

**INVESTIGATING INTER-CHRISTIAN AND INTERCULTURAL COUPLES  
ASSOCIATED WITH THE GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AMERICA:  
A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PROJECT**

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**Abstract**

This qualitative research project described individual, marital, and family challenges from the perspective of 376 intermarried respondents associated with the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. Participants' observations generally suggested that their religious and cultural differences enriched their own and their family's well-being. However, some participants described pervasive and lingering unresolved couple disagreements linked to their religious and cultural differences. These differences seemed to have a decidedly negative impact on individual, couple, and family well-being. Clinical implications suggest that intermarried couples' different religious and cultural backgrounds may be interconnected to the presenting problem(s) of couples.

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Over the past twenty years, Greek Orthodox Archdiocesan (GOA) statistics indicate that 62.5% of all marriages conducted in its churches are inter-Christian and intercultural<sup>1</sup> (Stephanopoulos, 2001). When those members marrying outside of the GOA are considered, it is estimated that approximately 75% of its members are intermarrying (Harakas, 1997). As a result of these trends, considerable debate has occurred within the GOA regarding this subject over the past several decades (Harakas, 1997). As a consequence of this debate, the first author was commissioned to examine intermarriages and families within the GOA.

The purpose of this paper is to present results from a qualitative study<sup>2</sup> that included 376 inter-Christian and intercultural spouses who had some level of association with the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America<sup>3</sup> (GOA). It is posited that MFTs reviewing this article will be

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<sup>1</sup> For theological reasons that are not relevant to this paper, other types of intermarriages are not conducted in the Orthodox Church. Readers wishing more information regarding this subject are referred to L. Patsavos, & Joanides. C (2000) and D. Constantelos, (1999).

<sup>2</sup>The information in this paper is from the Interfaith Research Project (IRP) sponsored by the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. For more information about the IRP, readers are directed to the GOA's Interfaith Marriage Website at [www.interfaith.goarch.org](http://www.interfaith.goarch.org).

<sup>3</sup>The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America has approximately one million adherents (Moskos, 1990, 1993). When other Orthodox Christians from Slavic, Romanian, and Arabic

in a better position to assist intermarried couples where one partner is Greek Orthodox and the other partner is from another religious and cultural tradition. This research may also be directly or indirectly applicable to other Eastern Orthodox Christians who intermarry.<sup>4</sup>

### **Methods**

Since the GOA was interested in discerning the individual, couple, and family challenges that intermarried couples encounter when seeking to worship in a Greek Orthodox Church, a grounded theory approach was adopted. It was reasoned that such an approach would serve to generate both a *rich description* (Geertz, 1973) and systematic conceptualization of the challenges that intermarried spouses, couples and families encounter in the GOA<sup>5</sup>.

#### Focus Groups

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backgrounds are considered, projections ranging between 2 - 3 million Eastern Orthodox are given (Ware, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Results from the IRP have been included in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese's Interfaith Marriage Website since 6/98. This site receives a minimum of 500 hits weekly, many of which are from other Eastern Orthodox traditions. To date, the first author has not received any feedback suggesting that these results fail to generally transfer to other Eastern Orthodox involved in an inter-Christian intercultural marriage.

<sup>5</sup> This paper will provide an overview of the thick, rich description that emerged. For information regarding the social ecological developmental cybernetics of cybernetics grounded theory of intermarried couples in the GOA that emerged from the Interfaith Research Project (IRP), please consult the first author.

The researcher formed groups with participants who had as much in common as possible. This technique made it less likely that participants would be debating each other and more likely that a recursive process would emerge allowing participants to build upon each others' observations and descriptions (Morgan, 1998; Piercy & Nickerson, 1996).

#### Description of the Sampling Technique

This study utilized a combination of purposive (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and snowball (Bernard, 1994) sampling techniques. Upon receiving permission from Archdiocesan and Diocesan bishops, clergy were contacted in order to recruit participant couples. In total, 38 Greek Orthodox priests assisted the researcher in his efforts to identify potential participant couples.

Two different types of focus groups were conducted in each diocese. One type of focus group was comprised of couples from the "X" Generation (20-34), and a second type of focus group was comprised of Baby Boomers (35-50). This decision was made in an effort to isolate any idiosyncratic cohort differences. Each group met for a two-hour block of time. Additionally, ten 30 - 45 minute debriefing sessions were conducted to obtain supplementary information in an effort to enrich the research process (Joanides, Brigham & Joanning, 1997). Fifteen individual 60 – 90 minute follow-up telephone interviews were also conducted with focus group participant volunteers. Heterogeneity was also sought to include as many different perspectives as possible. Spouses with high, moderate, and low levels of religious and/or ethnic attachments were recruited. Immigrants, converts, first, second, third, fourth, and fifth generation participants were represented.

