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# **Transnational Couples:**

**Looking at cultural differences from within a  
relationship**

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## ABSTRACT

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Despite a growing literature on transnational couples, little is known about the challenges they face. The aim of this paper is to study these challenges and to identify coping strategies. In order to understand these issues, qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven couples. Responders consisted of partners from different cultural backgrounds and were either married or in a romantic relationship. The paper looked at the cultural changes that lead up to the acceptance and growth in transnational relationships. Furthermore, the study examined how these changes have affected and are still affecting the individual couples. Through the interviews, the research looked at the interpersonal dynamics to identify the role of culture within the relationships. Culture, it was found, still plays a great role in the day-to-day life of the transnational couples, in spite of the shift from traditional to more liberal values identified in the study. The challenges faced by the couples were very different from each other as the study represented couples from different backgrounds together with their partner, a native Swede. However, a common issue among the couples was communication breakdowns and a lack of understanding of the partner's background.

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Keywords: Transnational couples, Strategies, Culture

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## I. Introduction

The effects of globalization and the emergence of more heterogeneous societies has led to an increased degree of interdependency of worldwide economies which in turn has boosted the increase in personal mobility and migration (Mitchell, 1997). People are not only traveling across continents for holiday but for business, studies, and the “overseas experience”. This increased mobility has accelerated the breakdown of barriers and taboos between people of different cultural and “racial” backgrounds, making it more acceptable to be in a romantic relationship with a person from another country and/or “race” causing romantic relationships to become more heterogeneous (Fu, Tora and Kendall, 2001; Piper, 2003; Song, 2009). However, taboos and prejudice towards culturally and “racially” heterogeneous romantic relationships still exist and are deeply rooted in some societies despite the increase in their relationships (Brandell, 1988; Porterfield, 1982). The study of transnational couples is important as it can give new insights into the understanding of racial and intercultural relations in a more general sense. For example Lewis (2014) talks about how the study of transnational couples can be used to measure the general racial acceptance and the level of integration in a society. By examining the interpersonal dynamics of the transnational couple great insights into the racial undercurrents and cultural context of a society can be discovered (Lewis, 2014).

Researchers have long studied the characteristics between people of diverse backgrounds as well as marriages and romantic relationships between people with different cultural and “racial” backgrounds as these are likely to create different dynamics in the everyday life of the couple (Berger and Hill, 1998; Gaspar, 2008; Johnson and Warren, 1994; Qian, 2005). However, contemporary research on the subject of transnational couples has primarily been focused on the cultural differences and the attitudes towards the couples rather than the real life experiences of the couple as a unit (Foeman and Nance, 2002; Karis, 2003; Killian, 2001; Seshadri and Knudson-Martin, 2013). The research has showed that transnational couples have a harder time staying in the relationship and the divorce rates for transnational couples are higher than intra-national couples (Bischoff, 2005; Troy, Lewis-Smith and Laurenceau, 2006). Many studies try to explain the reasons behind this phenomena through the approach of looking at the transnational couples from the outside such as people’s attitudes and why they think transnational couples have a harder time making it as couples compared to intra-national couples, that is couples of same “race” and cultural background (Foeman and Nance, 2002; Karis, 2003; Killian, 2001; Seshadri and Knudson-Martin, 2013).

The aim of this paper is to look at the problems and challenges that face transnational couples on a daily basis, not from the “outside” but from within the structure of the relationship. The purpose is then to try to formulate strategies and tools for transnational couples that will help and strengthen their relationships from the perspectives of the couples that will be interviewed for this study.

Since culture is a vital part of any relationship, especially in transnational relationships, it is important to base any research on a cultural foundation. Research has showed that one reason transnational couples have a harder time staying together is that some couples choose to ignore the cultural differences as they consider themselves no different from other couples. This is a great source of conflict between the partners as every individual carries and is strongly influenced by their cultural upbringing. Culture then, as a “natural phenomenon” you cannot choose, plays a major role when trying to understand transnational couples. People cannot jump between two cultures so the transnational couple exists somewhere in between the two (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2014).

If little research has been done on transnational couples from the perspective of the couple, even less has been done on transnational couples in Sweden as the Swedish definition of immigrants makes finding information problematic. Migrants to Sweden are not registered based on country of birth, which makes it difficult to analyze data within interracial couples (Fu, Tora, & Kendall, 2001; Haandrikman, 2012; Reiter and Gee, 2008; Troy, Lewis-Smith and Laurenceau, 2006). This study will, as stated above, look at transnational couples with one native Swede and try to formulate strategies and tools to help them strengthen their relationship.

The purpose of the paper is to explore the different challenges that face transnational couples and what strategies they use to deal with these challenges. As noted earlier, much research has been conducted regarding attitudes towards transnational relationships and the problem that transnational couples might face as a consequence of two cultures merging. However the lived experiences of transnational couples are understudied and the little research that has been conducted is limited to Black-White couples (Seshadri and Knudson-Martin, 2013).

This study will use an approach that focuses on the perspectives of the interviewed couples by looking into their own private relationships. The study will then explore what issues and/or

challenges these couples experience as a unit related to cultural and racial factors within their relationship:

- In what way do these challenges effect or impact their relationships?
- How do these couples handle and or cope with these issues and/or challenges?
- Which strategies and tools help the couples deal and/or cope with the issues that impact their relationships?.

