

INTERCULTURAL MARRIAGE IN SARAWAK: MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS

Rumaya Juhari, Rozumah Baharudin & Tan Jo-Pei

Abstract

Using data gathered from 240 intercultural-married respondents in Sarawak, this study examines motivational factors for intercultural marriage. A 10-item Likert scale adapted from Lewis and Yancey (1997) was used to measure motivational factors to marry inter-culturally. Findings revealed that respondents who earned higher income were not motivated by racial factors such as the uniqueness of intercultural marriage, attractiveness of other races and communication when choosing their partner. Interestingly, those who emphasized on non-racial factors such as love, shared interest, and similar economic status, were also found to consider racial related factors in spouse selection process. To conclude, intercultural-married individuals in the study seemed to be motivated by both racial and non-racial factors to decide upon their marriage.

Introduction

Intercultural marriage or mixed marriage is a subject that has not been adequately studied in most culture. As a form of an intimate relationship, intercultural marriage is inevitably subjected to all circumstances surrounding a marriage just like any other marriage, perhaps at a greater intensity due to the complexity and uniqueness of the marital bond. Several studies done in the United States on intercultural marriage have been focusing on the interracial marriages where the socio-economic dimension of the marriage has been put into the limelight. Report by the Population Reference Bureau of the US¹ concluded that younger and better-educated Americans are found to be more likely to intermarry and noted some variations across the ethnic groups. In the United Kingdom, evidence from the 2001 census² and other sources³ also suggest that intermarried groups are growing in size and recognition.

In Islam, during the time of the prophet Muhammad (PBUH), it was recorded that some of his companions practiced intercultural marriage. Historically, intercultural marriage in Malaysia has marked its appearance long way back during the Malacca Sultanate Empire. The marriage between Sultan Mansor Shah and Princess Hang Li-Po from China has not only marked the marriage of two persons of different culture, race, ethnic and religious background but also a marriage of geographical and political distinct. Recorded court cases such as *Re Maria Hertogh* (1951), *Chua Mui Nee v. V. Palaniapan* (1967) and *Martin v. Umi Kalsum* revealed the legal influence on such marriages in the country.

Why do people marry each other so different from themselves in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, and sometime nationality? Do the opposites really attract each other? It is the purpose of this study to explore the motivational factors that

are associated with intercultural marriage. The sociology of marriage signifies that most people practice *homogamy* where people marry within their own group. In short, *homogamy* is basically more practical and found to be fitting very well in the social contract where race is a major concern. Therefore, intercultural marriage is not a common form of marriage and often associated with vast different problems and challenges. If such phenomenon is a known fact, why do people still intermarry? A study held by a research team from the University of Michigan highlighted that chances to meet and interact with future spouse set a wide opening for intercultural marriage.

Kaori and Landswell (1993) pointed that the increase in educational level and economic activities enhance the chances for couples to meet especially at the workplace. This is further supported by Tsay and Wu's study which demonstrates that educational status, contextual characteristics (i.e. contact setting) and ways of becoming acquainted, have contributed to cross-cultural marriage.⁴ Batson et al. marked that better-educated men and women have the tendency to live in "racially mixed neighborhoods and have more interracial contacts in the workplace".⁵ Such opportunity according to the researchers, open the greater possibilities for establishing relationships such as friendship or other intimate relationship including marriage.

Some intermarried individuals admitted that the upward mobility in terms of socio-economic status motivate them to marry inter culturally.⁶ Potterfield revealed from his study that interest in certain race, chances and ability to marry, love and the aspiration to improve one's socio-economic status were found to motivate couples to marry someone not from their own group.⁷ Romano gathered that individuals who intermarry may be nontraditional, simply romantic, rebellious, or trying to compensate themselves for what they never had.⁸ Physical attractions, escapism from one's own culture, romantic love, and yearning to improve one's quality of life are among other motivational factors that Romano concluded from her several years of work with the intercultural marriage couples. A study done by Roy and Hamilton on Italian and Australian marriages revealed that higher rate of intermarriage are high in urban areas due to migration.⁹ They further concluded that young, educated and employed individuals in the urban areas are more responsive to direct and continuous contact with people from diverse cultural groups. Some other studies also suggested that the occurrence in intercultural marriage has increased social acceptance of these relationships.¹⁰

Research Objectives and Methodology

This study aims to examine the motivational factors amongst intermarried individuals. The relationships between background factors and the motivational factors are also explored. It is hypothesized that higher educational attainment and income may have increased the opportunity for the couples to meet and be involved and decide to mix marry. Conceptually, the study purports that the individual's background factors play a big role in motivating the couples to marry each other thus influence their marital quality. Background factors that are assumed to have significant relationships with the motivational factors are age, gender, and educational attainment, and employment status, number of children and length of marriage.

