



## Lives Together, Worlds Apart?

The Lives of Multicultural Muslim Couples

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# Lives Together, Worlds Apart? The Lives of Multicultural Muslim Couples

Manijeh Daneshpour

**SUMMARY.** The lives of multicultural Muslim couples is the focus of this paper. It is based on interviews with couples in which the husband is a Muslim of Middle Eastern descent with a wife of European-American or Asian-American descent. These women converted to Islam before or after marriage, or have remained Christian. The opportunities, strengths and challenges in such relationships are discussed, including issues that emerge connected to family, community, and society. In addition, current multicultural therapy competencies are reviewed and approaches, interventions, and strategies that may be useful in the treatment of multicultural Muslim couples are presented. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Multicultural Muslim couples, multicultural therapy, treatment issues with Muslim couples, Muslim-Christian couples relationships

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And among His Signs is that He created for you mates from among yourselves that you may live in tranquility with them and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts); verily in that are signs for those who reflect. (Qur'an 30:21)

Reasonable estimates of the Muslim presence in the U.S. now go as high as seven million (Khan Shamim, 2000). While a large percentage of this number represents immigrants to America from the Middle East, Africa and Europe, the number of converts also appears to be growing. This chapter is focused on multicultural Muslim couples. It is based on interviews with couples in which the husband is a Muslim of Middle Eastern descent with a wife of European-American or Asian-American descent. These women converted to Islam before or after marriage, or have remained Christian. Although there are no data available about how many American converts marry people of Middle Eastern descent, there is a growing number of such relationships, which creates numerous opportunities as well as challenges for these couples.

In this article, the opportunities, strengths and challenges in such relationships will be discussed, including issues that emerge connected to family, community, and society. In addition, current multicultural therapy competencies will be reviewed and approaches, interventions, and strategies that may be useful in the treatment of multicultural Muslim couples will be presented.

### ***METHODOLOGY***

This was a comprehensive qualitative investigation of the lives of ten multicultural Muslim couples between the ages of thirty-two and fifty-six who had been married from ten to twenty-two years. The participants were asked if they would participate in this study and were offered a brief, one-page description of the purpose of the study. They were informed of what they would get out of participating in the study, who would see the results, where they could obtain more information about the study, and how long it would take to complete the interview. Eight couples live in Minnesota; one couple lives in Oregon and the other lives in California. The eight couples that live in Minnesota were interviewed at their homes. The interviews were audio taped and all participants signed a consent form. The two couples that were not in Minnesota were interviewed over the phone using speakerphone and with their written consent; the interviews were audio taped as well.

In this sample the husbands were from Middle Eastern countries including Iran, Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine, which are racially considered to be what is referred to as “White,” but is technically of Arian decent. Eight of the wives interviewed were European American, and two were Asian American. The interview questions explored aspects of the couples’ lives, including their nuclear family background, dating history, courtship experiences, wedding, social life, public life, living and community environment, parenting and child-rearing experiences, education and employment experiences, values, religious differences, and areas of stress and disagreement. The final section of the interview explored issues regarding marital adjustment, communication, and decision-making. Couples also responded to questions regarding experiences with therapists and their expectations of the therapy profession. All tapes were transcribed after each interview to compare and contrast couples’ responses to different questions in order to develop some general themes and patterns.

The sample consisted largely of couples that were highly educated, and professionally employed, with middle class backgrounds. Hence, although the findings are not easily generalizable to all interracial couples, they suggest some patterns and themes that have appeared significant.

It is important to keep in mind that indeed I am from Iran, teach multicultural therapy courses, and have done extensive research with the Iranian population and thus can be considered to be familiar with Middle Eastern culture. Therefore, the conclusion can be drawn that my background might have created some biases in understanding the challenges and opportunities these couples have faced. Nevertheless, as a postmodernist, I do not believe in an objective reality, and furthermore, this article is simply based on my interpretation and understanding of the lives of these couples.

