

# Cross-Cultural Worker Marriage Issues: This is no honeymoon!

Even though agencies try to create realistic expectations during orientation, some cross-cultural worker candidates think that their cross-cultural service will be like a wonderful “honeymoon.” Though that may be the case for a short time, reality soon sets in.

When Dorothy Carey set sail for India, she was under no such illusion. As shown in the first brochure, she did not want to go. Unfortunately, reality was as bad as she thought it would be (or worse). She was on a ship for five months without stopping at a single port. During the first year on the field she had dysentery most of the time, and she lived four different places, at times with another family. She lived with the constant threat of malaria and attack by tigers. Her sister, who had promised to help her, left to get married. Near the end of the year, her five-year-old son died. Surely she would have said, “This is no honeymoon!”

Fortunately, most people do not have such a difficult time. We may ask questions such as: Is there a honeymoon period in cross-cultural work? Will becoming cross-cultural workers have an effect on our marriage? If both bride and groom want to be cross-cultural workers, wouldn't it be good to spend the early years of their married life on the field? Does having children when beginning cross-cultural work have an effect on our marriage? Do men and women react differently?

## Honeymoon Stage

During the early days or months of living in another culture, while still in “vacation

mode,” a person experiences interest, fascination, joy, and enthusiasm living in another culture. This may last for days, weeks, or even months.

However, when the inevitable difficulties with language, people, housing, and food arise, people may become critical, frustrated, resentful, and angry. Simple tasks become daunting challenges, and disillusionment sets in. This post-honeymoon time is very hard on marriage relationships, resulting in lower satisfaction in marriages.

Though thousands of cross-cultural workers have experienced this over the last couple of centuries, it was not until the end of the twentieth century that Christopher Rosik at Link Care studied this change in marital satisfaction systematically. Over a twenty year period he gave couples the Marital Satisfaction Inventory (MSI) three times:

- First, while they were candidates (before serving as cross-cultural workers),
- Second, four years later, after their first term of service in another culture,
- Third, an additional four years later, after their second term of service.

He analyzed the data comparing gender, length marriage, and ages of children (if they had any). The MSI has a measure of overall satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the marriage. Rosik found that satisfaction with their marriage declined significantly during the four years between the first and second times they took the test (during the first term), and it remained lower four years later the third time (during their second term).

## Just Married!

Of course, a similar phenomenon occurs in any marriage. During the early days or months after the wedding, while still in the

“honeymoon stage,” a person experiences interest, fascination, joy, and enthusiasm for married life. This may last for days, weeks, or even months.

However, when the inevitable difficulties from different expectations, different backgrounds, and daily “drudgery” tasks of living arise, newly-weds may also become critical, frustrated, resentful, and angry. Maintaining the relationship may become a daunting challenge, and disillusionment may set in. This post-honeymoon time may be hard on a marriage.

If a couple marries and leaves very soon to serve in another culture, the early days may be wonderful. Then if the two “honeymoons” end simultaneously, the following days may be dreadful. The couple may confuse cultural adjustments and marriage adjustments. The resulting disillusionment may cause them to leave the field, perhaps even the marriage. Even if they do not leave the marriage, their marriage may be damaged.

## Married, no children

In addition to the general overall measure of satisfaction, the MSI has nine measures of satisfaction for specific areas of marriage. Rosik found the same pattern of declining satisfaction during the first term of service and continued lower satisfaction during the second term in three areas.

- Affective communication: The amount of affection and understanding expressed by their spouse.
- Sexual dissatisfaction: The frequency and quality of intercourse and other sexual activity.

- Role orientation: Traditional vs. nontraditional orientations toward marital and parental gender roles.

That is, cross-cultural workers became more dissatisfied with the affection, understanding, sexual activity, and roles they were expected to play during their first term of service, and that dissatisfaction remained through their second term.

