

## CHAPTER 9

# Intercultural interpersonal relationships

Because we live in a world in which there is increasing contact with diverse others, understanding how differences are bridged – regardless of which socially constructed boundary we happen to be speaking – is an important pursuit.

(Vela-McConnell 2011: 3)

Communication between and among individuals is forever changed because of technology. People are now able to initiate, maintain, and terminate relationships through technological means . . . The effects of technology on our interpersonal relationships are unprecedented, unpredictable, and unstoppable.

(West & Turner 2011b: 379)

. . . a key to maintaining an intercultural friendship lies in effective communication between members.

(Lee 2008: 52)

## learning objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- 1 define what is meant by an intercultural interpersonal relationship
- 2 identify and describe ten categories of intercultural interpersonal relationships
- 3 discuss how society influences intercultural interpersonal relationships
- 4 identify the benefits of intercultural interpersonal relationships
- 5 define the terms 'social networks' and 'friendship networks'
- 6 identify and describe three types of social networks
- 7 describe cultural differences in the notion of friendship
- 8 discuss the role that language and humour can play in intercultural relations
- 9 describe the contact hypothesis and its implications for intercultural interpersonal relationships
- 10 describe the role and challenges of computer-mediated communication in intercultural friendships and romance
- 11 identify internal and external factors that facilitate or hinder intercultural interpersonal relationships (friendship, romance, marriage)
- 12 identify constructive ways to nurture intercultural interpersonal relationships.

## INTRODUCTION

Meaningful communication with other human beings is essential for our physical and mental health. No matter what part of the world we live in, forming intimate relationships is a vital element in life. This chapter begins by examining the connection between interpersonal communication and intercultural relationships. We then look at several categories of intercultural interpersonal relationships (interethnic, interracial, international, interreligious) as well as ties between people who differ in terms of social class, language, age, ability (e.g. physical, mental), gender and/or sexual orientation. Next, we discuss the numerous benefits of initiating and sustaining intercultural interpersonal relationships in today's interconnected world.

We then turn our attention to issues related to intercultural friendships and social networks (e.g. differing cultural perceptions, cyber connections, the formation of intercultural friendships/networks, barriers to the development of friendships between people from different backgrounds). Next, we shift our focus to romantic intercultural relationships and briefly look at factors that facilitate or hinder successful intercultural romance and marriage. Throughout, the impact of language, culture and context in intercultural interpersonal relationships is emphasized. Finally, drawing on recent research findings, this chapter concludes with suggestions for ways to enhance intercultural interpersonal relationships.

## INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION AND INTERCULTURAL RELATIONSHIPS

As well as satisfying emotional and practical needs, interpersonal communication plays a major role in facilitating our social relationships. **Interpersonal communication** can be defined as 'a special form of human communication that occurs when two people interact simultaneously and attempt to mutually influence each other, usually for the purpose of managing relationships' (Beebe *et al.* 2010: 174). This interaction, which may take place face-to-face, on the phone or, increasingly, online, helps us to initiate and sustain personal bonds with other human beings.

While most of our encounters with people are fleeting and impersonal, for a variety of reasons we crave a closer, unique connection with certain individuals (e.g. 'significant others', close friends). Forging personal, intimate ties with fellow human beings is central to our socio-emotional, mental and physical well-being. These bonds help us to define our personal and social identities. Interpersonal relationships, in turn, enable us to develop a sense of belonging in the complex, dynamic world in which we live.

To foster interdependence and camaraderie, we need to have well developed **interpersonal communication skills**, that is, communication strategies and techniques that can be improved through knowledge, practice, feedback and reflection (Trenholm & Jensen 2011; Wood 2013). Successful interpersonal communication requires that we have confidence in ourselves as well as the ability to listen and understand. Language, culture and context play a central role in determining how our social relationships are formed and maintained.

An **interpersonal relationship** refers to the connection or affiliation between two or more people, which fulfils physical, social or emotional needs. This association may vary in many ways, including duration and intensity. **Short-term relationships** consist of interpersonal connections that are very brief (e.g. lasting a few weeks or months), whereas **long-term relationships** are characterized by an intimate interpersonal affiliation that lasts many years and perhaps throughout one's lifetime. Interpersonal relationships may be intense or rather

distant. The connection between individuals may be based on common interests or concerns, love, physical or sexual attraction ('chemistry'), religious beliefs, work, politics, social commitment or other factors. The specific situations in which interpersonal relationships are shaped can range from educational or family settings, work, clubs or organizations, neighbourhoods and places of worship. All of our interpersonal relationships are developed within the context of particular social, cultural, linguistic, political and environmental influences.

**Relational bonds**, that is, the interpersonal connection between individuals, serve as the basis of social groups and society as a whole. These ties may be guided by law, tradition or mutual agreement between individuals. As we grow and mature, and possibly move to other parts of the world either temporarily or permanently, some of our affiliations fluctuate from time to time; that is, they differ in intensity and degree of intimacy. Some relationships endure while others come to an end for a variety of reasons (e.g. faded chemistry, conflict, infidelity, different life paths, etc.).

Compared with previous decades, **intercultural interpersonal relationships** (e.g. friendships, dating, co-habitation, marriages involving people with different cultural or religious backgrounds) have become much more commonplace and accepted in many parts of the world. Despite this, communication difficulties and other threats to these relationships still exist. Developing satisfactory intercultural bonds is believed by many to be more challenging than **intracultural relationships** (interpersonal bonds that form between individuals who share the same linguistic and cultural background) or **intraracial relationships** (interpersonal relationships between individuals from the same socially-constructed racial group). Not all societies are receptive to intercultural relationships, especially when they are of an intimate or romantic nature. Negative reactions can certainly hamper or even lead to the failure of intercultural unions. Along with individual characteristics and skills, societal norms and attitudes can play a significant role in determining whether intercultural connections flourish or falter.

## CROSSING BOUNDARIES IN INTERCULTURAL INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Intercultural interpersonal relationships can take many forms and cross one or more socially- and historically-constructed boundaries (e.g. class, race, language, religion). People may develop affiliations with individuals from different ethnic, linguistic, national, racial and religious backgrounds or form bonds with those who differ in terms of such dimensions as age, ability, gender, social class and sexual orientation (Sorrells 2013; Vela-McConnell 2011). The following section briefly describes various types of intercultural relationships and provides examples of each.

### Interracial intercultural relationships

As noted in previous chapters, '**race**' is a culturally and historically-transmitted concept. Orbe and Harris (2008: 8) define it as 'a largely social – yet powerful – construction of human difference that has been used to classify human beings into separate value-based categories'; however, as Goodman *et al.* (2012: 251) point out, '[a]mong humans there are no races except the human race'. Notions of race form the basis of racism and many interculturalists prefer not to use the term. Nonetheless, perceptions and attitudes towards 'race' *can* still impact intercultural communication, and the formation of interracial relationships remains a sensitive

issue in many parts of the world (Babbitt & Sommers 2011; Goodman *et al.* 2012; Orbe & Harris 2008; Smith & Hattery 2009).

**Interracial communication** refers to 'interactions between two individuals in a situational context where racial difference is a salient issue' (Orbe & Harris 2008: 268). Bonds between people from different racial groups are referred to as **interracial intercultural relationships**. An example would be a romance between a woman who is racially identified as Vietnamese and a man who is **biracial**, that is, he has both Hispanic and African roots. A friendship between a black man and a white South African male would be another example. If an Australian Aborigine forms a romantic attachment with a white Australian, this, too, would be considered an interracial intercultural relationship.

Attitudes towards the crossing of racial boundaries have changed significantly in much of the world, due in large part to anti-racist/social justice education and legislation (Fella & Ruzza 2013; Kailin 2002; Sensoy & Diangelo 2012). Despite this, as discussed in Chapter 7, racism persists and there are members of society who still view interracial relationships with suspicion, fear and disdain. In some situations, people may tolerate **interracial friendships** (relationships between friends who are affiliated with a different race) but object to more intimate, romantic ties (e.g. dating, marriage) (Goodman *et al.* 2012; Orbe & Harris 2008; Smith & Hattery 2009; Vela-McConnell 2011).

### Interethnic intercultural relationships

In Chapter 6 we learned that one's ethnicity can also impact on intercultural relations. Different from race, **ethnicity** is defined by Orbe and Harris (2008: 8) as 'a cultural marker that indicates shared traditions, heritage, and ancestral origins'. An individual may be considered racially Asian but Japanese in terms of ethnicity. An African American from Puerto Rico may be categorized as black in terms of race but be ethnically Hispanic.

Relationships between individuals affiliated with different ethnic groups are referred to as **interethnic relationships** (Gaines *et al.* 2006). Friendship between a French Canadian and a Canadian with Irish–Scottish heritage or a romance between a Malaysian Singaporean and a Chinese Singaporean would be deemed interethnic. In both examples, the interethnic relationships are between individuals from the same racial group. Interethnic relationships may also develop between people who are categorized as belonging to differing races and ethnicities. For example, a friendship between an Indian Singaporean and a Chinese Singaporean, or a romance between a Latino American woman and an African American man cross both ethnic and racial boundaries.

### International intercultural relationships

Relationships that develop between people that bridge 'national cultural and citizenship lines' are referred to as **international relationships** (Sorrells 2013: 152). On a university campus in Denmark, friendship between a Kenyan international exchange student and a Danish business major would be considered an international intercultural relationship. A romance that develops between a Syrian refugee and a Turkish citizen would also be categorized as an international union. Many international, intercultural relationships are interethnic, interracial and, possibly, interreligious. In other words, international relationships often cross more than one social boundary.

## Interreligious intercultural relationships

Increasingly, intercultural relationships involve multiple religions. **Interreligious intercultural relationships** refer to interpersonal connections between people with different religious orientations such as ties between Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Muslims, Jews or other faiths (or non-believers). **Interfaith** or **interreligious friendship** is characterized as an interpersonal relationship or friendship bond between individuals who are affiliated with a different religion.

The attitudes towards interreligious unions are viewed differently in different parts of the world, depending, in part, on the nature of the relationship (e.g. friendship, romance), the particular gender and religions involved and the sociocultural, historical context (Jones *et al.* 2009; Mackenzie *et al.* 2009; Reuben 2002). In the same environment, views about interfaith friendships and marriage may vary among people from different generations as well as among individuals of all ages as there are bound to be different degrees of openness.