### Description of Participants

A total of 202 participants took part in one of 20 focus groups that were conducted in every diocese across the GOA. Couples generally described themselves as middleclass. Each participant couple was comprised of one Greek Orthodox Christian and one non-Greek Orthodox Christian. Fifty percent were Greek Orthodox, 32% were Roman Catholic, and 18% identified themselves with a Protestant Church. One Hundred and six Baby Boomers and 96 “X”ers participated. Utmost confidentiality was assured to each respondent.

In addition to focus group participants, 174 individuals reviewed the emerging results on the Interfaith Marriage Website. These respondents offered feedback directly to the researcher on an interfaith couple feedback form. When focus group participants involved in the IRP are considered with those individuals who visited the Interfaith Marriage Website, results from the IRP reflect 376 interfaith spouses' descriptions and observations.

### Questions Utilized

Open-ended questions were utilized to generate conversation. Some examples of questions that were employed are: What has it been like being intermarried? What have been some of your surprises, blessings, challenges, and difficulties? Open-ended questions also tended to change as the research process unfolded.

### Techniques used to Ensure Trustworthiness

Code, theoretical, and operational notes were utilized to enhance the trustworthiness of the results (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Credibility; transferability, dependability and confirmability issues were considered and satisfied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Analysis**

Analysis proceeded in three stages (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In the first stage, or “open coding” stage, the researcher attempted to open the data up in an effort to begin identifying possible dimensions and properties in order to build a conceptual framework. The second stage, termed “axial coding”, assists the researcher to begin reconstructing respondent’s descriptions and interpretations in a systematic form. The third stage in this analysis process is termed “selective coding”. During this stage the researcher sought to identify a story line that was conceptually and systematically dense and was derived from the collected data.

### **Results**

Thirteen categories emerged which served to identify many of the primary lived experiences and challenges that intermarried couples encountered.<sup>6</sup> Some of the salient categories and information pertaining to MFT’s work appear below in summary form.

#### Negative View of Intermarriage

The fact that some couples belonged to different ethnic/faith traditions tended to create varying levels of detachment between them and their partner’s extended family. This was especially the case when spouses reported having high levels of attachment to their religious and/or cultural background or when they failed to consider how these differences might impact marital and family well-being.

#### Couples' View of Religion

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<sup>6</sup> For additional information please log onto the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese’s Interfaith Marriage Website.

Most functional spouses and couples generally de-emphasized theological differences and focused on theological similarities. They observed that religion served to positively impact their lives as individuals, couples and families. Respondents who emphasized theological differences generally described lingering conflicts that had a corrosive effect on marital stability and family well-being. These respondents described ongoing regrets and frustration. They further stated that they would not recommend intermarriage. They cautioned dating couples to thoroughly examine how their religious differences might impact them after marriage.

### Individual Challenges

Participants frequently described a type of distance existing between them as a result of their religious and cultural differences. Unfamiliarity with their partner's faith and cultural traditions often created some culture shock.<sup>7</sup> This was especially true for the non-Greek Orthodox spouse. Balancing the needs of the individual, couple, nuclear and extended family, and faith community was repeatedly mentioned.

### Couple Challenges

Couple needs often conflicted with personal, nuclear and extended family, and faith community needs. Such conflict frequently created marital instability. The establishment of healthy boundaries between couples' needs and the needs of other subsystems correlated with the degree of marital conflict couples experienced and vice versa.

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<sup>7</sup> Greek Orthodoxy has been decidedly influenced by Byzantine and Hellenic culture (Constantelos, 1999). As a result, non-Greek Orthodox participants repeatedly described a sense of bewilderment and feelings of strangeness in their efforts to relate to their partner's ethno-religious background.

### Parenting Challenges

Parents with equally high levels of religious and cultural attachments were the most likely to describe lingering disappointments and/or conflicts related to their efforts to help their children acquire a religious and ethnic identity. Parental disagreement and conflict was most pervasive when these couples failed to discuss and resolve issues relating to their children's baptism and continued religious development.

### Extended Family Challenges

When couples announced their intention to wed, family members (especially Greek American parents) occasionally withheld their blessings and approval. However, most extended family members eventually acquiesced and cutoffs were a rare exception. In those cases where cutoffs did occur, they generally involved the Greek Orthodox spouse and members from his or her extended family. In cases where Greek Orthodox extended families continued to view the non-Greek Orthodox partner as an outsider, this negatively impacted spousal well-being. In these instances, participants described the existence of covert alliances between the Greek Orthodox partner and his/her parents. These alliances tended to inhibit marital satisfaction.

