

# Strengthening Connections in Interracial Marriages Through Pre-Marital Inventories: A Critical Literature Review

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**Abstract** The importance of preparing for marriage is apparent when one considers the consequences of marital distress and the high rate of divorce. Pre-marital inventories help couples' prepare for marriage by identifying their personal risks and resilience profiles as well as other factors that may influence their marriage. Research demonstrates the benefits of pre-marital inventories; however, there is little research on their effectiveness for interracial couples. In this review challenges facing interracial couples are identified, the benefits of using eco-systems theory in the creation of pre-marital inventories are discussed, and suggestions on how pre-marital inventories can become more applicable to interracial couples are offered.

**Keywords** Interracial couples · Pre-marital inventories · Pre-marital education · Eco-systems theory

## Introduction

Marriage is beneficial for couples, children and communities (Gallagher 2004). Married individuals, on average, are healthier than the unmarried (Finchman 2003); unhealthy marriages, however, put couples' physical and mental health at risk (Lundbald and Hansson 2005; Pihet et al. 2007). Further, marital distress and divorce have serious physical, emotional, and financial consequences for couples and their children (Emery and Coiro 1995, as cited in Sullivan et al. 2004). The importance of preparing for marriage becomes apparent when one considers the likelihood of experiencing significant challenges early in a marriage, the consequences of marital distress, and the high rate of divorce (Halford and Simons 2005).

Pre-marital education (PE) aims to prepare couples for marriage, to increase the likelihood of healthy, satisfactory, marriages, and to decrease marital distress (Parker 1999;

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Stahmann 2000). Typically it is offered via skills-based education and is assessed with premarital/relationship inventories (PIs) (Parker 1999). Despite the benefits of PE (Silliman 2003; Stanley 2001; Stanley et al. 2006; Whelan 2007), only 10–35% of couples participate in marriage preparation (Silliman and Schumm 1999). PIs help couples learn how to create concrete connections in marriage by identifying their risks and resilience profiles as well as other factors that may influence the outcome of their relationship (Administration for Children and Families 2008; Halford and Simons 2005). Although these inventories attempt to predict the trajectory of relationship satisfaction in marriage, their use as predictors of marital success is not encouraged (Larson et al. 2002). Furthermore, research on PIs is limited in its involvement of diverse cultures and races (Larson et al. 1995), as the majority of marriage education programs generally are developed for and offered to Caucasian middle-class couples (Ooms and Wilson 2004). Moreover, much of the research on the psychometric properties of the top PIs is primarily based on white, middle-class couples from the United States (Fowers et al. 1996; Holman et al. 1994; Larson et al. 2007). PIs that fail to recognize that there are multiple ways of defining a successful marriage run the risk of perpetuating Eurocentric notions of a successful marriage, particularly when PIs, that are tested on and developed for white middle class couples, are applied unquestioningly to couples from different ethnicities. Findings from studies that solely utilize Caucasian couples as research participants, particularly Anglo-American couples, may not translate to all couples; consequently, these findings should be interpreted and applied cautiously to intercultural couples (Abela et al. 2005).

PIs may be “both more effective and efficient if they are designed to match the needs of particular couples rather than approaching all couples in the same way” (Fowers et al. 1996, p. 104). The growing cultural diversity in Western countries like the United States, (Shellenberger et al. 2007), Canada (Williams et al. 2005), and Britain (Bhugra and De Silva 2000), suggest a need to create PIs that are developed for and tested on ethnically diverse couples, particularly interracial couples. Furthermore, the increase in interracial marriages (Leslie and Letiecq 2004) necessitates further research on members of this demographic category. Future research should enable researchers to ascertain whether the current inventories are applicable to interracial couples. This article identifies some of the unique challenges facing interracial couples and provides suggestions on how PIs can become more applicable to these couples. Lastly, the benefits of utilizing an eco-systems theory in the development of PIs for interracial couples is explained.