A **pluralistic society** is made up of people from numerous cultural and ethnic backgrounds, whereby cultural diversity among citizens is acknowledged and encouraged. In a **religious pluralistic society**, many different religious beliefs, concepts and ideologies coexist. In such environments, individuals from different religious backgrounds may become friends or marry and live together in harmony, whereas in less open contexts strong social or religious sanctions (or even laws) may discourage or even prevent interfaith marriage.

## Social class differences in intercultural relationships

Multiculturalism, globalization, immigration, the spread of democracy, ease of travel and the Internet are creating more possibilities for relationships to form between individuals who have a different social background and status. **Social class** refers to 'a social grouping of people based on common economic and other characteristics determined by society and reflecting a social hierarchy' (Goodman *et al.* 2012: 252). In different geographical locations at specific times in human history, individuals or groups have been divided into social classes that have been accorded different degrees of power, prestige and influence. In industrial Britain, for example, people were recognized as belonging to one of the following classes: the upper class, middle class, working class or under class (impoverished). In India, the Hindu caste system, a hereditary division of labour and status, ascribed at birth, long dictated the kind of life people could lead. Those who were classified as 'untouchables' or 'Dalits' were at the bottom of the caste system and not allowed to freely associate with people from other castes.

The caste system is officially banned in modern, democratic India and the rigid class system that dictated everyday life in industrial Britain is no longer in force. Nonetheless, differences in social classes and discrimination persist. All over the world, groups of people are still distinguished by inequalities in such areas as authority, economic resources, power, education, working and living conditions, life-span, religion and culture. **Social markers** or indicators of class are still present and evolving. These context-dependent markers may include one's cultural background, accent, proficiency in another language (bilingualism, fluency in an international, prestigious language), wealth and income (e.g. 'new' versus 'old' money), material possessions (e.g. a fancy car, a large house), level and source of education, the prestige of one's occupation, racial or ethnic origin, the reputation of one's neighbourhood and so on (Block 2013; Meyerhoff 2010; Wardaugh 2010).

Although it has become much more feasible for bonds to form between individuals from different social classes, negative views about these unions persist and can certainly hamper

their development. **Classism**, prejudice or discrimination on the basis of social class, encompasses individual attitudes and behaviours as well as policies and practices that privilege one class over another. Unfortunately, in many regions, **social class prejudice** still exists, that is, people harbour negative personal attitudes towards individuals of another class. As noted in Chapter 7, prejudice remains a powerful barrier to the formation of interpersonal relationships between individuals who display different social markers (e.g. accent, speech style) and have a different class culture and status.

## Language differences in intercultural relationships

Language plays a significant role in the formation and maintenance of our intercultural relationships, whether our communication is primarily face-to-face, on the phone or online (e.g. email, Skype, text messaging). (Language in computer-mediated relationships is discussed later in this chapter.) In interpersonal situations, whether we realize it or not, our speech and nonverbal behaviours can convey information about our social status, personality, temperament, group affiliations and so on. Our communication partners continuously form impressions of us based, in part, on our language use. As we speak, they are considering how to respond or proceed (e.g. whether to share personal information, get to know us better or discontinue the interaction, etc.). Our language and communication skills (both verbal and nonverbal) influence the quality and longevity of our interpersonal relationships, whether intracultural or intercultural.

In conversations, our speech can build and demonstrate solidarity with our communication partners or it can lead to miscommunication, conflict and separation. As discussed in Chapters 4 and 6, the **communication accommodation theory (CAT)** posits that individuals may adjust their language use or patterns (e.g. choice of accents or dialects, style of communication) to bring them closer to or further apart from their interlocutors (Gallois *et al.* 2005; Giles *et al.* 2012). **Convergence** refers to the ways in which individuals adapt their communicative behaviours in order to reduce social differences between themselves and their conversation partners. These actions are believed to facilitate relationship building. People who become very close friends may even develop their own way of talking with each other that is unique to them. In contrast, **divergence** refers to the distancing of oneself from one's interlocutors by accentuating differences in one's speech (e.g. accent, communication style) or nonverbal behaviours (e.g. gestures, personal distance). Whether deliberate or not, as one might expect, acts of divergence can hamper the development of interpersonal relationships.

Nowadays, alliances frequently form between people who speak a different first language or dialect. In many parts of the world, English is the **lingua franca**, that is, the medium of communication between people who do not have the same first language. As English is the most dominant language of international communication in both face-to-face interactions and online, in many intercultural encounters, one or more of the communication partners are apt to be using this language (Jenkins 2007, 2013; Mackenzie 2013; McKay & Bokhorst-Hong 2008).

When people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds interact, the language that is used can be a powerful advantage for the most proficient speaker. For example, a native speaker of English who is communicating in the language with a less proficient speaker is privileged in this situation. The use of a second language in intercultural interpersonal relationships also increases the likelihood of miscommunication, an issue that resurfaces when we discuss barriers to intercultural friendships and romance.

## Age differences in intercultural relationships

Outside one's family circle, children tend to form close interpersonal bonds with peers, that is, those who are near in age, education and social class as they naturally spend much of their time together during their schooling. When people enter the workforce and gain more exposure to other social circles, either in face-to-face situations or online, friendships or romances may form with individuals who are from a different generation. Attitudes towards age gaps in interpersonal relationships vary in different sociocultural contexts. The degree of acceptance or non-acceptance of the age difference may depend on the nature of the bond (e.g. friendship, romance) and the gender(s) involved, as well as other dimensions (e.g. social, cultural, economic, political, historical) (Cupach & Spitzberg 2011; Lehmiller & Agnew 2011).

In North America, for example, wealthy older men have long formed intimate relationships (including marital unions) with considerably younger women. These 'May–December' unions are generally accepted as normal; however, when older women form romantic attachments with younger men, they are sometimes referred to as 'cougars', with their male partners dismissed as mere 'toy boys'. Among some elements of society, a double standard still exists. In Asia, as well as in Western nations, it is not unusual for older, white males to marry considerably younger Asian women; it is rare, however, for young white males to marry older Asian women (Constable 2005; Nemoto 2009; Waters 2005; Yancey & Lewis 2009). Societal norms and attitudes towards these age gaps are influenced by prevalent values and beliefs, which are conveyed by society, the mass media (e.g. television, films, the press) and social media (e.g. Facebook, twitter).

## Ability differences in intercultural relationships

The way society views people with disabilities (e.g. physical handicaps, cognitive impairment, mental illness) influences the interpersonal relationships that disabled individuals form with members of the community who are not disabled. Although the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations Enable n.d.) is bringing about positive changes in many countries, disability rights movements are at different stages in different parts of the world. In some contexts, formal education emphasizes the acceptance of people who are disabled and laws have been adopted to safeguard their rights, whereas in other cultures, the disabled are shunned by the majority. This is resulting in differing opportunities for relationships to form between able-bodied individuals and those who are disabled.

**Inclusiveness** is defined by Orbe and Harris (2008: 267) as 'general acceptance and appreciation of differences' within a community or society. **Social inclusion** refers to the act of giving all people in society an opportunity to participate irrespective of their background or characteristics (e.g. mental or physical disability, race, language, culture, gender, age, social status, etc.). **Social exclusion** refers to the opposite behaviour (e.g. barring individuals or groups from participating in one's activities, strongly discouraging or preventing ingroup members from forming relationships with people who are disabled or from a different social class, etc.).

Although the situation is improving in much of the world, segregation is still limiting interactions between disabled and able-bodied individuals. In some environments, people who are physically different or intellectually challenged are viewed with great suspicion. Considered a curse on the family or community, disabled individuals may be abandoned or kept hidden from the rest of society (Barron & Amerena 2007). In many countries, children with disabilities have no access to education or have limited opportunity to pursue higher education for

multifarious reasons (e.g. inadequate access and resources for the disabled, prejudice). Cultural stigmas can significantly curtail opportunities for the development of interpersonal bonds between disabled people and other members of society (World Health Organization 2011).

In much of the world, attitudes towards physical disabilities differ from those towards intellectual impairment or mental illness. Negative societal attitudes can make it particularly difficult for those with known mental illness (e.g. bipolarism, schizophrenia) or disability (e.g. autism, developmentally delayed) to form and sustain relationships with other people. This also makes it more difficult for individuals with mental illness to seek professional help (Watson *et al.* 2012). In some societies, pejorative terms are still used to label individuals with mental or physical abilities and they may be ostracized or excluded from mainstream society. (Chapter 7 discusses discrimination against people with disabilities.)

## Gender differences in intercultural relationships

Gender can also impact on intercultural interpersonal relationships. Communication between boys and girls and men and women has been the subject of research for many decades (e.g. Shi & Langman 2012; Tannen 1996, 2001; Wood 2009). As noted in Chapters 4 and 6, differences in language patterns and use (e.g. word choice, communication style), self-identities, expectations, roles and responsibilities, privileges and constraints, status, power and positioning can influence interpersonal alliances that form between men and women in a particular cultural context. Relationships between males and females in intracultural relationships are complicated and in intercultural or interracial unions even more so as the partners have been socialized in different linguistic and cultural environments (Renalds 2011; Smith & Hattery 2009; Vela-McConnell 2011).

## Sexual orientation and intercultural relationships

Intercultural interpersonal relationships may also form between individuals who have a different sexual orientation. According to the American Psychiatric Association (n.d.),

**'Sexual orientation'** is a term frequently used to describe a person's romantic, emotional or sexual attraction to another person. A person attracted to another person of the same sex is said to have a **homosexual orientation** and may be called **gay** (both men and women) or **lesbian**. Individuals attracted to persons of the other sex are said to have a **heterosexual orientation**. Sexual orientation falls along a continuum and individuals who are attracted to both men and women are said to be **bisexual**. (Bolding added to the original.)

Understandings of sexual orientation are shaped within particular cultural contexts and are sometimes influenced by religious doctrine. While some groups maintain that sexual orientation is a matter of choice and can be changed, it is more widely accepted in academia that it is innate and develops as one matures: 'Individuals may become aware at different points in their lives that they are heterosexual, gay, lesbian, or bisexual' ([www.psychiatry.org/mental-health/people/lgbt-sexual-orientation](http://www.psychiatry.org/mental-health/people/lgbt-sexual-orientation)).