### ***MULTICULTURAL MUSLIM COUPLES’ SIMILARITIES WITH OTHER COUPLES***

The lives of all these couples are very similar to the lives of same-race/culture/ethnicity couples, as depicted in popular and contemporary media and literature. These couples describe their attractions to each other in ways parallel to partners of the same religion/race/ethnic background. They indicate mutual interests, values and beliefs, ease in being in each other’s company, and physical attractiveness toward each other.

One of the couples interviewed consisted of an Iranian husband and a wife from the Asian country of the Philippines. She has never converted to Islam and to this day is a practicing Catholic. They reported sharing many common values and beliefs. The most common shared values for this couple were respect, honesty, trust, faithfulness, appreciation of diversity, family (including family of origin), and religion or spirituality. Expanding on this concept, the couple discussed the fact that their mutual values seemed to attract them to each other and at times it even seemed they had grown up in the same family, been taught the same things and had been raised in an almost identical manner. They attributed their marital success to the shared values they held between each other.

Two European-American women discussed how their tendency to share the same values and beliefs with their husbands of Middle Eastern descent reduced the level of potential conflict between them. The couples mutually felt that their shared values were particularly helpful when it came to maintaining consistency in their roles as partners and parents.

The areas of greatest stress or tension for all the couples, regardless of ethnic or racial background, tend to be very similar. Such examples of stress and tension usually consist of finances, juggling roles and responsibilities, parenting, communication related to dynamics of the relationship, and decision-making issues (Wehrly et al., 1999). The couples in this study tended to report similar stressors and tensions. In their response to questions concerning the impact of their racial, religion or ethnic differences, they tended to point out the existence of greater hurdles to overcome than their lack of racial or ethnic similarities.

### ***MULTICULTURAL MUSLIM COUPLES' CHALLENGES***

Even though multicultural Muslim couples tend to have many relationship strengths and stressors that are similar to couples that do not have such racial or ethnic differences, they nevertheless do face other unique challenges due to these minor but important differences. Depending on the length of time spent in this country, as well as the level of acculturation and assimilation, the cultural values and worldviews of Middle Easterners and Americans may present dramatic differences, and as a result may have an impact on the dynamics of the marriage. For immigrants and first-generation Middle Easterners, conflicts and differences related to communication patterns, language, gender roles, reli-

gious practices, parenting styles, customs, and foods were manifestations of profound cultural values and worldview differences. For the couples in this study, many of these issues related to cultural differences and conflicts were more prevalent in the early years of the couple's relationship, which will be discussed in the following sections.

### ***Religious Compatibility***

All couples talked about the importance of the religious aspects of their lives. Men whose wives converted to Islam agreed that indeed it was better to introduce their wives to Islam and encourage them to become Muslim prior to the marriage, but it seemed that women had some difficulty understanding this idea. Middle Eastern men struggled to point out their reasoning and simply explained that in enlightening their soon-to-be-wives of the views, practices and strong beliefs of Islam prior to being married, it would simply make it easier for the wives to have a better understanding of the religious background they hold and would in the future like for their wives to hold as well. European-American women struggled with their lack of understanding of the religion, and their partners' insistence got them even more confused. However, the same individuals admitted that Islam was very easy for them to accept within the passing of time in the actual marriage, whereas prior to the event such a conversion seemed near to impossible. Two others felt that their relationships were stable and lasting even without the conversion to Islam.

However, regardless of the timing of the conversion, whether before or after the marriage or not at all, all couples acknowledged that they had many conflicts and misunderstandings regarding their individual religious values at the beginning of their marriage even though flexibility, understanding, and tolerance for different perspectives played an important if not crucial role in the stability of their current relationship.

### ***Community and Social Issues***

Several couples struggled with differences regarding cultural and religious customs, particularly at social gatherings. At the beginning of their relationships, partners had problems understanding exactly what was to be expected of them and deciding how it was they were to deal with such a dilemma.

Given the fact that a non-Muslim is not bounded by Islamic values regarding dress code, mixed gender parties, consuming alcohol and eat-

ing non-halaal foods,<sup>1</sup> some non-Muslim women voluntarily chose to follow these customs in an effort to sustain a pleasant family life or simply as a goodwill gesture to walk the extra mile for their Muslim partners. For others, these issues became the major source of struggle.

