Counseling Cross-cultural Couples

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**Foreword**

My reason for choosing this topic lies in its relevance to two deeply satisfying areas of my life. Although my counseling orientation is grounded in the work of Carl Rogers and owes a lot to Carl Jung, I have never forgotten Freud's words heard long ago, that in order to be happy one must have both work and love. My work is that of a person-centered counselor and my love is that of an American-born wife for a German husband, living in his part of Germany for 39 years, married for 37 of them.

Of course the dual roles are more detailed than that. As to work, before becoming a counselor here with my focus on English-speaking expatriates, I was a phono-typist in a steel company, a native English-speaking teacher in a German high school, a stay-at-home mother, and a first-grade assistant teacher and an all-grades substitute teacher for English, German and social studies in an international school here. As to love, two intercultural children, German brothers- and sisters-in-law, nieces, nephews, neighbors and friends as well as a Congolese-French son-in-law, join my family in Texas and American friends in the United States as well as international friends here and in the U.S. to make up my world of love. Both areas are the result of rich processes over four decades.

And I have to admit I have always been fascinated by love stories. It's extremely satisfying that my life's dual focus has brought me to this topic of counseling cross-cultural couples.

For the purpose of this paper the terms "counselor" and "therapist" are used interchangeably. For the sake of readability, the generic terms "he" and "his" have been used. Both women and men are meant, with no special attribution to gender. American English spelling has been used, for example "counselor, counseling, centered," except in quotations from British texts.
Counseling Cross-cultural Couples

1. Introduction

1.1 Questions to be addressed

The topic "counseling cross-cultural couples" is meant in a broader sense than just the activity of a professional counselor in a couples counseling session. This of course will be addressed. But it is hoped that knowledge about some of the attitudes and skills discovered for a cross-cultural counselor to be effective will be useful to couples together and individually as well.

Psychologically counseling an individual, i.e., providing a professional helping relationship, is already an art and a science. Counseling an individual from a different country, culture, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, social class, educational background or sexual orientation from the counselor’s own can be even more challenging. Counseling couples is more complex than counseling individuals, and counseling cross-cultural couples is again even more challenging. In order to shed light on these different complexities, the following questions will be addressed:

In the face of such complexity, what supports a counselor in undertaking this kind of work?

How are cross-cultural couples and same-culture couples similar and different? Are there attitudes and skills that help intercultural couples make a success of their partnership that are different from those of successful same-culture couples? When considering possible phases of a loving relationship, are there particular stresses cross-cultural couples are more vulnerable to?
Do the attitudes and skills that help individuals adapt to new cultures help intercultural couples in their cultural transition with each other?

Is it helpful to bring into awareness the many submerged parts of culture in order to make dealing with them easier? According to Charles O’Leary, couples often believe “I can’t, but he/she won’t.” (2008, p.2 - Appendix 3). Can cultural explanations bring clarity? Or excuses not to feel responsible? Could bringing up the issues that cross-cultural couples might face discourage them? What does a counselor need to be aware of?

Are there higher expectations involved in a cross-cultural relationship, with more potential for disappointment?

If, in counseling an individual from another culture, where there is not one approach but an extension of the effective ways of counseling culturally similar people (McAuliffe, Grotham, Paré and Winiger, 2008, pp. 601 - 625), does this apply to counseling intercultural couples as well, where the central relationship is that of the couple to each other, not that of counselor and client? How do differences in immediacy affect couples counseling, since an individual client often talks about events in the past, whereas a couple in counseling manifests its way of relating in the present moment?

Does the counselor direct his support toward the relationship or toward each partner individually while the other watches, or toward both?

Are the four threads Carl Rogers discovered (1973, pp. 205 -215) for strengthening and facilitating a satisfying long-term partnership also valid and applicable in the context of an intercultural relationship? What are the special issues and challenges? The special rewards? And how do these need to be addressed by the intercultural partners themselves and by
a couples counselor whose aim is to support them? What are these four threads? Are any of them especially related to issues of culture?

1.2 Way of proceeding

Instead of addressing each question in order, the intention is to move from the particular to the general, in expectation that the answers will circle around the questions and become evident, so that at the end of this paper all the questions will have been answered satisfactorily.

To begin, results from a questionnaire sent to people who are or have been in cross-cultural partnerships (Appendix 1) will be presented. From the answers naming the special benefits and challenges respondents experienced in this kind of partnership, the role cultural forces play will be examined. In cross-cultural couples, there is always one partner who is not living in his or her culture of origin, perhaps both are not. Special stresses related to this fact will be examined. Since most of the literature on intercultural counseling focuses on cultural differences between client and counselor, first the issues involved and the attitudes and skills discovered for effectively counseling an individual from another culture will be described.

Then the focus will widen to examine approaches toward counseling couples and to examine their effectiveness in counseling cross-cultural couples. From the Swiss psychologist Jürg Willi, who has counseled couples in German-speaking cultures for over thirty years, the phases of the love relationship will be presented and their significance for intercultural couples explored. After that, each of the four threads Carl Rogers discovered which bind together satisfying and long-lasting partnerships will be examined for its cultural relevance and importance. The end result is to be a picture of effective attitudes, skills and approaches involved in the helping
relationship of counselor to cross-cultural couple clients. But further and more basically, the issues described and the picture evolved are also meant to be of use to the couples themselves, mutually and individually.

Throughout this work an underlying structure of integrating multiple perspectives will become apparent. The significance of this will also be addressed.

2. Questionnaire

2.1 Purpose and description

From the answers to a short questionnaire (Appendix 1) sent to people presently or formerly in intercultural partnerships mostly here in Germany, the aim was to discover what were the special benefits and difficulties they encountered, also what positive suggestions and resources they had to improve life for themselves and other similar couples.

The questionnaire was intended to be a qualitative rather than a quantitative survey, and it was first sent to about twelve people known to this author. Some of these sent it on to their friends and also to interested expatriate websites, so that in the end, 35 completed questionnaires were available. One of the partners was almost always a native English speaker, and in all but four of the couples responding, the partners were American and European, mostly German, so that the cultural differences were not as great as, for example, those between Western and African or Asian partners. Of the remaining four couples, the non-Western partners had lived for many years in a western country.

The responding international partners who live in a country other than their own do not consider themselves emigrants or immigrants. Their aim is not primarily toward a better life in a different country but toward a better life with a partner who happens to live in another country. A better description is
"expatriate," although the overtones of banishment or withdrawal of allegiance from one's native country do not apply. Rather, there is only the withdrawal of residence from one's native country, in order to be with one's partner. Therefore the use of German sources on people from different cultures is only partially applicable, as these sources are mainly directed toward dealing with large migrant populations. The present survey does not ask about naturalization to the partner's country.

This survey also does not ask specifically about children, since the focus is on the couples themselves and since there is already a good deal of research and literature on intercultural families and "third culture kids" (the children of families who live in a third country where neither of their parents are citizens).

2.2 Results

2.2.1 Benefits of living in a cross-cultural partnership

The main benefits given, in order of frequency, were

  love, companionship, finding the person one wants to spend one's life with, the realization that it is more important to be with one's partner in a foreign country than without him in one's own country, natural attraction, similar interests, respect and affection which has lasted; also the rearing of children who have a good knowledge of different aspects of the world;

  personal life enrichment from being able to deeply get to know and appreciate another culture, to exchange cultural knowledge, to share cultural differences and to find complementary cultural strengths, to have a "dual Heimat" and to be able to take from two cultures the positive sides;

  personal enrichment through learning another language, through travel, through international friendships, and personal development through being faced with a difficult challenge;
seeing one's own country more objectively and realizing what part it has played in forming one's identity while at the same time adapting that identity somewhat because of a new environment.

