

What's love got to do with it?

February 1 2011

With Valentine's Day fast approaching, a UQ study is shedding light on differences in relationships between people of different cultures, especially Chinese and non-Chinese backgrounds.

According to PhD student Danika Hiew, more Australians than ever are marrying partners from very different cultures to their own. "Partners in such inter-cultural marriages need to accommodate the different ideas about [marriage](#) that they bring from their cultures of origin," she said.

"About 30 percent of Australian marriages are between partners born in different countries, and an increasing number of Australians are marrying people from quite different cultures. For example, two thirds of second-generation Australians now marry outside their own ethnic groups."

Mrs Hiew, Professor Kim Halford and Dr Shuang Liu are researching how inter-cultural [couples](#) make their relationships work. In their first study they interviewed over 100 Australians from Chinese and Western backgrounds about what makes relationships great.

In her ongoing PhD research, Mrs Hiew is examining inter-cultural partners' beliefs about what relationships should be like, and the styles of communication they use. "We know many inter-cultural couples have very satisfying relationships, it is just that we don't know how they accommodate to each other," she said.

"Ideas about couple relationships vary greatly across cultures. Many

Westerners view love as necessary for marriage and its disappearance as reason for ending it. But many Chinese people see compatibility and support as the key ingredients of marriage," Mrs Hiew said.

"Many Westerners saw expressing affection through touch, and saying how you feel out loud, as really important. As one woman put it: 'It's important to remind your partner that you love them quite consistently – not just every once in a while. I think you should keep that spark alive ... like giving them a kiss and cuddle before you go to bed and ... just saying it.'

"These were less important for many Chinese. As one couple explained while mimicking affectionate gestures, 'We don't like 'honey, honey' ... 'love'. It's [physical and verbal affection] not important. Affection is when we work together. Let's say we need to prepare food for Chinese New Year – this is where the affection comes in. We work together, we clean up together. Working together is most important.'"

Mrs Hiew said ideas about talking through issues also varied greatly depending on the culture. "In Chinese culture there is much emphasis on harmony. Criticism and disagreement are often not directly stated in order to avoid damaging the [relationship](#). In contrast, Westerners are taught that open expression of ideas and opinions is healthy. As described by a Western man: '[You should be] open both with your own feelings and expressions ... There needs to be a willingness to engage in that dialogue to fully understand,'" Mrs Hiew said.

"A Chinese woman in an inter-cultural relationship reported that: 'I should respond likewise but I don't express what I really feel. I feel that difference between East and West ... a lot of times we don't say what we mean in case it hurts the other's feelings.'"

Professor Halford said: "Marrying into a different culture brings many

rewards. You learn your way of seeing the world is not the only one. Couples who can draw on the strengths of two cultural traditions can build a great life together. At the same time there is a need to understand and adjust to the different ideas your spouse has about what a relationship should be like."

More information: The team invites Chinese couples, Chinese-Western couples and Western couples who live in or near Brisbane to contact the research team on 0424 323 716 or interculturalresearch at psy.uq.edu.au to learn more about the research. Detailed information can be found at psy.uq.edu.au/lov

Provided by University of Queensland

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