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Couples at a Crossroads

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For Albuquerque newlyweds Sophia Nguyen Eng and Timothy Eng, both 25, cultural differences between her Vietnamese family and his Chinese family emerged when he asked her parents for her hand in marriage. They agreed, as long as he proposed in front of the entire family.

Santos Salinas-Contreras of Albuquerque and his wife, Catalina Salinas of Bolivia, say they found cultural differences in a surprising place — their finances.

After marrying and divorcing partners with the same cultural backgrounds, Shiyu and James Castillo found that his New Mexican roots and her Chinese heritage were less important than the role of family in their lives.

For many couples in our increasingly mobile world, marrying the boy or girl next door seems like less and less of a possibility.

That means more couples are negotiating cultural differences every day. But trying to define what those are by using historical definitions of race and ethnicity becomes more complicated. Even couples who check the same census box may have grown up in different parts of the world, speak distinct languages and practice different religions.

In New Mexico, with its long history of cultural diversity, interethnic marriages are significantly higher than the national average of 6 percent. Here, couples of mixed backgrounds add up to about 16 percent of all marriages, according to a study by demographer William Frey of the Washington, D.C.-based Brookings Institution.

Yet a recent study out of Ohio State University raises the question of whether a growing immigrant population means more people may be choosing partners of the same ethnic background.

In 2007 Ohio State sociologist Zhenchao Qian found that while overall rates of marriage between people of different races or ethnicities increased between 1990 and 2000, the rate declined among Asian and Hispanic populations. Hispanic men married to someone of another ethnicity dropped from 27 percent to 20 percent. Among Asian women, the number fell from 47 percent to 39 percent. Qian says a larger pool of immigrants in the United States means it may be easier to find a partner of the same background.

But the question of whether Qian identified a trend becomes more complicated when considering the similarities and differences between, say, New Mexico Hispanic and Bolivian Latina, or Chinese and Vietnamese, as the couples interviewed say they discovered when they came together.

Negotiating cultural differences are a challenge for any couple, says Dr. Patricia Covarrubias, a professor of communication in the Department of Communication and Journalism at the University of New Mexico. But they become even more complicated with partners of different cultural backgrounds, she says.

That's because culture is much more than ethnicity. Like an onion, multiple layers of culture form our unique sense of self.

"We 'do' culture out of habit and practice," says Covarrubias, who teaches intercultural communication. "And where does that habit and practice come from? Culture is transmitted at our caregivers' knee. There's a historical underpinning. Intercultural communication is not exclusively a racial, ethnic, linguistic phenomenon. It's not just, 'She's Mexican and he's Anglo.' "

For Covarrubias, who was born in Mexico and married to an Anglo man for 27 years, the cultural differences that emerged from their distinct homelands added a layer of complexity.

Rossana Miranda-Johnston, a native of Mexico married to an Anglo man from New Hampshire, is an intercultural consultant based in Colorado who works with couples moving abroad, as well as those facing their own cultural differences.

She helps couples identify cultural biases, asking them to draw "culture icebergs" with their differences about food and music at the top, views on gender roles and work ethic in the deeper layer. The exercise helps them understand that many cultural values are buried much deeper.

Miranda-Johnston recalls a recent wedding she attended. During the ceremony, the bride bent her head as the groom searched for eye contact. Later she saw the wife in tears. Her husband thought she didn't want to commit because she avoided eye contact. "This bride comes from Mexico," Miranda-Johnston says. "When looking at a moment of commitment, she thought bowing (her head) down was a sign of respect."

Commonalities, not obstacles

Shiyu and James Castillo say the important things were the same. Although she is Chinese and he is a New Mexican of Hispanic descent, both say they value family more than anything else.

Shiyu, 44, an associate professor of English in China, came to Las Cruces to earn a master's degree in education. Through a personals site, she met James, 44, an ultrasound technician who was born in California and moved to New Mexico as a child.

"I didn't care if she was white, black, Native American," James says. "All that mattered was that we were compatible."

The week before Christmas in 2006, Shiyu joined him and his family on a trip to Disneyland. On Christmas Day, he proposed. They married the following February.

Shiyu, who runs New World Immigration Services, a home business matching Western men with Chinese women, says her 17 years as an English teacher have helped her understand Western culture. She now encourages other Chinese women in mixed marriages to communicate with their husbands when they are unhappy — and to try and be more open about sex.

Last summer, the whole family — Shiyu and James, as well as his parents and son and her daughter — visited China for a month. When James watched his wife interact with her large extended family, he says, he recognized his own New Mexico roots.

"The way that they treated their parents is the same way we did," he says.