2.2.2 Difficulties

The difficulties had to do with the fact that in every situation, at least one of the partners is foreign:

- homesickness: the distance from family and friends, missing festivities and events with them, missing their presence and support at the birth of children and being able to share the children's development with them, the difficulty of rearing children in a foreign place without family of origin support, the feeling of being isolated and stranded because of one's specific culture-based attitude, outlook and ways of interacting, the feeling of being different, unaccepted, unappreciated, an outsider, not belonging, left out;

- having to communicate in a foreign language, in which it is easy to miscommunicate and difficult to convey nuances and speak from the heart;

- cultural differences in the understanding of nature and the obligation to families of origin, in role expectations, financial goals, time-management, decision-making, risk, morals, standards, humor, and food preferences;

- no longer feeling completely at home in one's own country because of now having a different, more critical way of looking at things, but also never wholly at home in the host country either, always considered a foreigner. (See the short parable "Culture Spectacles," Appendix 2, which shows how cultural adaptation permanently changes one’s world view).
2.2.3 Helpful suggestions, skills and resources

Again, in order of frequency, these were the responses:

Talk, talk, talk. Learn the language of the host country quickly, try to find a shared language and work toward fluency, because communication seems to be the most important aspect in relationships; stay open to communicating and compromising and be willing to negotiate. If something is not understood, accept that it was meant in a positive way.

Be flexible, adaptable, tolerant, open-minded, positive, accepting, and respectful of differences. Know that it’s good to recognize differences but not to the point of a superior/inferior comparison. Make sure both cultures are equally present and respected. Remain open-minded about one’s partner’s culture: the more one learns about it, the better one understands one’s partner. Be sensitive to the special challenges and needs of the partner from another culture and be generous in helping alleviate homesickness by enabling regular visits to his family.

Be patient, persistent, determined, forgiving. Take things step by step and make sure you have time for each other.

Keep your sense of humor; try to take life lightly and be easy-going.

Get a good mix of friends from both cultures, become involved in the host culture, a club of one’s native culture, and/or the international community.

Find an independent sounding-board, someone who has experience with what one is facing; consult a cross-cultural therapist (in four of 35 questionnaires. Two of these respondents are cross-cultural counselors and one is a coach).
Recognize that marrying across cultures does not necessarily mean exile or giving up former cultural identities and loyalties.

Be sure you feel secure in the relationship and surroundings before rearing a child in a foreign country.

Take the best of both country’s traditions and form your own set of traditions.

Be honest with yourself about your feelings in the relationship.

Invest time up front in really understanding the tri-cultural issues, especially the host country’s culture. (From a dual-national couple living with two school-age children in a third culture.)

2.2.4 Analysis of the results

From these three areas of benefits, difficulties and resources, it can be seen that the underlying themes are those of difference and equality: of accepting, respecting and honoring difference and of finding ways to ensure feelings of equality or to prevent inequality. The core issue is managing difference and power (inequality) through love.

Another dual theme is that of having the best of both the closeness of the intimate, loving relationship with commitment to it and its process, while at the same time having mutual commitment to each partner’s need to develop individually and autonomously.

A third dual task is that of adapting to new roles and re-defining one’s identity but also of recognizing one’s core values and deepest self, and striving for a partnership in which both partners can have fulfilling and inspiring separate and relationship identities.
Every living partnership involves change and adaptation. Unsurprisingly, intercultural partnerships involve even deeper change and more wide-ranging adaptation than others.

2.3 Supplementing the questionnaire

Before continuing to the next section on the cultural aspects involved in the counseling relationship, it is relevant to add the following insights on intercultural experience.

2.3.1 The scope of coping

Although not addressing couples, Craig Storti, a former Peace Corps volunteer, writes (1990, pp. 2 - 8) about first surviving the move abroad before coming to grips with the local culture, all at the same time adjusting to a new job, a new community, country, climate, mediums of communication, the near constant threat of getting sick and of not knowing anyone. It feels overwhelming just to cope, and that is all one manages, as there is no energy for more meaningful or fulfilling pursuits, which is further demoralizing. In addition to this, there is the constant onslaught of being surprised and confounded by foreign culture as well as being a source of surprise and confusion to the local culture. This is an uncomfortable and threatening experience at first that can produce a persistent sense of insecurity vibrating just below the threshold of consciousness, like a long-term, low-grade infection, not seriously disruptive but annoyingly debilitating (Storti, 1990 p. 28).

From the opposite point of view, that of German institutions searching for ways to understand and intervene more skillfully in supporting immigrants, the different ways of coping and the different defense mechanisms in different cultures are described. Coping is defined as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal
demands *that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person*" (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, p. 141, quoted in Muthny, Bermejo and Heckl, 1993, p.148; italics by this author). Just the fact of immigration itself is considered a critical life event (Muthny, Bermejo & Heckl, 1993, p. 156).

For the sake of this paper, the point to be made here is that a counselor should be aware that immigrants and expatriates are under considerably more strain than those living in their own culture and that they need a special measure of understanding, good will and support in order to cope, adapt, and thrive.

It is clear that the experience of immigrants of all kinds cannot be compared precisely to the experience of expatriate lovers settling in the country of their partners, but many of the stresses are similar, and they occur in addition to the stresses that a local native experiences. Concerning "inner" stresses, one of the greatest is that of a changed self-image or identity.

### 2.3.2 Identity

Pascoe (2003, p. 55) writes that the biggest "crime" her husband committed in relocating their family was that "it was his good fortune to have an identity that elevated and inspired him," whereas she was not so fortunate.

A deep metaphor for the connection between language and identity is given by Kirkpatrick-Tanner (1993, p. 232): "Cross-cultural lovers should realize that in most cases, one partner is attempting to communicate in a foreign language. Obvious enough, I know, but remember what even the best translation can do to a poem; now think what it can do to a human being." However, he sees this as a special chance that can give hope to cross-cultural partners, as each partner is forced to penetrate the other’s cultural shell, transcend it and pull back the shell to reveal the identity inside. "Persons from the same culture can go through life never pulling back that shell, never realizing they
should. But we confront and overcome the cultural barrier every day." (Kirkpatrick-Tanner, 1993, p. 234).

Is it true that culture barriers can be overcome? What would that involve?

3. "Culturally alert" counseling

3.1 Counseling and culture

All counseling encounters are multicultural, in that gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, religion, and social class are always present. (McAuliffe, 2008, p. 5). With reference to the present topic, to these cultural differences must be added those of being from different countries with different languages as well. Obvious international differences can at least make couples aware there could be cultural issues between them, which might not occur to nationally similar couples.

However, cultural uniqueness is only one of the explanations of human behavior. People have a common humanity (universal emotions) and a unique individuality (genetic, temperamental, unique past and present life circumstances) as well. So a tripartite model of human experience based on humanity, individuality and culture would give a more complex, ethical and accurate view of human behavior than a universalistic model (McAuliffe, 2008, pp. 19 -21).

3.2 Basic knowledge

To explore and explain culture comprehensively is beyond the scope of this paper, but there are several basic ideas relevant to the theme of counseling couples in cross-cultural relationships.
3.2.1 The "iceberg" model of culture.

In culture there are evident, observable factors in awareness and many more deeply internalized ones outside of awareness. Like the "iceberg models" of personality, in which the subconscious part is much larger than the conscious part and of communication, where about four-fifths is non-verbal, culture is more complicated and differentiated than it appears:

In surface culture one can include such things as language, literature, manners, customs, history and folklore, whereas deep culture includes communication style, role expectations, non-verbal communication, order of priorities, patterns of interpersonal relationships, approaches to carrying out a task, how tasks are assigned, work and learning styles, what motivates people, attitude towards words, attitude towards commitments, concern for efficiency, attitude toward and concern for planning, ways of establishing rapport, negotiation styles, attitude towards authority, tempo of work, pace by which individuals move from formal to informal, and perceptions of professionalism (Lago, 2006, p. 58), for example. Other concepts in "deep culture" are values, including notions of modesty, behavior toward the dependent, gender roles, conceptions of beauty, ideals governing child-rearing, ideas of cleanliness, theories of disease and healing, patterns of handling emotion, and many more (McAuliffe, 2008, pp. 27 & 28). Even deeper depths of the iceberg have been discovered by Hall (1969, passim) in regard to proximics (the use of space) and time (1973, pp. 1 - 19).