## **2. Transnational couples: Terminology and frequency**

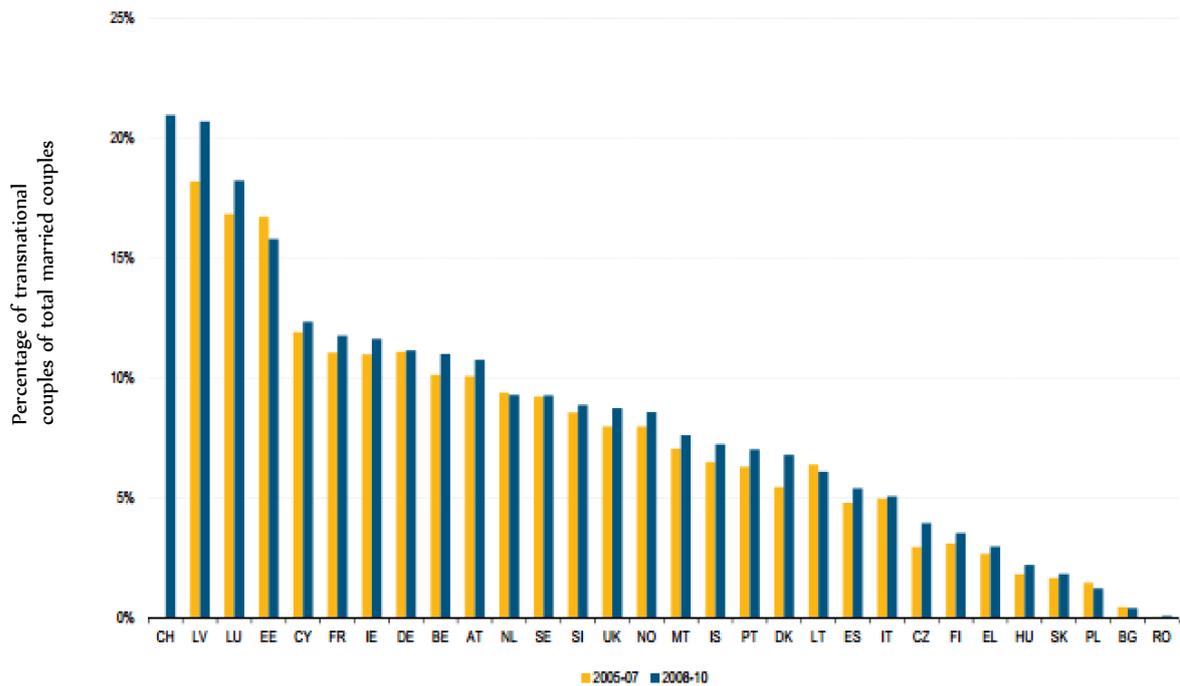
This brief chapter will look at the history of transnational couples and give a background to the subject of culture and transnationalism, globally as well as locally in Sweden.

Research on transnational couples has used an array of terminology to describe two people in a romantic relationship with different cultural, ethnical and or racial backgrounds. Terms commonly used in a Swedish context are for example intermarriage, mixed marriage, inter-ethnic marriage, inter-racial, inter-cultural and cross ethnic marriage. This study has chosen the term transnational couples to describe this phenomena (Törngren, 2011).

Intra-national couples are the opposite of the above-described couples; they are defined to be couples in a relationship in which the individuals are from the same race, religion and culture. These are couples that are defined as homogenous with two individuals in a relationship and or marriage with similar backgrounds (Hall, 2005).

Transnational couples have been a common topic in research in many countries, but have not yet been among the most anticipated areas of focus in Sweden. There has been no clear statistics in regards to transnational couples, as Sweden does not officially register any individual's ethnicity and/or race. Although in 2010, Statistics Sweden (SCB) managed to publish statistics on transnational couples that showed that 173,000 couples during 2004 to 2008 had started families in Sweden. The statistics showed that 16,000 couples consisted of one of the partners being born in Sweden, ethnic Swede, and the other partner was born outside of Sweden (Törngren, 2011).

A report produced by Eurostat in 2012 looked at the marriages of foreign-born persons in European countries, which included Sweden, revealed that on average 1 in 12 married couples was a transnational couple during the period of 2008-2010. The unions between transnational couples throughout Europe is illustrated in the graph below:



Transnational couples by country in descending order and year

Figure 1: The average of transnational unions of 2005-07 and 2008-10 by country in descending order

Source: (Lanzieri, 2012)

The Pew Research Centre has continued research on transnational couples, as this is an area of interest in the Western world. A study done in 2012 revealed that in 2010, 15% of the recorded marriages in the United States were between partners from a different race or ethnicity, which in this case was more than doubled from 1980 (Wang, 2012:1). Marriage across racial and ethnic lines continues to be on the rise in the United States. The share of new marriages between spouses of a different race or ethnicity increased to 15.1% in 2010, and the share of all current marriages that are either interracial or interethnic has reached an all-time high of 8.4% (Wang, 2012).

### Transnational couples in Sweden

There is a lack of research in regards to transnational couples in Sweden. However, a study by Haandrikman (2012) revealed that Cretser (1999) examined transnational marriages in Sweden for the periods between 1971 and 1993 and found that marriages between natives and migrants had

significantly increased. Furthermore, the study revealed that marriage increases were noted among couples that originated from both geographically and culturally distant countries. Previous research showed that marriages between transnational couples in Sweden increased from the 1970s to the 1990s due in part to the globalization process that increased the diversity of immigrants. The increase of transnational marriages has also been due to the opportunities of travelling abroad of Swedes. However, Swedes not only have to travel abroad to meet foreign partners; increasingly the chances are also considered to be high in Sweden due to the higher level of new migrants. The substantial diversity of the migrant population in Sweden has led to links of transnational marriages between native Swedes and immigrants (Haandrikman, 2012).

### **3. Previous Research and Theoretical perspectives**

This section will focus on previous research and the theoretical framework in regards to transnational couples. The previous research done on the subjects mainly focuses on two topics: the characteristics that define those in a transnational relationship and the attitudes towards transnational couples. This will give a good background and foundation to the study and help clarify the research.

The study of transnational couples has been used in research as a form of looking at how countries are succeeding with the integration of people in the local society. Studies show that the higher the rate of transnational couples, the more integrated they are in the communities and the better the integration policies of the nation works. However, Song (2009) revealed that the issue of transnational couples and integration should be considered a more complex subject than what the literature from the United States and Britain had revealed. Song (2009) states

So while intermarriage may be said to herald a form of structural assimilation in terms of one's status and formal inclusion in certain families and social networks and institutions, we cannot assume that minority individuals (or couples) who have intermarried necessarily feel welcomed, or that they 'belong', in many mainstream settings (p.341)

This study of the challenges experienced by the transnational couples and their families has revealed many of the attitudes towards the couples relationships and racial, ethnic, religious and cultural differences from the host or the dominant group in the societies and communities (Törngren, 2011; Nottmeyer, 2009; Song, 2009).

## Romantic Love

Transnational couples are relatively new phenomena that springs from the emergence of “romantic love” which in turn is not as old as one might think. Prior to the twentieth century, few married out of love but rather to keep or gain wealth such as property within the family or as a way to raise children to work on the family farm. For this reason, parents, and other influential family members, not only tried to influence their children’s choice of spouse but also used arranged marriages to ensure that the will of the family was executed. Sadly this is still a reality for many young people today, as arranged marriages still exists in many cultures. In addition to this, many governments passed laws that restricted who was allowed to marry who as the example of the American laws that up until 1967 banned people from different races to marry (Jacobson and Johnson, 2006).