Several Middle Eastern husbands in this study pointed out that by getting married to a non-Muslim woman, they knew that expecting their non-Muslim wives to behave in an Islamic fashion was not a sound expectation. They also knew that as a couple they would be invited to certain parties and dinners where it would not be unlikely for all non-halaal items to be served and even though he may not wish to consume such items, his wife could very well have wishes different to his. Therefore, both the husband and wife expressed the difficulty in the early years of their marriage in dealing with such problems due to the lack of understanding of what is expected of the other party.

### *Non-Muslim Celebrations*

Some couples discussed the struggle in celebrating holidays, births and other such occasions with family and friends. In the occasion of births, problems were commonly raised among the Christian grandparents regarding the baptizing of the child, a very important aspect in the Christian religion yet not at all acknowledged in the Islamic faith. Similar differences arose on such Christian holidays as Easter and Christmas in which great feasts are held and presents are distributed, which are again not an acknowledged aspect in the Islamic faith. In this study, all eight couples whose wives converted to Islam struggled with these issues. Women described that unless they made sure that their side of family understands their husband's reservations about such celebrations, the situation got very tense at such a joyful occasion and left bitter memories.

Along the same line, family of origin problems can also arise for women who have converted to Islam. A European-American woman with an Arab husband talked about how she—now a Muslim—had problems and conflict related to cultural values and worldview differences concerning celebrating Christian holidays both with her husband and her own family. This couple's cultural and religious differences resulted in both lack of support and acceptance from her family, which made the initial phases of their relationship difficult, if not a real challenge. When the family began to see their daughter's continual conflict between her commitment to the relationship and her commitment to them, and her American family of origin culture, her family began to re-

lax and understood the situation from what can be referred to as a different perspective. However, numerous concessions were made by all and involved the wife's willingness to respect, learn more about, and adapt to Arab and Islamic culture, making it possible for the couple to come to a level of understanding and compromise. And in return the husband participated in more gatherings when alcoholic beverages were not served and went to visit the wife's family on days that were not a Christian holiday, which resulted in the absence of the extended family.

Hugging and kissing cheeks of male and female friends across gender is another practice which is not permissible in Islam. Several couples talked about the confusion and anger at the beginning of their relationship regarding these issues. One European-American woman talked about how all of the sudden everything she was doing was considered wrong and it took her several years before understanding the religious reasoning behind it.

These differences that exist between Middle Easterners, Asians and European-American cultures are legitimate and may be of valid concern, but these couples appeared willing and able to rise above the differences even though they struggled a great deal during the first few years of their marriage. The willingness of one or both partners to respect and learn about the others' cultural backgrounds, including rituals, customs, and traditions, seemed to have far-reaching implications in the relationship between the partners and in the relationship both have with the families of origin, in-laws, friends, and associates.

### ***Friendship Circles***

Converting to Islam for these European-American and Asian-American women also had an impact on their friendships. Several couples, especially European-American women, discussed the difficulty they had with support of their non-Muslim friends at the beginning of their relationship. Some talked about friends wanting to go out and due to the possibility of drinking involved, they could not participate. Some talked about feeling different and not having much in common with friends anymore. Many talked about breaking ties with good friends due to ideology differences and began becoming friends with couples like themselves who were isolated from their own family and friends after converting to Islam.

### ***Acceptable Dress***

Islam prescribes dress codes for both men and women. Today, not many Muslim men and women, living in secular Muslim countries or

the West, follow the dress code perfectly. However, most Muslim women still do not normally wear sleeveless shirts, shorts, bikinis or other such revealing articles of clothing. A practicing Muslim man who is faithful to the ideology of the Islamic faith will inevitably prefer his wife and children to be dressed in a proper, that is, a non-revealing manner. If the wife is non-Muslim she is under no obligation to follow a strict Islamic dress code, or in that case a dress code at all. Nevertheless, she may choose to dress in a proper manner to please her husband, to avoid offending him, and to furthermore prevent the attraction of other men to her feminine beauty.