3.2.2 Culture as a social construction

Culture is a perception of reality that depends on certain people in certain surroundings over time. This means that it is a "map" of reality and not reality itself. A concept important to
understanding culture is cultural relativism, which means "treating other cultures as equal to one's own and deserving of respect" (McAuliffe, 2008, p. 29).

3.3.3 Significance

These two ideas of more going on than meets the eye and of equally valid though simultaneously different ways of perceiving "reality" may seem unsettling at first. How can we know what might lie in the underwater part of an iceberg, and how can we know whether our cultural map is accurate? Just realizing that there is a huge, invisible lower part to an iceberg makes it possible to slow down and perhaps avoid running into it. Realizing a map is accurate in familiar terrain but inaccurate in unexplored areas makes clear the necessity for a larger, more detailed map. This knowledge makes it easier to proceed more confidently and successfully. What is below the surface or internalized and unquestioned needs to be brought into awareness so it can evolve into a topic which can be verbalized and examined. Not realizing there is something below the surface or that different but equally valid maps can exist limits and keeps us ignorant of the world beyond our own terrain, if not ignorant of our own terrain as well.

3.3 Stages in the development of cultural identity and their importance

As emphasized before, one experience basic to cross-cultural couples is that at least one of the partners is a foreigner, or to put it another way, a member of a subordinate group. In the survey discussed above, 31 of 35 couples live in a country where one of the partners is a member of the dominant cultural group. The process of cultural identity development is different for each group, as shown by Lago (2006, pp. 181 & 182):
Individuals in subordinate groups seem to go through the following stages of cultural development:

Stage 1: An individual is rather naive in awareness of himself and others as cultural beings, possibly rejecting his cultural group realities and appreciating the dominant cultural group.

Stage 2: An individual encounters the reality of cultural issues, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, etc., which triggers dissonance about his identity.

Stage 3: The individual totally embraces his cultural realities and identifies with his cultural group, often totally rejecting the realities of the dominant cultural group.

Stage 4: The individual begins reflecting on what it means to be a cultural being, questioning the complete acceptance of his own group and the categorical rejection of the dominant group.

Stage 5: The individual internalizes his awareness of himself as a cultural being, appreciating his cultural group and selectively appreciating the dominant cultural group as well.

Individuals in dominant groups generally seem to progress through the following stages:

Stage 1: An individual has a limited awareness of himself or others as cultural beings but feels his culture is superior. He naively considers key aspects of culture unimportant factors in human relationships.

Stage 2: The individual is somehow forced to acknowledge aspects of himself as a cultural being and develops an intellectual acceptance of other cultural realities, perhaps also guilt over his own privileged cultural status.

Stage 3: The individual fully experiences himself as a cultural being and questions or challenges his own cultural privilege. Guilt about privileged status can lead to overidentification with
subordinate cultural groups and possibly an overly negative view of his own culture.

Stage 4: The individual honestly appraises himself as a cultural being, becoming introspective and reflecting on the categorical nature of his overidentification and overly negative view.

Stage 5: The individual develops new levels of understanding about himself as a cultural being and actively seeks relationships with diverse cultural groups. He becomes fully aware of sociopolitical influences and becomes committed to eradicating oppression of subordinate groups.

This model of cultural development is important not only for a person who leaves his own country and his own dominant cultural group in order to enter a new country where he will belong to a minority and thus will have to go through cultural identity development again -- or perhaps even for the first time. It is also important for counselors, because knowledge of cultural identity development levels can help them assess their own positions in order to be aware of their impact on culturally different clients. (Lago, 2006, p. 183).

In a later section on the phases of the love relationship, a similar developmental process will be encountered, and it is again a process a couple goes through individually and together.

3.4 Characteristics of a multiculturally-skilled counselor

From what has been previously stated, the importance of certain attitudes, knowledge and skills in counseling culturally different clients can be deduced:

According to Lago (2006, p. 124), counselors should have the following attitudes:
Awareness of and sensitivity to the counselor's own cultural heritage: assumptions, values, biases, stereotypes, preconceived notions, emotional reactions and personal limits; valuing and respecting, even honoring, differences; respect for clients' spiritual beliefs and values as well as indigenous helping practices; valuing bilingualism.

Lago (2006, pp. 123 - 125) sees the multiculturally-skilled counselor as having knowledge:

- about his own racial/cultural heritage and how it affects definitions of normality, the counseling process, and his social impact on others;
- about the cultural group his client belongs to;
- about how culture may affect personality formation, vocational choice, psychological disorders, and help-seeking behavior.

According to McAuliffe (2008, pp. 635 & 636), culturally skillful counselors:

- are able to engage in a variety of verbal and nonverbal helping responses, to send and receive both verbal and nonverbal messages accurately and appropriately. They are not tied down to only one method or approach but recognize that helping styles and approaches may be culture-bound;
- take responsibility for interacting in the language requested by the client, which may mean seeking a translator or referring the client to a competent bilingual counselor;
- are able to help clients determine whether a "problem" might stem from bias in others so that they do not inappropriately blame themselves;
- are not adverse to consulting with traditional healers or religious and spiritual practitioners in the treatment of culturally different clients, when appropriate;
take responsibility for informing clients about the processes of psychological interventions such as goals, expectations, and the counselor’s orientation;

are able to "lean into" difference, or to especially value it, rather than "leaning away from," or trying to avoid it.

According to Gaitanides (2007, p. 317), counselors with highly developed multicultural skills who are able to tolerate uncertainties and not to be thrown off balance when experiencing foreignness, ambiguity and contradictions, capable of detachment when perceiving themselves and others, able to be acceptant and empathetic towards those who are culturally different without giving up their own identity, able to feel their way empathically into the client's world, to listen and ask questions, are usually also able, in spite of language difficulties and insufficient cultural background knowledge, to build an enduring communicative relationship with their clients and to empower them to become their own experts.

By paving the way for this kind of dialog the counselor can learn from the clients themselves what they define as their problems and what coping strategies they have.

3.5 "Meta" quality: the helping relationship, a paradigm shift

The specific attitudes, knowledge and skills presented above profit from being complemented with a consideration of the deeper, core components of a helping relationship in general.

In the person-centered approach developed by Carl Rogers, the "motivational theory" is expressed in terms of an actualizing tendency, a potential toward socialization and fulfillment that every human being has inside, which, however, needs
relationships in order to develop. The actualization of human potential happens from an individual's own resources as well as through relationship with others. (Schmid, 2008, pp. 125 & 126). However, it is not just any kind of relationship that embodies this sort of catalyst, but a special one of encounter between two people, each willing to be touched, struck, and changed by the essence of the other, *the similarities* to the other as well as *the differences* from him. According to Schmid, Rogers discovered an attitude that runs opposite to the usual manner of perceiving and gaining insight, which is by attempting to fit the unknown into what is known, classifying it into an already known category or finding out enough about it to slot it into a known spectrum. This would be a movement from "me" to "you," or "what can I see or recognize in the other?" Instead, here the attempt is to take what is foreign or strange seriously and to treasure it at its own value, to be willing to undergo the process of understanding the other as really different, a movement from "you" to "me;" i.e., "what does the other let me see, what does he reveal to me, what does he want to have me understand about him?" (Schmid, 2008, p. 127).

This kind of encountering relationship has unintentionality as its prerequisite and is made possible by a special kind of presence, of being completely there, manifested in the three dimensions Rogers discovered as authencity, acceptance, and empathy (Schmid, 2008, p. 127). It is self-evident how essential this attitude is in helping clients, especially those from a different culture.

### 3.6 Making culture a topic

Along with the previously described embodiment of the helping relationship, the most essential quality to bring to counseling someone culturally different is the knowledge, trust and courage to respectfully make a topic of these differences when
they are relevant. Since much of culture is hidden, internalized and taken for granted, it is important for the background, or "medium" to be brought into consciousness and illuminated, in order to be able to be observed, examined, and put into perspective.

4. Counseling couples and cross-cultural couples

Keeping the above in mind, the perspective now widens to contemporary approaches to couples counseling in order to examine their usefulness for cross-cultural couples counseling.