## **Interracial Marriage**

An interracial marriage refers to a marriage between two individuals from different ethnicities/racial groups (the terms racial and ethnic are used interchangeably). These types of marriages have more than doubled in the last 20 years (Leslie and Letiecq 2004). Currently, many commonly used marital assessment tools are based on predominately white, Protestant individuals; furthermore, few studies on marital satisfaction have focused on non-white Americans (Haque and Davenport 2009). Instead of focusing on the benefits and predictors of marital satisfaction for these types of marriages, much of the research has focused on understanding why couples choose to marry outside their ethnicity, which implicitly suggests these marriages are abnormal and that it is important to understand the reasoning behind such choices (Leslie and Letiecq 2004). Research also has focused on the lack of support interracial couples receive in comparison to same-ethnicity couples (Leslie and Letiecq 2004). According to Root (2001, as cited in Leslie and Letiecq 2004, p. 561), a

lack of support “from family can put unrealistic pressure on these marriages and heighten negative emotions between partners.” Although social support and discrimination may be important constructs to consider when developing PIs for interracial couples, they have not been found to be strong predictors of marital quality for interracial couples (Leslie and Letiecq 2004).

Interracial couples may face unique challenges as a result of their different ethnic backgrounds. Research notes they may have a greater adjustment to marriage, in part through society’s overall attitude towards these relationships, which may range from curiosity to disapproval (Bhugra and De Silva 2000). Interracial marriages were not always accepted or respected. In fact, the United States Supreme Court did not declare as unconstitutional laws prohibiting interracial marriages until 1967 (Waldman and Rubalcava 2005). Interracial couples may be challenged as a function of backgrounds of experience related to differing habits, beliefs, values and customs, less common ground in the relationship, and institutional racism (Bhugra and De Silva 2000). Other areas that are heavily influenced by culture, and could become challenges in an interracial relationship, include differing sex-role expectations, parenting practices, attitudes towards work and leisure, holiday traditions, expressions of affection, and problem-solving strategies (Biever et al. 1998).

According to Leslie and Letiecq (2004), the literature lacks consensus on whether or not these couples experience a lesser degree of marital satisfaction than same-ethnicity couples. According to Solsberry (1994, as cited in Leslie and Letiecq 2004), interracial couples, especially African American/White couples, are likely to experience discrimination. Although Solsberry’s research was conducted 15 years ago, racism and discrimination are still pervasive and interracial couples may experience undue pressure because of it. In addition, one study found an association of a lower level of happiness in interracial relationships when the husband belonged to a minority culture (Leslie and Letiecq 2004). The research isn’t clear as to why this is true; however, it may be a consequence of the history of differential privilege based on gender and race (Foeman and Nance 2002, as cited in Leslie and Letiecq 2004).

Despite the challenges interracial couples may face, one should not assume these marriages are unhappier or less satisfying than ethnically homogenous marriages. Some authors tout the benefits of interracial marriages, which may include a more thorough preparation for marriage, a greater degree of commitment, tolerance, respect, acceptance of differences, and broader opportunities for learning and growth (Biever et al. 1998; Bhugra and De Silva 2000). Furthermore, children of interracial marriages may develop a greater degree of acceptance of differences (Biever et al. 1998).

### **Predictors of Marital Satisfaction**

Much of the research on predictors of marital satisfaction is focused on the micro level, the immediate settings and circumstances that directly influence interactions, such as children or life stressors (Leslie and Letiecq 2004). Gottman and Levenson (1992, as cited in Fowers et al. 1996) explored contexts at the micro level when they identified a couple’s style of interacting as a predictor of a dissatisfying relationship. Lewis and Gossett (1999, as cited in Administration for Children and Families 2008) also explored the micro level when they identified eight essential characteristics of a healthy marriage:

both partners participate in the definition of the relationship; there is a strong marital bond characterized by levels of both closeness and autonomy; the spouses are

interested in each other's thoughts and feelings; the expression of feelings is encouraged; the inevitable conflicts that do occur do not escalate or lead to despair; problem-solving skills are well developed; most basic values are shared and the ability to deal with change and stress is well developed. (n.p.)

Although this research appears reasonable and sound, one must be cautious when applying it to interracial couples, as the characteristics of a healthy marriage may vary by ethnicity.