Attitudes towards sexuality and sexual orientation are influenced by one's culture. Prevailing norms and perceptions can significantly impact one's willingness to develop an interpersonal relationship with individuals who have a sexual orientation that differs from the



majority. For example, if homosexuality is deemed socially unacceptable or even legally banned, gays are forced to hide their sexual orientation or risk harm. In hostile situations like this, it is very difficult or even impossible for individuals who are openly gay to form relationships with heterosexuals. Conversely, in inclusive societies where there are no social sanctions against such relationships, heterosexual-homosexual friendships are more commonplace and widely accepted.

### **Multiplex intercultural interpersonal relationships**

Intercultural interpersonal relationships often involve multiple cultural differences and the crossing of more than one socially- and historically-constructed boundary (e.g. age, class, language, ethnic, national, racial, regional, religious, sexual orientation, etc.). In England, for example, a wealthy, middle-aged Muslim businessman from Pakistan may meet and develop a **romantic relationship** with an ethnic Chinese immigrant, a 30-year old Christian woman from a lower middle-class family in Malaysia. As their relationship evolves through English, their lingua franca, at times, they may need to negotiate a language barrier as well as cultural differences in gender roles and expectations, communication styles, values, religious beliefs and practices. If their romance becomes serious (e.g. they contemplate co-habitation or marriage), they would also likely need to deal with external pressures including the attitudes of their family members, friends, religious leaders (imam or minister) and the larger society towards such a union.

## **BENEFITS OF INTERCULTURAL INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

Although crossing boundaries to establish intercultural interpersonal relationships can be challenging, it can also be highly rewarding. Developing connections with individuals who are different from oneself in terms of age, language, gender, ethnicity, race, ability, sexual orientation, religion, social class and nationality can enrich one's life in multiple and often unexpected ways. Potential benefits include, but are not limited to: heightened self-awareness, more understanding of other 'ways of being', the breaking-down of stereotypes, more sensitivity towards identity issues, the acquisition of new skills and pursuits, the refinement of one's intercultural interpersonal communication skills and more appreciation of diversity.

### **Heightened self-awareness**

When you develop a relationship with someone from another cultural, linguistic, or religious background, you are apt to be exposed to different values, communication styles, cultural scripts, traditions, languages or dialects and other ways of being. This can spur critical thinking about the messages you received from your ingroup (members of your culture) about outgroups (e.g. people who have a different religion, sexual orientation from your ingroup). Intercultural relationships can raise awareness of the many ways in which the socialization process has shaped your life (e.g. attitudes, values, beliefs) and self-identities. It can also enhance your awareness of your language use and communication style (verbal and nonverbal).

Sustained intercultural contact can prompt you to think more deeply about many aspects of your life (e.g. cultural heritage, language use, beliefs, daily rituals, etc.). While linguistic and cultural differences can be a source of irritation, they can also lead to heightened awareness of your attitudes, identities and habits *if* you cultivate a **reflective mindset**, that is, the ability to revisit and make meaning from your experience. Reflecting on your intercultural interactions can prompt you to consider how your habitual ways of interacting may be impacting others.

Intercultural relationships can help you to recognize unique elements of your own culture and language. When questions are raised about your habitual ways of doing and saying things, you may find it difficult to explain communication styles, traditions, beliefs and daily actions that you have long assumed were commonplace. You may not be able to answer queries about the history of your culture (or religion). You may be stumped by questions about the grammar, vocabulary, idiomatic expressions and other features of the language you learned as a child. This can motivate you to actively seek more knowledge about your own culture, language, religion and heritage, which can be a very positive outcome of intercultural relationships.

### **More understanding of different ways of being**

When you develop a personal connection with someone from another linguistic and cultural background you are apt to gain exposure to new ways of thinking, acting and communicating (e.g. unfamiliar worldviews, daily practices, linguistic expressions, communication styles). Over time, you may develop a deeper understanding of what it really means to speak another language and be affiliated with another group (e.g. linguistic, religious, ethnic, etc.).

### **The breaking-down of stereotypes**

Positive first-hand experience with individuals from another cultural, religious or language background can challenge preconceived notions or stereotypes about the group(s) they are associated with. Unfortunately, some people who develop intercultural relationships retain entrenched stereotypes and simply view their new friends or romantic partners as exceptions; however, if you cultivate an open mindset, negative images and misperceptions are likely to dissipate as you gain a deeper understanding of differing practices and beliefs. Even if you disagree with certain cultural elements, honing the ability to see another perspective can enhance future relationships.

Intercultural interpersonal relationships may compel you to critically reflect on how your home environment and personal experiences have influenced your perceptions and attitudes towards people who are different. Before personal contact, your stereotypical views may have been below your level of awareness and simply taken for granted.

### **More sensitivity towards identity issues**

Through sustained intercultural interactions, you may discover which facets of your identities become salient in different contexts. If you are observant and have well-developed listening skills, you may also uncover clues about the preferred self-identities of your communication

partners. This awareness can help you to understand how your intercultural friends or romantic partners view themselves and their place in the world. These discoveries can enhance your interpersonal connections.

### The acquisition of new skills and pursuits

Interpersonal intercultural relationships can introduce you to clubs, organizations and a range of activities that might otherwise be unknown to you. Exposure to novel situations and practices offers the opportunity to learn a new hobby or skills (e.g. Cajun cooking, cricket, sitar playing, mahjong). Without your intercultural friends and/or romantic partners opening the door for you, you may miss out on these delights.

Hiroko, a Japanese international exchange student in Vienna, learned how to make mouth-watering apple strudel from her Austrian housemates. While working in Tokyo, Leo, an Australian English language teacher, discovered the art of karaoke singing when he became friends with some Japanese colleagues. Vincent, a university student in New Zealand, took great pride in learning how to play the ruan, a traditional Chinese guitar, from Chen Peiyan, an immigrant from Xian, China who had become a trusted friend.

Developing a relationship with someone from a different linguistic background also opens up the possibility of learning an additional language or dialect. The desire to deepen one's intercultural friendship or romance can be a powerful source of motivation to master a second language. For example, Elena, a Russian, met and fell in love with Ahmed, a Jordanian law student, while doing an internship in the U.S. As their friendship blossomed into a romance, she became inspired to study Arabic, something she had never contemplated before. When she visited his family in Amman she was able to converse with his relatives. In some situations, like Elena's, new intercultural, international alliances can lead to the opportunity to get to know, and even visit or live in, another part of the world. Intercultural interpersonal relationships can open your eyes to new worlds and vistas.

### The refinement of intercultural interpersonal communication skills

Interpersonal communication is the primary way in which humans build, nurture and transform relationships. To develop effective and meaningful interpersonal relationships, we need to develop **communication competence**, that is, 'the ability to achieve one's goals in a manner that is personally acceptable and, ideally, acceptable to others' (Adler *et al.* 2013: G-2). **Appropriate communication** refers to communication that enhances the relationship while **effective communication** is associated with communication that achieves the desired results (Wiemann *et al.* 1997). Both dimensions can be improved through practice.

Developing interpersonal affiliations with people who have a different cultural background can also facilitate the enhancement of one's intercultural communication skills, which is vital in today's globalized world. Successful, meaningful relationships require effective interpersonal skills and when cultural differences are involved, it is imperative that we develop **intercultural communication competence**. This entails

impression management that allows members of different cultural systems to be aware of their cultural identity and cultural differences, and to interact effectively and

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appropriately with each other in diverse contexts by agreeing on the meaning of diverse symbol systems with the result of mutually satisfying relationships.

(Kupka 2008: 16)

Through sustained intercultural interactions, you can learn to be sensitive to the preferred identities of others, and discover how to deal with misunderstandings that naturally arise. Over time, you can hone your intercultural competence and become more 'Other-centred' ('partner-centred'), which, in turn, nurtures your relationship.

If you are communicating in a second language with someone from another cultural background, it is important to develop **intercultural communicative competence**, 'the complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself' (Fantini 2007: 12). (Chapter 12 explores this construct in more detail.) Being able to communicate effectively and appropriately in multiple languages affords more possibilities for intercultural dialogue and friendship.

### Enhanced appreciation of diversity

Finally, as you gain more exposure to people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds and develop meaningful intercultural relationships, it is possible to gain more understanding and genuine appreciation of diversity, which is very significant as our world is becoming more interconnected. Accepting and embracing someone who is culturally and ethnically different from yourself sets a positive example for others in our increasingly multicultural world.

As you build intercultural relationships, develop more intercultural knowledge and break down stereotypes, you can share your new understandings and attitudes with those around you. In this way, your more open mindset can have a positive impact on your friends, family and colleagues who have not yet forged any intercultural ties, perhaps due to negative images of people who have a different cultural, linguistic or religious background.

Intercultural relationships that differ from the norm (e.g. intracultural bonds) threaten 'the established and taken-for-granted order of our larger society' and have 'the potential to move our society in the direction of increased egalitarianism' (Vela-McConnell 2011: 183). Individuals who dare to cross boundaries, whether in terms of language, race, sexual orientation, class or other variable can inspire others to form similar relationships. Gradually, relationships that were once seen as taboo may become accepted as normal.

## INTERCULTURAL FRIENDSHIP AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

Increased migration, ease of travel, ethnically diverse communities and enhanced opportunities computer-mediated communication (CMC) (e.g. Facebook, email, blogs, MySpace, twitter, Internet relay chats, etc.) have made it more possible for intercultural friendships to form and this is leading to more diverse social networks.

**Intercultural friendship** is a personal connection or affiliation forged between people who have a different cultural background. Increasingly, these interpersonal relationships entail the use of a second language (e.g. an international language or lingua franca) by one or more of the friendship partners. Rooted in anthropology, a **social network** refers to 'the multiple web of relationships an individual contracts in a society with other people who he or she is bound to directly or indirectly by ties of friendship, kinship or other social relationships' (Trudgill 2003:

121–22). Sociolinguist Miriam Meyerhoff (2010: 295) notes that in a social network ‘not all members may know each other . . . and some members may know each other in a different capacity from others’. For example, a woman may form interpersonal relationships at work, have a different set of friends in her social life and yet another group of acquaintances in the sports club where she works out. Many of these individuals may never meet but they are still linked to each other by having a common friend. Their friends are also part of this woman’s wider social network even if she does not interact with them. A **friendship network**, a type of social network, includes individuals who are very close personal friends, acquaintances (e.g. those who are more distant) and ‘friends of friends’.

