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MARRIAGE BETWEEN JEWS AND NON-JEWS: COUNSELING IMPLICATIONS

This article considers the problems arising from cultural and religious differences in Jewish-non-Jewish marriage, briefly reviews the literature, and offers suggestions for assessment and treatment. Treatment requires dealing with family systems dynamics while educating the couple about the role of cultural difference in their relationship. The goal of treatment is to assist the couple to view their differences flexibly and use them to their advantage while they develop a blended culture that satisfies their individual and partnership needs, including the religious and spiritual.

Jewish-non-Jewish (exogamous) marriage tends to be less stable then Jewish-Jewish (homogamous) marriage. The current rate of divorce for Jews married to non-Jews is 32%, whereas the rate for Jews married to Jews, is 17%. Furthermore, exogamous marriage is increasing for Jews: 37% of Jewish men under the age of 40 and 24% of Jewish women under the age of 40 intermarried in the 1980s (Kosmin, Lerer, & Mayer, 1989). The potential for instability in these marriages and their increasing number ensures that mental health counselors need to develop an understanding and treatment approach for these couples. The assimilated cultural background of these partners may tend to make both the couple and the counselor forget that one major underlying contribution to their problems is their religious and accompanying cultural difference. These issues undoubtedly apply to gay and lesbian couples as well as to heterosexuals, and may be even more likely to be overlooked in working with the former.

The major challenge to interfaith marriage lies in the fact that the partners tend to lack an understanding both of the cultural context and meaning of each other's behavior and of the underlying family process issues, and therefore tend to assign blame in an exaggerated and polarized fashion, either exclusively to cultural difference or exclusively to personal pathology (McGoldrick, 1982). These couples have been unable to create a blended culture--relatedness, routines, and rituals--that fosters both the expression of their individuality and the resolution of conflicts (Falicov, 1986). Gender roles, parenting issues, religious expression, communication, problem solving, closeness and distance to friends and relatives, indeed an understanding of the purpose and meaning of marriage Itself, may all be heavily influenced by religious-cultural difference and may all contribute to conflict (McGoldrick & Preto, 1984). At the same time, family process

problems are intertwined with and frequently underlie complaints about cultural difference (Friedman, 1982).

Parental opposition may be a problem for these couples: 43% of Jewish parents and 30% of Christian parents openly oppose their children's interfaith marriage (Mayer, 1985). An extended family that disapproves of the marriage will not be available to provide support when trouble surfaces in the marriage. The commitment of the Jewish extended family to its Jewish identity, the tendency of the Jewish family to be very close-knit, and the fact that Jewish religious celebration is tied to family rituals, all tends to put pressures on the young couple that may in themselves be a source of conflict and prevent the couple from creating a comfortable blended culture (Gleckman & Streicher, 1990).

Treatment will involve addressing the couple's family process issues and distinguishing those from culturally based differences that become difficult only when they are rigidified in the relationship. A major goal of treatments to assist the couple to regard their differences flexibly and use them to their advantage, while they develop a unique blended culture (Falicov, 1986). Couples may be anywhere on a spectrum from destructively emphasizing their difference in background to being unaware that difference is playing a role in their problems.

During assessment, the couple can review the qualities that initially attracted them, which particularly in interfaith couples are likely to include differences that although once delightful, now feel very uncomfortable. The motivations for marrying out should also be made clear and may point to important unresolved family-of-origin Issues. An understanding of ethnic styles as described in McGoldrick, Pearce, and Giordano (1982) is vital. Equally vital is the avoidance by the counselor of stereotyping and the careful assessment of the degree to which the cultural styles do and do not apply to the clients. A useful tool is the genogram (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985), a genealogy which can be constructed by the partners and counselor with an emphasis on listing extended family members' beliefs and practices about religion, marriage, and family functions. Cultural and systemic behavior patterns will become clearer when laid out by generation on paper, and blaming will be reduced.

Partners who have maximized their differences may lead distant, parallel lives. Each partner may pursue his own religion and relationships with extended family and friends. They may also be polarized in culturally influenced areas such as boundaries and hierarchies. Here, differences can be reframed as opposites that attract and as behaviors the clients can flexibly choose whether or not to use (Falicov, 1986). Similarities between partners and differences between partners and their parents need to be emphasized in order to strengthen the couple bond and increase the boundaries between the couple and their parents.

If differences within the couple are minimized, boundaries between the couple and the family of origin may be too high and rigid. Individuation within the couple and intergenerational reconnection are needed. Partners may be interpreting culturally derived patterns as personality problems. The therapist can make dear the cultural-religious connections by highlighting them and reframing them from the couple to the culture. For instance, a problem over conflicting communication styles might be reframed as the Jewish preference for verbal expression versus the nonverbal ethnic approach of the other partner. To help the partners maintain flexibility around culturally based behaviors, their position in cultural transition can be emphasized as well as the commonalities and complementarity between them (Falicov, 1986).

It is critical to ascertain the role of religious beliefs, experiences and practices in each partner's life, and the significance of sharing them with the parmer. Partners may need assistance from the therapist in choosing or modifying rituals stemming from the families of origin so that each partner feels that his or her core needs have been addressed. Decisions about the religious upbringing of the children may bring underlying religious conflict into focus. The important factor here for the

children's sound emotional development is that the parents be in agreement regarding their approach to religion, whether it be one religion, both, or none (Petsonk & Remsen, 1988).

It is paramount for the therapist to uphold the view that no particular religious-cultural perspective is better than any other, and that each person's spiritual needs and feelings are deeply personal and can be understood but not negotiated. Therapists also need to be clear and secure about their own religious beliefs to comfortably facilitate the partners' learning about their own religious stances. Therapists should not assume that they understand the clients' perspectives if they happen to share the cultural-religious perspective of one of the partners. The therapist must be clear on his or her own values and feelings, particularly about intermarriage itself. If the therapist is particularly biased or uncomfortable, he or she should refer the couple to another clinician.

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

Interfaith marriage may also have important positive results for society in the reduction of prejudice. Social psychologists hold that intermarriage "furthers the assimilation and integration of a polyglot population into one community" (Blau, Beeker, & Fitzpatrick, 1984, p. 601). In this era of emphasis on ethnicity and pluralism, it is interesting that the high rate of intermarriage may be leading us toward a more mixed culture--the "salad bowl"--ideally, without the cultural losses so prominent in the "triple melting pot." The success of interfaith couples in maintaining the key features of their religious and ethnic identities within a successful marital relationship will be vital to ensuring continuity of religion and culture in a mixed community. The counseling interventions that will assist such couples consist of identifying the role of cultural difference in the couple's problems, assisting the partners to a more constructive use of their differences, sorting out and addressing the family process problems, and supporting the partners' development of their individual religious-spiritual practices and identities, while they create a new blended culture that expresses their goals and values.

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