

# The Art of Interviewing Intercultural Parents: Methodological Challenges and Opportunities

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## Abstract

This paper explores various aspects related to methodological challenges and opportunities that have emerged from in-depth, qualitative interviews with intercultural couples. According to the literature, most research related to intercultural couples has utilized conjoint interviews, in part for convenience of the interviewer. However, to gain rapport and to understand the perspective of participants, it is important to enable them to select a setting and structure that is most comfortable for their needs rather than those of the interviewer. Very little research, if any, has been conducted on the benefits and consequences of interviewing couples separately, together, or both. This paper is part of an ongoing research project that utilizes a grounded theory approach to investigate the experiences of intercultural parents and the construction of transcultural families. In this continuing study, each participant is encouraged to select an interview structure or configuration of individual, conjoint, or sequential interviews based on their preference, logistics and/or convenience. Although it was not an intended outcome of the research design, the choice of interview structure has illuminated different methodological challenges and opportunities when interviewing couples.

## Introduction

The literature on intercultural marriage reveals that this is a growing demographic group in the United States and Australia (Qian 1999; Lee & Bean 2004; Owen 2002). Previous studies on intercultural marriages have focused primarily on the challenges confronted by couples in these partnerships, as well as potential conflicts and decreased marital satisfaction (e.g. Bhugra & De Silva 2000; Crohn 1998). A relatively small proportion of the literature in this field has focused on the opportunities rather than conflicts associated with cultural difference (e.g. Hsu 2001; Romano 2001). In part, this is a consequence of the large proportion of literature that has derived from clinical populations or pathological perspectives of intercultural marriage.

One convergent theme in the literature on intercultural marriage is that parenthood is a particular flashpoint for conflict in these relationships (Bhurgu & De Silva 2000; Crohn, 1998; Gaines & Brennan 2001; Ho 1990). There is limited research on how intercultural couples resolve these conflicts, particularly in non-clinical populations, and how transcultural families are constructed when two individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds raise children together. The goal of this ongoing research project is to address some of the gaps in the literature on intercultural marriage and parenthood, including: how do intercultural couples

conceptualise and experience their cultural values related to parenting? How do intercultural couples negotiate their cultural differences in parenting, and how are these differences resolved? How do intercultural couples experience the process of mutual accommodation or mutual acculturation in parenting, if at all? And, how are transcultural families constructed and maintained?

## Definition of Terms<sup>2</sup>

*Culture* is a frame of reference, and a set of symbols that provide meaning, guide behavior, and influence one's reality and worldview. It is a pattern of 'traditions, beliefs, values, norms, symbols, and meanings that are shared to varying degrees by interacting members of a community' (Ting-Toomey 1999 p. 10).

*Cross-cultural parenting* describes the comparison and contrast of parenting attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and practices between two or more cultures.

*Intercultural* refers to interactions between members of different cultures.

*Intercultural Couples* are adult dyads who describe themselves as being in a significant relationship, each of whom has a self-identified cultural background that is different from their partner. Cultural background includes, but is not limited to, country of origin, ethnic heritage, racial identification, and religion.

*Intercultural Parents* are intercultural couples who are married or cohabitating, and are raising children (adopted, biological, or stepchildren) in a single household.

*Multicultural* refers to more than one culture.

*Multicultural families* represent several cultures existing simultaneously within a family, with individual cultures retained. This is metaphorically referred to as a 'mosaic' family structure.

*Transcultural families* are a pluralistic synthesis of two or more parental or filial cultures. Through the processes of cultural adaptation and mutual acculturation, a new family culture is constructed which represents an integration that transcends across cultural boundaries. This is also known as a 'woven tapestry' metaphor.

## Theoretical Framework

This topic is well-suited for a qualitative research design which aims to understand a phenomenon through the experience, perspective and narrative of research participants (Creswell 1998; Minichiello et al 2004).

<sup>2</sup> These definitions were developed by the author, for the purpose of clarifying different aspects of cross-cultural dynamics for this research project only. The literature uses many of these terms interchangeably.