As more and more people are coming into contact with individuals who have a different background (e.g. cultural, linguistic, religious) or orientation (e.g. sexual), researchers are beginning to take a closer look at the formation and quality of intercultural interpersonal relationships. Questions such as the following are driving their studies: what factors facilitate or hinder the development of intercultural friendships and multicultural/multilingual social networks? How are the Internet, social media and mass media affecting the development of intercultural alliances? What steps can be taken to nurture friendships that cross linguistic and social boundaries? In what ways are diverse friendship alliances and networks impacting society?

As noted in the previous chapter, the number of students who travel to another country for part of their education has grown exponentially in recent years; accordingly, more attention is being paid to the friendship patterns and social networks of local and international students (e.g. Gareis 1995, 2000, 2012; Green 2013; Hendrickson *et al.* 2010; Lee 2006; Li 2010). Many of these studies have revealed that during their stay abroad, students tend to maintain or develop friendship networks with individuals from their own country (**co-nationals** who speak the same first language) or individuals from other foreign countries (**multi-nationals**) (e.g. other international exchange students). While most express the desire to develop friendships with people from the host country (**host nationals**) prior to their sojourn, for a variety of reasons (e.g. culture shock, ethnocentrism, a language barrier, limited host receptivity, lack of intercultural competence, different understandings of friendship), many return home disappointed (Gareis 2012; Hendrickson *et al.* 2010; Kinginger 2009).

In both domestic and international settings, researchers have also carried out investigations of intercultural and interracial friendships in the workplace (e.g. multinational firms) or community (e.g. expatriate or immigrant families and host nationals) (e.g. Chen & Nakazawa 2012; Diggs & Clark 2002). Their work is informing us of potential barriers to successful intercultural interpersonal relationships and the diversification of social networks. Those who advocate the crossing of social boundaries voice concerns about the numerous internal and external challenges individuals may face in forming and sustaining intercultural friendships in educational, work or leisure settings, as well as in cyberspace (e.g. Li 2010; Marcoccia 2012; O’Dowd 2001, 2012). Their research is raising awareness of the most effective ways to nurture meaningful intercultural interpersonal bonds.

## Cultural perceptions of friendship

*A life without a friend is a life without a sun.* (German proverb)

*It is better to be in chains with friends than to be in a garden with strangers.* (Persian proverb)

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*Life without a friend is like death without a witness.* (Spanish proverb)

*It is better in times of need to have a friend rather than money.* (Greek proverb)

*Life without friends is not worth living.* (Turkish proverb)

What do these proverbs from different lands have in common? All of them point to the pivotal role friends play in our lives irrespective of the language(s) we speak or our cultural background. No matter where we reside in the world, friendship matters. It is through friendship that we gain much-needed practical and socio-emotional support and a sense of how we fit into society. Along with family relationships, friendship bonds help us to navigate the increasingly complex world in which we live. In situations where families are fragmented, close friendships can become even more crucial.

Through friendship we gain practical and emotional support, and an important contribution to our personal identities. Friendship also helps to integrate us into the public realm and “act as a resource for managing some of the mundane and exceptional events” that confront us in our lives.

(Allan 1989: 114)

Unlike relationships with family members or kinship bonds, friendship is more voluntary, although it is important to recognize that it is subject to the constraints of economic, political, linguistic, social, and cultural circumstances and other factors (e.g. proximity or nearness). Within a particular cultural context, linguistic sanctions as well as social norms and expectations play a role in determining who we form friendships with and how.

To complicate matters, the meaning attached to the word ‘friend’ varies in different regions of the world. As noted by Badhwar (1993: 36), ‘no account of friendship enjoys universal acceptance’. One’s conception of what it means to be a ‘friend’ is culturally constructed and situated, and varies to some degree in different cultural contexts (Chen & Nakazawa 2012; Collier 1996, 2002). In some cultures, specific linguistic terms or expressions are used to identify and distinguish between sub-categories of friends.

across all cultures and languages there is a word for a close relationship established outside the narrow family context . . . We find indications that some languages, during some periods of their development, gave more emphasis to an objective or material reality, such as the importance of mutual help, in close relationships, whereas other languages stressed the affective union of friendship, referring to a subjective reality . . . The scope of the connotations related to the words used for friendship seems to reflect the socio-historical circumstances under which the friendship was important. The horizon of these meanings includes family issues, ritual functions, mutual assistance, kindness, war comradeship, conflict solution, intimacy, and affection.

(Krappman 1998: 24)

Since we live in a diverse, dynamic world, it is not surprising that differing understandings of friendship have formed in different regions. Even within the same sociocultural context, notions of friendship can differ among individuals due to such factors as age, class, religion, gender and intercultural experience, among others (Adams *et al.* 2000, Chen & Nakazawa 2012; Lee 2008).

In the United States, the term ‘friend’ can encompass casual acquaintances as well as lifelong, intimate companions (Gareis 1995, 2012). In this context, a **casual friend** or

**acquaintance** refers to someone you have been introduced to but do not know very well. You might say hello when you meet and engage in small talk (e.g. chat about the weather or an assignment) but not reveal many personal details about yourself. The connection with acquaintances tends to be friendly but rather superficial. In contrast, a **close friend** refers to someone you can rely on to provide emotional support and perhaps lend a hand when needed. This relationship is more intimate and you are apt to share more personal details about yourself (e.g. your family problems, love life) and engage in a much deeper level of conversation on a wider range of topics. Within this sub-category, U.S. Americans may also designate one or more individuals as their **best friends** to indicate that they are especially close to them.

In general, European Americans tend to have a large collection of 'friends', which changes over time and, in most cases, involves only very limited mutual obligations, if any. Although most are casual relationships, these individuals are often referred to as friends, which can confuse people who have divergent understandings of what friendship means. Collier (1996, 2002), for example, discovered that conceptions of friendship differed among ethnic groups in the U.S.: African Americans emphasize the importance of respect and acceptance, Latinos tend to value relational support, Asian Americans stress the positive sharing of ideas, and for European Americans, recognition of individual needs is paramount. Not surprisingly, these different notions of friendships (e.g. expectations regarding obligations and trust) can cause misunderstandings and result in negative impressions.

In many cultural contexts, a clear distinction is made between friends and acquaintances. In China, the following proverb conveys the message that it is best to have a few close, lifelong friends rather than a large number of acquaintances who come and go: '*One's acquaintances may fill the world, but one's true friends can be but few*'. Another Chinese saying, '*Cooked at one stirring makes friends too easily*' underscores the need for adequate time and commitment to build up a genuine, long-lasting friendship. Researchers have found that friendship patterns among Chinese nationals are characterized by strong social bonds and obligations that develop over a long period of time. Li (2010: 15–16), for example, asserts that 'Chinese people make friends that tend to last longer and each party expects full support of resources, time, and loyalty from the other instead of casual, short-term friendships'. In traditional Chinese culture, lifelong friends may be considered like family members.

Cooper *et al.* (2007) reviewed cross-cultural studies of friendship and identified a number of cultural variations in intercultural friendships, including: 'selection (who can be a friend), duration (how long the friendship lasts), the number of friends, the responsibilities and prerogatives of a friend, and how long a relationship exists before it can be considered a friendship' (p. 169). While most research of this nature has focused on face-to-face interactions, the Internet and social media are also influencing intracultural and intercultural friendships.

## Language and intercultural cyber friendship

Technology and English, the primary lingua franca of the Internet, are changing the nature of interpersonal communication in much of the world. As noted by West and Turner (2011b: 379), 'communication between and among individuals is forever changed because of technology . . . The effects of technology on our interpersonal relationships are unprecedented, unpredictable, and unstoppable'. New communication technologies (e.g. the Internet, email, laptops) and social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) are being introduced at a rapid pace. These innovations are expanding possibilities for the development and maintenance of both intracultural

and intercultural relationships, especially among individuals who are able to converse in English or another international language.

Communication that is facilitated by computer technologies (e.g. the use of two or more networked computers) is referred to as **computer-mediated communication (CMC)**. Walther (1992: 52) defines it as 'synchronous or asynchronous electronic mail and computer conferencing, by which senders encode in text messages that are relayed from senders' computers as receivers'. In **synchronous communication** (e.g. Skype, chat rooms, Internet relay chat) all participants are online at the same time, whereas **asynchronous communication** (e.g. email) occurs with time constraints, that is, the receiver of an email message may not read it until several hours or days after it has been sent.

The rise of the Internet has led to the development of a virtual community of **netizens**, that is, individuals who actively engage in online interactions. While English is the primary lingua franca in cyberspace, the speed and format of CMC is bringing about new language forms (e.g. abbreviations), symbols and communication styles, which impact interpersonal relationships. To save time, netizens tend to communicate through **netspeak** (chatspeak or cyber-slang), 'an informal, concise and expressive style' (Marcoccia 2012). As CMC (email, chat rooms) is primarily text-based and dependent on verbal language, it has fewer nonverbal cues than in face-to-face interactions. To compensate for the lack of nonverbal information in text messages, graphic accents and symbols have become a regular feature in CMC (West & Turner 2011b). For example, emoticons (e.g. sad faces) and articons (e.g. pictures of objects) are frequently used to replace or enhance a verbal message.

In addition to email, the emergence of **social networking sites (SNSs)**, such as Facebook, twitter, MySpace, and LinkedIn, is making it possible to initiate and maintain interpersonal relationships online, instead of relying solely on face-to-face communication or phone calls, as in years gone by. As long as they have access to the Internet, people can now share personal information with friends and their wider social networks through Facebook, blogs, video chats, instant messaging, text messaging and other media. Photos and video clips can be uploaded to one's Facebook account or circulated via email within a matter of minutes. Facebook allows us to 'friend' people we barely know. Although not a social network, Skype, online video software, is also a widely used social tool that is connecting people around the world.

Intrigued by these innovations, researchers have been asking a number of key questions about the impact of the digital revolution on interpersonal communication and intercultural relations, such as, are the Internet and the proliferation of SNSs facilitating or hindering the formation of meaningful friendships and romantic connections between individuals from disparate linguistic and cultural backgrounds? How is the dominance of English on the Internet impacting on intercultural relations? What is the impact of netspeak on the interpersonal intercultural connections of netizens? What is the relationship between online interactions and face-to-face meetings within the context of intercultural friendship formation? Do they complement one another?