However, a change has occurred as a consequence of modernization that puts focus not on the survival of the family but on the romantic love of the people that want to chair their life together. The early research on transnational couples tried to explain why people from different racial backgrounds were forming unions through the exchange theory. The authors suggested that there were different tradeoffs such as economic status, economic security and beauty that the different parties had to give in return for something else. For example; an ugly rich man would marry a beautiful poor woman (Heaton and Jacobson, 2000; Rosenfeld, 2005). Many of these theories have however been done redundant by later research that show how the shift in the view of romantic relationships has continued. A study presented by Hull, Meier and Ortyl (2010) shows how that marriage was an important way of representing the lifelong commitment between two people. The view on commitment has since changed with the traditional value of marriage being substituted with cohabitation between two people in a relationship. There is more freedom of choice when it comes to show commitment within a relationship. People are more liberal in their thinking with individuals being able to choose whom they want to spend the rest of their lives with in either marriage or cohabitation. The study further reveals Sweden as the country with the highest cohabitation prevalence compared to other comparable countries and that Sweden has fully transitioned into the new paradigm of intimacy. People are more willing to express their relationship values outside the traditional norms and without the reinforcements of marriage. The study also shows that there has been a shift in commitment levels in romantic relationships. The traditional view of spending the rest of one’s life together has been exchanged by a notion of togetherness for now, for however it lasts. Giddens (1991) calls this cultural shift “late modernity” where people are less likely to stay in an unsatisfactory relationship as the individual

has the right to find happiness, sexual satisfaction and personal fulfillment in whatever relationship he/she sees fit (Giddens, 1991). This is emphasized by Allan (2001) that states that informal relationships such as casual sexual encounters are much more likely to play an increasing part in the construction of one's social identity (Allan, 2001).

Traditional cultural theory views culture as the deciding factor for how a person's life will end up. It is the culture that makes the decisions and not the individual and an individual cannot change his or her cultural background. In 1986, Ann Swidler wrote the paper; Culture in action: Symbols and Strategies (Swidler, 1986) which shifts the focus and function of culture from being the deciding factor to become something that pushes the person along in their own decision making process. This correlates strongly with Giddens (1991) theory on late modernity as she describes a shift from strong, traditional cultures to weak, more flexible cultures. According to Swidler, the weak culture is defined as a "tool kit" where individuals and groups can "pick and choose" the cultural elements they like rather than having to bow to a unified system of preset values and preferences. The theory does not however neglect culture or diminishes the role of culture but rather puts culture as the fundament that all actions stem from. Individuals that are faced with a situation take necessary actions to handle that specific situation (Giddens, 1991). Transnational couples are therefore freer to choose how to react and handle the day-to-day challenges as they can use culture as a tool kit to avoid the other vice so common hurdles (Swidler, 1986). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) summarize the process of individualization in the late modern societies as people, and especially women, are more able to aspire to self-fulfillment and prioritize the individuals rights. Furthermore, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2011) state:

The mixed-nationality couple does not exist anymore than does the foreigner (p.22)

There is a common feature in which transnational couples share, which is that, they embody globalization in the personal lives of the individuals. The challenges brought about the society and community impacts their daily lives together with their relatives and friends. These issues can therefore lead to conflicts between the couples either by creating confusion, surprise and or pleasure in the lives of transnational couples (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2011)

### Characteristics of Transnational Couples

Research has shown that people who are in the position of moving from one place to the other either temporarily or permanently are more likely to be in a transnational relationship. Mobility and the ability to travel is shown to be an important factor and catalyst for more nontraditional

relationships such as transnational couples. Transnational couples are not bound by traditional views and expectations to the same degree as more traditional couples and tend to be more free in their mindset (Rosenfeld, 2007). There are the different tendencies between males and females that are found within these groups towards their choice of partner especially those that marry interracially. Additionally, the rates of transnational couples are very different based on the geographic location, seen as a catalyst for the couples. Research has placed much emphasis on the reasons that determine transnational relationships by looking at being rebellious against strict parents and age differences between the couples (Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan, 1990). Furthermore, studies have revealed the use of social status of the dominant group in-order to gain from the minority group. This is explored by looking at the Basic Exchange Theory. The member from the minority group will trade up to marry an individual from another group to gain either influence, wealth and/or power by them trading beauty and intelligence (Troy, Lewis-Smith and Laurenceau, 2006; Davidson, 1992). Törngren (2011) points out the importance of friendship for transnational couples as the variable that has the strongest effect on attitude towards couples. Friendship with more diverse groups, not a specific group, results in more positive attitude towards transnational couples (Törngren, 2011)

Couples in these kind of romantic relationships are seen as contributors towards the shaping of social and cultural profiles, directly and indirectly, of their host countries. Transnational couples are less likely to identifying with a single group due to their relationships with people from different cultural spheres. This is due to the crossing of boundaries between groups when having a romantic relationship, which causes a change to ripple down from them to their descendants. This expands their networks knowledge of the differences within groups and in turn weakens the stereotypes which people are subjected to by belonging to a different group (Lanzieri, 2012). This is also described in the Socio-cultural perspective as the way people behave and mental processes that is shaped partly by their cultural and social contact (Sanderson, 2010).

However, studies have looked at the effects of conflicts between transnational couples leading to divorce due to misunderstandings between the individuals. These studies have been from a clinical and anecdotal perspective on how to help couples to deal with their differences. Transnational couples as revealed by these studies have a higher divorce rate, which suggests that these couples face more challenges in their relationships compared to intraracial couples. Studies show that the divorce rates of transnational couples in the USA are approximately 66% of compared to the 40-50% for all other marriages (Reiter and Gee, 2008). Therefore this should be

considered an important area for therapists when dealing with transnational couples even though they might still love each other or have a family, divorce is inevitable if couples do not truly understand each other in their relationships (Gaspar, 2008).

### Challenges Within Transnational Couples

This paper will look at the challenges that transnational couples face as a unit in their relationships. Many studies have been conducted that show that transnational couples have a lower rate of marital satisfaction than intra-national couples. There are many challenges that face transnational couples, as the couples also have to relate to the cultural aspects of each other's personalities. Culture has a great influence on how people think, how they act, how they feel, how they speak and how they listen in different situations. It is not only necessary for the spouses to find a common language, preferably the language spoken in the host country, but also to find an effective way of communicating without misunderstandings. Many cross-cultural relationships break down not only because the spouses speak different languages, they have different understandings of communications itself (Tomalin and Hurn, 2013). To be able to create a successful romantic relationship, the spouses have to acknowledge their different cultural backgrounds as they will affect the way the spouses relate to the language and how they express themselves. It is therefore important for the spouses to create a shared perspective with a common foundation to stand on. Without a common and shared perspective the two partners will view and interpret situations in very different ways that could lead to irritation and conflict and in the long run lower marital satisfaction. In the interviews, this paper will look at how the different transnational couples deal with the issues of multiculturalism and how they create a common and shared perspective. This paper will also look at what situations transnational couples face and how they handle these situations. It is important that transnational couples realize and actively work on trying to understand each other to try to minimize the sources of conflict by emphasizing their similarities and appreciating their interpersonal differences within the relationship (Assumpta, Paz Sandín and Paz Sandín, 2009; Chiswick and Houseworth, 2011; Davidson, 1992; Peresa and Schrifta, 1978; Fu, Tora and Kendall, 2001)

