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Global Alliance Strategies

What is a multicultural relationship, anyway?

During the writing of this book, the world, or my social network at least, divided itself into two distinct camps. There were those who were *really, really* interested in the subject matter and were keen to delve into the nitty-gritty details of multicultural love. Then there were those who *really, really* wanted nothing to do with the book and they scoffed, *yes scoffed*, that the nitty-gritty details of multicultural love are the same as in every relationship. Something about sex, money and power, but I don't remember the rest.

The first camp, The Flashers I called them, was absolutely desperate to be included in the book, and indeed almost begged to be interviewed. They saw in me a chance to reveal, flasher-like, their intriguing love stories and gain their Andy-Warhol-fifteen-minutes-of-fame. When I resisted their offers to expose their multicultural affairs because, according to my armchair psychologist assessment, they did not have the right profile, they would ask, "What is a multicultural relationship, anyway? We are *all* different, aren't we?" and then insist that their story was juicy and newsworthy.

The second camp, The Scoffers, would ask, derogatorily I might add, "How do you *define* a multicultural relationship, anyway?" indicating that 'multicultural' is a pretty loaded term for an armchair psychologist. They were usually the snooty intellectuals who were somewhat sceptical about my patent cocktail party answer, when asked about my profession, that I am writing a book. It was obvious that they thought 'writing a book' was a cheap euphemism for 'unemployed' or 'finding myself' or 'spoiled

housewife', not to say that any of the aforementioned labels are unworthy, or even untrue.

Both camps provided good questions though, so that is where my research began. I set out to answer, "What is a multicultural relationship, anyway? And how do you define it?"

Exogamy, outbreeding and the globalisation of love

What became immediately apparent in the research process was that there is a lot of talk about multicultural relationships, with an emphasis on the growing trend in this romantic phenomenon, the unique challenges that daunt the cross-cultural star-crossed lovers, and the ethnically rich, multilingual, globally aware offspring resulting from this 'social trend'. Very little attention, however, is given to the definition of a multicultural relationship.

There is a vague mention of the core components of multiculturalism, such as nationality, language, ethnicity, race and religion. Single issue terms like 'interfaith' and 'biracial' are bandied about as the hallmark of the modern day marital trend. There is also a bit of a 'bi' versus 'multi' discussion. Since there are only two people in an intercultural relationship, at least in theory, is it not therefore *bicultural* rather than *multicultural*? Some then suggest that *cross-cultural* is more appropriate, but are we then really *crossing* cultures, like bridges, or is it *intercultural*, which is sort of *between* cultures, or are we *merging* them, which brings us back to *multicultural*, doesn't it?

There are also a few racy terms that social scientists would use to describe the observed behavioural patterns of their research subjects, such as 'exogamy' and 'outbreeding'. To be honest, when I first saw the word exogamy, I thought it was a board game that kids might play on a rainy day, yelling "EXOGAMY" when all the plastic players, miniature men and women of different races wearing varied ethnic costumes, are successfully paired off. In fact, exogamy is not a board game but the 'custom of marrying outside of your own group'. It reminded me of my friend Cindy, a high school cheer leader, who quit the squad and dumped her football player boyfriend in our final year. Soon after this first 'scandal', she was caught in the library kissing the nerdy smart guy. Cindy had left the group, so to speak, and her exogamous incident was reported in the high school gossip newspaper as 'Cindygate'. Apparently it was the bestselling issue ever. Exogamy sells.

Outbreeding, by contrast and perhaps paradoxically, refers to the 'interbreeding of individuals or stocks'. It sounds kind of titillating, doesn't it? This free love flair, however, did not provide me with an answer to the cocktail party question, "what is a multicultural relationship?" or at least not for the kind of cocktail parties I usually attend.

Most of the discussions on and definitions of these terms that describe a multicultural relationship would suit the plot of a film noir, all dark and moody and loveless. It seemed that multicultural relationships are not quite the *globalisation of love* I was thinking about when I chose the title for this book. I wanted exotic love between ebony and ivory, war brides nursing foreign soldiers back to health *and then marrying them*, East meets West love at first sight with no common language 'but the look in her eye' kind of thing. Outbreeding just didn't cut it.