While researchers acknowledge that text-based CMC differs from face-to-face interaction, they disagree about its impact on interpersonal and intercultural relationships. Proponents maintain that the Internet increases the possibility for contact between people from diverse backgrounds:

The ability to reach so many different people from so many different places so quickly gives communication a new sense of power. Wherever we live, we can use the Internet to help bring diversity and new cultures into our lives, changing our social, political, and business lives.

(Gamble & Gamble 2013: 37)



Individuals can now become acquainted with each other online without revealing many personal details (e.g. their ethnicity, first language, race, religion, nationality, etc.). As noted by Marcoccia (2012: 358), 'some aspects of people's identity such as their ethnic group, gender, social class and accent are hidden in the text-based environment of Internet-mediated communication'. Netizens can freely express their views without revealing their real names and embarrassing themselves or their families. Advocates of Internet-mediated communication maintain that this is a positive feature as it enhances free speech and reduces the negative impact of stereotypes and personal biases. They argue that people who might never have the opportunity to meet face-to-face can cross social and cultural boundaries (e.g. age, language, race, religion, sexual orientation) and form relationships online, which in turn can break down barriers and lead to enhanced intercultural understanding (Ritchie 2009; Simons 1998).

Critics, however, maintain that the use of technology does not necessarily lead to effective communication or the development of meaningful interpersonal intercultural relationships. People may misrepresent themselves (e.g. lie about who they are) and, even if they are fully honest about their identities and what they stand for, the absence of personal information can limit the formation of meaningful intercultural friendships (Zimbler & Feldman 2011).

Compared with face-to-face interactions, emails, online discussion forums and Internet relay chats (and many other Internet tools) are characterized by fewer social cues (e.g. nonverbal signals, sociopragmatic information) and this can make it challenging to clearly convey one's ideas and emotions. Messages may not be interpreted as intended, especially when individuals from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds are interacting online in a second language.

While 'the informal and friendly style which characterizes much of the interaction on the Internet' is familiar to people who have been socialized in the U.S. and other 'individualistic nations', O'Dowd (2001) contends that it can be confusing and unsettling for netizens who are used to a greater power distance and more formal discourse between people who do not know each other well. Even if non-native speakers of English have studied English in school for many years, informal discourse and colloquialisms may be baffling at times and lead to miscommunication.

Internet-mediated global English is the lingua franca of the Internet. It is an opportunity for intercultural dialogue but also an obstacle in the sense that this 'cyberlingua franca' is not necessarily suited to any specific culture. CMC has a reduced social dimension. This characteristic aids intercultural communication because it reduces cultural differences, but, at the same time, it is an obstacle to intercultural communication because it increases misunderstandings or aggressiveness.

(Marcoccia 2012: 366)

Much more research is needed to determine the potential of CMC and SNSs for the formation and maintenance of intercultural friendships, especially as new communication tools become available. While the Internet, in theory, can reduce the perceived distance between individuals from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, intercultural interactions can also be rife with misunderstandings. The dominance of English and American values may be barriers to the formation of equitable intercultural friendships in cyberspace.

## Building intercultural friendships and social networks

Recent studies of intercultural friendship and social networks have identified a number of internal and external factors that facilitate the formation and maintenance of friendship bonds between individuals who are culturally different, including those who do not speak the same first language. While most investigations have focused on face-to-face interactions, in the past decade more attention is being paid to **cyber friendships** (e.g. email relationships) and ties formed through online social networking sites (SNS) (e.g. Facebook, MySpace, Skype). This is enriching our understanding of the nature, complexity and variability of intercultural friendships.

A review of recent research on intercultural friendship reveals that a wide range of elements play a role in determining the potential for these interpersonal relationships, including: proximity, social networks, similarity-attraction, personality, willingness to communicate (WTC), empathy, identity recognition and validation, uncertainty reduction/anxiety management, disclosure and relational intimacy, shared identity and relational maintenance, intercultural communication competence and social acceptance. Let's take a look at each of these variables.

**Proximity.** All intercultural interpersonal relationships are affected by the affordances and constraints in one's environment. To develop intercultural friendships we first need to have the opportunity to come into close contact with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. If you study, live or work in a multicultural, multilingual environment, you are better positioned to initiate and develop intercultural friendships than if you are a member of the majority culture and live in a society that is much less diverse. In an environment where many people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds intermingle in all aspects of life, it is easier to form intercultural relationships in both formal settings (e.g. at school, at work, in a place of worship) and informal situations (e.g. at a health club or social organization). Hence, proximity or nearness plays a role in the formation of intercultural alliances.

With an increase in CMC and SNSs (e.g. Facebook) it is becoming more possible to make connections with people who come from a different background (e.g. language, social class, race, culture). Marcoccia (2012: 353) asserts that the Internet offers its users 'an unprecedented level of contact with people from other cultural and social groups'. As the Internet reaches across national borders, proponents argue that it affords us more possibilities to develop intercultural ties, especially if we can communicate in an international language. 'By enabling us to join a wide range of online communities and interact with people who hold different worldviews, the Internet enhances our ability to communicate within and across cultural boundaries' (Gamble & Gamble 2013: 40). For this to happen, at minimum, one needs to have access to this technology and proficiency in an international language. As discussed in Chapter 1, the disparity between rich and poor nations means that there is unequal access to the Internet, SNSs and international language education. Not everyone has the opportunity to develop intercultural interpersonal relationships online.

**Social networks.** The degree of diversity in one's social networks also influences one's opportunity to meet and interact with diverse individuals. If some of our family members, friends (acquaintances, close friends) or 'friends of friends' already have intercultural or interracial friendships, we are more apt to develop interpersonal relationships with people who are linguistically, racially and culturally different (Chen 2002; Vela-McConnell 2011). We are more likely to view these relationships as 'normal'.

**Similarity–Attraction.** The **Similarity–Attraction Hypothesis** posits that we are drawn to people we perceive to be similar to us (e.g. those who share our first language, race, ethnicity, beliefs, values, religion, worldview, group affiliations, etc.) (Adler *et al.* 2013; Byrne 1969). While there are naturally multiple differences in individuals who form intercultural friendships, there are also similarities. In intercultural interactions, research suggests that we are attracted to what we have in common (e.g. similar personal characteristics, interests, values, experiences, etc.) (Osbeck *et al.* 1997; Vela-McConnell 2011).

In intercultural relationships, Chen (2002: 244) observes that '[g]reater perceived similarity facilitates a communicative relationship; interactions, once started, may lead to perception of greater similarity or convergence of partners' behavior, or both'. In a study of Japanese and U.S. American students, Kito (2005) also found that individuals in both groups were attracted to their intercultural friends due to perceived similarity (e.g. shared interests, values, etc.). Let's look at some other examples that illustrate this theory.

While in Vancouver for a year-long exchange programme, Irena, an avid tennis player from Moscow, was attracted to Parnchand, a Thai student who shared her love of the game. By the end of their sojourn, they had become close friends. Juanita, a Brazilian exchange student, discovered that she and Amena, a Bahrani medical student, shared a common interest in nature photography and this led to a meaningful friendship. Linguistic and cultural differences became less important as their connection deepened.

**Personality.** Intercultural friendship formation has also been linked to certain personality traits (e.g. extroversion, desire to help others, open-mindedness) (Gareis 2000, 2012; Peng 2011). In some studies, an extroverted personality has been found to enhance the likelihood of an individual to reach across social boundaries to initiate relationships with individuals from different backgrounds (Ying 2002).

While similarities in personality have been found to be the basis of friendship formation (Mehra *et al.* 2001), differing personality traits may also work well if they complement one another, as in the following example. Nuran, an Egyptian American physiotherapist did not come from the same cultural or linguistic background as Meedy, an Indonesian doctor, but their religious affiliation brought them together. As their relationship grew they discovered that their temperaments made them very compatible. Nuran was outgoing and talkative, whereas her Indonesian friend was quiet and reserved. Meedy was happy to let Nuran take the lead. In this intercultural friendship, shared interests and beliefs drew them together and their different personalities complimented each other.

**Willingness to communicate (WTC).** Another personality trait that is linked to interpersonal communication and intercultural friendship is **willingness to communicate (WTC)**. In first-language contexts, McCroskey and Richmond (1987) characterize WTC as an individual's general personality orientation towards talking. Associated with a fairly stable personality trait, WTC is believed to develop as we mature, bringing about a 'global, personality-based orientation toward talking' (MacIntyre *et al.* 2003: 591). In second language interactions, level of proficiency and confidence in one's second language ability both influence one's willingness to speak. MacIntyre and his colleagues (1998: 547) define WTC as an individual's 'readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2'. One's **language anxiety** (degree of nervousness when using the L2) and WTC impact on one's desire to initiate and sustain intercultural friendships in a second language (L2).

**Empathy.** Several studies of intercultural friendships have revealed that **empathy**, the ability to understand another person's feelings and point of view (Cornes 2004; Krajewski 2011), plays a vital role in determining the quality and longevity of both intracultural and intercultural friendships. Empathy has both cognitive and affective (emotional) dimensions:

The cognitive aspect of empathy entails an ability to effectively comprehend a distressing situation and to recognize another's emotions and assume that person's perspective . . . The affective aspect of empathy requires an individual to experience a vicarious emotional response to others' expressed emotions.

(Knafo *et al.* 2008: 737)

The ability to empathize with the perspective of someone from another cultural background is a key ingredient in successful intercultural relationships.

**Identity recognition and validation.** Understanding the personal meaning of one's self-identities and recognizing the preferred identities of one's communication partners are crucial elements in the formation of mutually satisfying intercultural friendships. Respecting the preferred self-identities of one's communication partners plays an important role in the development of trust in intercultural friendships. This, in turn, influences one's willingness to share personal information and spend time together.

**Uncertainty reduction/anxiety management.** One's ability to predict and explain behaviour, especially in initial interactions, can influence the formation and quality of intercultural friendships. The **uncertainty reduction theory (URT)** posits that the greater our ability to predict and explain our communication partners' behaviour, the greater the chance that our relationships will become more intimate (e.g. progress from stranger or acquaintance to close friend) (Berger & Calabrese 1975). As we become more familiar with our communication partners, we develop more understanding of their communication style, values and beliefs and our ability to predict their behaviour increases.

The URT is linked to the **uncertainty/anxiety management theory (AUM)**, which suggests that our enhanced knowledge and understanding of our communication partner reduces our level of stress or anxiety. As our sense of apprehension or fear diminishes, we can become more open to forming relationships with people who are different from us (Gudykunst 2004).

