysis, subthemes under the main categories were identified. More details were added to each category and subtheme until the point of saturation was reached. The themes and categories developed individually by each researcher were later

compared and discussed until agreement among all researchers was reached. By combining all the themes and sub-themes and defining connections among them, a model of the role of leisure in marital satisfaction among intercultural marriages was developed.

## Findings

The findings of this study revealed that leisure plays a complex role in the marital life of intercultural couples. The data were divided into three main themes: (a) factors that negatively influenced marital satisfaction among intercultural couples, (b) the positive role of leisure in marital satisfaction, and (c) the strategies used by couples to enhance their marital satisfaction through leisure. These themes will be described in the following sections of the Findings.

### Factors that Negatively Affected Marital Satisfaction of Intercultural Couples

The participants identified a number of factors, many of which had surfaced during their leisure engagements, which had a negative effect on their marital satisfaction. Language problems, differences in communication styles and norms of social behavior decreased spouses' satisfaction with leisure and with marriage in general.

**Language.** The ordinary attribute of communication between people from the same cultural group, may create problems among intercultural couples. Not only lack of language fluency, but also slight differences in tone and word usage may trigger conflict and consequently decrease satisfaction with marriage. Language was a particularly salient factor for women who came to the U.S. shortly after meeting their husbands. For example, Kateryna, who had met her husband in Russia and married him after two months of dating, described a language-related miscommunication that angered her husband and made her reevaluate her decision to emigrate.

First years when I didn't know English, when I didn't understand, [...] the misunderstandings could lead to separation. For example, he says "we are leaving in 30 minutes," but I didn't understand and I continued to do my own stuff, he came and says "I am waiting for you for the whole hour" and I say "I don't know anything, where?" and he is "I told you we are going for dinner," and when he speaks this way I don't understand at all. I am like jammed. And I start crying and think "Why? I should have stayed in Leningrad! I have everything there, I have such nice friends there."

Not only three of the interviewed women shared their language-related frustrations, but their husbands, whose native language was English, also found their experience very stressful. For instance, Kevin, who was married to a Korean woman, described his concerns:

We communicate in English obviously. I understand English much better than she does, so if she makes some mistakes in English that doesn't bother me. But, where there's a problem is if there's more than one way to understand something. I don't know which way she understands it so I have to guess. Tiny little differences in language can cause big arguments that last several hours, and I'm always nervous about it.

The ability to share thoughts and feelings with their spouses, sometimes taken for granted by *intra*cultural couples, may create problems and misunderstandings between spouses who come from different cultural backgrounds. Considering that ability to communicate with each other has an impact on marital satisfaction (Rosen-Grandon et al., 2004), it is possible that language-related problems may lead to lower level of satisfaction among some intercultural unions.

**Cultural differences.** Along with differences in language skills, cultural differences can lead

to communication problems. Two Korean-American and five East European-American couples listed a number of factors related to different cultural backgrounds they believed influenced their marital satisfaction. They included verbal/non-verbal expressiveness, the need/desire to share feelings, norms of interaction and discussion topics at social events, as well as the ways they handled expenses. Some of these problems surfaced in leisure situations and were related to different communication styles and behaviors during social engagements.

***Different communication styles.*** Besides differences in native languages, differences in cultural backgrounds may affect how spouses express themselves and communicate with each other (Kim et al., 1996). While conflicts related to language proficiency could decrease with time, misunderstandings based on differences in communication styles sometimes became more noticeable with years. As Injoo, one of the Korean wives, commented,

I'm from Kyungsang-do (province). We do not explain everything, but expect that the partner understands without explanation. But, Americans need to explain verbally everything. I think cultural difference is a really big problem. I like U.S. and I came here to study, but as time goes by, I perceive larger cultural difference in every aspect.

Interestingly, while Injoo considered American people to be overly talkative, she also perceived American culture to be cold and shallow. She believed American people did not share their true feelings with each other. She continued,

It's not a language problem; it's cultural problem. For Korean, when we have conversation, in our spirit, we cry together and are happy together. But, Americans never say bad words to family members. Americans are good at saying "hi" or "bye," but never show their bottom of heart.