Well, I had always fancied myself to be a closet snooty intellectual anyway, so I set out to create the *ultimate* definition of a multicultural relationship. Like black high heels in a woman's shoe closet, however, the definition of a multicultural relationship also requires more than one version.

According to my research, three distinct global alliance strategies could be identified:

- ♥ Same Same Relationships
- ♥ Different Different Relationships
- ♥ Same But Different Relationships

You can see already that these definitions will provide more useful information than the term 'outbreeding'.

Same Same

For anyone who has been to Thailand, you will know the meaning of Same Same. For example, Same Same is when you want to buy a white T-shirt in size small and the street vendor holds up a blue T-shirt in size large and says, 'same same'. And the street vendor is right to some degree because a T-shirt is the same as a T-shirt, right? Same Same partnerships are similar.

A Same Same relationship is based on the *obvious* cultural characteristics of the two lovebirds involved, such as nationality and

language. Technically, Same Sames are not really *multicultural* because they bear the same nationality and have matching passports, so they are both T-shirts so to speak. Their cultural reference points, however, may vary remarkably. This is easy to understand in very large countries like the USA, Canada, Russia, India and China. East Coasters and West Coasters, and those millions and millions in the middle, may well have different worldviews and cultural reference points. Variables ranging from the local weather to the political climate will influence how the indigenous population live their lives and, perhaps more importantly, how they think. Hence regional differences abound.

It is not only large countries that have Same Same couples however. Smaller countries also have regional differences. The Romeos and Juliets from the northern Italian province of South Tirol (Bolzano-Bozen), just south of the Austrian border and historically a part of Austria, may have little in common with their romantic counterparts from the southern islands of Sardinia and Sicily. The landscape and climate are different. The language is different. Industry and the work ethic are different. They are rather different actually, but also Same Same. They are both Italian, right?

Family culture

Another breeding ground for potential Same Same partnerships is within family culture, particularly in high immigrant countries like Canada and the USA, where everybody is from somewhere else. Second or even third generation families are still strongly influenced by the tradition and culture of their forefathers, often completely unaware of it. With a focus on the future and enjoying the fruits of peace and prosperity in the newfound land, or struggling and scraping by to establish a decent life in the newfound land, entrenched family values and behavioural norms influence how they interact with their partners.

Culture clash in the Canadian kitchen

My parents are Same Same. On the surface, they seem very much alike and very *Canadian* for that matter. They love canoeing and have a deep respect for nature and a Canadian flag waves in their backyard. They both believe in a liberal immigration policy and they watch the hockey match together on Saturday night. The stage for a culturally harmonious marriage seems set.

Below this veneer of Canadian-ness however, is a world of difference. My mother grew up in a Ukrainian neighbourhood, eating *Perogies* (potato dumplings) and *Borsch* (beet soup). My father grew up with English parents in a strong British community, and he still warms the pot first before preparing his tea. When they married, during the height of the Cold War no less, the first thing my 'foreign' mother was taught was how to make a proper Shepherds' Pie (a casserole of ground beef, potatoes and vegetables).

My mother excelled at pie making and thereby earned herself accolades as a good housewife and homemaker. It was the 1950s remember. Her mastery of the Shepherds' Pie, however, meant the death of *Perogies*. Again, it was the 1950s, and *Perogies* were for *Communists*.

Along with other cultural indicators such as language, dress and customs, my Canadian-born 'foreign' *Communist* mother was culturally squeezed into a British Canadian *Capitalist* family. And Capitalists eat Shepherds' Pie, not *Perogies*.

While President Truman and Joseph Stalin were cooking up hydrogen bombs in their boyish quest for global hegemony, the real consequences of the Cold War were being played out in my mother's kitchen. Supper was decidedly British, and this was long before Jamie Oliver brought British cuisine into *cuisine* territory. It was only with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Communism that the *Perogie* was de-politicised and became culturally neutral. The household *Perogie*-ban was lifted.