4.1. Relational counseling and the person-centered approach

Within the person-centered "family" there are several views on the theoretical basis of relational counseling.

4.1.1 Psychotherapy with two clients

Auckenthaler (1983, p. 78) sees partner therapy as psychotherapy with two clients, which means, the goal of partner therapy which is improvement of the relationship, is to be reached indirectly through the means of two individual therapies in the partners' presence. Since in the person-centered approach the goal of therapy is to change the relationship of the client to himself, in the direction of more authenticity, unconditional positive self-regard and empathy with himself, progress toward this goal brings progress in the ability to be in a successful relationship (Auckenthaler, 1983, p. 79). Auckenthaler strongly states that the goal of the improvement of the relationship between two clients is not the object of client-centered psychotherapy with couples; the therapeutic process is not started and continued for the sake of their relationship but -- which she sees as conforming to the term client-centered -- for two clients individually, who are in
relationship to each other but who first have to change their relationship to themselves if they wish to improve their mutual one (Auckenthaler, 1983, p. 80). What might seem a limitation, Auckenthaler sees as a strength and advantage in this therapeutic model. In contrast to other partner therapy approaches, in which the relationship itself is the object of therapy, here the concentration is on providing each partner with the chance to develop the necessary personal prerequisites for a good relationship and the chance then to put this into effect with each other outside the therapy room. The personal growth of each client is less encompassing than in individual therapy because its object is limited to developing their relational competence. (Auckenthaler, 1983, pp. 80 & 81).

4.1.2 Rogers' "Self" theory as entirely systemic

Coming from a very different perspective, Mearns (foreword to O’Leary, 1999, p. x), writes,

"the person-centred approach articulates well with couple and family therapy. Carl Rogers' "Self" theory, underlying person-centred work, is entirely "systemic", to the extent that family therapy concepts can even be applied directly to the configurations and dynamics which operate within the Self (Mearns, 1999, 1-6). As the person-centred therapist establishes contact with each emerging dimension of Self, she seeks to hold it in relationship while equally honouring other parts which may be in discord, and this is the case with many families."

4.1.3 Bridging the gap between these two opinions

O’Leary understands his work as a dialogue between the client-centred approach and the many other approaches which make up the literature on "relational counseling," a term which encompasses both couples and family counseling. He believes
that proficient person-centered counselors are particularly well-prepared to undertake work with couples and families because they have developed a strong sense of self-sufficiency which enables them to reduce their interventions in order to create a large therapeutic space essential to the members of a couple or family. In addition, proficient person-centered counselors learn to communicate their understanding of each family member in an atmosphere of acceptance, creating for each person the unique experience of being understood yet not judged in the presence of the other partner (O'Leary, 1999, p. xi).

At the same time, O'Leary warns that relational therapy is a medium which must be respected on its own terms. In direct contradiction to Auckenthaler, "It is not individual therapy done one by one with other people present." (O'Leary, 1999, p. xi).

For example, the counselor is asked to relate simultaneously and with acceptance to the person who feels controlled by someone else and to the person who feels the need to exert control. The skill of listening to multiple realities and the quality of embodying multi-directional partiality grow out of the following concepts about systems thinking held by most relational counselors (O'Leary, 1999, pp. 26 - 28):

The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This means striving for a wider lens of understanding of a couple’s life rather than focusing on a single unit within a system. Without denying the reality of the individual's experience, the conversation can be expanded to a discussion of all the mutual difficulties faced, and the symptom can be a kind of language which leads to awareness of all the pressures.

Any change in one part of a system affects the whole system. This frees the focus which might be blocked by concentration on a single part of the system, widening the perspective as to the reasons behind behavior and giving a couple a wider range of options for seeking change.
Causality is not linear, but circular. The systems-thinking therapist is less likely to ascribe values such as good and bad or right and wrong when a family drama is unfolding but is more likely to join the clients in exploring dimensions of other events and perceptions that landed them in their predicament. Not the notion that the behavior of one causes the behavior of the other but that both are in a complex developmental cycle gives a helpful perspective.

There is no identified patient to be cured in the midst of an otherwise healthy system, no scapegoat. Instead, individual reality is seen as co-created and resolvable within a wider variety of perspectives and behaviors. This avoidance of pathologizing makes relational counseling compatible with the person-centered approach, as does the view that people are always in process, always complex. Putting it succinctly, systems thinking allows ways of meeting individuals in context.

According to O'Leary (1999, pp. 42 & 43), the following characteristics of relational counselors are shared by the different approaches:

- **being active**, i.e., structuring the sessions so that the couples' needs, dilemmas and hopes are central; facilitating the stories of each partner, but not taking charge,

- **offering reframing**, which means offering a different perspective which changes the meaning of an event or process, derived from the assumption that the meaning a social group gives to an event or way of being helps create that event. This helps expand reality for people who might be blocked. The counselor tracks the course of the conversation in its meaning for each of the speakers rather than judging who might be right regarding the content of the discussion.

- **asking questions**. Although O'Leary knows that Rogers always pointed out the way counselor questions or comments
would interfere with the client’s natural and effective process, his hope is that facilitating-type questions, rather than information-seeking ones, may give clients a way to bypass interference and feel safe enough to reflect freely rather than defend rigidly. He suggests

*housekeeping questions* for the beginning and end of sessions, also for clarifying goals and inviting participation, *facilitating questions* that organize discussion, focus attention on the same issue, link what is currently being said to earlier interactions, clarify or reframe, *mediating questions* that invite accurate listening, give order during chaotic argument, focus attention on genuine feelings, opinions and wishes rather than on accusations, projected fears and threats. The counselor is often asked to provide a medium in which people can be heard and can hear without feeling they have to lose either their integrity or connection or both. An example would be asking what the intention behind an argument is.

O'Leary concludes that both family (systemic) therapy and the person-centered approach are paradigms that are hopeful for persons in distress but derive their hopefulness differently: the person-centered approach is deeply hopeful, based on the natural tendency of living organisms to move in a constructive and life-enhancing direction, whereas the hopefulness of the family therapy approach is based on the enormous creative possibilities engendered by systems thinking. (O'Leary, 1999. p. 29).

**4.1.4 Emotion-focused couples therapy**

Greenberg and Goldman (2008, pp. 46 & 47) have observed that enduring change in couples requires the development of both self- and other-soothing. They have found that the two broad
domains that need to be worked with in couples therapy are relational regulation of affect and self-regulation of affect.

In relational regulation of affect, the partners reveal themselves to each other and provide each other with soothing and with joy, pleasure, security, excitement and validation, and they do not trigger too much anger, sadness, fear, and shame. They also help each other accept, tolerate, manage and make sense of their feelings.

In self-regulation of affect, partners are able to calm and soothe themselves by accepting, tolerating, and managing the intensity of their own emotions. Marital harmony is seen as having to do with both (1) greater accessibility and responsiveness and (2) greater ability to tolerate some disappointment, separation, criticism and disagreement and still respond non-defensively and compassionately to one's partner's needs.

Partners who previously became upset, angry and emotionally dysregulated and escalated their demands to get their needs met when they perceived their partners as even slightly not caring, need to be able to respond to frustration in a new way. If, after communicating their feelings and needs, they find their partners are unable to respond, instead of escalating demands or withdrawing, they need to take a step back and work on regulating their own emotions to be able to soothe their own anxiety, tolerate the frustration of their needs, and respond constructively to minor need frustration and criticism. This ability to calm one's self in turn will help their partners to respond in more caring ways. It also will allow the self-soothed partners to respond more compassionately and empathically to their spouses (Greenberg & Goldmann, 2008, p. 47).

The focus of this kind of couples counseling is on both the relationship (system) and the self, with awareness of how they
mutually regulate each other. Self-regulation of affect is seen as the key process and affect dysregulation as the main source of couples problems. The key task for couples is mutual and individual regulation of affects such as anxiety, shame and anger. The fostering of interdependence -- mutual caring, validation, and concern for the needs of self and other -- is also emphasized (Greenberg and Goldmann, 2008, pp. 14 & 15).