Exploring ethnic diversity is very important when developing and applying predictors of marital satisfaction for interracial couples. The interplay between communication and emotional expression in a relationship, for example, varies amongst ethnicities (Abela et al. 2005). Maltese couples' style of conflict resolution, for instance, differs from norms of conflict resolution in Anglo-American culture (Abela et al. 2005). While the woman demand/man withdrawal style of communication is seen as distressing for Anglo-Americans, it does not correspond with marital satisfaction for Maltese couples (Abela et al. 2005).

If PIs have not been adapted for and validated within ethnically diverse populations, they could be perpetuating a Eurocentric perspective of what constitutes a 'healthy' style of communication and emotional expression. Ethnicity and culture influence a "significant role in the very construction of emotion" (Waldman and Rubalcava 2005, p. 236). Furthermore, misunderstanding of emotional expression can be compounded by communication problems; hence, it is important to understand the role and relationship ethnicity plays in communication and emotional expression. Ethnicity and culture may be critical factors that influence interracial marriages; therefore, they should be considered when developing PIs for this population.

### **Strengthening Connections in Interracial Marriages**

PIs generally focus on the weaknesses and strengths in a couple's relationship. Although it is important to be aware of these areas, interracial couples could benefit further by learning skills or techniques that will increase their marital satisfaction and success. Indeed, a number of studies have demonstrated the importance of skill development in marriage preparation for couples (Russell and Lyster 1992). Correspondingly, the effectiveness of PIs for interracial couples could be increased by including supplementary material that focuses not only on skill development but also educates couples on how to strengthen their marriage, in part by exploring their differences and similarities.

Exploring differences and similarities is important not only for interracial couples but for intra-racial couples as well, as there are differences both within and among ethnicities. It is important for educators to be cognizant of this point when developing and utilizing PIs. Although there are many differences and similarities to be aware of within and across ethnicities, it would be difficult if not impossible for PIs to be developed for every possible type of interracial couple. Despite the complexities involved, research highlights areas to consider, such as beliefs surrounding marriage and parenting, when developing a PI that is geared towards interracial couples in general.

Currently, PIs focus largely on individualism and Western ideals. A narrow focus on individualism is very different from the ways couples from other ethnicities may experience marriage. According to Waldman and Rubalcava (2005), Eurocentric culture is based on the value of individualism, whereas other cultures, like the Latino culture, are "based on a collectivist orientation, which emphasizes the importance and value of the family over

individual or professional needs, group achievement over individual achievement” (p. 234).

Modified PIs could benefit by assessing both individualistic and collectivist orientations for couples, as these orientations may exert influence on beliefs surrounding marriage as well as emotional expression and communication styles. For example, in the “individualistic Western society, effective family functioning depends on open and honest expressions of feelings and thoughts among members, whereas in collectivist cultures, such a communication style tends to be discouraged and is rather regarded as disrupting family harmony” (Chung and Gale 2009, p. 21).

PIs geared towards interracial couples also may benefit by including scales that consider how ethnicity influences perceptions of the role of extended family. Therapists working with interracial couples must recognize that it is not always helpful to focus on a couple; sometimes the whole family “may be the best ‘target’ for therapeutic intervention” (Bhugra and De Silva 2000, p. 188). According to Wilson et al. (1997), “interventions prepared for the broader family system and its problems will assist with improvements in marital adjustment more than will interventions centered on individual problems...[the author’s research] dispel[s] a traditional view that marital problems are really individual problems” (p. 303).