### Theoretical Foundation

This study, as well as the questions for the interviews, were explored through the book by Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim on *Distant Love*. The emphasis of the study was based on the chapter "Two Countries, One Couple: Tales of Mutual Understanding and Misunderstanding" which focuses on the challenges experienced by transnational couples from ethnicity, power relations, prejudices and barriers, suspicions faced by couples, intercultural differences,

misunderstandings and typical triggers between individuals.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim emphasized the reactions created by new realities and opportunities that the couples encounter in the different spheres of the society and community. There are people that oppose the relationships between transnational couples and other people are welcoming as they see this as hope for new tolerance and understanding. The globalization of the world has helped in further the possibilities of forming new innovative family structures rather than automatically following old traditions and norms. The so called “world families” or transnational couples have the ability and option to go outside their sovereign state as they are not limited by the cultural values. The shift from a local, national economy to a global economic environment has lead to family structures that are only limited by their own imagination. The loyalty is no longer with the nation state or the local community but within the family structure created (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2014)

### The Cultural Paradox

As seen above, the phenomena of transnational couples is an expression of a more modern society or of a weaker culture as described by Swindler (1986) where the individuals are not controlled by their origin or culture but freely choose how to live their lives (Swindler, 1986). The most powerful current in modern society is that of the individual’s self-fulfillment and achievement. People are seeking to be the authors of their own lives and to choose their own path without the involvement of outside forces such as culture, society or traditional family values (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). The fact the much of the literature on culture and transnational couples dismiss cultural differences as non-important or non-existent does not mean they do not matter and affect in the day-to-day life of transnational couples. On the contrary, it is when the cultural differences are ignored that they develop into negative energy that causes much of the problems for the transnational couples. It is therefore important to realize that culture does play a large part in the lives of transnational couples as they are faced with underlying differences in the way they look at and tackle life and if ignored will be a major contributing factor to the challenges in their lives (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2014).

### World Value Survey

This paper will try to encompass individuals from different countries to capture the different cultures by using the World Value Survey to categories our participants. This map uses cultural proximities, which reflects their relatively similar values. Each of the countries presented in the map is positioned according to the individual’s values (Welzel, Inglehart and Klingemann, 2002).

This will help the study to notice the participant’s cultural values between Sweden, Netherlands, Indonesia, Australia, Gambia, Kenya and Iran. The World Value Survey is used to show the similarities of cultural values between countries: Thus, Australia, Canada, the U.S. and Great Britain are cultural neighbors, reflecting their relatively similar values, despite their geographical dispersion (World Value Survey, 2012)

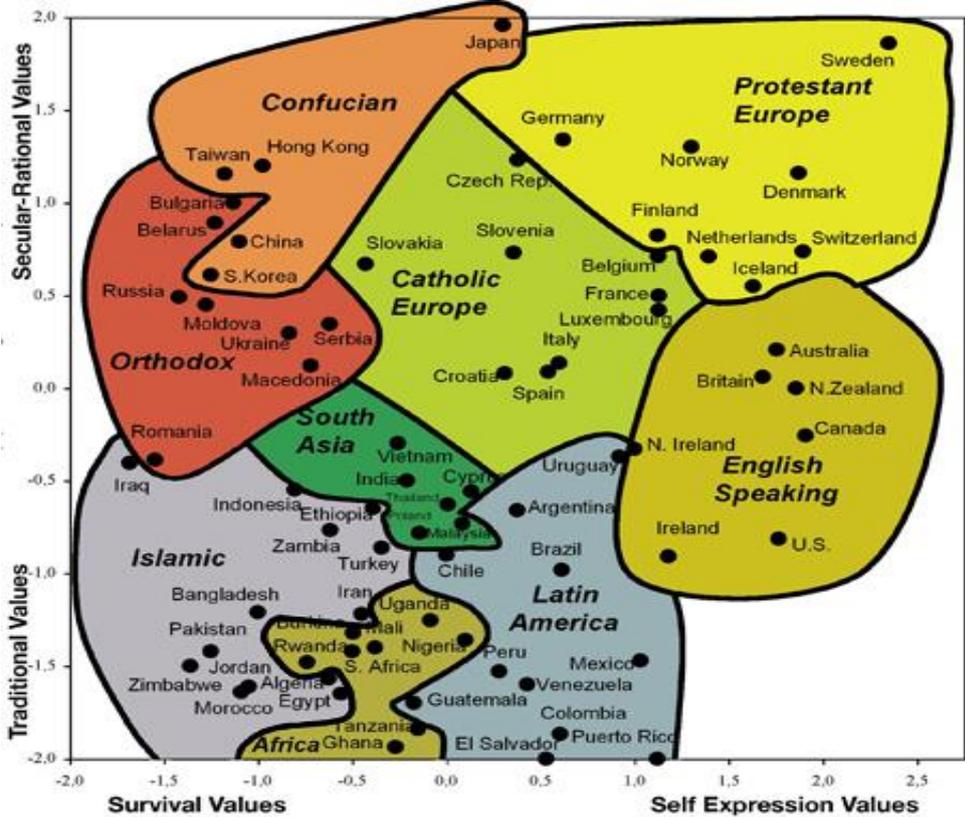


Figure 2: World Survey Graph- 2012

Source: World Survey Association (2012)

The graph has been divided into Traditional values versus Secular-rational values and Survival values versus Self-expression values. The upward movement shows the transgression from a traditional value base to a secular and the right way motion shows the transgression from a survival value system to a self-expressional value system. A simplified analysis shows that an increase in the national living standard has an effect on the cultural values of the nation, moving from the left lower corner to the top right (Inglehart and Welzel, 2010). While looking at transnational couples, it is interesting to note that couples coming from neighboring countries might have a greater cultural distance between them than couples coming from nations geographically far from each other.

## 4. Method

This chapter will describe the choice of methodology chosen for this study. This part will be divided into different sections to present the study's methodology, examine the aspects of research ethics and the research process for this study. (Denscombe, 2010) The authors of this study have been equally involved throughout the entire research process.

### Semi-structured Interviews

There are different kinds of approaches for interview methods and for this research the type of method used is semi-structured interview. This allowed the interviewer to become more flexible and most importantly for the interviewee to develop more ideas and speak more widely on the study. Additionally, this approach of interviews encourages couples to provide more detail and clarification towards the study allowing the data to be qualitatively analyzed (Denscombe, 2010; Harris and Brown, 2010)

The interviews focused on the relationships of couples in the process of their day-to-day relations as transnational couples. The questions varied between cultural and racial perspectives by looking at four different categories, which impact their lives and how the couples deal with these issues.