Greenberg and Goldmann (2008, p. 95 - 97) also believe that interaction between partners is best understood along the two dimensions of affiliation and influence, since love and power have been seen as major themes in intimate relationships. Problems in couples occur predominantly around struggles for closeness and feeling lonely and abandoned on the one hand (connection) and around struggles for identity and feeling invalidated, controlled or diminished (integrity) on the other.

Struggles related to developing and maintaining identity involve different emotions and require different responses, such as mirroring, validating, respecting, valuing of preferences, and attuning. Struggles around attachment or security are helped by responses of proximity and availability (Greenberg and Goldmann, 2008, p. 74). In both kinds of struggles, partners need and want support, availability and accessibility from their partners as well as validation, understanding and acceptance. Interactions can be viewed as the patterns of relationship behavior that individuals enact in an attempt to maintain or restore feelings of security, self-esteem, and intimacy. In this approach, the core of couples therapy is to help couples come to terms with dilemmas about differences in the domains of love and power. Also of importance is assessing where interaction lies on the two dimensions of affiliation and influence and what emotions underlie each partner’s position so that ways of intervention that will change the negative interactional cycle can be found.
The illustration on the next page is this author’s adaptation of the two-dimensional model of interaction presented by Greenberg and Goldmann (2008, p. 97).
Illustration 1: Love and Power

Two-dimensional model of interaction adapted from Greenberg & Goldmann (2008, p. 97)

The horizontal affiliation dimension is weighted more strongly than the vertical influence dimension, resulting in an oval to represent the space of interaction.
In different cultures intimate relationships are viewed differently. In the West, they are more about negotiating and equality; whereas in the East more about accommodating and complementarity. The nature of pair bonding is different in different cultures, and the therapist needs to be sensitized to and prepared to work with the different concerns raised by different cultural groups. Because in dealing with emotion therapists are touching the deepest, often tacit and most culturally-embedded aspect of people’s inner worlds, great sensitivity needs to be shown to the different cultural rules and meanings given to different emotions and their expression. Couples also are helped by making their assumptions around attachment and identity concerns more explicit and understanding how these affect their relationships, especially as they begin to assimilate some, but not other, aspects of their differences (Greenberg and Goldmann, 2008, p. 134).

The strengths of this approach are to be found in its prioritizing of emotion, its analysis of emotion, and its dual effort to help individual partners manage their emotions as well as help both partners support and understand each other.

The weakness is its certainty that the therapist is the expert on what is going on with the couple and knows exactly how they should proceed.

4.1.5 A focusing-oriented approach to couples therapy

This approach, presented by Amodeo (2007, p. 171), is also a dual one, working with one member of the couple at a time to elicit underlying issues as well as supporting the couple’s interaction. It rests on the premise that there is always more going on than is intellectually evident. Its main method is to invite experience to unfold in order to connect couples by sharing their more tender, vulnerable feelings that exist beneath surface, defensive or secondary emotions.
First the therapist does his best to connect with each person by conveying that he hears their feelings, concerns, perspectives, fears, hurts and hope for a more meaningful and fulfilling life. This kind of connection is consistent with findings from neuroscience that "the first part of limbic healing is being emotionally known -- having someone with a keen ear catch your melodic essence." (Lewis, Amini, and Lannon in Amodeo, 1977, p. 171). Then a safe and supportive environment in which issues can be openly explored is established by the therapist’s empathic, reflective listening, which he tries to equalize in order to avoid the appearance of taking sides.

Before productive therapy can occur, any cycle of mutual blame and defensiveness must be addressed, i.e., interactions infused with criticism, contempt, stonewalling and defensiveness must be gradually replaced with more self-revealing, relational communication. One way of doing this is for the therapist to encourage a couple to pause when he senses that a hurtful comment was made and to ask them to take a moment to notice what they are experiencing inside themselves just then,. If they can begin to contact the deeper feelings beneath their surface emotions and decipher the meanings inherent in them, something new may happen between them.

An underlying principle of focusing, as of the person-centered approach, is that forward movement in people’s lives is wanting to happen. Their well-being suffers when their process gets stuck. Focusing leads awareness to a place within that allows the next step forward to unfold naturally. Interpersonal stuckness and pain are the results of something that wants to happen for an individual within a partnership, but is not happening. Focusing facilitates the sense of "what wants to happen." (Amadeo, 2007, p.173). It is an approach which gently invites people to take time to notice what they are experiencing inside their bodies and to accept this "felt sense" and be curious
about what it wants to bring into consciousness. It also takes into account physical excitability and the realization that being emotionally flooded must be dealt with before non-defensive listening and fruitful interaction can occur. It proceeds from the premise that what is happening between the partners is a reflection of what is happening within the two individuals (Amodeo, 2007, p. 177).

This approach is useful for couples who have the patience, courage and willingness to self-reflect and to contact their deep inner feelings, putting their relationship on a new basis. It involves the risk of opening up and being vulnerable. Some couples may need a more interactively engaging style or a more cognitive or behavioral approach. Some partners may need referral to individual therapists to help them first become more connected to themselves (Amodeo, 2007, p. 181).

4.2 Narrative therapy

This approach was founded by David Epston and Michael White in 1990 and involves the use of questions in order to expand the awareness of distressed couples or families. These questions aim to generate experience rather than gather information. They challenge problem-saturated stories to make possible new stories with fewer villains and fewer dead ends by

*externalizing the problem*, i.e., finding a way to distinguish the persons from the problem, and

*encouraging reflection on unnoticed resources* in the couple or family. They identify and investigate the meaning of unexpected moments in which an individual or family acted effectively, cooperatively, freely, or otherwise as if the problem did not occur. These are discrepancies in the dominant (culture-, society-based) problematic story which persons come to recognize as significant and meaningful. These
discrepancies can be threaded into parallel sub-plots, modifying the dominant story to include more life (Payne, 2006, p. 79).

The aim behind the technique of evocative questions and the naming of dilemmas is to empower clients to trust in their own processes, not to highlight the counselor’s role (O’Leary 1999, p. 44). Of course, this is the aim behind all interventions: they are intended as connections, not intrusions, and each counselor must find those that best fit him and his work.

This approach concentrates on the clients’ resources and their ability, in co-creation with the counselor, to analyze the current story of their lives and then create (imagine) an alternative story around their preferred purposes, values and commitments. Clients are enabled to construct new meanings after dislodging their sense of who they are from previous problematical, culture-bound stories. This separation of story from the person (what is meant by externalizing the problem above) opens space for the clients to construct accounts of their lives that are more in line with their preferences. (McAuliffe, 2008, pp. 607 & 608).

Externalizing the problem makes it easier for clients to stand back and examine how the meanings of problems have arisen from the cultural context. Stories that once seemed like irrefutable truths begin to look more like influential cultural narratives. In the process of analyzing, or deconstructing the foundations of the client’s current, or problematic story, it becomes clear that this story is culturally induced and can be viewed as external to the client. It is one particular construction among many possible ones, not "the truth," and the client can have a relationship to his cultural stories rather than be subject to them (McAuliffe et al., 2008, pp. 608 & 609).

This makes it possible for the client to create an identity, a new story, that is apart from the now-externalized problem. New foundations are sought in alternative family or ethnic models or
in new stories about one's group in order to show that things could be different from the original problem story. The narrative counselor lets the client decide whether the alternative story is positive or negative. Clients come to see that cultural dimensions are the foundations for the stories they have told, parts of which may be useful and others of which can be discarded. They decide on the foundation of a story that works (McAuliffe et al., 2008, p. 611).

In couples counseling the overall aim of narrative therapy is to assist the couple to reconnect with the positive aspects of their relationship which have been mislaid or overshadowed, after each partner has had the chance to tell his or her version of the "bad" story. This starts the process of enabling them to discover their own solutions, drawing on rediscoveries through a changed atmosphere. Vicious circles of blame and resentment can gradually be reversed and virtuous circles of greater mutual empathy and understanding can be established. The counselor also analyzes conversations around culturally-derived role stereotyping and relationship norms which appear to be playing a destructive part in how one or both of the couple conceptualize the relationship. The changes and solutions are negotiated and discovered by the couple outside the counseling sessions, in the context of their private life together, with the goal being to re-invent the relationship (Payne, 2006, pp. 186 - 190).