Injoo's views were shared by some of the Ukrainian women as well. Discussing how cultural background affects one's leisure, Toma explained that she perceived the Russian way of spending time with friends and family as much deeper and more meaningful than the experiences she had while engaging in the same activities with her American friends. She said, "At Russian party everything happens active [eventful, enthusiastic], everyone is open and relaxed without silly smiles on their faces and hi-bye, we have it sensitively, interesting, thrilling."

***Different behavior during social occasions.*** Different communication styles were related to different expectations regarding behavior during social occasions, including the norms of interaction, discussion topics, and handling of expenses. For example, one of the couples shared their views on financial responsibilities related to leisure occasions. The Korean wife, Jina said,

Cultural difference is a big barrier. For example, when I meet friends, sometimes I pay for the dinner because it's good and I feel happy. But after coming back from the dinner, my husband always asked me "Why did you pay for the dinner?" and seemed to think that it's overreacting.

In a separate interview, Jina's husband, Steven, also commented on the same matter and attributed the problem to their differences in upbringing and cultural backgrounds.

Differences in organization and flow of social events were another cause of dissatisfaction discussed by three of the couples. A Ukrainian woman, Toma, explained why she believed cultural differences influenced her perceptions of leisure spent with her husband's relatives and friends, which was amplified by her lack of understanding of American values and discussion topics:

Some American celebrations that his mother arranges, like dinner at the table, “just come, have dinner and leave,” happen not like it happens in our country. Our dinners are very interesting, all the relatives gather, chat [...]. It’s not mine, not the way we have it here.

She later added,

If I just compare how I visited his friends, [at an] American party, even if we sit and drink wine and discuss some topics, I often get bored because they talk about topics, their own American values that I cannot understand, or American humor that I don’t understand.

It needs to be noted different communication styles and behaviors during social events can be also experienced by people with similar cultural backgrounds. For example, gender differences have been shown to be responsible for miscommunications between spouses (Hawkins, Weisberg, & Ray, 1980). Similarly, Gottman and Porterfield (1981) found the husbands’ inability to understand nonverbal messages of their wives decreased their satisfaction with marriage. The current study, however, also highlighted issues related to differences in cultural background and upbringing, different values, and language-related misunderstandings that are not commonly experienced by intracultural unions.

### **The Positive Role of Leisure in Marital Satisfaction among Intercultural Couples**

For all interviewed couples leisure played as important a role in achieving marital satisfaction as it did for their mainstream counterparts (Crawford et al., 2002; Johnson et al., 2006). For example, Marina, an Eastern European wife claimed shared leisure and quality time spent with her spouse contributed to a stronger marriage. “I think when people spend time together, either they want it or not, but that’s what leisure time is, it brings people together in a good way.” Frequent and healthy communication, facilitated by leisure, was perceived to be an important component of a happy marriage. Brandon, an American husband married to an Eastern European wife, said spending time together in a relaxed atmosphere improved communication and allowed people to share everyday events:

I think if you don’t spend that quality time with your spouse, you grow apart and that will cause problems. If you don’t speak with your spouse and communicate... you don’t have nothing. You gotta have communication. That’s what is very, very important to us.

The importance of communication and the ability to discuss everyday matters was also mentioned by four Korean American couples and three Russian wives, who suggested leisure provided opportunities to improve their marriage and to make it more interesting and satisfying. For instance, Kateryna described her efforts to be involved in her husband’s activities and to maintain healthy communication:

The house is big. It’s only two of us, each of us has his own floor... So, sometimes it’s only “hello honey, bye honey, good night honey” and that’s it. But I try. I try to ask what happened at work. How was his day? I try to be involved so it would be interesting.

Shared leisure time provided more than an opportunity for communication. It also allowed couples to develop and maintain common leisure interests, which were perceived by 13 participants as important aspects of a healthy relationship. One of the American husbands, Alex, commented on the importance of shared interests, hobbies, and experiences:

It would be really weird if we had two different sets of hobbies and that the other one didn't share. That was part of our closeness, part of our marriage is doing things together. You have to have something in common, 'cause [otherwise] why would you get married?

All of the participants perceived shared leisure to have beneficial influence on the quality of their marriage by providing time for communication and development of common interests.