This exploratory study was conducted in both east and peninsular Malaysia. Data from Sarawak, which is approximately 37% of the total number of the respondents in the original study, are used for this paper. The respondents were selected based upon meeting the basic criteria which are intercultural marriage (interracial or interethnic); at least one of the spouses must be a Malaysian citizen or residing in Malaysia, and have at least one child of age 5 to 18 years. The majority of the respondents were purposively selected from a listing provided by the Jabatan Perpaduan Negara, while a small percentage of them were conveniently identified using snowballing technique. A total of 240 intermarried individuals (male= 125, female=115) from Sarawak participated in this particular study. They are intermarried couples of different racial or ethnic groups. Table 1 describes the combination of race or ethnic of the respondents.

Data collection

Data were gathered using both the quantitative and qualitative techniques. For the quantitative approach, face-to-face survey interview was conducted at the respondent's premise. A set of questionnaire was used to facilitate data collection process. A total of ten intercultural married individuals were involved in a focus group session carried out prior to actual data collection. Findings from the discussion facilitate the formation of the questionnaire. The questionnaire covers the profile of the respondents, history behind the marriage and factors that motivated them to tie the knot, marital quality, family dynamics and social support that they received.

Procedure

Prior to interviewing the eligible respondents, telephone call was made to the respondents in order to obtain permission and set up time for interview session at their own premises. Only one of the spouses is involved as a respondent in the study.

The qualitative data derived from telephone interviews with ten randomly selected respondents from the list. Once the findings from the telephone conversation reach the saturation point whereby responses from one person seem very much the same as the rest of the group, a decision was made to terminate the process. Data were analyzed using the triangular technique in looking for themes that further explained the quantitative findings.

Measurement

Motivational factors for intercultural marriage. Respondents were requested to respond to an adapted version of Lewis and Yancey's (1997) motivational scale.¹¹ A total of ten items (six racial and six non-racial) were covered in the 3-Likert point scale where respondents were requested to indicate the degree of importance for all items. The maximum score for both racial and non racial factors is 15 and the minimum score is 5. The scale is quite reliable with an $\alpha = 0.72$ for the racial factors and $\alpha = 0.49$ for the non-racial factors. Sample items are as follows:

Racial motivational factors:

- Item #7: Found different race men/women more sexually attractive
- Item#10: Found persons of different race easier to talk with

Non-racial motivational factors:

- Item #1: Shared common interest
- Item #4: Social excitement of marrying interracially

Analyses

Quantitative data were coded and analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). Descriptive analysis was used to describe the distributions of the findings. Results are presented in terms of the mean, maximum, minimum, and percentage describing the distribution of the data in all the measured variables. The Pearson Correlation Analysis was used to analyze the relationships between variables. The qualitative data gathered from the telephone interviews were analyzed according to the identified themes and used to support quantitative findings whenever appropriate.

Results

This paper discusses findings from 240 intermarried individuals in Sarawak. The largest proportion (40.8%) of the respondents is of Malay-Bumiputra married individuals. The second highest racial combination is between the Chinese and the Bumiputra. These combinations depict any combination of husband-wife or wife-husband race or ethnicity.

Table 1: Combination of race of the respondents

Race	n	%
Malay-Bumiputra (MQ)	97	40.8
Chinese-Bumiputra (CQ)	49	20.6
Bumiputra-Bumiputra (different ethnics) (QQ)	39	16.4
Malay-Chinese (MC)	26	10.9
Other	29	11.3
Total	238	

Source: Fieldwork

Note: Missing = 2

Background characteristics

A total of 125 males and 115 females were included in the study. Of these respondents, a majority (44.2%) of them are in the age group of 36 to 45 years old while, approximately 33% are younger than 35 years old and 23% older than 45

years old. Obviously, these respondents are still in their 30's and 40's with the mean age of 39.4 and standard deviation of 7.6 years. Table 2 illustrates the background information of the respondents.

As for the educational attainment of the respondents, more than half of them (60.4%) obtained secondary school education and about 22% were either university graduates or attained college certificates that signify higher education (obtained more than 12 years of education) level. More than two-third of the respondents are currently employed in various sectors while the remaining are housewives or unemployed. The respondents reported an average of RM 2292.00 monthly while a majority of them (31.3%) earned between RM 1,000.00 to RM 2,000.00 of family monthly income. Almost half (47%) of the respondents in the study have been married for eleven to twenty years and about half (49.6%) of them have three to four children.