In reflecting on this approach, it seems to have the following advantages:

a hopeful perspective based on trust in the clients' resources and a positive perspective, aimed at finding their better-fitting stories,

a liberalizing effect when the "problem" is seen in its cultural terms and not as an individual deficiency,

a therapist who is not all-central: the relationship between the client and therapist does not comprise the crucial agent of
change; instead, clients' relationships and living contexts outside the therapy room are equally important to the therapeutic process (Payne, 2006, p. 171).

On the negative side, the same criticism applies as the one narrative therapists have of other therapies: that they proceed from an assumption of deficiency, assuming that the client needs to "grow" and that the problem is positioned squarely in the person (Payne, 2006, p.160). Although in all case studies the counselor’s interventions are given sensitively, transparently, and as tentative suggestions, and although the pace is exploratory, he seems to know exactly what he is aiming for and in which direction, with which steps, the client should travel. Surely, in reality the approach is not so linear, but it seems a rather directive construct. Perhaps the client has a different need than to re-write his life in this way at this time or is for some reason not able to act according to his better judgment. All in all, this approach can certainly be useful for analyzing the part culture plays in clients' lives when that is relevant.

4.3 The tasks of marital cultural transition and finding a balanced framework

The above tasks are at the core of cross-cultural couples counseling according to Falicov (1986, pp. 431 & 432), who rightly states that everyone who marries is to some extent engaged in an "intercultural undertaking," coming from different social units and having different background experiences and world views. All marriages necessitate some degree of mutual accommodation. With increasing frequency, marriages occur between partners of diverse ethnicity, religion, social class, race, or nationality. Social tolerance has increased, but within these marriages the diverse world views can produce strains and even serious conflicts (Falicov, 1986, p. 430).
Falicov (1986, p. 430) believes that in spite of potential difficulties, a cross-cultural marriage offers unique possibilities for creative and functional matches. The factors that make for success or failure, happiness or unhappiness, are extremely complex and cannot be reduced merely to degrees of cultural commonalities and differences. Because of the enormous complexity and variety of cross-cultural marriages, it is extremely difficult to make generalizations, and it becomes necessary to explore the conditions under which cultural differences interact with other family processes (Falicov, 1986, p. 430).

Metaphorically speaking, couples who intermarry enter a form of cultural transition. The main developmental task of this process of cultural transition is to arrive at an adaptive and flexible view of cultural differences that make it possible to

- maintain some individual values
- negotiate areas of conflict
- develop a new cultural code that integrates parts of both cultural streams.

Cultural similarities and differences cannot be viewed in isolation from the total complex of a couple’s other similarities and differences. Regardless of whether the cultural differences are large or small, the key observable outcome is whether difference and similarity stand in a fairly complex and comfortable balance or appear to be unbalanced.

Within a marriage possessing a balanced framework, cultural differences are more easily integrated, negotiated, or allowed to remain parallel or autonomous from other areas.

Within an unbalanced framework, the couple may either overfocus on (maximize) the cultural differences or underfocus on (minimize) them. This unbalanced use of cultural differences
provides a reliable indicator of problematic adaptation to the cultural transition (Falicov, 1986, pp. 431 - 433). Difficulties can be due to

patterns of conflict in cultural codes: lack of a shared cultural code;
cultural differences and not having had the permission to marry: difficulties in the realignment of boundaries with the extended family; and

cultural stereotyping in times of severe stress: "situational prejudice" in order to create a makeshift boundary for self-protection that prevents painful emotional involvement in situations of severe stress (Falicov, 1986, p. 433).

When the therapist assumes the role of cultural mediator or clarifier of values, there are several pitfalls to be avoided:

Cultural clarification is insufficient and even problematic if the discussion remains at the content level only. In developing restructuring goals for a couple, the therapist needs to attend to their process as well and to see how they inform each other.

Cultural clarification may unwittingly imply a sense of hopelessness about the possibility of change, since a cultural reframing could suggest that a particular behavior is unchangeable because it is rooted in culture. This exonerates individuals from personal responsibility. It is better to view a cultural trait as a resource that can be used or not, depending on the circumstances, rather than an inflexible feature.

Emphasizing the gap in cultural differences too strongly could facilitate further marital disengagement. To avoid this it is often helpful to define couples who are experiencing conflicting codes as being in cultural transition, which encourages them to seek negotiations of their difference and to encourage continuity with some of each spouse's traditions
while developing a new culture that is more personal, unique and tailored to their needs (Falicov, 1986, pp. 437 & 438).

Often it is difficult to secure unconflicted extended-family support for intermarriage, for cultural or other family reasons, and this lack of permission to succeed has an enormous influence. It is as though the couple does not have permission to enter a state of cultural transition and to begin to develop a new cultural code for their family unit. This is where an imbalance can begin (Falicov, 1986, pp. 438 - 445): differences within the couple can be maximized so the spouses do not blend, integrate or negotiate their values and life styles, each holding on to their culture and their family of origin, or differences within the couple can be minimized and a new code developed at the expense of cutting off all relationships with the families of origin ("you and me against the world").

When there is lack of permission for a couple to marry it it is sometimes necessary to explore the relationships with the extended families (Falicov, 1986, p. 445).

To sum up, cultural issues can be used to progress toward a restructuring of a marital relationship, especially in terms of interpersonal and intergenerational boundaries. Culture becomes foreground or background depending on the goals, but is always used positively, as a valuable resource for change. (Falicov, 1986, p. 449).

The great strength of counseling cross-cultural couples from this perspective is in using culture positively and in its positive picture of seeing all intimate couples as being in a kind of cultural transition. When difficulties are seen as hitches in a mutual process of adaptation, they are more manageable, not anyone's "fault." In addition, the idea of having a balanced view
of culture in the partnership, neither denying it nor overemphasizing it, shows what to aim for in a healthy cross-cultural partnership.

4.4 Discussion

All the approaches presented here are tried and tested ways of offering support to couples who want to improve their relationship. Auckenthaler and Amodeo make it clear that sometimes one or both partners would profit from individual therapy to first improve their basic abilities to relate before taking on relationship counseling. If this is not possible, Auckenthaler's model of psychotherapy with two clients at the same time, with a reduced focus to relationship issues could be useful. From systems theory it is clear that when one part of a system changes the rest also changes. The model of psychotherapy with two clients allows both partners to be present at the work the other is doing and to be aware of it. However, sometimes a partner has issues to resolve that are not ready to be shown to the other partner, and this possibility would point to individual counseling. Otherwise, couples are counseled with the focus on their interaction, with the counselor structuring the sessions for equality and offering intervention suggestions when the couple's process is blocked.

Especially in regard to cross-cultural couples, a flexible approach is needed, as in some cultures self-reflection and self-revelation are considered shameful. A behavioral therapy approach has not been presented here, as making culture a topic would involve examining the reasons behind actions from the aspect of the internalization of culture. The person-centered approach has been emphasized because it is especially acceptant of and open to difference and avoids a deficiency mind-set. Other approaches also focus on the resources of clients, and emphasize clients' responsibility for themselves, but
the feeling in these sessions is a more hierarchical one, perhaps more like that of doctor to patient, consulting an expert who can fix the problem. Many people have a different attitude when going to a counselor than going to a doctor, with a deeper fear of something being "wrong" with them. The person-centered therapist is dedicated to being with, not above his clients: authentic, understanding, and easy to trust.

Few of the surveyed cross-cultural partners named counseling as a possibility to help solve problems. Perhaps there is still a stigma attached to therapy and counseling. Also, finding a cross-cultural counselor with the right language and experience in a foreign country is more difficult than finding a counselor in the dominant culture.