Same Sames sometimes have difficulty recognising that they are multicultural because they are from the same country and therefore may not expect cultural issues to surface in their everyday lives. In *Intercultural Marriage Promises and Pitfalls*, Dugan Romano writes that at the beginning of the relationship, and often well into it, couples are not aware that they are 'operating from within two different value systems that are not in agreement'. Since Same Sames share the same nationality, it may not even occur to them to consider cultural issues in their relationship. They tend to label culturally based differences as personal preferences, or they eat Shepherds' Pie and ban *Perogies*.

The young and the culturally restless

Often at least one partner in a Same Same relationship has lived abroad for many years. Children of expatriates, diplomats, and 'army

brats' are what David C. Pollock and Ruth E. Van Reken call *Third Culture Kids* in their book with the same title. Third Culture Kids, or TCKs, tend to have Same Same relationships. Their experiences living abroad changes their fundamental cultural coding and even if they return to their home country as adults, their early experience in other countries alter their basic cultural framework. Their exposure to new cultures, education systems, and lifestyles teaches them that the way things are done is not the only way to do things, and they tend to pick and choose cultural bits and pieces along their international journey.

One of my first romantic relationships was very Same Same, although I did not recognise it as such at the time. He was from an expatriate family who had moved around the globe. He had lived in more countries in more far flung places on more continents by the age of twenty than most people will see in a lifetime. I was like George W. Bush when he became president. I did not have a passport.

My born-in-Brazil-Canadian boyfriend could not name the past five Prime Ministers of Canada, but he could list the United Nations Director Generals like they were his uncles. While I spent my youth learning the best snow shovelling techniques (it's all in the knees) and tending to first degree frost bite on my cheeks, he was frolicking on the beaches of the Great Barrier Reef. It hardly seems fair to call us both Canadian, does it?

We once went to London together. It was my first trip abroad and I was ecstatic with anticipation – Buckingham Palace! Big Ben! Harrods! He was quietly grumbling, "London, *not again*". It was not just this variance in our knowledge of world capitals that made us fundamentally different though. If you think of cultural behaviour and abiding by cultural norms as a kind of unconscious mimicry of the people who surround us, I 'mimicked' the Canadian world in which I was immersed, and that included unbridled enthusiasm for all things foreign, whereas he 'mimicked' his international world, where the concept of 'foreign' hardly exists. Well, let's say that we were in different cultural zones and went our separate ways. I still love going to London though!

In summary, Same Sames are multicultural couples with matching 'his and hers' passports. Whatever else matches is sheer luck.



Top 5 clues that you and your partner are Same Same

1. You and your partner sing your national anthem in two different languages.
2. When you first met, one of you had to ask how to spell the other person's name.
3. The in-laws, who live in the same country, are five time zones away.
4. Family parties look like the opening ceremony of the Olympics, just without the flags.
5. You cheer for the arch enemies in your country's professional sports league.

Different Different

For linguistic efficiency and because the term is impressive in its original context, I will refer to Different Different multicultural pairs as Double Ds. Double Ds are what most people think of when the term multicultural is mentioned. Double Ds do not share the same nationality, ethnic base, or language and are possibly of a different religion and race. You can hear or see their differences more readily.

Double D relationships are highly romantic. Just the chance, nay the *fate*, that you, from way, way over there happen to be way, way over here, and from the *billions* of potential people to meet, your paths cross and you have the opportunity to fall in love. Well, it is destiny written in the stars, Paul Coelho philosophy and the plot of a Bollywood romance all rolled into one.

The good news is that Double Ds do recognise that they are different and they therefore expect cultural diversity within their relationship. The bad news is that, well, I would not have much of a book if it was that easy, would I?