### Faith Community Directives

Ignorance of the respective faith communities' position toward intermarriage created some individual, couple, and family challenges. This was especially apparent during the following nodal points: (a) after engagement; (b) when couples' were deciding where they would wed; (c) when couples' tried to find a mutually satisfying worship site after marriage; (d) when couples were trying to balance extended family needs and their own personal and couple needs; and (e) when couples were trying to decide where to baptize their children. Orthodox theology also

created challenges for couples. This is because the Orthodox Church views itself as the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church (Patsavos & Joanides, 2000; Ware, 1997) and, consequently, does not allow non-Orthodox participation in the sacraments. Non-Orthodox are thus only allowed to participate in the Orthodox Church's religious life as passive participants.

### Gender Specific Differences

Non-Greek Orthodox male participants perceived Greek American dating guidelines as being more conservative when compared to the dominant American culture. This did not prove to be the case when non-Greek Orthodox female participants described the dating process. Both male and female respondents repeatedly stated that "wives/mothers" were entrusted with the couples' and family's religious well being. This observation generally applied even when spouses perceived themselves as having an equal level of religiosity. Immigrant and first generation Greek American male spouses assumed a proactive and dominant involvement with regards to the ethnic traditions practiced in these households. This sometimes created some marital challenges when the non-Greek partner failed to support these initiatives or desired to introduce competing ethnic customs. It should also be stated that Greek American female spouses were entrusted with the family's religious well-being, but also assumed a proactive role in inculcating their children into Greek-American traditions.

### Balancing Strategies

Participants repeatedly observed that premarital discussions were key to their efforts to strike some balance between individual, couple, nuclear family, extended family, and faith community subsystem needs. Continued communication throughout the marital life cycle also increased understanding and intimacy. Spouses also indicated that it was important for them to

acknowledge that their inter-Christian marriages were a “work in progress.” Patience, mutual love, acceptance, a willingness to compromise, the use of humor, fairness, and a freedom to choose were also continually cited. Developing healthy boundaries to keep out unwanted extended family intrusions were also frequently mentioned. Minimizing their religious differences and maximizing the benefits derived from belonging to two different religious traditions was another invaluable balancing strategy. Praying together was repeatedly considered invaluable to participants’ efforts to bridge the distance created between both spouses’ religious and cultural backgrounds.

### **Implications for MFTs**

The following observations should prove helpful to MFTs who work with intermarried couples where one spouse is Greek or Eastern Orthodox and the other spouse is from another Christian tradition. MFTs should show more caution when applying these observations to other intermarried couples and families.

#### Religious commitment and ethnic variability

While all participants in the IRP were intermarried, results indicate that there is a great amount of diversity within this population. For example, some partners described having equally high levels of attachment to their religious and ethnic backgrounds. Other partners’ statements suggested that they had equally low levels of religious and ethnic attachments. As such, MFTs should remember that variation exists as a result of intermarried partners different levels of religious and ethnic attachments. Moreover, these differences can have a decided impact on the type of challenges these couples will encounter.

### Differences impact stability

This research suggests that intermarried couples' differences created individual, couple, family, and extended family challenges. Depending on the mix of religious and ethnic differences, the challenges negatively impact individual, marital, and family stability. Participants with high levels of ethnic and/or religious attachments seemed to encounter the most challenges and vice versa.

### Religious differences and intermarriage

Couples who viewed their religious differences in negative terms described encountering challenges that compromised individual, couple, and family satisfaction. These couples reported lingering couple conflict that pervaded all levels of their family's life. Therefore, when intermarried couples and families enter therapy, MFTs should assess if partners' religious/ethnic differences are interconnected with the client system's presenting problems.

### Orthodox ecclesiology can create instability

Orthodox ecclesiology asserts that the Orthodox Church is "the One, Catholic and Apostolic Church" (Ware, 1997). This doctrine created challenges for most IPR participants. Specifically, couples reported struggling to respect this theological assertion. Many stated that when the Orthodox spouse insisted on emphasizing this doctrine, the non-Orthodox spouse felt disrespected and couple conflict often ensued – especially among couples where both partners had high religious attachments. Those who successfully resolved this challenge stated that they sought to keep "religious wars" out of their home. Others stated that they "agreed to disagree," and believed that God did not desire that their religious differences create individual, marital and family instability. MFTs should consider how this doctrine might be a complicating factor.

Offering non-judgmental observations and facilitating discussion is perhaps the most effectual method of intervention. Assisting couples in identifying the connections between their presenting problems and their religious differences can facilitate couple and family therapy.