The European-American women in this study talked about the difficulty they initially had understanding the reasoning behind the dress code. After having decided to become a Muslim, however, they accepted the dress code. Almost every European-American woman discussed their family's resistance and furthermore misunderstanding about the Islamic dress code. Families tended to mistakenly view the struggle for modesty of the women to be rather a sign of their oppression. Some women admitted that they had given up trying to explain their views to their families while others claimed that their families had come around and furthermore defended the Islamic dress code in front of other non-Muslims, when spoken ill of.

### *Issues of Parenting and Child Rearing*

Multiracial couples usually insist that their children have an identity based on the collective background of both parents (Brandell, 1988; McRoy & Freeman, 1986; Wardle, 1987). In this sample the two multifaith couples indicated that they believed in raising their children to embrace and celebrate the Middle Eastern and American cultures collectively and equally, thus exposing their children to the values, roles, norms, attitudes, behaviors, and even the languages of both cultures.

However, child rearing and parenting are the most important and complicated issues multicultural Muslim couples face, with the major concern being how to help their children practice their Islamic faith in this society, that for the most part, tends to stereotype and furthermore misunderstand the Islamic faith. In Islamic cultures, even those with secular governments such as Pakistan, Egypt, Bangladesh, Turkey, and Indonesia, the entire social environment supports learning and understanding Islam. Although cultural practices might deviate from the true meaning of Islam, nevertheless, children learn Islam in bits and pieces at home, school, through radio, TV and through their participation in Is-

lamic groups. Grandparents and other relatives also play a role to help parents teach Islamic values to their children. In the West, parents are faced with a totally different environment. In most cases, they have to be the only “bridge” between Islam and their children. Several couples discussed their frustration with teaching Islamic principles. Due to the fact that the husbands’ families live in the Middle East and the wives are not very familiar with the Islamic values and principles, husbands felt overwhelmed serving as the only connection to the Islamic faith for their whole family, which created even more frustration for the non-Muslim wife. Several European-American women said that after discussing different issues with other Muslim couples, they realized that their husbands’ interpretations of what is Islamic and what is not is a mixture of family of origins’ values and also cultures and traditions which might be very different for other Middle Eastern cultures.

The majority of the couples I interviewed spoke of wanting their children to have a sense of and appreciation for their Middle Eastern cultural backgrounds and heritages, since they are already exposed heavily to U.S. culture. Several couples gave examples of how, beginning very early in their children’s lives, they attempted to introduce them to the various aspects of their Middle Eastern cultural backgrounds, based on their Islamic faith. Couples stated that it is very challenging to raise children with Islamic values (i.e., no dating, no drinking, no dancing or listening to music, etc.) while they are exposed to U.S. cultures, which for the most part contradict almost all of these values. Parents emphasized the importance of talking with their children about issues of identity: providing identity-bolstering seminars, books, and films, and providing instructions for their children about what to say and how to respond in situations in which they are faced with making difficult choices. In addition, parents spoke of the significance of strong adult role models for their children, and of support from extended family, friends, and good connections to a strong Muslim community. They cited the necessity of their children’s learning to speak Arabic or Persian and enjoying customary foods. According to these couples, Middle Eastern “culture” has special importance for them and their children, due to its connection to their Islamic faith. However, they indicated that the decision to introduce their children to Middle Eastern culture came later, after wives had converted to Islam, and even then most couples indicated that raising children was the most challenging part of their relationship.

Several European-American women remembered that in the early years of child-rearing it had been frustrating not knowing what was “Is-

lamic” and what was “cultural” when they had to implement rules for their children. One European-American woman believed that her husband demanding to be the absolute authority figure in the family was an Islamic rule, and she needed to teach her children absolute obedience. However, later on, she realized that her husband’s father was a powerful man, and therefore her husband continued that pattern, and his behavior had nothing to do with the Islamic faith. Therefore, there was a significant struggle in understanding that religion, culture, and upbringing are each separate categories and can easily become blended, and therefore demented the true beliefs of what they know as their “Islamic faith.”

### ***Gender and Power***

This was a very controversial and difficult topic to discuss with the couples in which the wife had converted to Islam. All wives in this study indicated that prior to meeting their husbands their perception of the Middle Eastern cultures in general were very different. They believed that these cultures are patriarchal and not very inclusive to women in public life. However, many years later, they realized that when dealing with the Islamic perspective of any topic, there should be a clear distinction between the normative teachings of Islam and the diverse cultural practices among Muslims, which may or may not be consistent with the Islamic principles.

