Scilight

Intercultural Communication Studies

https://www.sciltp.com/journals/ics

Article

How Bicultural Couples Make Difference Work: Everyday Negotiation, Conflict, and "Couple Culture"

Xiaoyi Li

School of Chinese, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, China; cristina@hku.hk

How To Cite: Li, X. (2026). How Bicultural Couples Make Difference Work: Everyday Negotiation, Conflict, and "Couple Culture". *Intercultural Communication Studies*, *35*(1), 3. https://doi.org/10.53941/ics.2026.100003

Received: 13 February 2026
Revised: 14 April 2026
Accepted: 18 May 2026
Published: 28 May 2026

Abstract: In an increasingly globalised world, bicultural intimate relationships have become a common feature of contemporary social life. While research has extensively documented challenges associated with cultural difference, much of this work treats culture as a stable background variable and frames conflict primarily as relational strain. Less attention has been paid to how bicultural couples make difference workable through everyday interaction, and how such interactional work sustains intimacy. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with three bicultural couples residing in France, this qualitative study examines how partners interpret, manage, and integrate difference based on their narrated accounts of everyday interaction. Using an interactional, process-oriented view of culture and inductive thematic analysis, the study foregrounds negotiation practices rather than cultural comparison. Findings identify three interrelated patterns. First, language-related misunderstanding is a recurring site where difference becomes visible, but it is often addressed through communicative repair rather than avoidance. Second, conflict is experienced less as cultural clash than as everyday relational work through which expectations and norms are negotiated. Third, across partners' accounts of their relationship trajectories, repeated negotiation contributes to the emergence of a shared "couple culture" that can reduce the everyday salience of cultural difference. By treating communication as a relational and interactional process, this study advances a nuanced understanding of intercultural intimacy and shows how difference can be rendered workable through everyday communicative practices.

Keywords: bicultural intimate relationships; intercultural communication; everyday interaction; conflict negotiation; qualitative research

1. Introduction

Bicultural intimate relationships are increasingly common in contemporary societies. International mobility for education, work, and migration has expanded opportunities for sustained intergroup contact, bringing individuals into intimate relationships with partners who differ in language, cultural upbringing, and social norms (Piller, 2017). As a result, bicultural intimate relationships are no longer exceptional cases but an integral part of everyday relational experience in many societies. Despite their growing prevalence, such relationships are frequently framed in public and academic discourse as sites of heightened difficulty or vulnerability, with relational challenges often attributed to cultural difference (Bustamante et al., 2011).

Research on bicultural and intercultural couples has documented a range of challenges associated with managing difference in intimate life, including communication breakdowns, mismatched expectations in family and social contexts, and pressures arising from broader social environments (Bustamante et al., 2011; Piller, 2017). Much of this work, however, conceptualises culture as a relatively stable set of backgrounds or traits that partners bring into the relationship. From this perspective, conflict is commonly explained as the outcome of cultural mismatch, while relational success is associated with individual adaptability, intercultural competence, or prior exposure to cultural

difference (Bustamante et al., 2011). While such approaches have contributed to identifying potential sources of strain, they also risk reifying culture as a fixed explanatory variable and overlooking the dynamic ways in which partners actively engage with, reinterpret, and sometimes neutralise difference in everyday interaction.

In response to these limitations, scholars across intercultural communication and qualitative social research have increasingly challenged static and essentialised views of culture. Culture has been reconceptualised not as a bounded set of values or norms, but as a discursive and interactional process that emerges through social practice (Holliday, 2011; Kramsch, 1998). Within this process-oriented perspective, intercultural communication is understood as an ongoing negotiation of meaning and identity rather than the application of pre-existing cultural rules (Collier, 2005; Cupach & Imahori, 1993; Kecskés, 2014). This shift foregrounds interaction, relational context, and participants' own interpretive work, offering a more nuanced account of how cultural difference is lived, invoked, or backgrounded in intimate relationships.

This interactional understanding has important implications for how conflict and intimacy are conceptualised. Rather than representing relational failure, conflict can be approached as a communicative moment through which expectations, identities, and relational norms are articulated and negotiated (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Fincham & Beach, 1999). Intimacy, likewise, is not a stable outcome of compatibility but a relational accomplishment that must be continuously sustained through interaction, reflexivity, and mutual adjustment (Duck, 1994; Giddens, 1992). From this standpoint, the sustainability of intimate relationships depends less on the absence of difference than on partners' capacity to negotiate difference through everyday communicative practices.