An eco-systemic perspective recognizes that the dynamics between couples and their families may differ with collectivist orientations. The interconnectedness of individuals and the anticipated closeness a couple will have with their extended family may be better captured if PIs are designed to embrace the collectivist orientation and diversity within couples (Wilson et al. 1997). Of the top three most widely used PIs, it appears PREPARE, developed by Olson (2000), is the only inventory that heavily considers the closeness a couple will have with their extended family, as its Japanese version includes scales on family-of-origin and the on-going and reciprocal nature of the couple’s relationship with parents and in-laws (Asai and Olson 2004). Although it is important to consider the impact of one’s ethnicity and culture, PIs must not be developed with the assumption that individuals who belong to an ethnicity adhere to only one orientation. These individuals, as well as those belonging to more than one ethnicity, may feel closer to a collectivist orientation, an individualistic orientation, or fall somewhere in between. Asai and Olson (2004) note the importance of being aware of the tension that may exist between differing family structures. Furthermore, Chung and Gale’s (2009) study demonstrated that differing cultures’ values may sometimes both overlap and differ. Therefore, a PI may be more inclusive for interracial couples if they measured collectivist and individualistic orientations on a continuum and encouraged couples to discuss how their orientations may influence their values, thoughts, and hopes surrounding marriage, family, and extended family.

PIs geared toward interracial couples also may benefit from the inclusion of supplementary material that encourages couples to explore how their culture and ethnicity influence their perspectives of marriage and relationships. According to Waldman and Rubalcava (2005), couples “arrive at the therapist’s office without the understanding that each of the partner’s ways of organizing his/her subjective experience is based on unconscious and taken for granted familial and cultural organizing principles” (p. 236). The possibility for misunderstanding in a relationship is increased for interracial couples, especially when one considers that:

conflicting unconscious cultural presumptions collide and often interfere with the couple’s ability to create a harmonious relationship...[individuals] tend to presume that their cultural values are representative of truth and/or the way things ought to be.

Intercultural unions will necessarily bring cultural differences into an intimate confrontation. (Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005, p. 228)

PIs and/or supplementary materials thus should be utilized in order to explore and identify these unconscious presumptions. Ethnicity and cultural presumptions influence many aspects of a couple's life, including gender roles, family upbringing, as well as what one values in a marriage (Biever et al. 1998). Educators and therapists may benefit by taking steps to become knowledgeable of their clients' ethnicity and culture and of how these factors may impact their clients' relationships.

Supplementary material included with PIs could include a series of open ended questions that foster a level of understanding and respect for each other's differences, in part by discussing how ethnicity and culture influence each other's life (Biever et al. 1998). According to Greenstein et al. (1993), a couple's ability to establish mutual decisions will be fostered by having an understanding of one's own, as well as an understanding of one's partner's, religious and cultural background. This understanding can begin to develop by means of PIs, although it may take a lifetime to develop fully, as coming to "grasp with the meaning of race and cultural differences for one's sense of self and one's sense of his or her marriage is an ongoing process for interracial couples" (Leslie and Letiecq 2004, p. 570). However, PIs can be used proactively by encouraging couples, especially interracial couples, to learn more about their own and their partner's ethnicity. Areas that should be discussed include sex-role expectations, expression of affection, and problem-solving strategies (Biever et al. 1998). Additional areas for exploration include beliefs and values surrounding weddings, births, children's spiritual path, holiday celebrations, and death (Greenstein et al. 1993; Poulsen and Thomas 2007). Parenting is also a very important area to explore, as culture conveys "messages about what childrearing expectations are appropriate, what childrearing techniques are effective and what qualities parents should value in their children" (Okagaki and Divecha 1993 as cited in Costigan and Su 2008, p. 432). In addition to exploring parenting styles, it is also imperative for couples to discuss the emphasis they may want to place on their children's ability to identify with their different ethnicities. According to Alba (1991, as cited in Sussman and Alexander 1999, p.173), couples who wish to maintain ethnic and marital harmony may want to consider focusing on the similarities between their ethnicities, place less emphasis on their differences, and discuss how "they will socialize their children to have an ethnic identity."

PIs adapted to meet the needs of interracial couples also may profit by including a scale that measures racial identity, which concerns the extent to which "individuals are aware of, understand, and value their racial background and culture...[racial identity] may serve as a psychological buffer against environmental stressors" (Leslie and Letiecq 2004, p. 560). Indeed, marrying interracially may encourage, or even force, individuals to reflect on what their ethnicity means to them. Leslie and Letiecq discovered that a strong racial identity and racial appreciation resulted in a higher evaluation of marriage for interracial couples, whereas Sussman and Alexander (1999) did not find ethnic identity to be predictive of marital satisfaction for interfaith couples. The contradicting research on the importance of ethnic identity may be a consequence of the demographics of the studies' participants, as Leslie and Letiecq's (2004) study focused on middle-income African American/White couples who lived in culturally diverse neighbourhoods, whereas Sussman and Alexander's (1999) study focused solely on Jewish/Christian couples.