For example, three women that were married to Iranians discussed the issues of power and gender differently as opposed to European-American women who were married to Arabs even though the teachings of the Islamic faith are supposed to be the same. Nevertheless, all couples interviewed emphasized that if they would have married someone from their own cultures the issues of gender and power would have been very different. Specifically, Arab men discussed their cultural expectation to be the provider and the protector of the family and seeing their wives working and making significant contributions to their married lives were challenging for them. On the other hand, they expected their wives to take more power in family decision-making, but their wives preferred their involvement in family affairs and joint decision-making.

It was also evident that they used or misused their Islamic faith to gain more power, which was challenged by their wives once they became more knowledgeable about the true teaching of the religion. One European-American woman talked about how at the beginning, she perceived her husband to be a very good Muslim and therefore superior in many different aspects of morality and later on, once she read books and

attended religious gatherings, she realized that she herself had actually become a better Muslim!

Nevertheless, in this sample, male power existed more so at the beginning of their relationship than later, but women often eventually understood that the power role of their husbands has not been Islamically validated, but rather an adaptation of their father's or forefather's demented belief of male roles in Islam, and the interpretation varies from one culture to another.

### ***APPROACHES, INTERVENTIONS, AND STRATEGIES FOR THERAPY WITH MULTICULTURAL MUSLIM COUPLES***

The mental health field has only recently begun to address the issues and concerns of the multicultural population (Wehrly et al., 1999). Mental health professionals have had limited experience working with multicultural couples and have often relied on dated literature that depicts interracial/interfaith relationships as being fraught with pathology and doomed to failure. Some multicultural couples in this study reported working with professionals who made judgments about their relationship problems based on the partners' cultural and religion differences. These judgments were based on the assumption that racial, religion, or cultural background differences always result in relational difficulties. McGoldrock, Giordano, and Pearce (1996) suggest that the greater the cultural differences between spouses, the more problems they have adjusting to marriage. This was true for two couples in this study, but we need to urge mental health professionals to be careful about making this assumption without a thorough assessment of each couple.

It is also absolutely essential that therapists who work with multicultural Muslim couples examine and explore their own attitudes and beliefs about these relationships. Myths and stereotypes continue to cloud societal images of individuals who marry persons of another culture/religion. The therapist's awareness of his or her own attitudes and beliefs is a foundation for doing competent and effective therapy with multicultural couples (Solsberry, 1994). It is crucial that therapists are not only aware of their personal biases, but that they also recognize the negative effects that such biases can have on the therapy process (McRoy & Freeman, 1986). One couple talked about how they felt judged when the therapist assumed their marital problems are solely related to their reli-

gion and did not validate their other more important relationship concerns.

Myths and stereotypes about multicultural marriage also have the potential to have a negative impact on the multicultural couple's relationship. These myths and stereotypes are often at the root of the opposition that these couples experience as rejection and alienation from family and friends. One couple talked about their frustration with the therapist because she was not able to validate their sense of alienation, and it seemed to them that she was siding with people who reject and alienate them. Davidson (1992) suggests that therapists be critically aware of these theories and myths, recognizing their inherent racial/cultural biases and guarding against their influence in the therapy process. Couples may enter therapy in an attempt to discuss and understand the objections to their relationship (Wehrly, 1996). The therapist must be able to empathize with the couple and validate feelings that the partners may be experiencing. It may also be necessary to refocus the couple's attention on to the strengths of the relationship. A major strength that is often overlooked or minimized is the ability of couples to transcend or appreciate their vast differences. Further, the therapist should assist the couple in recognizing and drawing on the strength of the relationship to empower the couple to resist stereotypes and grapple with family issues.

Several couples talked about their families' opposition that this marriage is for ulterior motives (i.e., staying in the U.S., obtaining legal status or residency). It is certainly possible that a person has married a European-American for ulterior motives and in doing so is fulfilling stereotypes and myths. If, in the context of the therapy process, this is revealed, it should be explored, and the therapist should assist the couple in identifying and clarifying the partners' reasons for being together. Attempts should be made to help the couple determine if, because of love or other positive factors, the relationship has a viable chance of survival (Davidson, 1992; Okun, 1996).