### **Strategies Used to Improve Marital Satisfaction through Leisure**

Realizing the benefits of shared leisure but also taking into consideration conflicts that could arise during leisure time, the couples used a number of strategies to minimize the potential for harm and to improve the quality of their time spent together. The couples compromised on issues related to leisure participation, respected solitary leisure of their spouse and differences in each other's leisure preferences, as well as used leisure to learn about each other's culture.

**Compromises and adjustments in leisure.** One of the strategies used to improve marital satisfaction that all European-American couples and one Korean-American couple discussed was making compromises in leisure to avoid conflict. The following reflections of our interviewees suggest that compromising and adjusting to each other's interests were important parts of daily routines. For instance, one of the Korean wives, Jina, described,

If I like certain food, then he compromises. So, I don't think that one person decides everything. [...] Considering my and my husband's personal characteristics, no one is leading or controlling over the [leisure] choice of the other. Sometimes my husband compromises and sometimes I compromise. So I don't think that it's one-sided.

Participants also employed a variety of strategies to negotiate their leisure interests. They used persuasion, tried different activities to test their interests, or sometimes gave up participation in a particular activity if one of the spouses did not enjoy it. For Brandon, married to a woman from Ukraine, the desire to spend time with his wife was strong enough to make him give up some of his leisure interests. "Usually we [prefer] the same things than doing things by ourselves. We enjoy doing everything together. I mean if I want to go to do something and she is not, I would rather stay home and spend time with her." Others, conversely, mentioned that at times they participated in some leisure activities just to please their spouse. For instance, Nick, an American husband of an Eastern European wife, said, "I've noticed something she really enjoys that I enjoy taking her to and that would be taking her to see opera and plays, that sort of thing." Similarly, Anna, an East European wife went for road trips with her husband in order to spend time with him even though she disliked riding in a car. She commented,

Well, he likes to go to some natural areas; he likes the process of driving itself. He would say, "Let's go to this city, I will show you some historical stone." "Ok, let's go." But for me it's not leisure, but to spend time together, we do that.

Two of the husbands also watched television programs in Korean and Russian (languages they did not understand) since it was important for them to share leisure time with their spouses.

The participants compromised not only by modifying their own leisure interests, but also by changing styles of participation and by attempting to adjust their behavior to meet the cultural expectations of the spouse. As Kateryna, one of the East European wives, commented,

I ask him almost every day; invite him almost every day [to go for a walk]. We can't unfortunately... like we gave it to our [Russian] husbands straight from the shoulder when we were young, [but here] we shouldn't do it. The person should come to it

himself. Really, Russian wives are rather rough and very strict, but I am fighting with myself, so he likes to be with me. [...] In Russia, I never even asked my husband, if he wanted it or not. "Victor, today we are going to park." Like a fact. And here, one week in advance, I start saying that we are going for barbeque or somewhere. It's different. Before you say you agree to do something to your friends, you have to convince your husband. And, of course never raise the voice as it is usual in Russia. Never-ever!

While couples of the same cultural background also often compromise in leisure, due to cultural differences our respondents had to navigate, the necessity to compromise in leisure might have been greater than among intracultural marriages.

**Being respectful of solitary leisure and differences in leisure preferences.** Almost all of the participants talked about the importance of being respectful of each other's interests and did not mind their spouses participating in certain individual pastimes. For example, John, married to a Korean-American woman, reflected, "She is not the big fan of the skateboard, but she has been supportive of me." Another American husband, Alex, said even though he preferred spending leisure time with his wife, he respected her right to individual leisure interests, "Of course, if she was interested or I was interested [in something the other person does not enjoy], we'd respect each other." One of the Russian wives, Anna, also commented on the necessity for spouses to spend time away from each other:

Well, boys' days.... it happens just once a week, and he also needs time to take a rest from me, so I am absolutely fine with that. So even if he wants to go somewhere, even to meet his ex-girlfriends, it's his right. He can do this because the person can't be constantly with someone and be in constant submission.