The goal of this study is to explore the individual's subjective experience of culture, as well as the lived experience of raising children in a multi- or transcultural household. As such, social constructionism provides the guiding theoretical framework of this study. Social constructionism suggests there are multiple human realities, and that what we know as reality is constructed through interactions with others (Gergen 1985). Gergen theorized that the particular meanings that individuals attribute to situations or behaviours are influenced by the social and cultural context in which they occur. Social constructionism 'views discourse about the world not as a reflection or map of the world but as an artifact of communal interchange ... [and] forms of negotiated understanding are of critical significance in social life, as they are integrally connected with many other activities in which people engage' (Gergen 1985 p. 266-8). This is particularly evident with culturally diverse relationships, because culture creates a system of significant symbols that guide human behaviour. When individuals cross cultural boundaries, there is 'evidence enough that strikingly diverse understandings can be formed of the same phenomenon' (Crotty 1998 p. 47).

Thus, in utilizing a social constructionist theoretical framework in this research design, it is important to understand how individuals and couples identify and situate their cultural context, the meaning with which they ascribe aspects of cultural difference, and how they negotiate or mutually construct transcultural families. The focus on parenting provides a lens in which to explore this phenomenon.

## **Grounded Theory Methodology**

Theoretical orientation informed the choice of methodology. Grounded theory was selected because it enabled data to emerge directly from the participants' narratives through in-depth, recursive style interviews (Minichiello et al 2004). Through a method of constant comparison, an inductive theory is developed from patterns and themes embedded in the data (Strauss & Corbin 1998). Consistent with grounded theory methodology, this study utilized in-depth interviews as a primary technique in data collection to elicit perceptions of the experiences and observations of intercultural parents.

Although grounded theory provided the approach to data collection and analysis in this study, Fassinger (2005) noted, 'it is unfortunate that so little has been written about interviewing techniques and decisions in grounded theory' (p. 158). Specifically, grounded theory does not establish methodological parameters or guidelines for interviewing couples or dyads. A review of the literature indicated that most research (grounded theory as well as other methodologies) related to intercultural couples utilized conjoint interviews, in part for convenience to the interviewer (e.g. Horowitz 1999; Luke & Luke 1998; Romano 2001; Rosenblatt et al 1995; Soncini 1997). One researcher conducted individual before conjoint interviews with interracial couples in a study of the construction of narratives of racial histories and identities (Killian 2001). After consultation with my supervision team and UNE peers, I decided to defer the structure of the interview sessions to each respective participant and/or couple, based on what was most comfortable and convenient for their needs and preferences. My intention was that this participant-centric structure would facilitate

rapport, and that it would best approximate the goals of qualitative research in general and grounded theory in particular. Although this has resulted in a diverse set of interview configurations, and an inconsistent structure across interviews, a rich dataset has emerged that represents the experiences of mothers, fathers and couples who are raising children in culturally diverse households.

## Sampling and Recruitment

A criterion-based purposive sample was used to collect initial data from participants who were in an intercultural relationship raising one or more children together. In an attempt to maximise the degree of potential cultural difference, the initial recruitment was focused on couples who met at least the first and one or more additional criteria: (1) born and raised in different countries of origin until at least 16 years of age, where primary socialization would have occurred in each respective country; (2) different ethnic background, or sociocultural heritage including language and ancestral origin; (3) different racial identification; and (4) diverse religious affiliation or religion of origin. Although race is often used interchangeably with ethnicity in the United States, it is important to note that race is a social construct rather than a category that is meaningful in terms of ancestral origin (Cameron & Wycoff 1998). Racial identification persists as a common categorization used in the United States, and because of the social significance ascribed to one's group or collective identity based on a perception of shared racial heritage, as well as differences in power and experiences of oppression, this category was included as a criterion of difference.

