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Identité, culture et intimité

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# Do intercultural couples “see culture everywhere”?

Case studies from couples who share a lingua franca in Finland and Hong Kong

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# *Do intercultural couples “see culture everywhere”?*

*Case studies from couples who share a lingua franca*

*in Finland and Hong Kong*

Fred DERVIN

**Abstract:** *Even if the concepts of identity and culture have been questioned by scholars for quite a while now, especially in relation to their “solid” understanding (Bauman 2001; Baumann 2001), they remain central in everyday discourses on interculturality. The phenomenon of “seeing culture everywhere” as analysed by Briedenbach & Nyíri (2009) is still very much present in daily life and research, often leading to stereotyping. In this article, my focus is on five intercultural couples in Finland and Hong Kong. Many studies have been published on this type of population and they often tend to adopt a “culture-alibi” and/or differentialist approach (Abdallah-Preteille 2003; Piller 2002; Dervin 2010). The specificity of the couples here is that they share a lingua franca to communicate, i.e. a language of which none of the partners are “native speakers”. My approach is constructivist and is interested in how the couples potentially use differentialist discourses on cultures and other identity markers to talk about “intercultural couplehood” and the stereotypes associated with them. I shall show how stereotypes in such intimate relations are produced, negotiated and also questioned by the partners during research interviews.*

**Keywords:** intercultural couplehood, identity, Finland, Hong Kong, culturalism, *lingua franca*.

**Résumé :** *Malgré la remise en question des concepts d'identité et de culture, notamment dans leurs compréhensions « solides » (Bauman 2001; Baumann 2001), ces concepts demeurent centraux dans les discours quotidiens sur l'interculturalité. Le phénomène de « voir la culture partout », tel qu'il a été analysé par Briedenbach et Nyíri (2009), accompagne souvent ces discours menant à des stéréotypes. Dans cet article, l'auteur s'intéresse à cinq couples interculturels en Finlande et à Hong Kong. De nombreuses études ont été publiées sur ce type de population, adoptant souvent une approche culturaliste et/ou différentialiste (Abdallah-Preteille 2003; Piller 2002; Dervin 2010). Les couples examinés ici ont pour spécificité de partager une lingua franca, c'est-à-dire une langue dont ils ne sont pas locuteurs natifs. L'approche proposée est constructiviste. L'auteur s'intéresse à l'utilisation de discours différentialistes sur les cultures et d'autres marqueurs d'identités pour parler des couples. Il s'agira également de montrer comment les stéréotypes dans de telles relations intimes sont produits, négociés et remis en questions par les partenaires des couples lors des entretiens de recherche.*

**Mots-clés :** couple interculturel, identité, Finlande, Hong Kong, culturalisme, *lingua franca*.

## Introduction

It has now become a truism to say that physical and virtual mobility and migration have accelerated in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Pieterse 2004). One of the most notable consequences lies in the increase in the chances of people having a partner from abroad (Karis & Killian 2009; Heikkilä & Yeoh 2011). At first sight, what will be referred to as intercultural couplehood in this article is not a new phenomenon. History has witnessed many instances of such couples: Moses and Zipporah, Cleopatra and Marcus Antonius, Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon, Pocahontas and John Rolfe, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, John Lennon and Yoko Ono, etc. Ragnhild Johnsrud Zorgati's latest book *Pluralism in the Middle Ages: Hybrid Identities, Conversion, and Mixed Marriages in Medieval Iberia* (2011) reveals distinctly how much intercultural couplehood has accompanied world history. But it is also important to bear in mind that intercultural – and “interracial” – couplehood has not always been perceived positively, especially in modern times. As such, Nazi Germany banned interracial marriage, South Africa also prohibited it during the apartheid era and intercultural and interracial marriages were illegal in most areas of the United States until 1967. Even today intercultural couplehood can still very much be a taboo (Dervin 2011).

According to applied linguist Ingrid Piller, who has worked extensively on intercultural couples, what makes intercultural couplehood special today is the fact that “discourses of love, romance, gender and sexuality, have become enmeshed with cultural discourses. Culture is made relevant in the emotional lives of many people and has come to inflect love and desire” (2011: 113). As such “doing” intercultural couplehood tends to be depicted positively and put into scene in global media, with e.g. a large production of films about intercultural relationships (*Ae Fond Kiss*, *Chocolate*, *The Lover*, *My beautiful Launderette*, *Mississippi Masala*, etc.). Therefore one can easily assume that the *doxa* or common sense on intercultural couplehood is very much a postmodern phenomenon, which, as we shall see, tends to depend on the old, tired and problematic concept of culture in research worlds and beyond. The fact that such discourses often lead to stereotyping and moral judgment on the self and the other (Holliday 2010) needs to be examined increasingly.

There are many other labels in the literature used to talk about intercultural couples, which might reflect specific emphases. The Francophone literature uses “mixed couples/marriages”, “domino couples” (Kuoh-Moukoury 2000), “binational unions”, “exogamy”, etc. In English, an even larger variety has been identified: “multicultural/mixed marriages”, “intermarriage”, “interracial couples”, “interlingual families”, “cross-border couples”... By using “intercultural”, I place my work within a potential danger zone as the notion of the “intercultural” is polysemic and sometimes used as an empty signifier to refer to the “Other” (Abdallah-Preteceille 1986, 2003; Barbot & Dervin 2011; Dervin 2011).