Interestingly, while few of the existing studies (Cronan, Cavin, & Scott, 2007) found a positive association between individual leisure and marital satisfaction, the fact that some degree of individual leisure is necessary for maintaining a happy relationship came up strongly in the narratives of our interviewees.

**Using leisure to learn about each other's culture.** Leisure engagements also gave spouses an opportunity to learn about the culture of their partners. It was particularly important for women who came to the U.S. shortly after marriage. For instance, Kateryna said she would prefer to participate in different leisure activities, but believed it was important to spend time with her husband to learn about his culture: "I artificially increase my interest to spend more time with my husband. For example, watching movies, discussing books. I try to read books he gives me and discuss them with him." Alex, one of the interviewed husbands, commented on the "appreciation for finer things" his Russian wife had and his attempts to be "her little student."

Her background and her understanding of art and finer things, her very sense of classic literature or ballet, the arts is unreal! You know, I am trying to be a little student. I mean, in Russian culture I think it's very common - suddenly someone gets a guitar and in that kitchen or people hanging out, there are classic songs that people all know and people will sing. You don't really find it a lot here.

Over time, couples learned about, accepted, and internalized each other's culture by participating in shared leisure. Steven described his fascination with the Korean way of life he was exposed to during his time in Korea. He considered many Korean customs as "healthier" and was happy to make changes to his diet and other aspects of his life.

Their bodies are more flexible and their culture involves sitting on the floor and sleeping on the floor as a normal part of life. And that has influenced me in working towards a more normal and natural physical self. Also, their diet, the traditional green diet, has a much healthier balance and that has influenced my behavior in terms of how I eat. So, I think I have really taken on these elements and that culture that seemed to be healthier.

All of the Korean wives and two of the East European wives also commented that by participating in leisure activities they were able to increase proficiency in their spouse's native language. Two of the interviewed American husbands also used leisure to learn the language of their wives. Soomi, for instance, revealed that her husband watched Korean soap operas to maintain his proficiency in Korean.

### Discussion and Conclusions

Several themes were developed as a result of this study. *First*, intercultural couples faced unique challenges to their marital satisfaction. Such factors as language deficiency or differences in communication styles and social behavior often manifested themselves in leisure-related situations. These results lend some support to the findings of the existing research that claimed intercultural marriages might face additional challenges related to deficiencies in language skills (Anderson, 1993; Narayan, 1995) and early childhood socialization of spouses (Forry et al., 2007). While communication problems were previously identified as an important factor affecting marital satisfaction among mainstream couples, they usually resulted from gender differences and heterogeneous personality traits (Feeney, 1994; Gottman & Porterfield, 1981). Participants in this study reported different cultural backgrounds as another factor that affected their communication and led to disagreements between spouses.

*Second*, the findings highlighted the positive role of shared leisure in intercultural marriages. In some respects, this positive role of leisure was similar to that among intracultural unions. For instance, the participants claimed leisure made their marriages stronger and provided opportunities for healthy communication and spending quality time together (Holman & Jacquart, 1988; Johnson et al., 2006; Larson & Holman, 1994; Rosen-Grandon et al., 2004). It is not a new idea that leisure is "a primary setting for social bonding" (Kelly, 1999, p. 57) and spending time together, talking about the day and sharing feelings are helpful in maintaining a healthy relationship (Baxter & Dindia, 1990). We argue, however, that while joint leisure is important for mainstream marriages, it takes on an additional role for couples who grew up in different cultures. In particular, it helps intercultural couples to create shared background, "to build common future," and to develop a shared communication platform.

*Third*, realizing opportunities to increase marital satisfaction provided by leisure, intercultural couples employed a number of strategies to make their marriages stable and happy. They made changes and adjustments to leisure in order to improve communication and to avoid conflict, attempted to reduce cultural distance by learning about each other's culture, as well as used leisure to pursue their own interests and to recuperate from marital tensions. Similarly to intracultural couples (e.g., Johnson et al., 2006), the ability of spouses to adjust their leisure patterns to changes in the family life cycle (e.g., birth of children) was identified as important for marital satisfaction. We believe the need for such adjustments might be higher among intercultural couples since differences in language, hobbies and even sense of humor may increase the frequency of potential conflict. Moreover, spouse's support and positive attitude toward the

partner's individual leisure was shown as an important component of marital satisfaction (Baldwin et al., 1999).