Social status, educational attainment, sexual orientation, and biological relation (e.g. adoptive parents, step-parents) are other examples of culturally important characteristics of family systems, and recruitment attempts were made to include participants with a wide-range of socio-cultural characteristics and backgrounds who met the aforementioned intercultural criteria. Participants were recruited from personal and professional contacts and referrals throughout the United States. Each potential participant was sent a recruitment flyer and information sheet which described the goals and procedures of the study. The research was described as 'an exploration of the experience of intercultural couples raising children together' to avoid introducing potential bias when communicating with potential participants. As one goal of the study was to understand the participants' subjective experiences of culture and parenting, individuals and couples were recruited into the study based on a self-identification of the referenced criteria. This avoided the potential conflict of a couple satisfying the criteria but not identifying themselves as an intercultural couple.

As data collection and analysis continued in the study, the recruitment approach shifted from purposive to theoretical sampling, because 'sampling and analysis must occur sequentially with analysis guiding data collection' (Strauss and Corbin 1998 p. 203). According to Strauss and Corbin (1998 p. 201), theoretical sampling is a strategy employed to 'maximize opportunities to discover variations among concepts and to densify categories in terms of their properties and dimensions'. After the first five interviews were transcribed and coded, categories of acculturation and proximity to families of origin emerged across all of

the interviews. Thus, for subsequent participants, theoretical sampling was used to better understand the variation of experience of non-immigrant intercultural parents with differing levels of acculturation to the United States. Consequently, the recruitment shifted to include a spectrum of couples that are first- or second-generation Americans married to first-, second-, or later generation Americans, as well as variation in residential proximity to families of origin.

As different patterns and themes emerged from the process of axial coding additional interviews, the selection of additional participants was made on the basis of theoretically important categories. For example, an early theme that appeared was the importance of religion, and religiosity as a commonality that superseded cultural differences. Thus, couples who had religious differences in addition to the other criteria were sought to better understand this phenomenon. This stage of data collection and analysis also included follow-up interviews with participants for clarification and elaboration of emergent themes.

## **Participants**

Seventeen individuals from twelve intercultural couples were interviewed. The participants represented diverse economic backgrounds, educational attainment, professions, geographical residence, level of acculturation, years married, and number of children. It is anticipated that another five to ten couples and/or individuals will be interviewed to obtain theoretical saturation. Table I (see Appendix) identifies the cultural background and interview configuration of the participants in the study.

## **Procedure**

All interviews lasted from one to two hours. The majority of participants preferred to be interviewed in their own homes, but three selected a public location because of convenience (public library, university office, convention center). Although the homes had, in general, more distractions (such as children interrupting the interview), this was far outweighed by the convenience and comfort to participants. Prior to the interview, each participant was briefed on the rationale and goals of the study, and written informed consent was obtained. Participants were also informed that confidentiality would be maintained and at any point they could instruct the interviewer to turn off the digital recording device. Of the 17 participants, two requested to go off the record before they revealed sensitive information.

Five types of interview configurations emerged: mother only, father only, conjoint, sequential (one immediately following the other), and serial (more than one interview over time with one or both parents). In all cases, the primary caretaker of the children was interviewed.

## **Instrument**

A recursive, conversational style of in-depth interviewing was used to enable the participants' narratives and experiences to emerge with minimal interference (Minichiello et al 2004). A moderate use of self-disclosure

was employed to establish rapport and gain 'insider status', a technique described by Rubin and Rubin (1995). This is particularly evident when learning about cultural norms and rules. As Rubin and Rubin noted, 'to learn about culture ... [one] must be allowed to cross the boundary and become accepted' (p. 171). As an individual who is in an intercultural marriage and who is in the process of adopting a daughter from China, my limited personal disclosure facilitated my access to participants as someone who wanted to learn from them, who was generally curious about their experience as parents, and was not studying them as something deviant. Having insider status enabled me to more quickly delve into sensitive topics as someone who was empathic and understanding of the dynamics of intercultural relations.

As a mental health counselor by training, it was important to disclose my professional background and to clarify the nature of the research relationship. In California, all licensed practitioners are bound by a code of ethics that mandates a clear separation between the boundaries of a therapeutic and a research relationship. To maintain the distinction, all previous therapeutic clients were excluded from participation in the study, and all research participants would be excluded from a future therapeutic relationship. However, this professional disclosure did impact the content of some of the interviews, described in the discussion section below.