The conflicting findings in the available literature call for further study of the role of ethnic identity when developing a PI for interracial couples. Interracial couples and those

working with them also may benefit from reflecting on what their ethnicity means to them, as therapists working with ethnically diverse couples “must be especially sensitive to their own cultural biases and organizing principles, lest they unconsciously distort their understanding of the client’s subjective experience” (Waldman and Rubalcava 2005, p. 231). Poulsen and Thomas (2007), note the importance of self-reflection and exploration of one’s ethnicity and culture for both therapists and clients when they state, “therapists and clients bring their own culture, values and beliefs to the therapy setting and therapists have an ethical obligation to understand and be aware of their own and their clients’ cultural values” (p. 143).

As a couple starts a new life together as husband and wife, they may benefit from co-constructing a culture between them. By creating a co-culture couples are encouraged to celebrate their diversity, in part by recognizing and discussing where and how they differ and the ways in which they are similar. According to Gottman’s (2000, as cited in Barnacle and Abbott 2009, p. 68) Sound Marital House theory, couples benefit from creating a collective narrative, which involves “combining the cultures of two different families to create shared meaning”. Co-creating a culture can be facilitated through questions that encourage couples to speak to those aspects of their partner’s culture or extended family that they admire and those aspects that are concerning (Biever et al. 1998).

It is important for couples to discuss aspects of their partner they are concerned about, as they may be a source of stress for a couple. PIs may be more applicable to interracial couples if they evaluate potential stressors couples may face in relation to their ethnicity, culture, and faith (Asai and Olson 2004; Bhugra and De Silva 2000). Because interracial couples may experience a lack of support, the inclusion of supplementary material that encourages couples to explore their current and potential areas of support also may be beneficial.

Although exploring ethnic identity, areas of support, and other micro contexts may be beneficial for couples, focusing solely on the couple’s relationship can be reductionistic, as it ignores the bigger contributing factors to a couple’s relationship. It is important, therefore, to consider the multiple contexts that influence a couple and their marital satisfaction (Busby et al. 2005). Eco-systems theory suggests a focus on the multiple contexts, while also encouraging a broader, holistic perspective of what contributes to a successful marriage for interracial couples.

### **Utilizing Eco-Systems Theory in the Development of Pre-Marital Inventories**

Marital satisfaction may be predicted by the quality of a couple’s premarital relationship; consequently, in order for PIs to be more applicable to interracial marriages, additional research is needed on the predictors of marital satisfaction for interracial couples (Fowers et al. 1996; Markman et al. 1993). Eco-systems theory lends itself well to the development of predictors of marital satisfaction for interracial couples. It encourages reflection on the different demands in a couple’s lives, their responses, as well as the resources they have to cope with those demands (Rothery 2008). Also respected from this perspective are the differing experiences of individuals (Fiese and Tomcho 2001; Sussman and Alexander 1999, Wilson et al. 1997). Interracial couples may experience demands on their relationship that differ from intraracial couples. PIs developed for interracial couples would benefit from an eco-systems perspective, as it encourages consideration of the multiple and unique demands that may face interracial couples.

Eco-systems theory draws on general systems theory and ecological theory; it emphasizes consideration of the multiple relationships that “link clients to their social (and physical) environments” (Gitterman 1996 as cited in Rothery 2008, p. 98). It also speaks to the multiple environments or levels (micro, mezzo, and macro) that influence the quality of marriage for interracial couples (Leslie and Letiecq 2004). It is important to consider the multiple environments or contexts that influence a couple and their marital satisfaction (Busby et al. 2005). Eco-systems theory respects differing experiences of individuals; likewise, research using this perspective speaks to the differing ways men and women experience marital satisfaction (Fiese and Tomcho 2001; Sussman and Alexander 1999, Wilson et al. 1997). PIs developed as a reflection of the eco-systems theory would consider the unique and multiple levels and demands that influence couples.