**Disclosure and relational intimacy.** Researchers have also identified a linkage between self-disclosure and friendship development. **Self-disclosure** refers to 'the process of deliberately revealing information about oneself that is significant and that would not normally be known by others' (Adler *et al.* 2013: G-11). Altman and Taylor's (1973) **social penetration theory (SPT)** suggests that as self-disclosure increases in depth (degree of intimacy on a particular topic), amount and breadth (the number of topics about which one self-discloses to one's communication partner), our relationships become more intimate. While this theory assumes that self-disclosure leads to the development of positive impressions, this is not necessarily the case in all cultures. Cross-cultural studies have identified cultural variations in the topics, timing, amount of self-disclosure and degree of relational intimacy in interpersonal relationships (e.g. Cahn 1984; Chen 2010, 2012). In a study of intercultural friendships, Chen and Nakazawa (2012: 146) found there is 'a complex interplay among cultural backgrounds, friendship types, and degrees of friendship in influencing patterns of self-disclosure'.

Linked to disclosure is the notion of **relational intimacy**, which refers to 'the closeness one feels and/or enacts towards one's friend' (Chen & Nakazawa 2009: 83). In a survey of 252 ethnically diverse university students, Chen and Nakazawa (2012) discovered that cultural dissimilarities in disclosure had the most impact in the early stages of the relationship. As relational intimacy increased, the depth and frequency of self-disclosure also tended to increase, lending partial support for the applicability of social penetration theory to intercultural and interracial friendships. In general, as the relationships grew, 'self-disclosure exchanges progressed from public-outer areas of the selves to all public, immediate, and private areas of the selves' (Chen & Nakazawa 2009: 93); however, there was less negative self-disclosure. The researchers concluded that 'communication in close intercultural friendship may not be as personalistic as that in close intracultural friendship and may be more complex' (Chen & Nakazawa 2012: 147).

**Shared identity and relational maintenance.** Successful intercultural bonds depend on one's interpersonal communication skills and ability to relate to one's communication partner. **Relational identity** is defined as 'a privately transacted system of understandings that coordinate attitudes, actions, and identities of participants in a relationship' (Lee 2006: 6). **Mutual facework** refers to the process of developing a shared sense of identity in a relationship (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi 1998; Tracy 2002). Domenici and Littlejohn (2006: 94) explain that '[w]orking together to build, maintain, or threaten the status of the relationship constitutes the work of mutual face'. **Relational maintenance**, 'communication aimed at keeping relationships operating smoothly and satisfactorily' (Adler *et al.* 2013: 287), requires the ability to read one's partner and recognize when he or she needs more personal space and privacy, or more support and closeness. Individuals who are more skilled at reading their intercultural partners are better positioned to respond appropriately. (See Chapter 10 for more discussion on Facework.)

**Intercultural communication competence.** People have varying degrees of intercultural competence. Those who are interculturally sensitive and possess well-developed intercultural communication skills are apt to be less fearful of interacting across social boundaries and more strongly motivated to establish friendships with people who differ from them in terms of first language, gender, ethnicity, religion, etc. Individuals who possess a high level of intercultural sensitivity and intercultural competence are also better positioned to nurture intercultural relationships and deal with misunderstandings that arise. As noted by Chen (1992), an individual's degree of 'other-orientation, sensitivity, and the ability to provide positive feelings predict success in initiating and managing intercultural friendships'.

Lee (2008: 52) suggests that 'a key to maintaining an intercultural friendship lies in effective communication between members'. When interacting in a second language, fluency in the language *and* intercultural competence can greatly facilitate the formation of intercultural bonds. Individuals who are confident, fluent speakers of a second language are better positioned to use their second language to initiate interactions with potential intercultural friends than those who are excessively worried about making grammatical mistakes or saying the wrong word. This is linked to the notion of willingness to communicate (WTC) that was discussed above.

**Social acceptance.** As noted by Sorrells (2013: 156), 'intercultural relationships do not occur in a vacuum'. Our perceptions of intercultural interpersonal unions are shaped within our particular socio-historical, political and linguistic context. When we cross boundaries, we

are impacted to varying degrees by the beliefs and attitudes that are prevalent in our environment (e.g. the perceptions of our family members, community, religious figures, the mass media) and the degree of openness towards friendships and romance between people from different backgrounds. The attitudes towards intercultural interpersonal relationships in one's social networks and community can impact our willingness to initiate interactions with people who are culturally different. In environments where anti-racist, multicultural education is a regular feature in classrooms and diverse social networks are commonplace, the atmosphere is apt to be much more conducive to the formation of intercultural friendships.

### Barriers to intercultural friendships

Many interculturalists contend that intercultural friendships are more difficult to initiate and maintain than relationships between individuals who share the same linguistic and cultural background. Chen and Nakazawa (2009: 77), for example, state that '[i]ntercultural and interracial relationships face barriers, tensions, and challenges that are absent from intra-cultural and intraracial relationships'. Researchers have identified a number of internal and external factors that can hamper the development of satisfying intercultural friendships (limited contact opportunities; differing motives; unmet expectations; anxiety and uncertainty; differences in communication styles; differing values, worldviews and perceptions; stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination; language barrier; miscommunication). Let's examine each in turn.

**Limited contact opportunities.** As noted in the previous section, demographic variables play an important role in the formation of intercultural friendships. For example, individuals from the majority culture who live in an area where there are few people with a different linguistic or cultural background (e.g. ethnic minorities, international students) have less opportunity to form intercultural friendships than those who reside in a multicultural, multilingual neighbourhood.

While it is now possible to make intercultural connections online, in a review of recent research on social networking sites, Neuliep (2012: 338) observes that 'SNSs are used primarily for social interaction with friends with whom users have a preestablished relationship offline', adding that 'they serve mostly to support preexisting social relations within geographically bound communities'. He concludes that 'SNSs such as Facebook are not the primary means by which people meet and initiate relationships with others from different cultures' (p. 338). More studies are needed that explore the connection between CMC, SNSs and intercultural friendships.

**Contact frequency, duration, and quality.** As well as having sufficient opportunities for intercultural interactions, there must be adequate, quality time together to grow the relationship. For example, while third culture kids (TCKs) or global nomads have exposure to different language and cultures, if they move from place to place very frequently, there may not be sufficient time or they may be less motivated to develop deep interpersonal relationships, as noted by Heidi Sand-Hart, a TCK:

I have often been surrounded by people who don't fully understand me. In order for people to understand the many facets and undercurrents of my TCK traits, it takes time, and usually time is not on my side. Therefore I have often been misunderstood, and felt alone

in a crowd and isolated. Just as you're allowing some of the walls to fall and getting closer to someone, it's time to move on. You begin to hold onto people and circumstances less and harden yourself a little in relationships.

(Sand-Hart 2010: 137–38)

**Unmet expectations.** When people from different cultural backgrounds interact, they may have different understandings of friendship as ideas about what friends should and should not do are formed in our home environment during enculturation. Conflicting cultural expectations of roles and obligations can lead to misunderstandings. DeCapua and Wintergerst (2004) and Gareis (2000), for example, note that differing conceptions of friendship can result in confusion and hurt feelings between international students and their U.S. American hosts. In particular, the newcomers may feel let down by American students who are very friendly but less forthcoming with offers of help.

**Disparate motives and degree of investment.** If an intercultural interpersonal relationship is to flourish, both parties must have a sufficient level of interest, motivation, time, energy and commitment to interact and nurture the connection. Without this degree of investment, intercultural friendships may not move beyond the category of 'acquaintance' ('hi-bye' friend), as noted by the following TCK:

The most important aspect in life is relationships, and my friends have been ripped away from me at every turn. It takes so much energy and effort to maintain hope in new friendships, when you keep losing them all the time . . . Sometimes I don't see the potential of making a new friend; I see the work involved in getting to know them and quickly analyse whether it's worth it or not. This has been ingrained into my mentality from the routine of making and breaking friends so frequently. I am aware that it is a gamble, since you can miss out on a lot of friendships . . .

(Sand-Hart 2010: 136)

**Anxiety and uncertainty.** Another challenge is the management of anxiety and uncertainty that naturally arises when one interacts with individuals who have a different linguistic and cultural background (e.g. different values, ways of being). This is linked to the AUM theory that was mentioned previously. If you have a high level of anxiety and lack confidence in your ability to come up with interesting talking points, or you worry excessively about making mistakes when communicating in a second language, inhibitions and lack of WTC can hold you back from initiating and developing intercultural friendships. For example, Mandy, a bright Taiwanese university student, wished to join an international exchange programme in Dublin. Her application was successful; however, as the departure date approached she grew increasingly nervous about what lay ahead.

Because I'll be in a foreign country for such a long time, there'll be lots of problems. I really want to make friends with people from other cultures but I'm worried that I won't be able to get along well with the local students. I don't know what we can talk about and I've never used English much outside of class.

Lacking confidence in her interpersonal skills and informal English language skills, she withdrew. Her fears and lack of self-esteem also held her back from initiating conversations with international students on her home campus.

**Cultural differences in communication styles.** Differences in communication styles can also impede the development of intercultural friendships and lead to misunderstandings. In the U.S., for example, students are encouraged to express their opinions in class and to challenge the views of others, in ways that are deemed polite in their context. If they go to Japan, South Korea or another East Asian country on exchange and continue to pose questions and openly disagree with the comments of their professor or another student, they may be considered loud and aggressive, and 'too proud' (arrogant). Local students who have been socialized to value the comments of their professors much more than their fellow students may resent the newcomers for speaking up and 'wasting valuable class time' (Jackson 2013; Ryan 2013).

In East Asian contexts, incoming international exchange students from the U.S. and other countries that encourage direct discourse may attribute the reticence of local students to shyness, weak second language skills, insufficient knowledge or lack of preparedness for class. While some of their assumptions may be valid at times, the behaviour may also be due to cultural differences in communication styles, learning and teaching philosophies, 'cultures of learning' and social norms of discourse and demeanour in classroom settings (Cortazzi & Jin 2013; Jackson 2003, 2013; Ryan 2013). (See Chapter 8 for more discussion on 'cultures of learning'.)