In this article, I am more interested in the *inter-* of the intercultural rather than the *-cultural* to examine intercultural couples in Finland and Hong Kong. Most studies on intercultural couplehood have relied heavily on national cultures to explain the “challenges” that intercultural couples encounter. Waldman and Rubalcava's 2005 study illustrates well this flaw when they write: “The mutual provision of affect attunement becomes more problematic and difficult in intercultural marriages because

culture plays such a significant role in the construction of emotion” (*Ibid.*: 236). My understanding of culture is not as narrow and encompasses many other elements such as language, generation, gender, professional occupation, social status, etc. and the intersection of these aspects. Also I see “intercultural” interaction as a co-constructivist and negotiating phenomenon, during which people have to put themselves into scene and potentially manipulate the other by e.g. putting a generic national culture on the table (Abdallah-Preteuille 1986). This is where the notion of stereotypes becomes central as it is through them that many intercultural couples may negotiate their identity, intimacy, relationships and everyday lives (Piller 2011; Dervin 2011).

## **Intercultural couplehood without culture?**

Researchers note increasingly that we know very little about intercultural couples because there is not one single category of such couples but many and varied types of intercultural couples with difference experiences (Karis & Killian 2009: xix). Yet this is ambiguous in most recent studies, where, on the one hand, one can identify criticisms of the overused and abused concept of culture for being too generic, solid and static (e.g. Bystydzienski 2011; Cools 2011), but on the other, national culture remains one of the most salient explanatory factors of the “challenges” used by researchers to look into intercultural couplehood. Let us note at this stage that the *dei ex machina* of *challenges* and *difficulties* are also often used to work on intercultural couples, as if there were a natural link between them. It is also noteworthy that very few researchers have actually questioned the dichotomy of “intra-” and “inter-” cultural couples, as it appears to them superficial today (Falicov 1995; Piller 2002; Varro 2003; Cools 2011). As such any couple faces having to negotiate their everyday lives, their identity as a couple and create their own habits, manners, behaviours, traditions, etc. Another issue is that of labels: do intercultural couples see themselves as *intercultural*? What about the people around them (close family, friends, acquaintances, etc.)? Do researchers – but also politicians and decision-makers – impose these labels on them? Abdallah-Preteuille (2006: 480) reminds us that “No fact is intercultural at the outset, nor is the quality of intercultural an attribute of an object, it is only intercultural analysis that can give it this character”. In her 2001 novel *Mole, The Cappuccino Years*, Sue Townsend reveals how such unstable labels as *intercultural* or in her case *mixed marriages* can be. The main character, Adrian Mole, tells us about a phone call he received from an English TV producer:

*A researcher from Kilroy rang this morning to ask me if I would appear on the show tomorrow morning to talk about “mixed marriages”. I pointed out to her that my African wife was divorcing me. “Due to racial intolerance?” she asked, sounding excited. “No”, I replied. “Due to her intolerance of my personal habits”. She said they were doing a show in November called, “My partner’s habits are driving me mad”. Would I be interested? I said, “No”. (Ibid.: 230)*

As can be seen, upon hearing that the problematic situation of Mole’s couple does not derive from “racial intolerance” (which could also read as cultural intolerance, *cf.* Balibar’s 1991 argument that we are increasingly experiencing *racism without race*), the normality of intimate relations emerges.

Yet there remains in research what I call a “romanticization” of intercultural couplehood: the couples differ from other couples and should be considered as such (*cf.* e.g. Cools 2011). I propose to examine several cases of intercultural couplehood *without culture* in this article, i.e. intercultural couplehood beyond static and solid representations of national cultures and identities. In other words, I am not approaching the couples under scrutiny from the potentially biased and ideological concept of culture – i.e. culture does not determine my analytical approach – but from a critique of the concept and some of its acolytes such as identity and language.

In order to do so, I am looking at how intercultural couples from Finland and Hong Kong talk about themselves, through references to their “culture” and another important identity marker: language. I will also be looking at who contributes to these constructions. In their book, *Seeing Culture Everywhere*, Briedenbach & Nyíri (2009) explain: “Today’s world is a world shaped by a consciousness of culture that penetrates everyday life as well as matters of state in an unprecedented way. Culture – or rather, cultural difference – is now held to be the main explanation for the way the human world functions”. Culture is thus everywhere, it tends to explain and justify everything, especially when we talk about the “intercultural” and the “Other”. In their study on Mexico-American couples, which tends to rely a lot on the concept of culture in its limited understanding, Molina, Estrada & Burnett (2004: 140) still note the omnipresence of what they call “cultural camouflage” in intercultural couples’ discourses. Cultural camouflage corresponds to what Abdallah-Preteuille (1986) calls Culture-Alibi, i.e. a stereotype that justifies a habit, a way of thinking, traditions, etc. Molina *et al.* (*Ibid.*) give the following example: “Hey Honey, sorry I am late, but I am Latino”.