The couples were interviewed face to face in their homes and questions were straightforward to avoid the interviews from turning into conversations. This is noted by Denscombe (2010) as problematic if there is no distinction between a conversation and an interview, where the interviewer is guiding the interviewee during the questions. The participants were informed of the categories for the study and were notified what the different terms meant beforehand for the purpose of the study. Personal face-to-face interviews allowed the researcher's personal contact with the couples, as the study at hand was sensitive and rather personal about the couple's relationships. Therefore interviewing them at their homes encouraged the couples to discuss their personal and sensitive issues freely, which affected them as a couple, and they were more open about their relationships and encounters on a day-to-day basis (Denscombe, 2010). The couples were first interviewed together and then followed by a separate interview that lasted approximately 1- 1½hrs. The interviews were recorded and then followed by a verbatim transcription.

### Questions for interview

This section will explain how the interviews were conducted with the couples in relations to the aim of the study.

The interviews were conducted with the aim to examine the different challenges faced by the transnational couples; the questions also included probing questions that were the final questions used at the end of the interview. Refer to the appendix.

This kind of question allows for the probing of the interviewee to fully investigate the research topic in more depth through new ideas and theories (Denscombe, 2010). The main purpose of having individual interviews with the couples is to gain more perspective of the topic researched; furthermore it portrays the lives of specific people who are targeted for the study (Denscombe, 1998).

### Presentation of respondents

Categories for the couples who participated in the study of transnational couples:

1. characterized as interracial and intercultural couples to be classified as transnational couples
2. married or in a relationship (living together) with and without children

The following is an illustration of the couples used in the study categorized by gender and which country there originally come from:

Couple #	Country/ Female	Country/Male	Children
1	Sweden	Netherlands	1
2	China	Sweden	None
3	Indonesia	Sweden	None
4	Iran	Sweden	None
5	Sweden	Uganda	None
6	Australia	Sweden	2
7	Sweden	Gambia/Sweden	2

Table 1: Cultural mix of interviewed couples

The couple's status in regards to marriage and living together will allow the study to explore the issues that the couples experience within their relationships and the common friends, family and surroundings that they have together. Five participant couples in Sweden have been identified through author's social network and two participant couples were referrals from the couples that were interviewed. The categorizations of the couples used to describe the couple's racial/cultural background by country and/or culture of origin: Uganda, Netherlands, Iran, Indonesia, Australia, China, Gambia/Sweden and Sweden. One of the participants was born and raised in Sweden but had Gambian cultural origin and background. What these couples have in common is that they are married and in a romantic relationship with a person born and raised in Sweden. All the couples had one partner that is foreign born. The couple's age ranges from 25 to 45 years. Most

importantly the couples were chosen using the World Value Survey to examine the cultural differences between the different couples represented by the countries of origin. The couples were therefore chosen from the secular-rational values, traditional values, survival values and self-expression values represented by their country of origin. This was important for this study to be able to measure the cultural values of the participants to their partner whom was a native Swede.

### **Ethical Consideration**

The participants were informed that their names would be changed for this study in order to protect their privacy, as the information provided is very personal and sensitive. The participants have divulged their experiences, which also include their families, friends and societies they live in. This will help ensure that the participant's personal information is protected and that they will not be traceable for whatever means in the future. This is considered of great importance when it comes to research of such nature because of the of personal information divulged by the participants which may cause inadvertently social harm to the participants in our study. Therefore a careful consideration for the participants has been placed above all for this study (Polonsky and Waller, 2011). The different terms used in Swedish context for transnational couples have also been explained to the participants, as well as the terms culture and "racial" content used in this study.

### **Data Collection**

The first step was to prepare the questions for the interviews for the couples, this was followed by verbatim transcription and analysis to get the results for the study. The research conducted was to look at the relationships between different couples and their day-to day experiences as a couple together with their family, friends, society and or community impact on their lives.

The interviews conducted were semi-structured with a total of 7 couples of which 5 of the couples were friends of the authors and 2 couple were a referral. The interview questions were categorized into four different categories with open questions where the participants gave more details about their daily lives. There was also follow-up interviews for the questions that were not fully answered during the interviews conducted. Refer to appendix.

### **Interpretations and Analysis**

The process followed for the interpretations and analysis was the content analysis process, which is normally used to analyse qualitative data from interviews (Elo and Kyngäs, 2007). Furthermore,

the study used the deductive content analysis to build the result from the analysis as the study has been based on previous knowledge and the purpose of the study tested the present theories on transnational couples (Elo and Kyngäs, 2007). The transcript were read again one by one very carefully to ensure the labelling of the relevant words, phrases, sentences and sections for the analysis. This was followed by the coding part of the couple's interview responses as they had been categorized through the questioning during the interview (Denscombe, 2010). The study's research questions allowed the exploration of the issues in the couple's lives and the answers were grouped in general sentences that were used to capture the main idea conveyed by the study. The result formation was contributed by the deductive content analysis, which was related to the study's question and the participant's experiences. The four categories presented in the questionnaire determined the result using previous knowledge and theories. The step of interpretation and analysis determined the result for this study and showed which areas need to be improved in the study of transnational couples.

## **5. Result**

This chapter will analyze the data from the couple's perspective about the challenges they as a unit encounter and how they deal and or cope with these issues.

### **Social dynamics within the relationship**

In this section the couples explored the differences and similarities within their relationship and examined the courses of action taken by the couple to either deal or cope with issues that caused conflicts in their relationship. The couples found that they were very interested in learning about each other's cultures as this helped them in understanding their individual standpoints. Despite their cultural backgrounds, the couples tended to lean more towards the element of loving each other and seeing their differences and similarities as issues that make their romantic relationship strong. They all appreciated that their partner had either given up a part of who they were to settle down here in Sweden. Therefore understanding, learning and communicating about their differences and similarities has only made them more of a "normal" couple, which is the idea behind a functioning relationship.

Lisa, Swede, and Jorgen, Dutch, had similar backgrounds and cultural values and beliefs. They pointed out that the similar cultural beliefs came from the close proximity of the countries whereas they feel it would have been a different story if they had come from more distant countries. One of the issues that they had identified within their relationship was the way they

expressed themselves that would lead to misunderstandings as they put different meanings into the same words as Lisa explains:

Jorgen uses the Dutch version and says it's "ok" whereas a Swede will normally use big words such as awesome if we are complementing food. I know Jorgen means that the food is good but for other Swedes it could be misinterpreted as not good.