#### Ethnocentric attitudes

Ethnocentric attitudes tended to create distance and conflict that undermined individual, couple and family well-being. As such, when MFTs work with this population, they should assess if couples' cultural differences are linked to the client system's presenting problems. Helping couples to identify the linkages between their presenting problems and their cultural differences can facilitate couple and family therapy.

#### Cultural shock and the Non-Greek Orthodox partner

Non-Greek Orthodox repeatedly described experiencing different levels of culture shock that were linked to their ignorance of Greek Orthodox religious and familial idiosyncrasies. Protestant Christians who were unfamiliar with ritual and liturgy were especially confused by Orthodox liturgical and sacramental traditions. Non-Orthodox participants also found Greek families to be more enmeshed than their own. In some instances, some non-Greek Orthodox described feeling like outsiders several years after their marriages. In these cases they described how unhealthy coalitions had developed between their partner and extended family that functioned to undermine marital satisfaction and family well-being.

#### Balancing subsystem needs

Couples repeatedly described a process whereby they sought to strike a balance between individual, couple, nuclear family, extended family and faith community subsystem needs. In instances where a skewed emphasis was placed on one subsystem's needs, this tended to have a

negative systemic impact on individual, couple and family well-being. Balancing subsystem needs was a constant challenge for intermarried couples. Learning how to balance subsystem needs was indispensable to individual, couple, and family well-being.

### Developmental challenges

Participants described encountering numerous developmental challenges across the family life cycle. Couples who were able to find mutually satisfying resolutions to the religious and ethnic challenges they encountered at early stages in the family life cycle were in a better position to negotiate successive challenges. When couples were unable to find resolutions at earlier stages, these failures complicated their efforts to find answers at later stages.

### Challenges related to children

This research suggests if couples have failed to address their children's religious development before marriage, lingering and pervasive disagreements and disappointments were more likely to emerge after marriage. When intermarried couples and families present themselves for therapy, MFTs should consider exploring if their children's religious and cultural development is interconnected with the client system's presenting problems. Such issues may seem peripheral, but may well be more central to therapy than either the therapist or clients might first suppose.

### Ethno-religious<sup>8</sup> pulls can impact marital and family stability

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<sup>8</sup> Greek Studies scholars and Greek Orthodox theologians utilize this term to describe the interconnected relationship that exists between religion and ethnicity within the Greek Orthodox experience (Constantelos, 1999). Greek Orthodox Christians involved in the IRP frequently

Participants with an ethno-religious background were more likely to want to infuse elements of their ethno-religious traditions into their family's home life. This was especially true of immigrants and first generation participants. Greek Orthodox women were particularly motivated to inculcate their children into their ethno-religious background. Greek Orthodox men seemed to be more invested in passing on elements of their Hellenic background to their children and seemed less interested in their children's religious development. Family therapists' work with couples where one or both individuals have an ethno-religious background might profit from these observations, especially when it seems that religious differences are interrelated to the presenting problem(s).

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Results from this research suggest that intermarried couples encounter individual, marital, family, extended family, and faith community challenges as a result of their religious and cultural differences. This research also indicates that the number and intensity of these challenges is related to spousal (a) perception of intermarriage; (b) level of religiosity; (b) ethnic attachments; (c) gender; (d) the length of time one's family has been in this country; and (e) length of time a couple has been married.

Couples who perceived their religious backgrounds in negative terms were more likely to report higher levels of marital and family dissatisfaction. Couples with equally high levels of attachment to their religious and ethnic backgrounds were more likely to report experiencing challenges related to their religious and cultural differences. Participants whose religious and

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described an inter-relationship between their religious and ethnic backgrounds. However, the degree of connection tended to vary.

cultural backgrounds could be characterized in ethno-religious terms also expressed a strong commitment to introducing ethno-religious traditions into their households and inculcating their children in their ethno-religious background. In the case of participants from ethno-religious backgrounds, female participants seemed to be more invested in infusing their home life with their ethno-religious tradition; male participants were often more invested in passing on ethnic traditions. This was especially true of Greek Orthodox males.

Participant observations also suggested that many couples underestimate the types of challenges that they will encounter related to their religious and cultural differences. Furthermore, results indicated that challenges could stem from social-ecological factors, where individual, couple, nuclear family, extended family, and faith community subsystem needs conflict. These challenges can also emerge from the developmental changes that take place as these marriages and families pass from one life cycle stage to the next.

A keener understanding of how the information that emerged from this research can help MFTs with their work with intermarried couples. Discerning how destabilizing religious and ethnic differences can be and seeking to assess how these differences are interrelated with presenting problems can assist therapists in their effort to facilitate positive change in the lives of intermarried couples and families.

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