In this article, I argue that this should be analysed as a construction, as a strategy hiding a specific objective (a potential excuse in the example above) and not as a “Truth” (*Latinos are late so you have to accept it*). It also means that the context of interaction should be taken into account: who is present? Where are the interlocutors? What language(s) are they speaking? What is the role of the researcher? Etc. (*cf.* Brubaker 2004; Howarth 2002: 17; Gillespie & Cornish 2009).

A “Truth” about a culture is always constructed with and for an other and thus requires to be examined as such. For the anthropologist Alban Bensa (2010: 36-37, my translation), we should “free ourselves from the absurd idea that actors are full and complete participants in their own world without examining their confusion, their questioning, their relative distance from what they live. Anthropology should not drown the will of others in that naive belief that confuses form and substance, metaphor and concept, what signifies and what is signified”. This translates in Piller (2000) as “it might be much more useful to ask how cultural and national identity is ‘done,’ i.e. how it is constructed in on-going interactions”. I believe that working on stereotypes in intimate intercultural relationships should rely on this principle. A stereotype is a representation, which emerges in interaction and is thus unstable (Bar-Tal 1997). As much as possible I shall demonstrate how my presence, as a plurilingual researcher who works for a Finnish institution, who is also involved himself in an intercultural relationship, might have had an influence on the various processes of construction under scrutiny in the study.

## About the study

This study is based on data derived from a larger research project, which collected 23 interviews with foreign partners of intercultural couples in Hong Kong and focus groups with 14 couples in Finland. The choice of these two contexts is based on my own professional and personal contacts.

Hong Kong and Finland (7 million and 5 million inhabitants respectively), though dissimilar in political and economic terms, are interesting contexts as very few foreigners who visit or stay in the countries know or get to learn the local languages (Finnish, Swedish, Cantonese/Mandarin), hence the use of *lingua francas*, especially English, in interaction with locals. The phenomenon of intercultural couplehood is not rare in these contexts but it is very rarely talked about in the media (Cools 2011). For this study, it was impossible to retrieve precise and current statistics about intercultural couples in both contexts (Cools’ 2011 volume on intercultural couples in Finland makes a similar claim). While discussions about immigration constantly appear in the press, to my knowledge no societal debates on the impact and characteristics of intercultural couples have been present in national media in both countries – a few documentaries and films on such couples have been televised. It is thus impossible to say how intercultural couplehood is perceived in general in Finland and Hong Kong. For the Finnish context, Cools (2011: 35) hypothesizes that the nationality, ethnicity and the first language of the foreign partner have an influence on the way intercultural couples are treated and talked about. Are these two contexts comparable? I am not interested in generalising about intercultural couples in these two contexts based on a few couples. What I intend to do is to examine similarities and differences in the way(s) the couples construct intercultural couplehood, culture, language and stereotypes across the two spaces and between the couples. It is obvious that some components of the participants’ discourses in this article could also be found in the participants’ utterances of the entire research project mentioned above.

This article examines a focus group with two intercultural couples in Finland and interviews with two foreign partners and one couple in Hong Kong, which will serve as case studies. In each case one of the partners is always from the “locality” (Finland/Hong Kong). Discourses on intercultural couplehood, and especially how this notion is constructed through the potential use of stereotypes, are my main emphasis. Unlike previous studies, this article examines intercultural couples that share a *lingua franca* (English) and do not speak the other partner’s language(s) (or very little) (on the concept of *lingua franca*, cf. Dakhliya 2010 or Dervin (ed.) 2010). This is an important aspect of the study as sharing a *lingua franca* in intimate relations can have an impact on “politics of identity”, i.e. the fluctuation of identity markers which are co-constructed and negotiated in interaction. Also, the use of *lingua francas* might modify the “power game” and hierarchy in intercultural communication: none of the speakers can claim the superiority of the so-called native speaker neither can they serve as specialists of the “culture(s)” attached to the language they share. Even though this is very difficult to demonstrate as power is also transformed when the researcher discusses with a couple that shares a *lingua franca*, this makes this context of the study quite appealing for the study of stereotypes and representations.

The couples were found through *Snowball sampling* (Frey *et al.* 2000). The focus groups were organised as follows: in Finland, the couples sat with the researcher in a room at a Finnish university; in Hong Kong, the interviews took place in cafés and shopping malls. This means that the contexts of encounters between the researcher and the research participants differed – which may have had some impact on what was said and negotiated but this is difficult to examine as in the construction of cultures, identities and stereotypes, a combination of contexts, interlocutors and shared discourses might impact on discourses – not just one of these elements (Gillespie & Cornish 2009). This is why I shall try to mention the potential influence of the researcher as often as possible in the analysis.

It is also important to note that the fact that the Finnish data derive from a focus group gathering two couples that did not know each other and the Hong Kong data from both solo interviews and the interview of a couple will influence the discourses shared and constructed by both the participants and myself. At the beginning of the encounters, I explained to the participants that I was interested in the use of language(s) in intercultural couplehood. I did not mention the concepts of culture, identity and stereotype.