How do you say 'I love you'?

Santos Salinas-Contreras and Catalina Salinas married seven months after they met at a University of New Mexico gallery, when they forged an immediate bond over their shared love of art and architecture.

Catalina, a painter and UNM architecture student, says her family is a typical Bolivian mix — she has an indigenous great-grandfather who married a blue-eyed

German and a grandmother who married a Spaniard. Santos, a sculptor and art education graduate student, spent much of his childhood in Louisiana, where his was one of few Hispanic families there.

Santos, who considers himself "American first, New Mexican second," says his father grew up speaking Spanish but his mother didn't. Now Santos is preparing to learn Spanish, and Catalina is perfecting her English.

Cultural differences have emerged over subjects like money. While Santos says he was used to the student life, the idea of racking up a typical American's student loan bills was unheard of to Catalina. In Bolivia, Catalina says, it is normal for students to live at home and for family to take care of student finances. "If you don't have money, you don't spend money," she says.

Both say they don't seem that different from friends in Albuquerque — who come from a diverse mix of cultural backgrounds. As the couple sit in their rented cottage near UNM, Santos takes a napkin from his wallet. On the napkin, from Two Fools Tavern in Nob Hill, he asked friends to write messages of love in Navajo, Greek and Arabic.

When he decided to propose at sunset in the Organ Mountains in Las Cruces, Santos wanted to add one more. He went to a local gas station for advice, polling customers for just the right phrasing for: "I want to spend the rest of my sunsets with you. Will you marry me?"

The Spanish wasn't perfect, but Catalina understood all the same.

A common worship

U.S. Army Capt. Timothy Eng and Sophia Nguyen Eng, both 25 and from San Jose, Calif., met in high school but reconnected after college while he was stationed in Georgia and then deployed to Iraq. They say the differences between his Chinese and her Vietnamese backgrounds don't come up every day, but they did emerge at a predictable time — their wedding.

On the wedding day, they started with the Vietnamese tradition of the groom offering gifts to the bride's family, followed by a tea ceremony common in both Vietnamese and Chinese traditions. Sophia switched between a Vietnamese wedding dress, a white "American-style" dress, a gold party dress and a red sequined Chinese-style dress. Both say they figured out early this was the time to bring family traditions together.

Timothy and Sophia say that a partner of the same background wasn't important to them or their friends. But for Sophia's family, marrying a Chinese man was "second best." The biggest barrier was linguistic — her parents speak only moderate English.

For Sophia, a shared first language came in a distant second to a shared religion. Her mother is Christian and her father is Buddhist, a source of tension every Sunday. When Sophia became a Christian, she wanted someone who shared her beliefs.

Timothy's family attended a Chinese-language church although he doesn't speak Chinese. Now the couple attends Calvary Chapel and First Vietnamese Baptist Church in Albuquerque, where Sophia translates the sermons into her husband's ear.

Timothy says he is used to translations. His mother, born in Taiwan, spoke Mandarin and his father, born in Chicago, spoke Cantonese. With English as the only common language, neither side of the extended family could communicate with the other.

What's your label?

Talking about race, ethnicity and culture is complicated by years of changing and imperfect definitions. The first U.S. census measured slaves as three-fifths of a person and did not count the Indians who were not taxed. By 1890, the census included Chinese and Japanese, and a "mulatto" category was divided into "octoroon" and "quadroon."

By the 2000 census, people could self-identify as American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; Black or African American; Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander; or White. Within the Asian category, people could further identify themselves in several categories, including Chinese, Asian Indian and Native Hawaiian.

Hispanic or Latino background was considered an ethnic category, not a racial one, and people who identified as Hispanic could specify Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican or Other Hispanic. In 2000, people could also identify more than one race for the first time.

How people define themselves also varies by region and custom. In New Mexico, Anglo is often used instead of white and Hispanic is often used instead of Latino. Sociologists like Zhenchao Qian of Ohio State University use census categories to examine marriage between people who identify themselves as different races and ethnicities. But unlike the census, demographer William Frey treats Latino as a racial category.

While many people use "race" and "ethnicity" interchangeably, Stanford University professors Hazel Markus and Paula Moya define them separately. According to Moya and Markus, editors of the forthcoming book "Doing Race: 21 Essays for the 21st Century," race and ethnicity are a "dynamic set of historically derived and institutionalized ideas and practices."

They say race has historically been used to sort people into ethnic groups according to perceived physical and behavioral characteristics and associates value and power with those characteristics. Ethnicity lets people identify with others based on presumed commonalities like language, history, nationality and religion, they say.

Markus adds that both race and ethnicity can be sources of both pride and prejudice.