**Differing values, perceptions, and worldviews.** When individuals cross cultural boundaries, they are exposed to differing values, perceptions and worldviews. If one or more of the communicators has very limited intercultural experience, assumptions may be made that their ingroup's values, perceptions and worldviews are shared by everyone. It can be quite a surprise to discover that this is not the case. When Larona, a university student from rural Botswana, travelled to San Francisco for a semester abroad, she found it difficult to accept some of the habits and values of her American roommate. She was especially shocked to discover that the young woman often spent the night with her boyfriend in his dorm room.

**Stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination.** As noted in Chapter 7, ethnocentrism can lead to negative perceptions and attitudes towards individuals and groups who are different. When individuals first meet someone from another linguistic or cultural background, they may have already formed an impression of that person based on stereotypes or previous interactions with people they associate with the same group.

Within the context of race relations in the U.S., Gordon Allport (1954) proposed the '**contact hypothesis**', which suggests that increased contact between different cultural or ethnic groups can lead to mutual acceptance and reduced levels of tension/prejudice. Multiple studies have found that if intercultural relations are to be successful, certain conditions need to be met, such as social and institutional support, equal status between groups, intergroup cooperation and the likelihood of meaningful interpersonal relationships (Pettigrew & Tropp 2011). When these conditions are not in place, stereotypes may persist and intercultural friendships do not materialize or progress.

**Contested identities/identity misalignments.** In order for intercultural friendships to work well, the individuals involved must recognize and demonstrate respect for each other's preferred self-identities. As noted in Chapter 6, in intercultural interactions one's preferred identity may be misunderstood and contested or challenged. For example, it can be very upsetting for people who speak English as an additional language to be constantly reminded of this, especially when they see themselves as fluent speakers of this global language.



When sojourners or immigrants cross cultural and linguistic boundaries they may experience identity confusion and this can negatively impact on the development of intercultural friendship. If one feels insecure and confused about one's identities and positioning, it can be difficult to forge meaningful ties with people from other cultures. Feeling under threat, individuals may become defensive and cling more tightly to a national identity (Block 2007, 2013; Jackson 2010). Ethnocentrism is not conducive to the formation of intercultural interpersonal relationships.

**Language and culture barrier.** It is generally easier to explain your thoughts and feelings to individuals who share the same linguistic and cultural background. Intercultural friendships, however, often involve the use of a second language. In many relationships, for example, one or more of the friends may interact in English or another language or dialect that is not a first language. If not fully proficient in the language, it may be difficult to communicate ideas and feelings, especially in informal situations. It can also be challenging to accurately interpret messages (verbal and nonverbal) that are being transmitted. Many international students, for example, have learned formal English in classrooms in their home country; outside of academic situations, they are confused by idiomatic expressions and other forms of informal, social discourse that require background knowledge they do not possess (Gebhard 2010). In some intercultural relationships, people may attribute misunderstandings to cultural difference when a language barrier is to blame, and vice versa.

**Expectancy violations.** Through the process of primary socialization in one's home environment (**enculturation**), we learn to expect certain behaviours (verbal, nonverbal) in certain situations and when social norms are broken (e.g. cultural scripts for such speech acts as greetings, refusals, apologies, requests are not followed) we may be quite shocked. Individuals who break social norms of behaviour (e.g. omit expressions of politeness) may be perceived as rude or ungrateful. A visibly negative reaction (e.g. puzzled look, frown, raised eyebrow, scowl) may then be taken personally, and, in some cases, wrongly interpreted as prejudice.

Not surprisingly, as suggested by the **expectancy violation theory** (Burgoon 1978), negative perceptions can curtail the cultivation of intercultural friendships. Insufficient cultural knowledge (e.g. lack of familiarity with linguistic and cultural norms in other cultures) can hamper intercultural relationships. (See Chapter 5 for more discussion of the expectancy violation theory in relation to nonverbal behaviour.)

**Humour and emotional display.** Cross-cultural differences in **humour styles** (the ways people use humour in everyday life) can also lead to interactional difficulties and negative reactions (e.g. Miller 1995; Yamada 1997). The ability to recognize and create humour is vital in the development and maintenance of meaningful intercultural interpersonal relationships. As noted by Bell (2006), Matsumoto (2009) and others, shared laughter binds people together.

While humour is a universal phenomenon, how, when and why it is used can vary considerably among cultures. Very often, humour relies on common understandings of culturally specific topics. People who share a common history and language are apt to use the same forms and styles of language or, at minimum, be familiar with them. This facilitates relationship development as they can understand each other's jokes and sense camaraderie between them. Individuals who have been socialized in a different environment, however, may fail to grasp what lies behind jokes. The stories and sarcastic remarks that send their intercultural friends into fits of laughter may be a complete mystery to them.

Cast on the outside, those who do not share the same humour may become quite irritated, especially if no attempt is made to help them understand the jokes. In some situations, this can be a significant barrier to the enhancement of cordial intercultural relationships. Lana, for example, found it challenging to build a warm relationship with her host family during her sojourn in England. Unable to grasp their humour, she felt like an outsider: 'I was so frustrated that I couldn't get their jokes. Everyone was laughing so happily at something which I could not understand!'

In some situations, offensive humour (e.g. jokes about ethnic groups) may also serve as a barrier to the development of intercultural friendships. If one's communication partner remains silent when one's ethnic group (or other ingroup) is maligned, this can lead to the demise of the relationship.

**Emotional display.** Cultural variations in the display of feelings and emotions can also be a barrier to the development of satisfying intercultural friendships (Matsumoto & Hwang 2012; Safdar *et al.* 2009). **Emotion regulation** refers to the process of modifying one's emotions and expressions in particular situations (Gross 1998) and as noted by Safdar *et al.* (2009: 1), '[c]ulturally shared norms dictate how, when, and to whom people should express their emotional experiences'. As people from different cultural backgrounds may have learned to express (or suppress) their emotions differently (verbally and nonverbally) in certain contexts, this can result in misunderstandings.

**Limited emotional intelligence and sensitivity.** Adler *et al.* (2013: 246) define **emotional intelligence** as 'the ability to understand and manage one's own emotions and to be sensitive to others' feelings'. Individuals who have limited 'emotional intelligence' and intercultural sensitivity are apt to have a more difficult time building respectful, mutually satisfying intercultural friendships. They may be perceived as lacking empathy or viewed as too emotional and unstable. In some Asian countries, for example, people may smile when embarrassed or unsure how to respond and this can easily be misinterpreted as uncaring and insensitive by newcomers to the region.

**Facework and conflict management.** When people from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds interact, misunderstandings and conflicts are bound to occur from time to time. Without mutual facework and effective conflict management skills and techniques, small problems may spiral into major disputes that can lead to permanent break-ups. (See Chapter 10 for a more in-depth discussion of intercultural conflict, facework, and conflict mediation techniques.)

**Social sanctions.** Even if individuals who cross social boundaries (e.g. class, language, race, sexual orientation, religion) do not harbour negative sentiments about others, they may encounter a negative reaction from family members, ingroup friends and the community in which they live. Hostile, racist contexts where segregation is the norm can certainly inhibit the formation and maintenance of intercultural friendships.

Despite these potential barriers, there is reason for optimism. With an open mindset and commitment, people can and do overcome obstacles and develop long-lasting friendships that cross linguistic and cultural boundaries. For example, in her investigation of intercultural friendships between Chinese and American students on a U.S. campus, Li (2010: 64) drew the following conclusion:

Although intercultural friendships might seem challenging in the beginning stages, if the dyad is able to understand cultural influences on perceptions of self and others in the process of friendship and identify the factors that influence the formation and maintenance of intercultural friendships, intercultural friendships can be as strong and last as long as intracultural friendships.

## INTERCULTURAL ROMANCE AND MARRIAGE

*Where there is love there is no darkness.* (Burundi proverb)

*The heart that loves is always young.* (Chinese proverb)

*A life without love is like a year without summer.* (Lithuanian proverb)

*It's better to have loved and lost, than to have never loved at all.* (Alfred Lord Tennyson, Britain)

*Love is a flower which turns into fruit at marriage.* (Finnish proverb)

All of these international sayings clearly convey the notion that love and romance are important. While humans in all corners of the globe crave affection, there are differences in our perceptions of love and marriage. Just as views about intercultural friendship have evolved over time, attitudes towards intercultural and interracial romance are shifting in many parts of the world. These days, more people are dating and even marrying individuals who have a different cultural and linguistic background. The Internet (e.g. dating, matchmaking sites) and SNSs are playing a role in bringing people from different cultures together for romance and marriage, with English or another international language often serving as the lingua franca. According to a study conducted by the PEW Research Center, in 2010 one in 12 married couples in the U.S. involved an interracial union (Wang 2012). Further, in more regions and nations around the globe, it is now possible for people of the same sex to marry legally (Corvino & Gallagher 2012; Phy-Olsen 2006).

### Terms associated with intercultural romantic relationships

Before we examine factors that facilitate or hinder intercultural romance, it is helpful to understand some of the many terms and issues that are associated with this complex topic. Many of the terms relate to the nature and quality of the relationship.

A **platonic intercultural relationship** refers to an affectionate friendship between individuals of the opposite sex who have different cultural backgrounds; the connection does not involve sexual relations. A **casual intercultural relationship**, or **casual intercultural dating** are the terms used to describe a physical and emotional relationship between two people from different cultural backgrounds who may have a sexual relationship without necessarily expecting the commitments of a more formal romantic relationship. **'Friends with benefits'** refers to a casual sexual relationship among friends who are not romantically or emotionally involved.

**Intercultural romance** is characterized as a close interpersonal relationship between individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds who share a romantic love for each other. An **intimate intercultural couple** refers to a romantic union between 'partners from different countries, nationalities, ethnicities, and religions who may possess quite divergent beliefs,

assumptions, and values as a result of their socialization in different sociocultural spaces' (Killian 2009: xviii). **Intercultural gay (lesbian) romance** refers to a romantic relationship between two males or two females. **Intercultural cyber or online romance** is a romantic relationship that is primarily mediated through online or Internet contact. In net discourse, this contrasts with conventional intercultural offline romantic relationships, which are initiated and largely maintained through face-to-face interactions (Döring 2002).