Johan, Swede, and Nadya, Indonesian, expressed that they had very different cultural beliefs and values. Johan and Nadya pointed out the family values as one of the biggest differences, Sweden being an "individualistic" society while Indonesia is a "collectivistic" society. This leads to conflicts in their relationship as Johan is considered to be more closed and tend to keep things to himself while Nadya considered herself laid back and social. Nadya explains it like this:

Johan when he's having problems all he does is think, think and not express himself and when I'm having problems I like to talk straight to tackle the issue.

Peter, Swede, is used to using sarcasm to communicate in many different situations. However, this leaves his partner Daydan, Iranian, confused as she is not used to sarcasm and doesn't understand why or how it is used in communication. This has led to many misunderstandings and conflicts between the two of them as Peter uses sarcasm to ridicule situations. The couple revealed that they have different cultural values and beliefs. Peter explains:

We think differently, she does not understand when I'm joking or when I'm being serious and I can see the frustration in her face because she is trying to think about what I just said to her.

Ahmed, Uganda, and Annika, Swede, have really different cultural beliefs and values. Ahmed comes from a very traditionalistic culture whereas Annika comes from a much more secular cultural setting. Annika considers herself to be an open-minded person while Ahmed is considered to be the more conservative person in the relationship. This leads to conflicts in their relationship together with the expressions and time concept that Ahmed uses. Ahmed says:

I think my ethnic origin decided who I am.... You can take a man out of Africa but never Africa out of the man.... If you are from a certain tribe the food describes who you are, what you eat is different and everything is different. It is the tribalism in me.

While Annika explains:

Hakuna matata, this is an African saying that Ahmed uses and in some instances I really don't understand why he uses it.

Ahmed is also a time optimist so we put everything too late and he says it will be ready in 30 minutes which then I know that the food will be ready in 2 hours.

The couples noted their differences from communication styles and how their culture affected their day-to-day relations with their partners. The couples showed acceptance and acknowledgement despite the indignation of their partner's cultural aspects that were portrayed in their relationship.

Tijan, Gambian/Swede, and Johanna, Swede. Tijan is of a mixed cultural background with both Gambian and Swedish cultural heritage. He grew up in Sweden but has experienced strong cultural influences from his father, family and relatives who are Gambian, which has imprinted the Gambian cultural beliefs and values on him. Johanna started questioning much about Tijan's culture when his father passed away. They have both been shadowed by the Swedish culture but Tijan still has different beliefs from his partner. Johanna explains;

When your father died you realized that you had more brothers and then we got more exposed to your culture and relatives... and how to make funeral arrangements because your father was Muslim and there are other practical things that I noticed about your culture that made me wonder.

In this instance, Tijan has had more influence from the Swedish culture compared to the other non-Swede participants who related more about their cultural background as being part of who they are. Tijan also noted that his origins played a role in his life because of the interactions with his siblings, which was important for both him and Johanna.

Karl, Swede, and Stacey, Australian, are a Christian couple and they're not considering themselves traditional as they put their faith before everything. They however still classify their cultural beliefs and values as similar as they are both from western countries. There are although some differences that Stacey realizes about Swedes that would lead to misunderstandings in their relationship. Stacey explains

Swedes are perfectionists while I come from a laid back environment. I resented having to learn a new language and leaving my life behind which has been completely different here whereas I am quite anxious in Sweden constantly. I am no longer myself as my dream and aspirations have changed because of being in this country. This leads me to be resentful towards my husband.

Tang Chi, Chinese and Robert, Swede explain how the expectations from each other's families impact their lives. Tang Chi is more traditional compared to her partner and how they express themselves culturally. There are more expectations from Tang Chi's family with regards to respect and as Robert makes his own decisions because of his individualist point of view. Robert explains

I have to address Tang Chi's uncle and aunt by their titles and not by name for example...In Chinese culture you can use your parents savings and they see the family as a unit which is different in my case.

The couples further explained that there are levels of tolerance and considerations within a relationship, if the other misunderstands or misinterprets what the other has said or meant, they usually take some time to think about their differences within their cultures. This is much easier when you are in a relationship to be more tolerant and considerate of one's culture. This not only helps them as a couple to explore miscommunications and if it is cultural or if it is something that a person has decided to adopt along the way. The anticipation that they are going to co-exist as two different individuals with cultural differences comes as no surprise for the couples as they assume that this is the same for other couples that are from the same "race", cultural background and ethnicity. As Stacey, Australian, explains:

Everyone is different and therefore there is nothing special or different about our relationships. People assume that because we are from different countries, races, culture and ethnicity we will have more challenges within our relationship.

### Social dynamics in regards to the couple and Society

Despite the hardship that the partner who is not a native Swede encounters, especially the language barrier, couples have to overcome the unusual comments made by people either about their partner or their children. Lisa, Swede and Jorgen, Dutch, have experienced obstacles that have had a negative impact towards their relationship. This included not just being unable to find a job but the process of getting Jorgen's personal number. All the couples mentioned how the language has affected their relationship even to a stage where Stacey, Australian, resented the idea of speaking the language to anyone. Stacey felt that there was an expectation that she had to speak Swedish fluently after a year in Sweden. This made her feel as if she was being forced to become someone else. Nadya, Indonesian, has further experienced that people do not even give her the opportunity to speak as they assume that she cannot speak Swedish. This has also caused a shift in the way she feels about the Swedish society and Swedes as people. Additionally, Nadya has experienced that Swedish women have been more negative towards her with presumptions that she is from Thailand. This has made her feel that people are judgmental towards her for being with her partner who is a native Swede.

The couple's experiences with society were very similar even though there have been no confrontations from the society in whole, the couples have still felt that they are being judged one way or the other for being in a transnational relationship. The exception has been with Ahmed, Uganda, who has experienced confrontational words from different people about their relationship. Ahmed explains

Even at a local student pub, once a student said "you guys come here and take our women".

The negativity from society didn't seem to affect or impact the couples' relationship as they felt that there is nothing you can do to change how people feel about the diversity of people in Sweden. The couples tended to ignore and explain the irrelevancy of how society projects their feelings towards transnational couples because this did not affect how they felt about each other. People will always find some forms of negativity with stares and their expectations on how we should and should not act as a couple; this does not affect who we are and the choice of whom we want to spend our lives with. The couples explained that although they might dismiss how

society perceives them as a couple, the other partners who are native Swedes are more likely affected or are saddened by how difficult life can be for their partner by the society in which they live in. The native Swede want their partners to feel at home and be able to become part of the Swedish society by the partners not being scrutinized, stared at, expected to speak a language fluently which is not their mother tongue and continually sidelined. This is where you found that the native Swede provided more support for the partner in terms of more communication in explaining why society has high expectations on the partners who are not native Swede.