Davidson (1992) suggests that in some cases a clinical professional may work with the couple and family members (if they are still around) to discuss different issues related to multicultural marriage. Family members may be invited to examine whether their accusations about ulterior motives expose their prejudice rather than indicating weakness in the couples' decision to marry. In general, all couples in this study believed that multicultural couples' marriages still present concern for members of this society, especially multicultural Muslim marriages. In working with couples and their families, it is important for therapists to

help them become aware that in accepting the relationship, they may be making different and also very difficult choices. This may carry some high demands (Davidson, 1992), including that of role modeling what it means to live harmoniously in a multicultural society.

According to Solsberry (1994), a therapist who works with a client of the same race, who is interracially married, may assume that there are no racial or cultural differences between the therapist and the client. The multicultural marriage, however, generally places the client in a position that is currently different from that of the therapist. As indicated by Sue, Arrendondo, and McDavis (1992), the culturally skilled therapist has knowledge and understanding of the life expectancies, cultural heritages, and historical backgrounds of culturally different clients. However, the influences of being married to a person of a different race, religion, and culture positions a client who is of the same background as the therapist to potentially have a very different cultural experience and worldview than the therapist. For multicultural Muslim couples the therapist might feel more connected to the European-American partner and assumes that she understands her issues better without recognizing the differences between them. One European-American woman talked about her frustration with the therapist trying very hard to emancipate her from supposedly an oppressive relationship without understanding the vast ideological and value differences between them.

It is important, when multicultural couples present concerns regarding the relationship, that therapist explores the basis for and possible origins of these concerns. Ibrahim and Schroeder (1990) also suggest that an assessment be conducted to help the therapist understand each partner's worldview and cultural identity, as well as to help each partner understand the other's worldview and cultural identity. According to Okun (1996), differences in expression of emotion, expression of physical affection, beliefs of partners regarding roles, power distribution, cultural influences on family structure, views about parenting, and the meaning of love should be considered in any multicultural marriage. According to Ibrahim and Schroeder (1990), in addition to examining worldview and other cultural matters, the following may also be explored: the couple's satisfaction with the relationship, the effectiveness of communication between the partners, the commitment and level of solidarity in the relationship, the developmental differences that each partner has experienced or expects to experience, the occupational status of both partners, and the family role expectations of both partners. In examining concerns that may be a function of the cultural differences that exist between the partners, it is important to help couples explore

the following: how each partner defines his or her cultural identity, the meaning that cultural identity has for each of them, and how the meaning given to each one's cultural identity influences and affects the relationship and the dynamics within the relationship (Okun, 1996). The exploration of each partner's worldview and cultural basis can assist the couple in understanding some of the reasons for the partners' conflicts (Ibrahim & Schroeder, 1990). The same dynamic exists for multicultural Muslim couples. It is important to note that even when individuals marry someone from the same culture and ethnic background, they still have to deal with different family values and role expectations. Thus, it is necessary to normalize many of these issues and not blame it on cultural difference.

### CONCLUSION

Based on a research study of ten couples, this study provided an overview of the unique experiences of multicultural Muslim couples in the United States. Growing opportunities for interactions between people of differing cultural backgrounds makes it likely that the number of multicultural relationships will continue to increase. In addition, there is going to be continued growth in the segment of the U.S. population that accepts Islam as their religion; therefore, the expansion of the meanings of multicultural couples should include Christian-Muslim couples when discussing couples and families. Therapists will need to assess their own views on this population and be able to assess these couples' needs, strengths, and differences. It is paramount for mental health professionals to increase their knowledge and broaden their understanding of multicultural couples and their Islamic faith if they want to help these couples thrive in their relationships.

### NOTE

1. Non-halaal can simply be defined as foods that are not permitted in Islam to be consumed by a Muslim such as pork and meats which have not been processed in an Islamic way; in technical terms this word is referred to as "lawful" in the Quran.

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