Due to more patriarchal nature of Korean society (Lim, 1997; Min, 2001), we expected that Korean wives might be more willing to adopt the strategy of adjustment and compromising than others. We were surprised, however, to find that individuals who belonged to all three cultural groups (Korean, American, and Eastern European), as well as both men and women appeared equally willing to make concessions when it came to spending free time.

Leisure also provided intercultural couples unique opportunities to learn about their spouse's culture (food, traditions, art, films and literature) and language. While intracultural couples may also need to make adjustments due to their different upbringing, personalities and different expectations they bring to marriage (Bouchar, Lussier & Sabourin, 1999), considerable cultural differences added a layer of complexity to the interactions among spouses interviewed in this study. Thus, the need for healthy communication and consensus building (Larson & Holman, 1994), as well as shared time together may be higher for intercultural couples than for couples from the same ethnic background. Some of the participants perceived leisure as "work," stating that they could engage in something more personally enjoyable (e.g., reading a book in their own language); however, they thought it was important to use this time to learn about things that were valued by their spouse. A similar concept—purposive leisure—has been introduced in the context of family leisure where parents often consider spending time with their children as stressful, but important component of children's healthy development (Shaw & Dawson, 2001). Current findings suggest that purposive leisure may be used by families not only for the benefit of children but also to improve marital satisfaction of couples.

Based on the findings of this study (see Figure 1), we suggest that leisure may play three important roles in relation to marital satisfaction among intercultural couples. It can be considered as "part of the problem" (many tensions related to different cultural backgrounds of spouses are likely to surface in leisure-related situations), it can be an indispensable component of marital satisfaction (by helping to develop shared interests, build healthy communication and providing opportunity to spend quality time together), and it can serve as "part of the solution" to marital problems. Specifically, this study helped to identify conscious ways in which intercultural couples used leisure to improve their marital satisfaction. They made compromises and adjustments to leisure (including finding common interests, establishing communication and trying to avoid conflict); used leisure proactively to learn about each other's culture and to maintain communication; and used leisure as an opportunity for positive seclusion—to give themselves a needed respite, as an opportunity to pursue their own interests, and to recuperate from marital tensions.

This study examined leisure activities in which intercultural couples participated both with their spouses and by themselves. In several cases, individual leisure was avoided in order to facilitate shared leisure. Spouses also realized, however, the importance of individual leisure as a key to marital satisfaction. This finding is rather unique since individual leisure was often believed to have a negative effect on marital satisfaction in early studies (Holman & Jacquart, 1988; Orthner, 1975). While the importance of respect and support for spouse's individual leisure pursuits was discussed by Baldwin et al. (1999), studies that would document the importance of individual leisure in maintaining a happy relationship are rare (Cronan et al., 2007). The findings of our research seem to suggest that in order to promote marital satisfaction, couples should strive for a balance between joint and individual leisure that is optimal for both spouses. Tensions may arise, however, when spouses of different cultural backgrounds show preference for different degree of relatedness in marriage. For example, Markus and Kitayama (1991) suggested many