### **Social dynamics in regards to the couple and extended family and friends**

Transnational couples experienced no disapproval towards their relationship when it came to their family and friends. The issues raised were mainly from the mothers who were more concerned about the couples both moving away from them and not being part of their lives. The beginning of their relationships especially for the non- Swede, families and friends had been more welcoming and accepting of the relationship. This was noted with all the couples who mentioned that people spoke more in English and explained a lot about the Swedish culture to the non-Swede partner. The Swedish families and friends were also curious about finding out more about the culture of the individual brought into their lives. There were a lot of considerations when it came to families and friends towards the non-Swede being accommodating and making them feel comfortable with their new surroundings. Couples did not feel the need to explain their choices of the person they have chosen to be in a romantic relationship with to their extended family and friends. Their extended families and friends also tried to incorporate and enjoy their holidays, celebrations and foods from the other non- Swede partner. This also depended on whom the couples spent more time with and to what extent they knew them.

### **Social dynamic in regards to Children**

The couples with children explained the importance of having them growing up to be more exposed to both their cultural values and beliefs as part of their lives. Despite having more of the Swedish influence due to having their family and friends in Sweden, couples with children taught them about their other cultural identity. This was also the same with couples without children as they felt strongly about exposing the children they might have in the future. This importance of identifying with both cultures is so that the children are able to have relationships with all members of the family, both the Swede and non- Swede. Ahmed, Uganda felt strongly about their children in future identifying with both his religion and culture. Ahmed explains

My name would be their last name. If I didn't do that it would cause a lot of friction within my family. There's a lot expected from me as the only boy, a lot of pressure.

The interracial transnational couples with children experienced forms of discrimination because of the color of skin that their children have. This affected their parents as well as they felt frustrated about the actions towards their children. Lisa, Swede and Jorgen, Dutch explain

The midwife passed some comments about our son because she thought he was suspiciously white, she questioned it a couple of times...she further questioned why our son had blondish hair if his father has dark hair.

Additionally, Jorgen has experienced strange looks from people who don't know him, they look at his son and look at him suspiciously. Jorgen explains,

It feels like they are asking themselves "what is he doing with this child".

Tijan, Gambian/Swede and Johanna, Swede explain

Our son came home sad and told us that other children had told him that they do not like the color of his skin, which is brown. They had told him that people from Africa are normally naked and no money. This made us very upset that our son had been exposed to such comments at school.

Couples showed a strong interest in the wellbeing of their children to become more involved in the cultural differences and educate their children about the diversity of people they might encounter in their lives. The most important aspect that couples wanted to create in their children's lives was a very strong sense of self and identity so they can be able to grow up and stand up to different sorts of discrimination. The couples without children also anticipated some form of scrutiny because their children will be different from other children. The couples felt that it is every parent's responsibility to educate their children so that change can be accomplished for future generations not to hang on to old traditions and embrace change for the sake of their children. That is why they all felt strongly about educating their children about the diversity of

people and teaching them about their cultures. This could in turn help their children have access to both of their parent's origins. Jorgen explains

I would like for our son to have the choice of either pursuing his life either here in Sweden or in the Netherlands. That is why we expose him to both our cultures and families.

All the couples mentioned that having children would change their outlook on culture. This was due to the fact that the couples wanted to move from a more traditional aspect of raising children to a more diversified view of culture.

### Strategies from the couple's perspective

The couples noted the importance of communication, open-mindedness and respect of each other's cultures. This helped to bring them closer and to become more united as a couple and family. The issues regarding differences in race or culture were irrelevant to them as they felt they fell in love with the person and everything else was secondary. They explained how it is a non-issue to be a transnational couple and it is not a subject of discussion as they feel just like other couples.

The couples also realized the importance of assimilating their partners who are not Swedish in order for them to feel like they are part of the society where they can both raise their children and be a family. The couples had also anticipated that there will be differences between the two of them and so they were prepared for the journey ahead of them.

It was very important to all the couples that they took certain aspects from their cultural beliefs and values in their relationships to better communicate and raise their children.

Ahmed explains

You have to adapt. You can't come from Africa to Sweden and keep acting like an African. There are cultural differences that you will encounter everywhere you go. My partner, I'm sure if she also has to move to Africa she couldn't go around with her feminist propaganda the same way she does here. It would be unacceptable.

Even though the couples do not place so much emphasis on their cultural differences and similarities in their day-to-day relations, the couples tend to see each other as one and classify themselves as the other person from a different background. They choose to be with this person

and will make it work because they love and respect each other like any other normal couple in a romantic relationship.

## 6. Discussion

The society's more widespread numbers of transnational couples is a relatively new phenomenon that springs from the cultural changes that has occurred in the wake of modernization and globalization. Intimate relationships and marriages used to be a tool to keep wealth and economic status within the family and not based on a romantic love relationship. This restricted individuals from finding their own partner as the parents were very much in control of whom they would marry. With modernization came the beginning of a cultural change and the introduction of romantic love relationships where the individuals were able to choose their own partner out of love. This change also led to the introduction of transnational relationships as a greater mobility increased the possibilities of finding a partner from a different cultural and "racial" background.

This is something that the couples represented in the study confirmed as they witnessed how they fell in love with an individual regardless of "racial" and cultural background. They all had the freedom to choose their own partner and were not restricted by family and relatives. Research on transnational couples has showed that couples with different cultural background have a harder time staying together, an increased risk of divorce and lower marital satisfaction (Bischoff, 2005; Troy, Lewis-Smith and Laurenceau, 2006). However, much of the research up until now has focused on the attitudes towards transnational couples and looking at the couples from the outside to try to explain the challenges these couples face. Little research has been done, looking at these challenges from within the couple and the interpersonal dynamics at play. Even less research (none) has looked at these dynamics in a Swedish context. The aim of this paper has been to explore the different challenges that transnational couples face on a day-to-day basis and what strategies they use to deal with these challenges. Tomalin and Hurn (2013) look at the challenges faced by couples from different cultural backgrounds and relate these to fundamental differences in the way they communicate with each other. This can lead to couples viewing and interpreting situations very differently and this in turn can then lead to irritation and conflict within the relationship. The strategies that have been continuously explored by literature are the awareness principles of each other's cultures, not only by the couples but also the families, friends and the societies the couples operate within. Sensitivity is also seen as key towards understanding the difference between cultural and "racial" backgrounds (Tomalin and Hurn, 2013). Foeman and Nance (2002) further dissected transnational communication into different stages or areas that can help the transnational couple identify the different challenges that they

face and gives them the tools to work through these challenges (Foeman and Nance, 2002). The main challenges experienced by the couples interviewed were different types of communications breakdowns and misunderstandings. Many of them reported challenges in understanding differences in meanings of words and expressions that encompasses the individual's background. The couples were also faced with differences in fundamental values and beliefs that were reflected in the way they acted and communicated with each other. Some of the challenges that the couples faced were afflicted upon them from the surrounding society such as language barriers and a lack of understanding from people they encountered in their daily lives.