Important background information about the couples is presented in this paragraph. In Hong Kong, the foreign partner was French in the three cases – these were the only three French speakers of the entire data. Their interviews took place in French and are thus linguistically comparable. As to the couples in Finland (Meri-Walid; Leena-Albert), the male partners were from Africa in both cases – again a potential comparable aspect. The “Finnish” couples had all met in the husband’s country in Africa during the wife’s holiday (Tunisia and Congo). They had been together for over 4 years in both cases. The “Hong Kong” couples had met in Hong Kong – the foreign partners had found a good teaching job in Hong Kong before moving. They had been together between 3 and 5 years. While all the partners in Hong Kong were employed at the time of the interview, the African partners in Finland were unemployed and receiving training in service provision. This means that status-wise, they differed immensely and that there was some power imbalance between the partners in Finland as the men were dependent on their Finnish wives. This might have an influence on how they construct their couples. Again I shall try my best to indicate when and if it is the case. Finally in terms of language skills, all the partners spoke very good English, with variations mostly in terms of accents. For the Hong Kong-born partner who took part in one interview, English was her second language (Cantonese their first language) – *idem* for one of the African partners in Finland. For the Finnish participants Swedish, which is one of the two official languages of the country, was their first language. All the participants in this study had a university degree (B.Ed., B.A. or M.A.).

A final comment before moving on to the analysis: A critical issue is that of basing the following analysis exclusively on a focus group and interviews. Ideally these two sets of data could have been complemented with participation observations in the couples’ homes or in other social contexts, whereby even more complexity in terms of how the couples construct unstable identification strategies in relation to “doing” intercultural couplehood using English as a *Lingua Franca* could have been analysed. A future study will thus blend in both discourses and participation observations.

## Direct discourses on “culture”

Let us start with the concept of culture: Do the couples *see culture everywhere*? If so how is it constructed?

The Hong Kong couples were asked the direct question: “Is the fact that you belong to different cultures problematic?”. It can be argued that by confronting them with this question, the couples were influenced in their answers. Yet it is interesting to note that they answered negatively to it in a more or less coherent or precise manner. They could have answered positively, not knowing my own scholarly position on this issue.

For Sophie, the question represents a “fake problem”, which she attaches to language skills:

*No frankly, it is a fake problem because, as long as we talk to each other, there is no problem. Even if one of us says “this is white” and the other “this is grey”, no, there is always a time when we have to make compromises, and we have to be patient because we don’t speak English perfectly, and we have to accept our own limits and the others’.*<sup>1</sup>

In Alain’s reply, culture is not mentioned and it is hard to decide if what appears to be differences in the couple are individual or cultural:

*Certain manners of... well... we have different levels, but also the way we see things, the way we analyse a situation, for example, we are watching telly and something happens, we won’t analyse it the same way, then what makes it interesting is that we talk about it. I find this to be extremely enriching and then about daily life, well yeah daily habits yes certainly there too.*<sup>2</sup>

Alain does not use the word *culture* but talks about “manners” at the beginning of his turn and then about “daily habits”. Later on in the interview, I asked him if his couple manipulates each other by means of their cultural belongings from time to time. He answered:

*Yes at home we don’t do that, actually it has never happened, it has never happened, but I find it difficult myself to understand what is it that makes me French? What are my values that should be present in a Frenchman? I have difficulties in defining. I do not renounce my French origins at all but for me it doesn’t answer to extremely precise criteria, and I am lucky as we have never had*

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1 “Non franchement, c’est un faux problème à partir du moment où on parle, y a pas de problème même si y en a un qui va dire *ça c’est blanc* et l’autre *ça c’est gris*, non y a toujours un moment où il faut faire des compromis... et il faut être patient parce qu’on parle pas tous les deux anglais parfaitement et il faut accepter et ses limites et les limites de l’autre”.

2 “Certaines manières de... ben oui... on a des niveaux différents, aussi bien sûr notre manière de voir les choses, d’analyser une situation, ben par exemple on regarde la télé, il se passe un truc, on va pas l’analyser de la même façon. Puis ce qui est intéressant, c’est qu’on en discute. Ben ça je trouve ça extrêmement enrichissant et puis sur le quotidien, oui sur des habitudes quotidiennes, ouais certainement aussi”.



*this type of discussion. I say I am lucky because it is a bit sterile because it is not the way a couple will survive...<sup>3</sup>*

His answer shows an “open” and non-reifying understanding of intercultural relations and of the concept of culture. He seems to be aware not only of “cultural camouflage” and the potential stereotypes (*cf.* the direct quote *at home/in my country (?) we don't do that*) but also the potential dangers of this phenomenon (*it is not the way a couple will survive*). By asking “what is it that makes me French? What are my values that should be present in a Frenchman?” Alain seems to be questioning generalising, potentially stereotypical ideas.