Table 2: Background characteristics

Family background variables		n (%)	Mean	s.d.
Age	≤35	80 (33.3%)	39.44	7.56
	36-45	106 (44.2%)		
	>45	54 (22.5%)		
	Maximum = 58			
	Minimum = 24			
Education	≤6	43 (17.9%)	10.31	3.77
	7-12	145 (60.4%)		
	>12	52 (21.7%)		
	Maximum = 23			
	Minimum = 0			
Sex	Male	125 (52.1%)		
	Female	115 (47.9%)		
Employment status	Employed	178 (76.1%)		
	Unemployed/housewife	56 (23.9%)		
Family income	<RM1,000	68 (28.5%)	RM2292.00	RM2028.89
	RM1001-RM2000	75 (31.3%)		
	RM2001-RM3000	44 (18.4%)		
	<RM3000	53 (21.8%)		
	Maximum = RM300			
Minimum = RM12,000				
Length of marriage	≤10	66 (27.6%)	16.17	7.30
	11-20	113 (47.3%)		
	>20	61 (25.1%)		
	Maximum = 35			
	Minimum = 2			
Number of children	1-2	64 (26.7%)	3.54	1.73
	3-4	119 (49.6%)		
	>4	57 (23.7%)		
	Maximum = 12			
	Minimum = 1			

Source: Fieldwork

Note: s.d. = standard deviation

Motivational factors

People marry for various reasons. The findings revealed that almost one-third of the respondents scored high in the non-racial motivational factors. The same pattern is observed for both male and female respondents. On the other hand, the reverse findings are found for the race related factors whereby almost 70% of the respondents scored low on the scale. The similar pattern is evident for both genders. Table 3 displays the mean and standard deviations for the motivational factors for intercultural marriage of these respondents.

Table 3: Means and standard deviations of items measuring motivational factors

Factors	Mean	s.d.
<i>Racial</i>		
The novelty of marrying interracially	1.97	0.77
Social excitement of marrying interracially	1.89	0.75
Found different race men/women more sexually attractive	1.55	0.70
Found person of different races easier to talk with	1.70	0.74
Desire to have cleverer children	2.39	0.76
<i>Non-racial</i>		
Shared common interests	2.25	0.79
Found him or her personality attractive irrespective of race	2.34	0.72
Shared similar entertainment	1.90	0.72
Similar economic categories	1.88	0.81
Love	2.76	0.52

Source: Fieldwork

Note: s.d. = standard deviation

As indicated in the above table, for the racial factor, desire to have “children who have high tendency to excel academically” (mean=2.39) tend to be reported as the most important factor that motivated the respondents to marry someone outside their own group. For nonracial related factors, love is rated highest among intermarried respondents, followed by personality, common interests, similar entertainment and economic categories. Table 4 reports that there is no significant difference between male and female in terms of both racial and non-racial motivational factors to intermarry. Both gender scored quite similarly on both ends of the scores for both factors.

Examining the motivational factors according to combination of race or ethnic of the couples, it was revealed that for the racial factors, all respondents from race combinations seem to score low on the scale. The findings were quite evident for the Malay-Bumiputra and Chinese-Bumiputra couples. This finding interestingly revealed that racial factors alone may not have motivated them to intermarry. However, the distribution of high and low scores on the scale for Bumiputra-Bumiputra and Malay-Chinese couples is not very much widely spread out. The only reading that is high on the score came from the other combination (combinations that are not dominant for this group).

Table 4: Motivational factors according to gender of the respondents

<i>Motivational factors</i>		<i>Overall</i> (n=240)	<i>Men</i> (n=125)	<i>Women</i> (n=115)
<u>Racial factors</u>	Low (5-10)	161 (67.9%)	83 (66.4%)	78 (69.6%)
	High (11-15)	76 (32.1%)	42 (33.6%)	34 (30.4%)
	Mean	11.11	11.05	11.18
	s. d.	2.06	2.05	2.08
	Missing	3	0	3
<u>Non-racial factors</u>	Low (5-10)	89 (37.6%)	48 (38.4%)	41 (36.6%)
	High (11-15)	148 (62.4%)	77 (61.6%)	71 (63.4%)
	Mean	9.50	9.66	9.31
	s.d.	2.58	2.56	2.60
	Missing	3	0	3

Source: Fieldwork

Note: s.d = standard deviation

Probing into the nonracial motivational factors, the Chinese-Bumiputra (65.3%) and Bumiputra-Bumiputra (59.0%) couples apparently scored high on the scale. However, the other race combinations score low on the scale. Table 5 describes the motivational factors according to combination of races.