Research highlights the benefit of utilizing an eco-systems perspective in the development of PIs. As a result of a review of 50 years of research on pre-marital predictors of marital quality, Duncan et al. (2007) proposed that predictors of marital quality could be organized into an eco-systemic developmental perspective, which incorporates the role of the individual, couple, family and socio-cultural context. Larson and Holman’s (1994, as cited in Larson et al. 2002) review of 50 years of published longitudinal and cross-sectional research on premarital factors resulted in three categories of premarital factors that predict marital satisfaction and stability. Their categories include background and contextual factors, such as family-of-origin dynamics and support for the relationship; individual traits and behaviours, such as self-esteem, interpersonal skills and emotional health; and couple interactional processes, such as similarity in race, values and attitudes.

Interracial couples, Leslie and Letiecq (2004) suggest, may benefit from exploring the micro level (specifically spouse characteristics and life stressor), as it is the “daily circumstances of life affecting marital interaction, where one would expect issues of race and racial difference to be most salient to marital quality” (p. 560). Gottman and Levenson (1992, as cited in Fowers et al. 1996) also speak to the importance of exploring the micro contexts, such as a couple’s style of interacting. Other areas that influence an interracial couple’s relationship at this level include expressions of affection and problem-solving strategies (Biever et al. 1998), as well as commitment, tolerance, respect, and acceptance of differences (Bhugra and De Silva 2000).

In addition to the importance of considering the role ethnicity plays at the community and mezzo level, the macro/structural level is another important area that may influence marital relationships (Hewitt 2008). According to Karenly and Bradbury (2005), marital educational interventions are limited if they do not consider the macro level and the external environment’s influence on marital outcomes. Leslie and Letiecq (2004) note the importance of exploring the structural level for interracial couples. Hewitt (2008) also discusses the importance of considering how structural factors, such as workplace demands, put extra stress on marriages. Furthermore, by focusing on helping a couple simply deal with stress, therapists are only helping couples learn how to be reactive instead of proactive (Hewitt 2008). Interracial couples’ relationships may experience external stress, such as discrimination. PIs can be more proactive by measuring couples’ perceptions of the external or structural challenges to their relationship and how they want/or don’t want to handle them. Although the structural level is an important area to be addressed, incorporating the multiple external factors that may influence a relationship may be difficult to facilitate in a PI.

Despite the benefits of using eco-systems in the development of PIs for interracial couples, a concern of this theory, expressed by Rothery (2008), is that in practice, an eco-systems theory tends to emphasize the present, which can be limiting when it is important



to look at a couple's past and how it can influence their future relationship. Another concern is that this theory can be used to encourage couples to accommodate to their circumstances (Rothery 2008). For instance, if low-income couples utilize PIs that ignore issues like poverty, they are not helping couples change their situation, nor are they considering the external demands on couples' relationships. Moreover, according to Grimes and McElwain (2008), a "therapist who neglects to emphasize the pervasive role of poverty in clients' lives only encourages an attitude of personal failure that furthers disempowerment and keeps quiet the voices that need to be speaking out against social injustice" (p. 221). Although PIs can not include every context and possible factor that would contribute to a positive marital life, eco-systems theory can be a useful tool in understanding the multiple contexts that influence interracial marriages.

## Conclusion

The importance of preparing for marriage is apparent when one considers the likelihood of experiencing significant challenges early in a marriage, the consequences of marital distress, and the high rate of divorce (Halford and Simons 2005). Although PIs can be used to help couples prepare for marriage, their applicability to interracial couples is questionable, as they generally are developed for and offered to Caucasian middle-class couples (Ooms and Wilson 2004). The growing cultural diversity in the West, the increase in interracial marriages, and the unique challenges and opportunities facing interracial marriages all point to the need to create PIs specifically for interracial couples. Future research, however, is necessary in order to explore the predictors of marital satisfaction for interracial couples, to inform the design of PIs created for interracial couples, and to assess the psychometric properties of these instruments.

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