For the third Hong Kong couple, this open way of conceptualising intercultural intimacy is clear from the beginning. In what follows, Jean seems to be constructing what could be considered as a coherent and realistic discourse on intercultural couplehood *beyond culture*, which he names “the loophole” (*échappatoire* in French):

*I: Is the fact that you come from two different countries problematic?*

*J: No, I think that in the life of a couple, there are so many factors at play that reducing them to languages and cultures is a bit too quick, it is an easy way to settle problems. Maybe subconsciously I have done this, maybe it crossed my mind but it was more like a loophole, rather than trying to understand a little bit that it is a bit limiting, but it is true that regardless of this, you can't avoid these stereotypes which hide behind, which can last for a while when you don't want to find a solution.<sup>4</sup>*

Jean mentions the word stereotypes and shows that he is aware of their potential use in intercultural couplehood. Jean then gives an example of how these generic, a-contextual, imagined and imaginary elements (stereotypes) are used in a humorous manner in his couple:

*It is often a rather ironical way to laugh at each other: ah you are French ah you are from Hong Kong...<sup>5</sup>*

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- 3 “Oui chez moi on fait pas comme ça, non étonnamment non, c'est jamais arrive, c'est jamais arrivé mais j'ai du mal moi-même à cerner quels sont... qu'est-ce qui fait que je sois français? quelles sont les valeurs qui devraient être présentes chez un Français? euh j'ai du mal à le définir. Je ne renie pas du tout mon origine française mais pour moi ça répond pas à des critères extrêmement précis, et j'ai de la chance, on n'a jamais eu ce genre de discussion. Je dis j'ai de la chance parce que c'est un peu sterile... parce que c'est pas comme ça qu'on va faire vivre un couple”.
- 4 “I: D'être de deux pays différents, ça pose des problèmes?  
J: non, je pense que dans une vie de couple y a tellement de facteurs en jeu que... les réduire à des problèmes de langues et de cultures, c'est un peu rapide quoi, c'est une façon facile de régler des problèmes, peut-être que inconsciemment j'ai du utiliser au moins ça ç'a du me traverser l'esprit, mais c'était plutôt l'échappatoire, plutôt que d'essayer de comprendre un peu que c'est un peu réducteur quoi. Mais c'est vrai que malgré ça on peut pas vraiment éviter ces stéréotypes qui sont derrière, qui durent un peu, quand on a pas envie de trouver une solution”.
- 5 “Souvent c'est plutôt une façon un peu ironique pour se moquer de l'un et de l'autre: *ah t'es français ah t'es hongkongaise...*”.

Now let us have a look at the Finnish data. Unlike the Hong Kong couples, discourses on culture are not tackled directly, by either the interviewer or the interviewee. Actually, the concept was not identified a single time in the transcription of the focus group. If the concept had been mentioned by e.g. the researcher, its presence might have been more obvious (as is the case in other focus groups in the Finnish data). This is where the influence of the researcher’s discourse can be revealed. However there was a lot of the discussion centred on the concept of *identity*. In what follows, the couples start exchanging on the fact that the Finnish partners are actually members of the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland (around 6% of the 5-million Finnish population). Leena reacts to her husband labelling wrongly her as a Swede:

Albert: *Not like I don't much like lay the emphasis on the fact that she is Finnish or Swedish. I think it is ok that she is Swedish...*

Leena: *I am not Swedish! That is the worst thing you can say: I am a Swedish-speaking Finn!*

Albert: *Yes, she is Swedish-speaking Finn, but I don't put too much emphasis on that background. I believe that it is only individual attitudes; I look at it that way*

As in the Hong Kong data, the husband shows an open-minded approach to labelling people: her wife might be Swedish-speaking, i.e. not like the majority in Finland, and yet it does not seem to matter to him. The “misunderstanding” or even stereotype (which is often recycled to denigrate Finland-Swedes in Finland: they are Swedes) over the wife being Swedish or Finland-Swedish leads the whole group to discuss the potential differences between Finnish speakers and Finland-Swedes. While Albert appeared to move beyond dichotomies in the excerpt supra, both husbands begin detailing general characteristics (Finns are shier, less elegant than Finland-Swedes, etc.), in reaction to which, annoyed, one of the wives stresses that “every person is different there are a lot of Finnish speaking people that are different from other Finnish speaking people you can't say that everybody is the same”. In doing so, she puts into question the stereotypes shared by her husband and reveals an “open” approach to Otherness.

To summarize the findings in this first analytical section, it appears surprising at first to note that very little “seeing culture everywhere” is done in the data – as this has always been the emphasis in most studies on intercultural couplehood (Piller 2011). What is also novel is the fact that some of the couples are aware of the fact that culture can serve as a strategy to manipulate the other. Yet there are few hints, here and there, of solidification of the partners’ groups through the use of stereotypes, which are related to a national identity rather than culture.

## **Perceptions of the intercultural couples**

### **Questioning common sense about intercultural couplehood**

On several occasions, the couples criticize implicitly or explicitly certain ready-made ideas about intercultural couplehood. We look at the questions of language use and the dichotomy of “intra-” and “inter-” cultural couples in what follows.