Table 5: Motivational factors according to combination of couple's race

<i>Motivational factors</i>	<i>MQ</i> (n=97)	<i>CQ</i> (n=49)	<i>QQ</i> (n=39)	<i>MC</i> (n=26)	<i>Others</i> (n=29)
<u>Racial factors</u>					
Low (5-10)	64 (66.7%)	39 (79.6%)	22 (57.9%)	14 (53.8%)	6 (21.4%)
High (11-15)	32 (33.3%)	10 (20.4%)	16 (42.1%)	12(46.2%)	22 (78.6%)
Mean	9.53	8.90	10.13	8.69	10.32
s.d.	2.57	2.22	2.85	2.72	2.34
Missing	1	0	1	0	1
<u>Non-racial factors</u>					
Low (5-10)	59 (62.1%)	17 (34.7%)	(41.0%)	21 (80.8%)	15 (53.6%)
High (11-15)	36 (37.9%)	32 (65.3%)	(59.0%)	5 (19.2%)	13 (46.4%)
Mean	11.06	11.12	11.33	10.46	11.54
s.d.	2.11	2.05	2.08	1.98	1.93
Missing	2	0	0	0	1

Source: Fieldwork

Note: s.d = standard deviation; Malay-Bumiputra (MQ); Chinese-Bumiputra (CQ); Bumiputra-Bumiputra (different ethnics) (QQ); Malay-Chinese (MC)

The qualitative information gathered from the telephone interviews are in accord with the above findings. Among the responses given are as follows:

- i. "... it is fate...actually there was no plan for it..."
- ii. "... maybe I wanted to know about the other culture. Other than that, it is my destiny..."
- iii. "... partly because I wanted to have smart kids"
- iv. "... depends on individuals...as for myself, I've never thought about it, you see, women of different race, they have beautiful characters... good quality, inner beauty, devoted to their husbands... have faith"

It is also interesting to learn that almost half (49.1%) of the respondents met their spouses at the workplace. Another 21.4% of the respondents met their spouses at social gatherings, and 9.6% met during their students' days. There are respondents who were introduced by friends or relatives (8.7%), childhood sweethearts (8.0%) and 3.3% were married through family arrangement. Some of the respondents also reported having someone in their family who was also intercultural married.

Factors that correlate with motivational factors

To understand the relationships between the variables involved in the study, a series of correlational analyses have been conducted. Table 8 illustrates the findings for Pearson Correlations analyses between the background factors and motivational factors. Apparently, family income is the only background factor that is negatively significant with the racial-related motivational factors. In other words, people who earn more seem to be less motivated by factors such as the uniqueness of intercultural marriage. Other background factors of the respondents seem not to have any significant relationship with the motivational factors.

Table 6: Relationships between family background and motivational factors

Family background variables		Motivational factors	
		Racial	Non-racial
1.	Age	0.02	0.00
2.	Sex (1=male; 0=female)	0.07	-0.03
3.	Education	-0.03	-0.03
4.	Employment status (1=working; 0=non-working)	0.04	-0.01
5.	Total family income	-0.14*	0.05
6.	Number of children	-0.05	-0.05
7.	Length of marriage	-0.02	0.00

Source: Fieldwork

Note: *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Conclusion and recommendation

As an exploratory study, the above findings have described the pattern of motivational factors for intercultural marriage among inter-racial or inter-ethnic married couples of Sarawak. Interestingly, among the racial related motivational factors, the desire to produce intelligent heir seems to be the most highly important rated factor by the respondents. Although there is no scientific evidence to support this claim, it is a popular belief among the people of the Malaysian culture that mixed marriage parents give birth to children who tend to perform better academically. It is also popularly acknowledged that children of mixed marriage parents tend to have better physical appearances in terms of beauty.

On the other hand, love, personal attraction and common interest are the three most important non-racial motivational factors for intercultural marriage in this study. These findings are similar with any other type of marriage or intimate relationships. Therefore, it is evident that as human beings, the non-racial factors for marrying seem to be consistent across culture. The unique factor that contributes most may not be available from this study; however as for the higher income group, it is the opportunity to meet with the prospective partner of a different culture that may have become the prelude to such relationship. This notion highly supports the mate selection concept that has been suggested by earlier work. The qualitative information gathered from the respondents also supports these findings. Future researches are deemed to explore in great details of both mate selection as well as marital processes in such a unique relationship. Examining whether or not motivational factors have certain roles in determining the quality of marriage of the couple may also be explored.

Endnotes

- ¹ It is cited in Zinn, Eitzen and Wells. See Zinn, M. B., D. S. Eitzen, and B. Wells, *Diversity in families*. 8th ed. (New York: Pearson, 2008).
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