An interview guide was developed to loosely structure main topic areas including the participants' conceptualisation of their cultural values in parenting, the negotiation of cultural differences in parenting, and the construction of transcultural families. The funnelling technique was employed with an initial question of 'tell me about your experience as an intercultural parent'. This proved to be too broad: the first two participants requested additional clarification and specificity. I modified the initial question to 'tell me about your cultural background and that of your spouse' which helped situate the participants in a cultural context before exploring their experience of cross-cultural parenting and transcultural families. This was consistent with a flexible, iterative research design emphasized by Rubin and Rubin (1995) and Minichiello et al (2004). As data collection progressed with theoretical sampling, the interview guide was continually modified to reflect new areas and emergent themes to explore, consistent with the guidelines set forth by Strauss and Corbin (1998).

## **Discussion: Methodological Challenges and Opportunities**

A primary methodological challenge in this research design, which focused on interactions between two or more people, was how to ensure the fidelity of data while providing confidentiality and comfort to the participants. Because the goal of this research was to explore participants' subjective experiences of cross-cultural parenting, either conjoint or individual interviews were appropriate; but before data collection commenced, it was less clear which structure would elicit richer data.

## Conjoint Interviews

As stated previously, a review of the literature demonstrated that most research on couples is conducted in a conjoint format. Horowitz (1999) observed that:

*... by interviewing couples together, the perspectives of each participant could be compared and a fuller picture was obtained. To avoid possible repression of data from one partner due to the presence of the other during the interviews, individuals were invited to contact the interviewer if they wished to add information at a later time; however, no new data surfaced from individual contacts (p. 4).*

The possibility of repression of data was a primary consideration in a conjoint format, and it was not surprising that participants would not actively follow-up with the interviewer to contribute censored data at a later point. In addition to the potential problem of self-censorship or repression of data on a topic such as parenting, another challenge that emerged was the asymmetrical speaking time during an interview. For example in a conjoint interview with participants 2 A/B, the mother continually interrupted the father, spoke on his behalf, or corrected his interpretation of an event by stating, 'no, you don't remember right'. This was not because of a language constraint, and it served to silence his perspective on several occasions despite continual redirection.

There was a tremendous opportunity in the conjoint format to gain direct observation of styles of negotiation and decision-making within the couple, which can be either consistent or incongruent with the narrative. In the case above, the husband made statements such as 'I caved in that case', or 'I just give in' with reference to how conflict was resolved in their household, which was consistent with the interaction style between the couple during the interview. In a different example, participants 10 A/B indicated that they used a consensus style of decision-making, and their deference to each other during the interview demonstrated this as well.

Another opportunity that emerged with a conjoint interview format was access to richer data and examples because of a synergy effect between the couple. For example one partner may use an example that triggers a response or a different perspective of the same phenomenon. In the interview with participants 10 A/B, the husband was unable to think of an example of cultural differences in parenting, and his wife declared 'I can think of some if you can't!' In the case of participants 8 A/B, the mutual recounting of a conflict with an extended family member highlighted underlying differences in their perceptions of the event, in part based on their different racial experiences in the United States.

Overall, the conjoint interview provided a window to observe a couple's interaction. A focus on the process of these interviews, rather than exclusively on the content, provided a deeper understanding of the experience of intercultural parents. My observations on this process, as well as the context of the interviews, were recorded in a field journal and as analytic memos in the *Ethnograph* coding software.

## Individual Interviews

From the seven individual interviews, it was apparent that there was less censorship and more in-depth answers in contrast to the conjoint format. Several participants specifically mentioned that they would not feel as comfortable to discuss certain topics if their spouse or partner was present. Participant 4 emphasized that he felt much more comfortable to speak freely about parenting issues and his experiences with his wife's family of origin in a confidential, individual interview. Two participants requested that the recording device be turned off to protect the confidentiality of their story, and certainly they would not have been comfortable to speak freely on these sensitive topics in front of their partners.