Even if Double Ds know *cognitively* that they are different, they are still blinded by love. They focus on the similarities in personality, such as "you won't believe it, we met at an airport and he *loves* to travel, just like me" or "he *also* cried when Bambi's mother died, we must be soul mates". Furthermore, Double Ds delight in cultural distinctions such as

“he’s 35 and lives with his mother, isn’t he a *devoted son?*” or “he carries a ceremonial dagger with him, I feel so *safe*”. The differences add to the romantic glamour and magic of the situation.

When I started writing *The Globalisation of Love*, it was the Double Ds I had in mind. Proudly, I am a Double D myself.

Ambassadors for world peace

My husband is Austrian and I, as you will hear repeatedly throughout this book, am Canadian. Well, an Austrian and a Canadian seems like a good match, doesn’t it? We both love the great outdoors, and we love to ski, and hike and climb. We both cried when Bambi’s mother died. We must be soul mates!

Well into our second decade together, we have learned, sometimes by coincidence and a good laugh and sometimes by painstaking trial and error, that we are not always soul mates and occasionally not even a good match. Some days, it is all we can do to avoid an international incident.

Although this is not reality TV, I welcome you to take a look into our private lives for a moment. (Sorry darling, just think of the royalties.) On the surface, our likes and dislikes are strikingly similar, thankfully along with our sense of humour. However, how we *communicate* our likes and dislikes and how we *deal* with our likes and dislikes is rather different.

Some dissimilarity can of course be attributed to personality. We are not twins after all. Undeniably though, the non-overlapping spheres of our behaviour often get back to culture. The disparity between our attitudes toward life and our expectations of daily living would be a sociologist’s research dream. How we define and express fundamental emotions such as happiness, anger and sorrow would make an easy PhD thesis. Dealing with our ‘high involvement – low involvement’ and ‘linear–reactive’ communication styles would keep a counsellor’s family well fed for years. Where we fall on the optimism – pessimism scale is further apart than Mars and Venus. Power hierarchy, respect for authority, blaming, cheating, concepts of time, leisure and cloth versus paper napkins at the dinner table, again are all starkly different.

Our epiphany was our first wedding anniversary. Dear reader, brace yourself for this ghastly account of a GloLo meltdown. As the memory

is still profoundly painful, I will stick to the main detail(s) of the story: There was no Happy Anniversary gift. Now I have said it for all the world to hear. My fairy tale romance with a charming Euro-man came to a sudden and screeching halt. In my fairy tale, you see, the husband ‘surprises’ his wife with a lavishly expensive gift, even though they cannot really afford it, because he thinks she is worth it.

Why, I asked myself repeatedly, and eventually him, after 365 days of *more or less* wedded bliss, was there no gift? Had I not demonstrated my continued love and commitment by ‘surprising’ my husband with a big, juicy steak barbecued, *medium rare*, just the way he likes it? Note to readers (and to husband): I am vegetarian. Well, I wished I had burned it.

Obviously I spent the day in tears. I could not imagine that the beautiful tradition of gift-giving, as a symbol of continued commitment and love between a husband and wife, was not universally practised around the world. The absence of a gift could only indicate one thing: he loved me no more.

Heated discussions ensued, *after* he finished his steak, and commenting that it was ‘perfectly cooked’ I might add. There were reckless accusations of forgetfulness, cultural insensitivity, and being a tight-fisted cheapo. There were nasty refutes. “I did not *forget* to buy a gift, I simply *did not* buy a gift”, “North American imperialism is the plague of modern society” and “if I ordered something from eBay now, would it still count?” to quote just a few.

As you can well imagine, my heart was in tatters, although the sparkly earrings I picked up at the jewellery store around the corner, *as a symbol of our continued commitment and love*, did cheer me up somewhat.

After this harrowing first anniversary, which very nearly became our last, we started to look deeper into the fault lines of our relationship. We recognised that there was more to ‘me and you’ than just ‘me’ and ‘you’. We are products of our collective cultures. We are not only from Austria and Canada, we are the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the British Commonwealth, we are the old establishment and the new frontier. We are practically rewriting history just by being together. We are Double D, Different Different.