In the interviews, the topic of *lingua franca* use was obviously omnipresent as this was one of the main emphases of the study. At the beginning of his interview, Alain

reacts to the question “how does it feel to use English as a *Lingua Franca* with your partner?”. He answers:

*A: I have shared my life with somebody from Hong Kong for the last 2 years, and before that I was in another relationship with another lady from Hong Kong. So with this problem of language...*

*I: so you see it as a problem?*

*A: (Laughter) no no no no, I use the word problem, I didn't think about... but with this... I could find another word to replace it, it is the first word that came to my mind, it is not really a problem in reality, it is not a problem as it is not difficult...<sup>6</sup>*

Alain uses the word *problem* when he introduces the topic of *lingua franca* use. I asked him then why he had used the word, suggesting that this was interesting and/or potentially limiting (thus hinting at my views on the matter, especially in relation to the concept of culture). His reaction could show that he reflects on the use of the word but that in fact he had used it automatically, without thinking. In other words, the word is used but it does not actually mean *problem*. Would there be a hidden stereotype here? E.g. the idea shared largely by researchers that intercultural couplehood is before all problematic because of their culture?

In the next excerpt, Jean talks about the use of a common language in his couple:

*J: [...] All the people who have a certain relationship share a personal language there are always references to certain situations that the two people can understand, it is quite general.<sup>7</sup>*

According to Jean, any type of intimate relationship, any couple, creates a “personal language”. Does this mean that he questions the dichotomy, see the potentially stereotypical idea of intra vs. intercultural couples? Most probably, if we refer back to what he had to say about culture in the previous section. For the doxa, these two types of couples are viewed as very different types of relationships (Cools 2011).

### **Othring the couples in terms of languages rather than culture**

Intercultural couplehood, or exogamy, symbolises intimate relationships, which can intrigue and interrogate (Piller 2000). In what follows, I am interested in how the others perceive the couples (friends, family, acquaintances), and how they talk about them. Being *lingua franca* users, it does not come as a surprise that the others share stereotypes about their language use, rather than cultures, in what is reported by the participants.

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6 “A: Je partage ma vie avec une Hongkongaise, ça fait 2 ans et avant j'étais dans une autre relation avec une autre Hongkongaise. Donc aussi avec ce problème de langue...  
I: Donc toi tu le vois comme un problème?

A: (rires) Non non non non, je dis le mot problème, j'ai pas pensé à mais avec cette... je pourrais chercher un autre ot pour remplacer, c'est le premier mot qui me vient, c'est pas vraiment un problème. En réalité c'est pas un problème, dans le sens c'est pas une difficulté”.

7 “J: [...] Tous les gens qui ont une certaine relation, ils ont un langage personnel, y a toujours des références à des situations que les deux personnes peuvent comprendre. C'est assez général”.

*Can they learn each other’s language?*

In her interview, Sophie, evokes some “individuals” throughout. These people keep telling her that she will never be able to learn Cantonese correctly (one of Hong Kong’s official languages; her partner’s first language). She rejects this idea several times in the interview and asserts that one of the reasons why she is willing to learn it properly is to put an end to this misconception. According to her, the Hong Kong context leads to such discourses:

*In Hong Kong, in fact the problem is that when you speak Cantonese, there are two things in fact, there is some sort of shade in Cantonese people’s heads, which makes them say: “ah no a foreigner impossible to speak Cantonese”. [...] there’s also another thing which is problematic: Hong Kong people think that if you speak Cantonese, they think that we think that they are not educated enough, so they answer in English.<sup>8</sup>*

Jean also mentions something similar in his interview:

*[...] What I regret a little is that in this Hong Kong environment, it is quite difficult for example for me to learn Cantonese because, people tend to use English with foreigners.<sup>9</sup>*

Contrary to the other partners, Alain does not seem to be “annoyed” by this problem. When I asked him how Cantonese people react when he speaks Cantonese, he replies:

*Well no, there can be a bit of a surprise at the beginning, but maybe the fact that I express myself in Cantonese at that very moment with a Cantonese lady with whom I share my life, reduces a bit their surprise.<sup>10</sup>*

What has been identified in this section is the omnipresent representation that when one is in a specific place one must learn/speak the local language(s). It is easy to see how problematic this representation is for couples who share a *lingua franca* and who do not speak the local languages.

It is interesting to note that, unlike the participants in Hong Kong, none of the research participants in Finland mentioned the fact that the “locals” did not expect them to learn Finnish and/or Swedish. Again is this related to what was being co-constructed with the researcher? As such, in Finland, foreigners often make the same complaint as

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8 “A Hong Kong, en fait le problème, c’est que quand on parle cantonais, y a deux choses, en fait y a une espèce d’écran dans la tête des Cantonais qui fait qu’ils se disent *ah non étranger impossible de parler cantonais*. Même chose au Japon, c’est pareil. Et y a aussi une autre chose qui fait qu’il y a aussi un autre problème: les Hongkongais pensent que si on parle cantonais, ils pensent que nous on pense qu’ils n’ont pas assez d’éducation pour qu’ils nous répondent en anglais”.

9 “[...] Ce que je regrette un peu, c’est que dans l’environnement hongkongais, il est assez difficile par exemple pour moi d’apprendre le cantonais parce que les gens ont tendance à utiliser l’anglais pour les étrangers”.