5. Process perspectives

To the information discussed above it is important to add the dimension of time and to remember that relationships are processes. Of special relevance to the present theme are Jürg Willi’s description of the phases of the love relationship process and Carl Rogers’ four strands of a long-term, satisfying relationship process. These perspectives put cross-cultural relationships into a wider framework.

5.1 Phases of the love relationship process

Willi presents the following phases of the love relationship process in view of challenges to personal development (2008, lectures 2.1 - 2.14):

Phase 1: Longing for love
Phase 2: Choosing a partner. This has to do with a person’s (unconscious) wish to uphold and continue the pattern of his family of origin or to correct and change that pattern toward a new orientation. Central questions, which can also be below
the level of consciousness, are: "What chances for new personal development does my partner make possible for me? What chances for new personal development do I make possible for my partner?"

Phase 3: Being in love. In this stage of a couple's process there is enmeshing and loss of autonomy. The feelings are: "This is the person who makes everything possible for me," and "I am the person who makes everything possible for her." The lovers live in a kind of euphoric utopia, strongly idealizing each other and not paying much attention to their environment, which often feels irritated at their absorption in each other.

Phase 4: Love's disappointment. This is the most important phase, where a re-connection to reality begins and the partners start to become more autonomous again. There is an interplay between idealizing and seeing realistically, between an ideal and a real relationship.

Phase 5: Creating a mutual world. Now the couple sets up house together, has a circle of friends, and perhaps thinks of having children as an expression of something enduring originating from their love. The personal challenges are those of commitment and cooperation. The couple develops a mutual system of constructs as to how they see the world; things become more real to each through their partner's commentary; they have an expanded mutual memory.

Phase 6: Catching up on what has been neglected.

Phase 7: A long-standing marriage, in which the partners do things for and with each other, seeing where they are needed. In this phase loss of the partner can feel as though a person is cut in half.

In each of these phases there are challenges to personal development and possible fears to overcome: fears of fulfillment, fusion, regression, dependence and loss of self, fears of being
unhappy or of conflict, fears of obligations, loss of freedom, of being taken advantage of, of being tied down -- and in the second half of life, fears of drifting apart or of losing one's partner (Willi, 2008, lecture 4.1).

Willi sees the goal of couples therapy as integrating what has been repressed, not in order to save the relationship but for the well-being of the partners. He prefers not to set the therapeutic goals too high and, for example, accepts a partner’s limited ability to be in a relationship and just tries to create a tolerably good situation (Willi, 2008, lecture 4.16). He bases his approach on a "reality principle" rather than a "rational principle," meaning, for example, that he accepts partners' intense, sometimes grandiose life plans as enriching their lives, even though higher expectations and more unconventional relationships can bring more suffering. They also make for a bigger life (Willi, 2008, lecture 4.13). Happiness is not something one can demand, and a better question than "Am I happy?" is "Do I consider my life a successful process, as difficult as it sometimes is, and do I have the feeling it is meaningful?" (Willi, 2008, lecture 1.3).

Intercultural marriages are certainly unconventional, sometimes idealistic, with high expectations of adaptation of one's self and one's partner, and with many, many possibilities for a "bigger" life.

5.2 Four threads of permanence and enrichment which unite partnerships in process

From in-depth interviews of couples who were experimenting with marriage and its alternatives in the 1970's, Carl Rogers discovered the following threads of permanence and enrichment in a developing intimate partnership: (Rogers, 1973, pp. 205 - 215):
1: "Dedication? commitment?" to the relationship process.

The question marks are Rogers' own, searching for the right term. He has seen that there is no guarantee in marriage, no matter how sincere the marriage vows are spoken and felt at the time they are spoken. He sees a partnership as a continuing process, not a contract, and believes the work done on this process is for personal as well as for mutual satisfaction. The commitment is individual, but the constant, difficult, risky work is done together. The partners recognize that a relationship is lasting only if that lasting quality exists in the present moment and they need make no major attempt to clear up past or future difficulties, except as they make mutual life unhappy right now. They see their relationship as a flowing stream, not a static structure. They focus on the loving and living which exist between them, occasionally even achieving a transcendent quality (Rogers, 1973, p. 208).

This corresponds to Willi's findings that couples gave their main reasons for staying together as love and identification with the relationship process, before satisfaction or happiness (Willi, 2008, Lecture 2.1).

2: Taking the risk of deeply vulnerable communication

Voicing one's own feelings and not accusing one's partner, based on the attitude "I want to share myself and my feelings with you, even when they are not all positive," can risk the whole relationship for the sake of its growth. But Rogers is convinced that one effect of sharing the deepest feelings one can discover in one's self, is that it almost inevitably draws similar sharing from the other. If this complex quality of sharing, risking, receptive communication exists, even partially, there is a great likelihood of a developing, releasing relationship rather than a static mode of relating (Rogers, 1973, pp. 208 - 210).
Getting in touch with these kinds of feelings was described above in the sections on a focusing-oriented approach to counseling couples and on emotion-focused couples counseling.

3: Ceasing to live by roles

According to Rogers (1983, pp. 211 & 212), to live by the role expectations of one's parents, religion or culture is to bring to disaster the ongoing, differentiating process of a developing partnership, not because these expectations are in themselves "bad," but because the behavior they call up is from expectation by others, not from individual choice. Knowing our feelings is a life-long effort, but to the extent that we can listen to our organisms and move in the directions that feel right to them, we are moving away from behavior guided by role expectations and toward a complexity of partnership far less simple and far more satisfying.

In cross-cultural couples, role expectations can play an even greater part, as they can be more deeply internalized and more strongly taken for granted.

4: Becoming a separate self and sharing more of this separate self

Rogers (1973, pp. 212-214) finds that in a living partnership in process, each partner has developed into his own selfhood by

discovering his own self by continuously trying to get closer to the awareness of his inner feelings and organismic experience, accepting himself as a changing complexity of various elements, of which he need not be ashamed,
dropping masks, moving away from facades, being what he changeingly is, and being good to the child he always carries within,
experiencing values, having an internal center of evaluation, encouraging growth in his partner as well as in himself
perhaps coming to prize himself as the richly varied person he is, openly be more of this person and able to encourage his partner to her unique personhood as well.

The self-authorization described above, that is, having an internal center of evaluation, is especially pertinent to cross-cultural couples, whose transition process requires them to find a new code of values.

6. Conclusion

What supports a counselor undertaking the complex work of supporting cross-cultural couples? How can he possibly keep track of all the elements? Letting the couples lead and listening to their system for multiple influences is one way.

All intimate partnerships can been seen as "cross-cultural" in the sense that they include deep beliefs from differing cultural backgrounds. Couples who come from different countries and live together in a country where one is foreign have special issues around finding a common language, the homesickness of the partner who does not live in his own country, the relationship to the families or origin, and the difficulty the "foreign" partner has in redefining his identity and achieving a feeling of belonging that extends beyond his intimate partnership.

Many of the approaches and suggestions presented can give the impression that a formulaic or systematic way of counseling these couples is to be aimed for. The concept of the new kind of helping relationship that does not try to fit the unknown into an already formed pattern but leaves the new as completely different and welcome to be revealed, questions the effectiveness of such a systematic way of proceeding by pre-formed pattern. The value of this completely free way of offering help is especially clear in cross-cultural relationships.
However, this author does not see how one can manage to be this free or open in reality. More realistic would be to realize that this is simply what happens: counselors have pre-formed pictures, judging and slotting people and experiences into them, as well as pre-formed ideas about how to counsel. But this need not be all that happens. It is quite possible to realize that the picture, judgment or model is never complete, to be open-minded enough to welcome changes, differences, and new information, to always continue refining and fine-tuning according to experience in order to include as much "reality" as possible.