We, we decided, are ambassadors for world peace. If we cannot get along, with our shared passion for alpine sports and our common tears for Bambi, how can we expect nations and empires, with their nuclear

weapons of mass destruction and imperialist ambitions, to manage the world over? Our diplomatic misunderstandings and occasional border skirmishes are now analysed and reviewed with a level of precision and expertise that would make a NATO General proud.

And isn't it just lovely how, once a year, on the anniversary of this treaty, the Austrian ambassador gives the Canadian ambassador something shiny and sparkly in a small velvet box, *as a symbol of their continued love and commitment to world peace*, and she barbecues him a big, fat juicy steak, cooked medium rare, just the way he likes it?

Global village

My husband and I have cultural differences, but we are veritable *twins* compared to Jacqueline and Fred. I met them at a hotel lobby in London. They had arrived ahead of me and I observed them for a few moments before introducing myself. They have a sort of Heidi Klum-Seal flair to them and did seem to attract second glances just by being there.

Jacqueline began our conversation by ticking off their contrasting identities on her fingers.

"We are Black-White, Muslim-Jew, Middle Eastern-European and Arabic-French, so we cover most of the sensitive topics in world culture and politics today. Thankfully I am not American. It would be too much of a cliché," she added.

"Our children are British and therefore different from either of us," Fred continued. "We are also 18 years apart in age, so there is a generation gap. Our household is a little global village of nations and three generations."

"Over the past 15 years, we have negotiated on everything," Jacqueline provided further detail. "There is language and religious holidays. Obviously we are both liberal, but we are still products of our upbringing. When we got married, there were so many discussions and compromises. The only thing we really agreed upon was that we were getting married."

I could not help but ask if it was not too much of a burden for them to have such a diverse household or if they would have preferred a partner with whom they share more commonalities.

"No," Jacqueline stated vehemently. "Maybe it would have been easier for our parents, but it would have been boring. We learn so much from each other," she beamed.

"I agree," said Fred, "our marriage breaks down a lot of stereotypes. I hope other people learn from us too."

In summary, Different Different relationships are between partners who are, well, different. Some of the variances are banal and meaningless, and also can be sources of enlightenment and laughter. Some differences are deep and historical and even difficult to recognise as cultural diversity. Double Ds create little global villages within their own household and, perhaps inadvertently, become ambassadors for world peace.



Top 5 clues that you have a Different Different relationship

1. When you cross international borders with your spouse, customs officers ask, "Are you travelling on business together?"
2. Your neighbours think your spouse is the housekeeper/nanny/gardener.
3. Your family has never been to the country where your spouse grew up and would have difficulty locating it on a world map.
4. The marriage certificate was preceded by travel visas, immigration documents, blood tests and a criminal record search.
5. When you hear a CNN newscast about two warring states, you think, "yes, we had the same problem last year..."

Same But Different

The Same But Different relationship, or SBD for acronym lovers, is a third category of multicultural relationship that is a close cousin to the Same Same relationship. Remember how my parents are Same Same because they grew up in the same country but have a fundamentally different culture? Same But Different couples grew up in a *different* country but have fundamentally the *same* culture.

A SBD relationship is one that is defined by the *dominant* socio-ethnic trait which defines them most as a person, usually religion, race and ethnicity, and usually at least one partner is in a minority context. Hence we have such terms as French Canadian, Russian Jew and African American. The French, the Russians and the Africans are not minorities *per se*, however they represent a minority population in the particular socio-cultural mix where they are living. Let's look at the French Canadian example first.

Pierre grew up in a French Catholic family near Montreal, Canada.

"I am French Canadian, not Canadian French," he explained. "So when I met Joelle in Lyon, it seemed natural that I would have a French girlfriend. I did not think, 'she is not Canadian'. I thought, *c'est bon*, she is French, like me."