The research set out to answer the following questions in regards to the challenges that the transnational couples faced;

- How or do these issues and/or challenges effect or impact their relationships?
- How do these couples handle and or cope with these issues and/or challenges?
- Which strategies and tools help the couples deal and/or cope with the issues that impact their relationships?

There is a strong correlation between the theoretical frameworks created by Swindler (1986) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) in regards to culture and transnational couples and how the couples in the study addressed and handled the challenges they were faced with. The couples were eminent to not let the issues and challenges effect or impact their relationship if they could avoid it. The communication breakdowns were however hard to always staying on top of and were the main source of conflict within the relationship. All of the couples did however come into the different relationships with an attitude of humbleness that there were going to be some communication challenges due to their differences in cultural backgrounds. The couples showed increasing acceptance and acknowledgement despite the occurrence of resentment from their partner's based on cultural aspects. Challenges within the relationship were often easier to deal with as the couples became more and more aware of their cultural differences in contrast to challenges coming from society at large. Many of the couples witnessed how they felt scrutinized and challenged by their surroundings as they experienced a lack of understanding and suspicion of their physical and cultural differences. These challenges were often harder to handle and affected both partners, however in different ways, even if the experience was aimed at the one partner as both often felt betrayed and questioned by their surroundings.

One aspect was obvious with many of the couples, when children came into the picture the differences in culture came more into the limelight and this was one of the major obstacles for the transnational couples. This was due to the exposure of children that brought forward previously hidden differences in cultural values and norms. According to Beck and Berk-

Gernsheim (2011), the future of a child not only reminds people of their childhood but also processes of socialization experienced in their past.

With the identification of their cultural differences and the acknowledgement that they come from very different backgrounds came a strong willingness to learn more about each other and to gain a deeper understanding of the partner's way of thinking. Beck and Beck- Gernsheism (2011) explain that if either partner within a romantic relationship ignores cultural differences, this will become a major source of misunderstandings and conflict.

The couples then used their different cultures as tool kits to create a new, mixed culture based on the highlights from both cultures.

This paper has showed that there has been a change in the way we look at culture and that many cultures have progressed from “strong” to “weak” cultures where people pick and choose cultural elements that they relate to instead of being directed by set cultural values and norms. Marriages and romantic relationships are nowadays based on love and companionship chooses their partner from their own self-fulfillment rather than cultural obligations, which has led to the acceptance and increase of transnational couples.

However “weak” cultures might have become, culture still plays a major role in people's lives and still define who they are and how they act in their romantic relationships. Culture still affect people's attitudes and limits their day-to-day choices. Today's transnational couples are a result of modernization as people are more able to knowingly make the decisions that shape their lives but culture still plays an important role in these decisions.

### Future Research

This study has captured the challenges and strategies used by couples in Sweden with their foreign partners on issues that affect their relationships on a day-to-day basis. Although this study tries to encompass couples from both different cultural and “racial” backgrounds by using the World Values Survey, the interviews focused mostly on their cultural differences, which does not measure their marital satisfaction and or happiness. As noted this study was to examine the challenges and strategies used by the couples interviewed. Therefore, further research on the subject should continue to focus on the interpersonal dynamics of the transnational couple, as this will give deeper insight into the inner workings of transnational couples and how the trends can be reversed so that more transnational couples can enjoy longer and more satisfactory relationships. Additionally this would be useful for therapists and clinician's working with transnational couples because it is an important insight when helping people from different cultural and “racial” backgrounds.

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## Appendix

### General Questions

1. Age:
2. Nationality/Cultural nationality:

### Social dynamics within the relationship

3. Do you have any common elements from your cultural background as a couple?
4. If so, what is it made up of?
5. Are you curious about your partner's culture?
6. Would you say that your ethnic origin defines who you are and if not why?
7. Do you see your partner as a member of another group?
8. If so, how does this affect your relationship?
9. What cultural adjustments have you made to support your partner? What made you willing to do this?
10. What were your first cultural impressions of your partner country of origin?
11. What are the similarities between your cultural beliefs and values?
12. What are the major differences between your cultural beliefs and values?
13. Have you experienced that your partner becomes sentimental about issues that tie them to their country of origin?
14. Does this lead to misunderstandings in your relationship?
15. If you have lived somewhere else as a couple, has there been a power change and or dependency within the relationship since moving to Sweden?
16. Have you noticed differences between yourselves in relation to different communication patterns and ways of talking (verbal and non-verbal) that normally lead to misunderstandings?
17. Do you think that being together can be classified as a rebellious act to your culture?

### Social dynamics in regards to the couple and Society

18. How is your relationship perceived by others?
19. Have you as a couple experienced discrimination/racism in the community in regards to your relationship?
20. How do you handle and or cope with situations like these?
21. As individuals, do you have different emotions from your partner in these situations?
22. Do you have any specific ways to deal with negativity aimed at you as a couple from society?
23. In your relationship, have you experienced forms of scrutiny (close looks, stares) or been regarded with amazement because of your differences?

24. How is your partner, who is not a native Swede, perceived by society?
25. What impact does this have on your relationship?
26. In what way do you think you as a couple can be able to deal more efficiently with issues that impact your relationship from a society perspective?

**Social dynamics in regards to the couple and extended family and friends**

27. Has there been any forms of disapproval between your families about your relationship?
28. Do you find that you become defensive about your relationship to family and friends?
29. Do the social dynamics in your circle of friends and extended family change when you bring your partner who is not a Swede?

**Social dynamics in regards to Children**

30. Do you have children?
31. How do you deal with the cultural differences in relation to raising your children?
32. What cultural identity would you like your children to identify with?
33. Is it important or not that your children have a connection to both cultures?
34. Have you experienced any discrimination or do anticipate some negativity with regards to your children from society?
35. If so, how or would this affect your relationship?
36. How do you deal with negativity or discrimination aimed at your children as a couple?
37. Do you think that children will change your outlook about your culture?

**Finishing questions?**

38. Which aspects (if any) needs more focus on in order to cope with the different issues within your relationship?
39. If you had an opportunity to go back to the beginning of the relationship is there anything that you would do differently?
40. Do you have anything else that you would like to add?