The model aimed for at the beginning of this paper has turned out to be a mixture -- relative and imperfect -- hopefully useful for particular moments, people and situations. A great deal of space has been given to answering "what to know" and "what to do/how to do it." Less space has been given to answering "how to be," which cannot be learned by reading anyway. The final suggestion to cross-couples counselors is to keep all of this in the back of the mind and the depth of the body, and then, when encountering clients, to "forget" it and just stay present, accompanying the clients as completely as possible.
Afterword

My U.S. American cultural bias in this paper is apparent even to myself, but I am happy to have come to know something about the work of Anna Auckenthaler, who is German, Peter Schmid, an Austrian, Jürg Willi, Swiss, Dave Mearns and Colin Lago, British, Martin Payne, Australian, and Leslie Greenberg and Rhonda Goldmann, South African and Canadian.

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Good friends Sonia Veldhuizen of Melbourne and Elaine Terlinden of Houston helped more than I can say. Thank you.

Much appreciation to all those who answered the questionnaire.

And, as always, most thanks to Stefan.
Appendix 1

Questionnaire
for those now or previously in Cross-cultural Relationships
in connection with a master's thesis for
the FernUniversität Hagen with the title
„Counseling Cross-cultural Couples“

I would be very grateful for your e-mail** or standard mail response to any of the following questions. I promise your name will not appear in my thesis.

1. What cultures are/were represented in your partnership?

2. a) In what countries have/had you lived singly and as a couple? b) For how long?

3. a) Where did you meet, and b) what language did you originally speak together?

4. What language do/did you speak afterwards as a couple/family?

5. What have been/were the greatest rewards

6. and the greatest difficulties in being with a partner from a different culture?

7. If there have ever been/were any deep cultural or other misunderstandings in your partnership, what has been/was/would have been useful to you in solving them?

8. What inner and outer resources / attitudes and skills have supported you best?
Thanking you very much for your contribution,

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**To reply by e-mail:** • pull questionnaire attachment out of e-mail on to desktop • after responding on questionnaire, save and give title • pull it back into an e-mail and send to me. Thanks!
Once upon a time, there was a girl named Mari, who lived in a small country called Marila. The special thing about Marila was, that every citizen was born with an implanted set of spectacles with yellow glasses. These spectacles made everything Mari could see appear in a friendly yellow, but she couldn’t take off her spectacles. One day she decided to live for a while in the neighbour country called Azuro.

The Azurans as well were born with implanted spectacles, but with blue glasses! Because of the different colour of their spectacles, Mari saw things differently than the Azurans -- yellow instead of blue. But Mari was well prepared before she left to Azuro, she has learned a lot about different colours for spectacles. After some time she managed to put on some blue spectacles, not exactly the same tone of blue the Azurans had, but very close. By and by, she was able to see things like the Azurans, but only partly: Because she couldn’t take off her yellow spectacles, she had to wear her new blue spectacles on top of her own yellow ones -- and everything appeared to her in green!

Even the blue spectacles could not be taken off again, not even after she returned to Marila, and by understanding more about the perspective of the Azurans, she developed a new perspective on her own culture as well.

Appendix 3

Six Core Conditions in Couple and Family Therapy
Charles J. O'Leary
Revised June 23, 2008

The six core conditions are a secure base and a reliable job
description for the couple or family therapist. Different from an
individual therapist, the couple or family therapist manages
activity and process direction without losing the intention and
effect of client-centeredness. Couples cannot function
successfully in repairing lost connection and shared meaning
without learning how, in part at least, to offer the six conditions
to one another. (And to stop denying one another respect,
empathy and genuine sharing!) The counselor's practice of the
six conditions empowers the clients to find those qualities in
themselves and in one another.

The Therapist is in Psychological Contact with Each Client

Can I manage a safe space in which harmful conversations at
home are translated into shared emotions and impasses that
can be discussed? Can I establish the ability to empathize with
each individual without victimizing his or her perceived
adversary? Can I make sense out of my particular therapy
setting as a place for listening as well as talking? Can I be at
home with a whole range of motivation and especially with
people's ambivalence about sharing floor time with a perceived
opponent? Can my own activity be responsive to the needs of
the client for structure or letting go of structure? Can I be
comfortable with a range of topics from the everyday and very
simple to the deeper exploration of the emotions?
The Clients are (in part) in a state of Incongruence

Incongruence in relationship occurs naturally in the complexity involved in living closely with others. The stresses of the family life cycle change persons without their full awareness. It is more useful for me to think of people as trapped by incongruence rather than deliberately being incongruent. (In general, in families, people can think „They won‘t!“ rather than „They can‘t!“ about others; then „I can‘t!“ rather than „I won‘t“ about themselves.) The process of family and couple therapy allows for new perspectives that make congruence more possible. The whole premise of person-centred counseling is the creation of conditions in which incongruence is allowed to pass away as unnecessary.

The Therapist is Congruent

Therapists have a clear idea of their role in the meeting that they use as a kind of compass; words or actions are either congruent or incongruent with this purpose. They are clear about what is their business and what is not. Their participation reflects clarity about their own boundaries and respect for those of the client.

Therapists do not consider themselves already congruent, but rather are seeking congruence. They may catch themselves at incongruence and be open about it. Good therapists are non-defensive and, in fact, welcome challenges for three reasons. Clients are empowered by speaking up for their own perceptions; being non-defensive in the face of client challenge models a way of being that is most helpful in day-to-day family life; humanity in the face of mistakes and disagreement creates harmonious relationship life.
The Therapist Experiences Unconditional Positive Regard for the Clients

Along with empathy, this is the heart of helpful couple and family therapy -- genuinely accepting not only each member of a couple or family but their situation as one that good people could find themselves in. Therapist's liking of a couple or family creates a healing environment. Distressed couples are trapped in the feeling that they cannot like or affirm their loved ones without losing their power. The therapist makes sense of predicaments, helping clients to name their situation without having to make one or more people the villain. People are affirmed by describing what they are up against. Key words in couple and family therapy are: Normalizing and Reframing.

Normalizing is a way of talking that emphasizes how human, predictable, natural and understandable a predicament can be. Reframing is a way of description that allows for someone not to be seen as bad, inadequate, undeserving of a chance, hopeless or completely wrong.

The Therapist Experiences Empathy for the Clients' Internal Frame of Reference

Unique to couple and family work is the concept of "multi-directional partiality" that is: being on everyone's side at the same time: offering empathy for one person that doesn't contradict empathy for another. Therapists practice the Rogerian art of reflective listening: trying to understand and clarify both what is being said and the feelings behind what is being said. Consistent with Rogers' example, empathic responses or translations are always subject to client correction. Therapists translate the experience of the individual as well as the shared dilemma of the pair or group. Therapists are strong
and assertive about their right to translate each person's communication without being interrupted. Empathy not only reduces stress and increases positive motivations; it also opens the door to the deeper emotions that allow connection to be restored.

Clients are at least to a Minimum Degree able to perceive these Qualities

Part of the learning of a helpful couple or family therapist is the art of being credible and trustworthy for people whose relationships hang in the balance. We cannot control outcomes -- whether couples stay together or not, but we can become confident that our office can be a secure place for couples to do the work they need to do. Unlike individual therapy, we may need to be assertive so that our empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard are not lost in the fog of couple or family conflict.

References


forgot to ask Carl Rogers: a therapist’s dialogue twenty-one years and four thousand clients after Carl’s death." Norwich, England. 8th World Conference for Person-Centered and Esperiential Psychotherapy and Counseling.  (Appendix 3).


Afterword to the revised edition, October 2010

One of the guidelines to scientific writing is: „not to start with Adam and Eve.“ For the wider-than-scientific use of this paper, added after it was evaluated, I can admit the beginning is Lao Tse:

Love conquers all. There is no defense against it.
Tao arms with love those it would protect. (The Book of Tao, 67)

While working on this paper I was also deeply influenced by Jocelyn Chaplin's Deep Equality. Living in the Flow of Natural Rhythms, Shunryu Suzuki’s Branching Streams Flow in the Darkness. Zen talks on the Sandokai, and John Welwood’s Love and Awakening. Discovering the Sacred Path of Intimate Relationship.

Three valuable expat websites are: Robin Pascoe’s ExpatExpert, ExpatWomen, and William Parks‘ „Transatlantic Letters.“

The artwork on the cover is Substrat 2 iii, by Thomas Ruff, 2001.