10 “Ouais, eux non, il peut y avoir une légère surprise au départ mais peut-être le fait aussi que je m’exprimerai en cantonais à ce moment-là avec cette Hongkongaise avec laquelle je partage ma vie, ça réduit un peu la surprise”.

the Hong Kong participants: Finns reply to them in English when they try Finnish or Swedish (Dervin 2008).

*Varied reactions to the couples' linguistic situations from families and friends*

In this section we examine the influence of friends and family on the construction of the couples. In the Hong Kong data, Sophie says that these people do not actually comment on their situation. It is quite different for Jean who confesses that, having lived in Hong Kong for 15 years, he has been disappointed in his level of Cantonese, especially as he sometimes loses face and gets embarrassed when he has to tell his friends and family in France that he does not speak the language. He goes as far as saying that he feels “ashamed” about it:

*When people ask me if I speak Cantonese, I say no [...] well, I say I can survive, I can work it out, and personally I feel a bit ashamed to give this answer, because after so many years here and when I see students who do not have access to a French-speaking environment, and who after a few months a few years are able to manage to communicate.<sup>11</sup>*

It is not thus the others who “blame” him for not speaking Cantonese but himself, through the others.

Alain’s family has lived abroad and speaks English very well, which facilitates their encounters with his girlfriend. Alain used to live in another country for a long time and has had several foreign partners: “it is not a situation which puzzles them (his parents) I think they are quite used to this”. On the other hand, his partner’s parents do not speak English but this does not seem to represent a problem:

*Her parents do not speak English at all, so our communication is... I have met them several times at a restaurant, often our level of communication is quite limited, but it is also related to the fact that they are quite reserved people, who do not communicate a lot, but it is quite accepted from what she told me, it is not a problem.<sup>12</sup>*

The couples in Finland share very similar experiences than the Hong Kong couples in relation to friends and families. Let me emphasize here again the very specific case of these couples as the Finnish partners are Swedish-speakers and thus represent a minority in Finland. Even though they both claim to speak Finnish, they say they feel more confident in Swedish. The male partners try to learn Finnish to be able to find a job in Finland so they have no real motivation to concentrate on Swedish. One husband (from

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11 “Quand on me demande si je parle cantonais, je dis non [...] bon je dis je survis, je me débrouille, je me démerde et personnellement j’ai un peu honte de donner cette réponse parce que, après tant d’années ici, et quand on voit des étudiants qui n’ont pas accès à un environnement francophone et qui, après quelques mois, quelques années arrivent à se débrouiller à communiquer”.

12 “Pour sa famille, ses parents parlent pas anglais du tout donc j’ai une communication... je les ai rencontrés plusieurs fois au restaurant, assez souvent j’ai une communication qui est assez limitée aussi, mais c’est aussi du fait que c’est des gens assez réservés qui communiquent pas beaucoup... mais c’est assez accepté d’après ce qu’elle m’a dit, c’est pas un problème”.

Tunisia, Walid) told me during the focus group that he had tried to speak Finnish with his partner’s parents but to no avail, as the parents’ Finnish was inadequate. His wife could not speak French or Arabic and could not thus communicate with the Tunisian family. The other couple uses English with the parents in both Finland and Cameroon.

In this excerpt, the wife from the Tunisian-Finnish couple explains why she has not learnt French, which she could use with her husband instead of English:

*I thought in the beginning, that maybe French would be easier to learn than Arabic, when he insisted that I also learn something, that he speaks French would of course be easier for a Swedish-speaking person, coz I has some similarities but no I am bad at learning languages, so and then when it is not his real language anyway, so I thought it would be like a little bit stupid to learn French, because your language is Arabic anyway, but if I knew French at least I could communicate a bit with your relatives, now I can’t communicate with them at all.*

It is quite interesting to see in her answer that she is herself a victim of a limited, monolingual and Eurocentric conception of language to defend her own position – a stereotype about language? As she puts it, French is not her husband’s “real language” (*your language is Arabic anyway...*). She also evaluates her potential learning of French as “stupid”. This might indicate her ignorance and misunderstanding of the Tunisian context but also, again, her limited understanding of language use.

In the follow-up to this discussion, Leena asks a certain number of questions to understand the Tunisian context better:

Leena: *So you communicate in English with his family?*

Meri: *Sign language, yeah basically.*

Leena: *Coz they don’t speak English?*

Walid: *No, nobody actually speaks English, but they know they speak a bit French, it depends on how much school...*

Leena: *And then what makes me lazy, is because your mother speaks English.*

After having listened to the Meri’s answers, Leena draws the following conclusion about her own situation: she speaks English with her husband’s mother, which makes her “lazy”, i.e. she doesn’t need to learn another language. Here again one could find the voice of the doxa, for whom speaking the other’s first language is a main objective in intercultural communication – but what does it mean in the case of hyper-plurilingual countries such as Cameroon where people might have several “mother tongues”?