**Intercultural marriage** entails a social union or legal contract between individuals from different cultural backgrounds who may possess differing values, worldviews and personal philosophies (Renalds 2011; Romano 2008). This definition encompasses bonds between individuals who cross social and culturally-constructed boundaries (e.g. linguistic, ethnic, racial, religious, social class, etc.). **Interfaith marriage** refers to marriage (a religious or civil union) between partners professing different religions (Jones *et al.* 2009). **Racial endogamy** denotes marriage within one's own racial group (Goodman *et al.* 2012), whereas **interracial marriage** refers to a union between individuals who are regarded as members of different races (Smith & Hattery 2009; Yancey & Lewis 2009). A marriage between a Filipino Catholic woman and a black Muslim man is an example of an interfaith, interracial marriage. **Interethnic marriage** refers to marriage between people with different ethnic backgrounds (e.g. bonds between a Welsh woman and a Scottish man). **Monogamy** refers to the practice of being married to only one individual at a time, whereas **polygamy** denotes the practice of having more than one spouse at a time (Jacobson & Burton 2011; Numila 2009). **Same-sex marriage** or **gay marriage** refers to a union between members of the same sex (e.g. a marriage between two women or between two men) (Corvino & Gallagher 2012; Phy-Olsen 2006). **Co-habitation** refers to living together in a sexual relationship without being legally married. Among individuals and cultural groups, reactions to co-habitation, same-sex marriage and multiple marital partners differ. Conventions and attitudes towards the dissolution of marriage (e.g. divorce) are also impacted by social and religious mores and laws, which vary significantly among cultures.

### Factors that facilitate or hinder intercultural romantic relationships

Similar to intracultural unions, some intercultural romances and marriages are more successful than others. Even with an increase in global interconnectedness, significant cultural variations still exist in mating rituals and practices (courtship or dating behaviours) such as the age of sexual consent for males and females, parental involvement in match-making and the degree of male–female contact permissible prior to marriage, etc. (Hamon & Ingoldsby 2003; Jankowiak & Paladino 2008). Differences in attitudes towards premarital sex may cause intergenerational and interethnic conflict especially among immigrants in Western countries (Lamanna & Reidmann 2011); practices that differ from those of the majority culture (e.g. homosexual romance, arranged marriages) may be met with hostility in some quarters (Phy-Olsen 2006).

Based on interviews with intercultural couples, Romano (2008) compiled a list of factors or characteristics that contribute to successful marriages between people who have different cultural backgrounds: commitment to the relationship, ability to communicate, sensitivity to each other's needs, a liking for the other's culture, flexibility, positive self-image, love as the main marital motive, common goals, spirit of adventure and sense of humour.

Relational intimacy and the development of a relational identity also help determine the fate of these unions. Within the context of intercultural romance and marriage, **third-culture**

**building** refers to the melding of different cultural identities and practices to form an identity that is unique to the romantic partners or family unit (Rosenblatt 2009). **Relational interdependence** (mutual dependence or reliance on each other) not only helps couples embrace and reconcile differences, it can help to cushion them from negative forces (e.g. hostile reactions from family members and religious figures who disapprove of the relationship). While intercultural couples may develop 'their own intricate, multilayered systems', they are impacted by 'the many other systems in which they are embedded, including their families and cultures of origin and an assortment of other economic, legal, political, and social systems' (Rosenblatt 2009: 3).

As well as prejudice and racism, intercultural couples may face a number of other obstacles, including: a language barrier, conflicting ideas about premarital sex, differing expectations and perceptions of roles and responsibilities (e.g. disparate views about appropriate duties for wives and husbands), differing ideas about acceptable displays of affection in public and private domains, conflict management differences, a power imbalance, family pressures and social constraints, differing perceptions of child rearing and unfamiliar beliefs and traditions (e.g. religious ceremonies and customs).

## ENHANCING INTERCULTURAL INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

There are those individuals from diverse backgrounds who have created a world, at least within their own private lives, that is not broken by the socially constructed boundaries of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ability, and age; people who have established deep, lasting relationships with others from very different backgrounds.

(Vela-McConnell 2011: 3)

How have these individuals been able to develop successful intercultural interpersonal relationships? How can you bridge linguistic and cultural barriers to initiate and maintain rewarding and mutually-satisfying relationships? Drawing on recent research on intercultural interpersonal relationships (friendships, romance, marriage), the following section offers practical suggestions to initiate and optimize relationships with individuals who are linguistically and culturally different.

- If you do not have any intercultural interpersonal relationships, reflect on the reasons why this is the case. Are your fears or attitudes (or those of your family/social networks) keeping you from making intercultural connections? If yes, challenge yourself to leave your comfort zone and initiate a relationship with someone from a different linguistic and cultural background, whether face-to-face or online. Bear in mind that intercultural connections must be genuine and respectful if they are to be meaningful.
- Perceptions of relationships differ across cultures. Consider your own views and expectations and how these ideas formed. How might these understandings differ from those of your intercultural partners?
- Do not assume that you or your intercultural friend or partner is an ambassador for a particular linguistic or cultural group. When you get to know someone from another linguistic or cultural background, you are developing an interpersonal relationship with an individual.
- Cultivate an open mindset. Refrain from forming expectations of behaviour based solely on your own language and culture. For example, be attentive to differences in

communication styles and recognize the validity of differing social norms (e.g. cultural scripts) and worldviews. Avoid making snap judgments about behaviours that puzzle or annoy you and make an effort to view the world from your partner's perspective.

- Be attentive to differences in disclosure norms, values, verbal and nonverbal behaviours, and make an effort to develop relational intimacy.
- Work to eliminate any personal biases and prejudices that you may have that could negatively impact on your intercultural interpersonal relationships.
- Recognize the importance of respect and genuine concern in intercultural friendships and romances. Are you attentive to the needs of your communication partners or overly focused on your own interests?
- Assess your level of intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication apprehension. Based on what you have learned in this book and elsewhere consider constructive ways to overcome impediments to the development of healthy intercultural interpersonal relationships.
- Make a personal commitment to devote the time necessary to enhance your interpersonal intercultural communication skills to develop meaningful relationships (face-to-face and online).

As our world is becoming increasingly diverse and interdependent, it is vital for us to acquire the knowledge, skills and mindset that can nurture meaningful connections with people who have a different cultural or linguistic background. While intercultural interpersonal relationships (e.g. friendships, dating, marriage) can be more challenging than intracultural connections, they are well worth the extra time and effort involved. 'Because we live in a world in which there is increasing contact with diverse others, understanding how differences are bridged – regardless of which socially constructed boundary we happen to be speaking – is an important pursuit' (Vela-McConnell 2011: 3).

## SUMMARY

In this chapter, we reviewed various categories of intercultural interpersonal relationships and discussed the many potential benefits of face-to-face or online connections with people who have a different linguistic or cultural background. We examined differing cultural perceptions of friendship and identified a number of internal and external factors that can either facilitate or hinder intercultural or interracial friendships and diverse social networks. Then, we turned our attention to romantic relationships (e.g. dating, co-habitation, marriage) between people from different cultural backgrounds. After reviewing key terms associated with this topic, we examined multiple variables that can lead to success or failure in intercultural romance and marriage. Finally, we discussed ways to optimize intercultural interpersonal relationships.

## discussion questions

- 1 Why do people tend to form friendships with people who have a similar background?
- 2 Define what friendship means to you. What do you expect of your friends?
- 3 Identify different types of friendship that are common in your context. In your first language, what words are used for each type? Provide examples of different categories of friends.
- 4 Identify challenges people may experience in initiating and maintaining intercultural relationships.
- 5 How can language impact intimate intercultural relationships?
- 6 Define social networks. Draw diagrams to illustrate your social networks. Do you have friends from other linguistic and cultural backgrounds? If not, why not?
- 7 What role can self-disclosure and relational maintenance play in intercultural interpersonal relationships (e.g. platonic, romantic)?
- 8 Define the concept of 'face' and explain how facework can influence the quality of intercultural relationships.
- 9 In today's globalized world, how has technology changed the way intercultural friendships and romances are formed and maintained?
- 10 Intercultural marriages are on the rise in many parts of the world. Discuss the benefits and challenges of these unions.
- 11 In small groups, discuss the challenges bilingual intercultural couples might face, especially if they decide to make their relationships permanent.
- 12 Based on your own intercultural experiences and what you have read in this chapter and elsewhere, identify five strategies that might enhance intercultural interpersonal relationships (e.g. friendship, platonic friendship, romance, marriage). Share your ideas with your classmates.

## further reading

Bystydzienski, J.M. (2011) *Intercultural Couples: Crossing Boundaries, Negotiating Difference*, New York: New York University Press.

The author examines the multidimensional experiences of intercultural couples who negotiate their identities, gender expectations, language use, family relations, child-rearing, financial matters and lifestyle.

Hruschka, D.J. (2010) *Friendship: Development, Ecology, and Evolution of a Relationship (Origins of Human Behavior and Culture)*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

In this multidisciplinary book, the author synthesizes cross-cultural, experimental and ethnographic data to better understand the broad meaning of friendship, how it develops,

how it interfaces with kinship and romantic relationships and how it differs from place to place.

Karis, T.A. and Killian, K.D. (ed.) (2009) *Intercultural Couples: Exploring Diversity in Intimate Relationships*, New York: Taylor and Francis.

This edited collection covers a broad range of topics and issues related to intercultural couples, including bilingualism, interfaith relationships and Internet-mediated relationships.

Rabotin, M. (2011) *Culture Savvy: Working and Collaborating Across the Globe*, Alexandria, VA: ASTD Press.

The author draws attention to how fear, stereotypes and misunderstandings negatively impact intercultural relations. Suggestions are offered to develop respectful, rewarding friendships with individuals who have been socialized in a different cultural and linguistic background.

Romano, D. (2008) *Intercultural Marriage: Promises and Pitfalls*, 2nd edn, Boston: Intercultural Press, Inc., Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

Written by an intercultural counsellor, this book explores the benefits and challenges of intercultural marriage (e.g. linguistic, religious, cultural difference).

Shelling, G. (2008) *In Love but Worlds Apart: Insights, Questions, and Tips for the Intercultural Couple*, Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse.

The author discusses ways to develop and nurture intercultural intimate relationships (e.g. romances, marriages).

Vela-McConnell, J.A. (2011) *Unlikely Friends: Bridging Ties and Diverse Friendships*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

This accessible book focuses on successful friendships that cross one or more social and cultural boundaries (e.g. age, race, gender, class, sexual orientation, religious affiliation). The author raises awareness of interpersonal techniques that can enhance intercultural interpersonal friendship.