

Cross Cultural Conundrums

His parents just won't leave us alone. They drop by unexpectedly; his mother rearranges my kitchen cupboards; they get angry if we don't visit them every weekend. I want to have a life, alone with my husband! Meanwhile; She is so cold and distant that her behaviour appears disrespectful and I am left defending her to my family who doesn't understand why I married her. I wish she would get along with my family.

The cry for marital solidarity against family intrusion and alternately the plea for peace and cooperation is more often seen in cross cultural marriages where one party is from an Eastern European, Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, Asian or East Indian background and the other is from a Western background. Western culture values independence and moving from one's family of origin to establish one's own family as a separate unit. Many other cultures value the growth of the primary family, where members do not move away to establish independent entities, but rather grow and expand within their own family collective.

Neither cultural style nor value is either good or bad, better or worse. But, they are distinctly different and unless understood by the parties of the cross cultural marriage, those differences can turn ugly when one partner claims the other to be a momma's boy who can't stand on his own two feet and the other partner is castigated for being cold, uncaring and disrespectful.

In social science jargon, these family differences are seen on a continuum where one end is referred to as enmeshed and the other side referred to as disengaged. Taken to their extremes, enmeshed families are so into each other's business that members cannot seem to function without the constant inputs and directions from other family members. There is a co-dependency where persons cannot stand on their own two feet and make independent decisions. On the other side, members in overly disengaged family do not have any meaningful contact with each other and have little to no tolerance for the inputs of other family members. These persons will appear fiercely independent, like lone wolves.

In the cross-cultural conundrum, both parties may have started off closer to the middle, but as each takes offence with the other, their positions become more and more polarized and behaviour appears more and more disproportionate and exaggerated.

The challenge for the newly married couple is coming to an understanding of their cross-cultural differences without either demeaning the other. To find balance, both persons must make accommodations where in fact, they

may each find some degree of discomfort as they make concessions with a view to establishing their own rules for managing the continuum.

It may also be helpful to talk openly and frankly with extended kin about the cross-cultural differences and what rules you are establishing for yourselves to determine your boundaries as a newly married couple.

I wasn't sure how the conversation would go and I was afraid that I was going to offend my in-laws. So I told my mother-in-law that I am not used to someone else arranging my cupboards and that in my family, we were expected to do those kind of things on our own. I explained that when she did it for me, I felt she was saying I didn't know what I was doing and that I wasn't good enough for her son. She explained that she saw how hard I worked and thought it would be helpful if when I came home at the end of the day, she had things in order for me, ready to go. She said she only arranged the cupboard that way as it worked well for her and thought it would for me too. I learned that her intentions had nothing to do with her thinking that I was inadequate, but was her way of trying to be supportive.

I couldn't understand how parents could not show an interest in their family. They never called or visited. It was just as if they couldn't care less. I talked with her parents and explained how in my culture family is everything and how we know we are loved by how people take interest, call and visit and yes, even tell each other how to do things. I told them that they were welcome to call and visit. They explained that they didn't want to intrude or appear meddling for fear I would be upset. They said their distance was meant as respect and not as disinterest. They were pleased to hear that they were welcome in our home.

While love may have brought you together, it will be a developing understanding and then accommodation of differences that will keep you together. Including extended family in the conversation may help in the process.

Gary Direnfeld, MSW, RSW
(905) 628-4847
gary@yoursocialworker.com
<http://www.yoursocialworker.com>

Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.