Despite these theoretical developments, empirical research has only begun to examine how bicultural couples negotiate difference within the everyday interaction of intimate relationships, where relational histories and emotional stakes are particularly salient. Many studies continue to prioritise identifying sources of difficulty or cataloguing types of cultural difference, rather than analysing how couples themselves engage with difference as it arises *in situ*. As a result, the micro-level processes through which difference becomes manageable—or even relationally productive—at the level of everyday interaction remain insufficiently understood.

To address this gap, the present study examines how bicultural couples negotiate difference in everyday interaction and how such negotiation contributes to the maintenance of intimacy across their relationship trajectories, as recalled and narrated in interview accounts. Rather than asking whether cultural difference is inherently problematic, the study explores how difference is interpreted, negotiated, and integrated into relational life through communicative practices. Conflict is approached not as a breakdown of the relationship, but as a key site of relational work through which partners articulate expectations, test boundaries, and recalibrate shared norms.

Empirically, the study draws on qualitative interviews with bicultural couples living in France. France serves here as an empirical context rather than a bounded national case, offering a setting in which diverse bicultural relationships can be examined. While participants' experiences are situated within specific social and cultural conditions, the analytical focus lies on interactional processes through which difference is negotiated in intimate relationships more broadly. By approaching the empirical setting as a site for examining relational processes rather than national characteristics, the study seeks to generate insights that are conceptually transferable across a range of bicultural contexts.

By foregrounding lived experience and everyday interaction, this article contributes to a growing body of work that conceptualises culture, conflict, and intimacy as dynamic and relational processes. It offers qualitative insight into how bicultural couples actively construct what may be described as a shared "couple culture" emerging through everyday interaction, negotiation, and mutual interpretation. In doing so, the study shifts attention away from cultural difference as a fixed source of relational difficulty and towards the communicative practices through which difference is rendered workable within intimate life.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framing

2.1. Rethinking Cultural Difference in Bicultural Intimate Relationships

Scholarship on bicultural and intercultural intimate relationships has traditionally foregrounded cultural difference as a central explanatory factor shaping relational dynamics. Early studies, often situated within sociological and intercultural communication frameworks, approached such relationships through comparisons of values, norms, and communicative styles associated with partners' cultural backgrounds (Kalmijn, 1998; Ting-Toomey, 1999). Within this paradigm, cultural difference is commonly treated as a relatively stable attribute that individuals bring into the relationship, predisposing couples to particular patterns of misunderstanding or conflict. Relational difficulties are thus frequently attributed to incompatibility between cultural systems, while relational success is explained through individual adaptability, tolerance, or intercultural competence.

While this body of work has generated valuable insights into the structural and social challenges faced by bicultural couples, it has also been widely criticised for its tendency to essentialise culture and overgeneralise cultural patterns (Holliday, 2011; Piller, 2017). By framing culture as a fixed background variable, such approaches risk obscuring the interactional processes through which meaning is produced and negotiated in intimate life. In particular, they leave limited analytical space for examining how partners actively interpret, contest, and reconfigure cultural meanings through everyday interaction. As a result, cultural difference is often positioned as an inherent source of difficulty rather than as a relational phenomenon whose relevance emerges in and through interaction.

In response to these limitations, more recent work in intercultural communication and interactional sociology has advanced a process-oriented understanding of culture. From this perspective, culture is not conceptualised as a bounded set of values or norms but as an emergent property of social interaction (Kramsch, 1998; Holliday, 2016). Meaning is understood to be co-constructed by participants *in situ*, drawing on available semiotic resources, prior interactional histories, and contextual contingencies. Within this framework, intercultural communication is approached not as the application of predefined cultural knowledge, but as an ongoing process of meaning negotiation that unfolds through interaction (Kecskés, 2014).

This interactional turn has been further reinforced by work in interactional sociolinguistics and pragmatics, which demonstrates that participants selectively invoke, foreground, or background cultural categories depending on interactional context and relational stakes (Gumperz, 1982). Rather than treating cultural difference as a constant or dominant explanatory factor, these approaches highlight the situated and contingent nature of cultural relevance in interaction.