In what follows, the first couple talks about a certain pressure from the Tunisian family to learn Arabic:

Walid: *They always ask me if she knows some Arabic, but she always says hi and bye.*

Meri: *They really want me to speak more.*

Walid: *Of course they want.*

Meri: *and every time they ask “so have you learnt any Arabic?” “No” and I should be more... I could actually use body language with them a bit more, but I am a bit like shy Finnish [...]*

Even though Meri was quite open-minded about not “solidifying” Finnish and Finland-Swedish people (*cf. supra*), here she does not hesitate to refer to a stereotype about Finns (*I am a bit shy Finnish*), often used as an auto- or hetero-representation, to explain herself and her lack of non-verbality and competences in Arabic (Abdallah-Preteceille 2003; Breidenbach & Nyíri 2009). Though the word culture is not mentioned here, this could easily be a reference to “Finnish culture”. Interestingly, she talks about herself as an individual Finn and not about a culture.

The Finnish couples’ friends and acquaintances also contribute to othering them. In the following excerpt, I asked them directly if people saw their relationship as problematic. This is what the two couples negotiate:

Meri: *Many actually comment to me, many Finnish-speaking always think that it is crazy, that we always speak English, they think we should speak Finnish instead and Swedish, my family at the beginning they said yeah definitely we should speak Finnish because then you learn Finnish better; but at work you need it and stuff like that, but now I think they understand that it is not easy to change languages.*

Albert: *We have so many friends who understand English, of course, I speak English with my friends and she also speaks English with my friends.*

Leena: *I would say like, when we hang around with Finnish-speaking people, it is like they so much want to like speak English, because it is not so many opportunities for them to practice their English, so it is actually a problem because if they would just stick to Finnish, then maybe they would learn some Finnish.*

Different attitudes and reactions are presented here, based on what others have said. While the first couple seems to be facing incomprehension (*they think it is crazy*) and is urged to speak Finnish or Swedish together, the second couple is surrounded by people who seem to have a positive attitude towards the use of English and who even profit from the couple to practise their English. Leena considers that it is problematic because it reduces the opportunities for her husband to learn Finnish – though the latter does not seem to be disturbed by the situation in the rest of the focus group. We have here a similarity with the Hong Kong couples, except that for the husbands in Finland, learning the local language(s) could mean finding a job – while the French participants in Hong Kong do not need Cantonese to find one.

The presence of a young child in couple 1 increases discourses and comments on the multiplicity of languages imposed on them by the use of English as a *Lingua Franca*. In the following excerpt, the wife inserts negative voices of the others (*cf. the repetition of many*). These voices comment on the future well-being of their little boy (*confusion*), which she contradicts by mentioning her own observations and the boy’s actual competences.

Meri: *many have, now that we have a child, commented that we have too many languages, that we speak too many languages at home, and that our child will be like confused, that many have actually commented on, every time I say what we speak at home, people are like: “oh that’s really a lot of languages that will be confusing for the little boy” but he has actually picked up languages like really good and he from even watching TV, he knows Finnish words and Arabic and*

*Swedish and some English words, actually that’s the language he knows least  
just some few words [...]*

Here again it is not culture as such which is constructed as being a problem but language. Meri’s excerpt contains in fact many stereotypes about plurilingualism in child rearing (e.g. plurilingualism is confusing).

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I wanted to approach intercultural couplehood from a different angle, i.e. beyond culture, to work upon the concept of stereotypes. What emerges from the data is that when the couples talk about their relationships and about how other people perceive them, culture is not *everywhere*. In fact, language use – English as a *lingua franca* but also the partners’ first and second languages – is often at the centre of stereotyping, rather than culture.

There are many potential explanations for this phenomenon.

One aspect that has been put forward on several occasions in the analysis is the potential influence of the researcher himself. As such the use or not of key concepts such as culture, identity and stereotype in his questions and comments could be leading the participants in certain directions. I hypothesized on this issue a few times during the analysis. But this may not always be automatic. For instance Carine Cools in her study entitled “*Relational Dialectics in Intercultural Couples’ Relationships*” (2011) often asks her research participants if the fact that they come from different cultures impacts on their relationships. Most couples reply by mentioning language – not culture.

Another probable explanation is the fact that the five couples have been together for quite many years and that, overtime and depending on the context, perceptions and constructions of culture may not matter as much as in the beginning of an intimate relationship.

A point to explore in a future study is the potential impact of the partners’ level of education. As such all the people who were interviewed in this article have a Master’s Degree, especially in language education. One can hypothesize that such education has triggered some reflexion on interculturality, otherness and identity in the participants. But we need to be careful with such claim as in my experience people who have not studied or travelled extensively can also be very “open-minded” in relation to the use of the word culture.

Finally, the very fact that the couples share a *lingua franca*, as asserted earlier, might alter the way they see themselves as representatives of different “cultures” or “countries” – as the language they share is not symbolic of these entities. Also by its hybrid and mixed nature, a *lingua franca* such as English might hint at the imagined boundaries hidden behind “national cultures” and allow them to move beyond solid and static visions of “culture”. No clear-cut evidence of this was identified in the data. The challenge is to find methodologically sound tools to research this aspect.



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