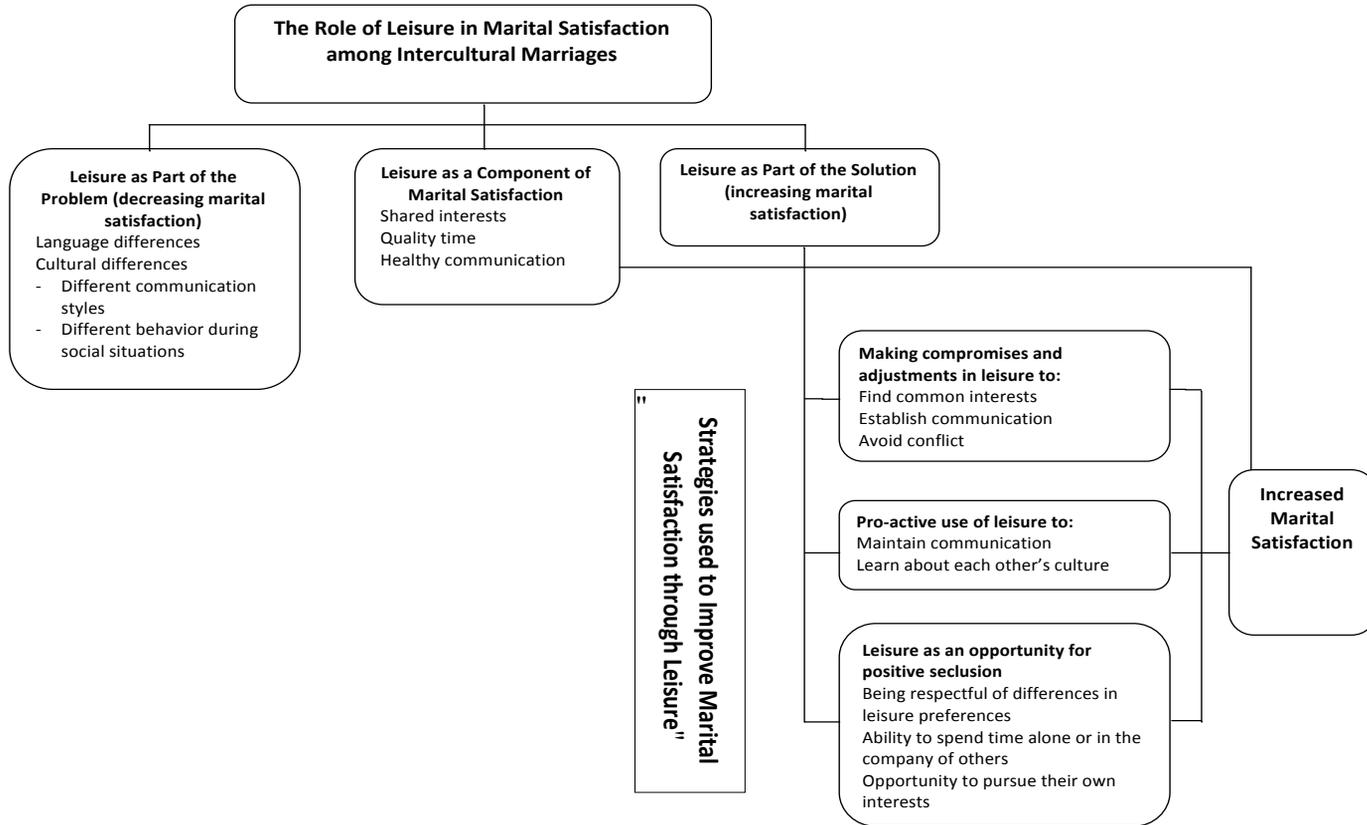


Figure 1. The role of leisure in marital satisfaction among intercultural marriages.

Asian cultures emphasize “attending to others, fitting in, and harmonious interdependence with them” (p. 224). On the other hand, people from Western cultures may be more likely to seek independence from others and an opportunity to express their individuality (Bellah et al., 2007).

While the results of this study were generally consistent with those of the existing research, some findings commonly reported in the literature were noticeably absent. The findings previously mentioned in the literature that were confirmed in this research included challenges related to deficiencies in language skills (Anderson, 1993; Narayan, 1995), differences in early childhood socialization (Forry et al., 2007), and communication styles (Feeney, 1994; Gottman & Porterfield, 1981). Moreover, the importance of leisure for healthy communication, quality time spent together (Holman & Jacquart, 1988; Johnson et al., 2006; Larson & Holman, 1994; Rosen-Grandon et al., 2004) and social bonding (Kelly, 1999) was also mentioned as a way to maintain healthy relationships. The ability of spouses to adjust their leisure patterns to changes in the family life cycle (e.g., birth of children) (Johnson et al., 2006) and spouse’s support and positive attitude toward the partner’s individual leisure were shown as important components of a high marital satisfaction (Baldwin et al., 1999). On the other hand, discrimination and prejudice (Forry et al., 2007; Hibbler & Shinew, 2002; Zebroski, 1999), sub-par socioeconomic resources (Hohmann-Marriott & Amato, 2008), loss or reduction of social networks (Forry et al.; Hibbler & Shinew), and problems associated with high dependency among international wives (Anderson, 1993; Narayan, 1995) were not identified among intercultural couples who took part in our research project. The fact the participants did not mention these problems may be interpreted in several ways. While discrimination and prejudice, as well as reduction of social networks, may have not been detected due to the fact only half of the participating couples were *interracial*, it might be interpreted as evidence that some types of interracial unions (e.g. White-Asian) may face less prejudice than others (e.g., White-African-American) that were the subject of previous research. It is also possible societal attitudes toward interracial marriages have changed in recent years or overt racism has been replaced with less explicit forms of discrimination (Bonilla-Silva, 2003).