"Pierre is different from French men," Joelle joined in. "In some ways he is more charming and sometimes less charming, but I like it. He speaks like my grandfather did. It reminds me of the past."

SBDs recognise the similarities in each other, which is typical at the beginning of any romantic relationship, but often do not recognise the power of the differences. Since their language and religion are usually the same, communication is not considered a problem, and they share the same value system. Their skin colour is the same, so they share a common heritage and history. Despite different nationalities and passports in different colours, they are often not even aware where they are the same and where they differ.

There are, for example, many Turkish immigrants in Vienna, Austria and now so-called 'second generation' Turks. The second generation Turks live within the Turkish community however they attend Austrian schools and are influenced by their birth country. When these second generation romantics marry new immigrants from Turkey, they have fundamentally different perceptions of both their ethnic background as well as their host country. They have different levels of comfort and understanding within the host country as well as practical issues such as language and understanding the local systems.

Drinking *Ballı Süt* (milk with honey) in Vienna's Turkish district, Güner, a thirty-something dental hygienist from Istanbul, explained her situation with Fahri, her Turkish-Austrian husband.

"I came to Vienna from Istanbul when I was 27. I am educated and modern although it was always clear that I would marry a Muslim. Fahri came to Vienna when he was six years old. But he

is more traditional than I am. There were debates about head scarves and education for our daughter. My decision to work was a big issue for him. Perhaps because he lived outside Turkey for so long, he holds onto the old values and traditions that he knew as a boy. I am 100 per cent Turkish. Fahri has Austria in his veins."

When I pointed out the contradiction of their situation, that she in fact seemed to have more of Austria in her veins, Güner continued.

"Turkish women, particularly in the capital, are changing. Fahri is not there to see the changes. He thinks of traditional Muslim wives. I am a modern Muslim wife but that does not mean that I am Austrian."

Güner and Fahri share a common history and heritage. What they miss together is a common present. Their ethnicity and religion are the same, but their modern day interpretation of it is different.

A third SBD couple, African American Diana and Nigerian Omar, had a similar experience, this time based on skin colour.

"My family was happy that I chose a Black partner," explained Diana, "and I was happy too. I did not want to marry out. I am proud to be Black. Marrying a White man would betray my Black heritage. We need to stick together," she added solemnly.

Her husband, Omar, from Nigeria, saw things differently.

"Diana says she is a Black woman or an African American. Why? Before she met me, she had never set foot on the African continent. I am from Nigeria. I grew up in a rural area where everyone is Black. I did not know that I was 'Black' until I came to the United States. Suddenly I am a 'Black man', not just a Nigerian or a man. Diana and I have the same skin colour, but our experience being Black is very different. If I was Caucasian or Asian, Diana would not have chosen me."

"You see," Diana lit up, "it is good to be a Black man."

What defines Diana in her home setting is being part of the Black minority in the USA. The history of slavery, oppression, bigotry and racism is internalised and is a strong component of her character. On the outside, Diana and Omar might seem similar, but on the inside, they are culturally different. As Omar put it, their experience being Black is entirely different. They are the same, but different.



Top 5 clues you have a Same But Different relationship

1. You have different passports (see, you really are different).
2. One of you thinks that your partner is too liberal, too orthodox, too traditional, too modern, or too Western.
3. Your parents were pleased with your choice of partner *before* they had actually met your partner.
4. Your children have dual citizenship.
5. You and your spouse have the same faith/ethnicity/colour/language, but visiting the in-laws still requires international travel.

So, let's get back to the original question at the beginning of this chapter: what is a multicultural relationship, anyway? It is a relationship where fundamental values and norms are based on different cultural frameworks. The balance of power between the two cultures expresses itself in language, food, religion, and family traditions and may be in constant flux between his, hers, theirs and others. At the risk of sounding like a snooty intellectual, the answer is, a multicultural relationship consists of partners who are the same, or different, or the same but different, who have inadvertently signed a pact and are on a lifelong mission for world peace.

In the next chapter, we will look at profiles of these multicultural relationship ambassadors.