A decade earlier Steve Sweatman studied first term cross-cultural workers, and he found that they also experienced sexual dissatisfaction and dissatisfaction with affective communication. He did not study role orientation.

## Married, with children

Children in the home resulted in two additional specific problem areas.

- Conflict over child rearing: This was the conflict between spouses about child rearing practices. Again, satisfaction declined during the first term and continued lower during the second term.
- Dissatisfaction with children: This included both the relationship between the spouses and children as well as parental concern with the emotional or behavioral well-being of at least one child. This changed little over time for those entering cross-cultural work when they had been married for five or more years. However, the dissatisfaction increased during both the first and second terms for those married less than five years when they entered cross-cultural service.

## Gender differences

Wives and husbands had significantly different levels of dissatisfaction in three areas.

- Problem solving communication: general ineffectiveness in resolving differences. Wives more dissatisfied than husbands each time they took the MSI.
- Time together: the couple's companionship during time shared in leisure activity. Dissatisfaction for both husbands and wives increased significantly, but it increased during the first term for the wives and during the second term for husbands.
- Role orientation (defined above): Wives endorsed more traditional gender and parental roles than their husbands each time they took the MSI.

In his study of first-term cross-cultural workers a decade earlier, Sweatman also found the greatest area of dissatisfaction was with time together. In addition, he found that that this dissatisfaction was significantly correlated with depression. He did not check to see if there was a difference between husbands and wives relative to the correlation with depression.

## What can we do?

Serving as cross-cultural workers is often hard on marriages. After a brief honeymoon period the pressures of work and the stress of living in another culture begin to take their toll on marriage relationships. However, to be forewarned is to be forearmed.

Since the first term of cross-cultural service can be so difficult, it is a crucial time to take action to protect and preserve marriage. The best general thing to do is to make your marriage a high priority in your lives. Of

course, you want to serve others, but you must also care for yourself and your marriage.

Since both studies using the MSI pinpointed several specific areas where cross-cultural workers are most likely to be dissatisfied in marriage, those areas are good places to begin.

- Both studies noted that "time together" is a major problem. Begin by scheduling *at least* two hours every week for "relationship time" as described in the brochure on that topic. If you do not do so, you will probably grow further and further apart regardless of how close you believe you are.
- Both studies noted problems in affective communication, and one noted a lack in problem solving communication. Make it a priority to express your affection and really understand your spouse. Also learn how to resolve your differences so that they do not fester under the surface. Unexpressed and unresolved conflicts tend to explode under stress.
- Both studies noted sexual dissatisfaction. Use your upgraded communication skills to discuss your sexual frustrations. Unresolved conflicts in this area may lead to illicit sexual activity, but this may be prevented by meeting each other's needs.
- Also use your communication skills to resolve conflicts about child rearing practices. Parents who do not present a united front to their children often wind up with divided families.

Finally, if possible, find a "mentor couple" about ten years ahead of you in their marriage relationship and child rearing. Meet with them on a regular basis to ask questions and listen to their suggestions.

For more specific information please see the article by Christopher Rosik and

Jelena Pandzic titled "Marital satisfaction among Christian cross-cultural workers: A longitudinal analysis from candidacy to second furlough," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 2008, Vol. 27, No. 1, 3-15.

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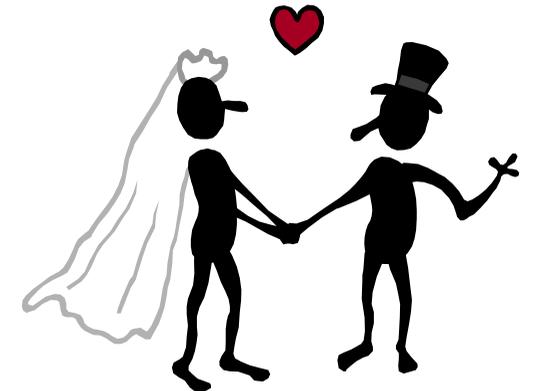
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