We also expected to detect some inequality in power distribution between American husbands and their foreign-born wives (Anderson, 1993; Narayan, 1995). The findings of our study, however, did not support this expectation. The majority of international wives did not mention lack of equality in their marriage and reported their spouses to be cooperative and understanding in regards to leisure. We believe this finding can be related to the fact the majority of wives participating in the study married their husbands when they already had lived in the U.S. for several years, were of middle class background, and were employed outside of home. This might have placed them in an advantageous position as compared to international brides who come to the U.S. with little formal education and ability to function in the American system.

When undertaking this study, we also expected to observe differences in perceptions of gender roles in Korean-American marriages. We anticipated Korean women who were influenced by the patriarchal ideology of Confucianism to be more passive and compliant with decisions of their husbands (Lim, 1997; Min, 2001). Interestingly, five out of six Korean wives interviewed in this study argued they did not have to make substantial adjustments following marriage and, in fact, found their husbands to be more accommodating than themselves when it came to leisure. Again, high socio-economic status and the wives’ prolonged residence in the U.S. prior to marriage might have affected gender relations for these couples.

### **Implications/Limitations**

This study provided valuable insights into leisure’s potential for preventing conflict and increasing marital satisfaction in intercultural marriages. Among the implications of this study for

marriage counselors and therapists, as well as for leisure managers could be the development of joint activities fostering the learning about spouse's culture, such as international movie nights, cooking classes, as well as trips to cultural centers, performances and museums. Developing family traditions that would incorporate customs from both cultures and identifying leisure activities that could be enjoyed by both spouses are other strategies that could help intercultural couples improve their relationships and satisfaction with marriage. Marital satisfaction among couples from different cultural backgrounds can also be increased by fostering leisure engagements that can help to develop communication skills and appropriate conflict resolution strategies.

**Limitations.** While this study provided some interesting contributions to the existing literature, it also has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, no clear distinction was made between intercultural, international, and interracial dimensions of couples' identities. Second, our sample included foreign-born wives who had lived in the U.S. for different periods of time before marriage. This might have affected the results of this study since cultural distance and language barrier possibly played a lesser role in shaping the quality of marriage for unions where wives had resided in the U.S. for prolonged period of time prior to marriage. Third, social-desirability of responses might have tainted accounts of the couples related to the happiness and stability of their marriages. In particular, this problem could have affected the interviews with Korean-American couples, as revealing marital troubles to strangers was likely inconsistent with cultural values of Korean wives (Pyke & Johnson, 2003). Lastly, the findings of this study were based on interviews with 12 couples only and thus cannot be generalized to all intercultural unions, or even to other couples of Korean-American and Eastern European-American background. Nevertheless, they do provide an interesting glimpse into the experiences of this particular group of people.

**Questions for future research.** We suggest that future research should explore in more detail how leisure can be used by intercultural couples in order to improve their marital satisfaction. Using bigger samples and quantitative research methods would help to elucidate which of the strategies identified in our study are successfully employed by other intercultural couples. The studies should also be conducted to explore the roles of leisure in developing family traditions, maintaining culture, and language preservation among children from intercultural unions. We also believe that the role of leisure in marital relationships should be explored among various non-traditional families, including same-sex, long-distance relationship families, cohabiting partners and others. Issues of discrimination toward non-traditional families, as well as the effects of power relations and gender roles on the quality of international unions should be investigated. Since intercultural unions are on the increase in the United States and throughout most of the Western world, such work is timely and important.

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