A challenge associated with encouraging participants to speak freely and in confidence was the potential for the interview to morph into a quasi-therapy situation, in part because of disclosure of the professional background of the interviewer. Several participants concluded that the interview was 'sort of like therapy' because of the type of issues that were explored. Both participants 5 and 6 spoke in depth about unresolved childhood and family of origin issues, as well as prior abusive relationships.

In the context of establishing rapport and maintaining an informal, conversational technique to access individual narratives, some participants ventured into topics that were more detailed and less focused on the research topic. For example, participant 4 spoke at length about observations from his recent visit to Iran, including socio-political observations about the culture in general rather than at an interpersonal level with his family. Other participants recounted their challenges with US immigration law, told detailed narratives about how they met, and provided in-depth information about the accomplishments of their children.

Individual interviews require greater creativity to allow the participants' narratives to emerge while maintaining the overall research focus. At all times, the interviewer must maintain clear boundaries between the researcher and therapeutic roles, and provide professional referrals as appropriate.

## Sequential Interviews

In the sequential interview configuration, the partners were interviewed immediately after the other. Although this format was not anticipated as one of the potential options, it emerged as a solution to logistical and time constraints with two of the couples. There were several indicators that this format combined some of the benefits of individual and conjoint interviews, while minimizing some of the challenges associated with both. Although there may have been some self-censorship because of a consciousness that the other partner was to be interviewed next, it can be assumed that there was less data repression in comparison to a conjoint interview because of the greater degree of confidentiality. Furthermore, there was an opportunity to directly observe some of the synergy and interaction effects between the partners during transitions before and after one or both of the interviews. Finally, the time-efficient format of the sequential interview combined with the



awareness that the other partner was waiting to be interviewed (or to leave) seemed to have the effect of keeping the interview with a tighter focus and less susceptibility to quasi-therapy.

## **Conclusion**

In any qualitative in-depth interview it is important to establish rapport and to facilitate the stories of participants by creating as comfortable and convenient experience for them as possible. Providing participants with the choice of interview location and structure in this study was a means of establishing this environment. In each of these scenarios, follow-up interviews with participants were essential. Not only was it important to elucidate meanings from the previous interviews, but it was critical to test emerging assumptions and hypotheses. One unanticipated outcome of this research design was an illumination of the benefits of such an eclectic approach. In having participants select their preferred structure, I had access to multiple configurations of the interview format, each with their own benefits and challenges. In this case, the richness of the data was in the inconsistency of the structure.

## APPENDIX

Table 1

	<b>MOTHER<sup>3</sup></b> <b>Country of</b> <b>Origin, Ethnicity</b>	<b>FATHER</b> <b>Country of</b> <b>Origin, Ethnicity</b>	<b>Type of</b> <b>Interview<sup>4</sup></b>	<b>Type of</b> <b>Follow-Up</b> <b>Interview</b>
1	Haiti, Haitian	USA, Caucasian	Mother Only	
2	USA, Caucasian	Spain, Spanish	Conjoint	Sequential
3	USA, Caucasian	Vietnam, Vietnamese	Mother Only	
4	Iran, Persian	England, British	Father Only	
5	USA, Caucasian	Uruguay, Latino	Mother Only	
6	Russia, Russian	USA, Caucasian	Mother Only	
7	Peru, Peruvian	USA Caucasian	Mother Only	
8	Nigeria*, Yoruba	Canada, French Canadian	Conjoint	
9	England, Welsh	Nigeria, Igbo	Sequential	Mother Only
10	USA, Caucasian	Japan*, Japanese	Conjoint	
11	India*, Indian	USA, Caucasian	Mother Only	
12	USA, Caucasian	Spain, Spanish	Sequential	Conjoint

<sup>3</sup> All participants are US citizens or residents. Country of origin represents the country from which the participant or the participant's parents (\*) immigrated. Ethnicity is identified by self or spouse.

<sup>4</sup> A conjoint style refers to the couple being interviewed together, and a sequential configuration is characterized by one participant immediately following the other partner with minimal overlap.

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