Applied to the study of intimate relationships, this perspective suggests that cultural difference does not operate as a fixed source of conflict, but as one of multiple interpretive resources through which partners make sense of misunderstandings, tensions, and expectations. Qualitative studies of intercultural and transnational couples increasingly show that partners do not consistently attribute conflict to cultural difference; instead, they often draw on personal histories, relational norms, and shared routines when interpreting interactional breakdowns (Piller, 2017). Over time, couples may develop locally meaningful practices that take precedence over broader cultural categories, indicating that relational dynamics cannot be adequately explained through background-based models of culture alone.

Importantly, the present study does not seek to compare cultural value systems, nor does it approach bicultural intimacy primarily through questions of identity positioning or ideological discourse. Instead, it adopts an interactional explanatory framework that focuses on how cultural difference becomes relevant, negotiable, or backgrounded within everyday relational practice. By examining how partners themselves orient to difference as it arises in concrete interactional situations, the study foregrounds process and practice rather than cultural attributes as the primary analytic lens.

Despite these important advances, what remains under-theorised is how cultural difference is practically managed within the ongoing interaction of intimate relationships. Existing research either treats cultural difference as an underlying cause of relational difficulty or relegates it to the analytical background once interactional perspectives are adopted, without close examination of how partners themselves orient to, negotiate, and recalibrate difference in everyday life. Accordingly, this article treats cultural difference not as a stable explanatory variable, but as a relationally accomplished phenomenon whose relevance emerges through everyday communicative practice within bicultural intimate relationships.

2.2. Conflict, Negotiation, and Relational Work in Intimate Relationships

Conflict has long occupied a central position in the study of intimate relationships. Within both relationship research and intercultural communication, conflict is frequently conceptualised as a sign of relational strain or dysfunction, particularly in contexts marked by cultural difference. In studies of bicultural couples, conflict is often attributed to incompatible values, divergent communicative styles, or mismatched expectations rooted in partners' cultural backgrounds. Such accounts implicitly position conflict as a problem to be managed or minimised, reinforcing the assumption that relational stability depends on the reduction of difference. In line with this interactional orientation, the present study approaches conflict not as an outcome to be explained through cultural background, but as a communicative process through which relational expectations are articulated and adjusted *in situ*.

An alternative body of scholarship has challenged these deficit-oriented approaches by conceptualising conflict as an integral component of relational life. From this perspective, conflict is not merely a breakdown in communication but a site of relational work through which partners articulate expectations, negotiate boundaries,

and recalibrate shared meanings (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Fincham & Beach, 1999). Rather than signalling relational failure, moments of disagreement can function as opportunities for clarification, alignment, and the renegotiation of relational norms.

Relational dialectics theory has been particularly influential in advancing this view. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) argue that intimate relationships are structured by enduring tensions—such as autonomy and connection, stability and change—that cannot be resolved once and for all but must be continually negotiated through communication. From this standpoint, conflict is not an anomaly but an expected manifestation of relational tension. Crucially, these tensions are not inherently cultural in origin; rather, they emerge from the dynamic interplay between individual desires, relational histories, and situational contingencies.

Building on this interactional understanding, qualitative studies of intimate relationships have highlighted how relational meaning is actively constructed through communicative practice. Duck (1994) conceptualises relationships as communicative accomplishments, emphasising that intimacy is achieved and sustained through everyday interaction rather than guaranteed by compatibility. From this perspective, conflict episodes are not isolated events but are embedded within longer interactional trajectories that shape how partners understand one another and the relationship itself. What matters, therefore, is not the presence of conflict per se, but how partners interpret, respond to, and integrate conflict into their shared relational narrative.

When applied to bicultural intimate relationships, this interactional approach challenges assumptions that cultural difference necessarily intensifies conflict. Empirical studies suggest that while cultural categories may occasionally be invoked to explain misunderstanding, partners often draw more heavily on personal dispositions, relational expectations, and situational factors when negotiating disagreement (Piller, 2017). Over time, couples may develop locally meaningful norms governing how conflict is expressed, managed, or deferred, thereby reducing the explanatory salience of cultural difference.

Despite these theoretical advances, the application of relational and interactional perspectives to bicultural intimate relationships remains uneven. In much existing research, conflict continues to be implicitly treated as a symptom to be explained—often through cultural difference—rather than as a communicative process to be examined in its own right. This leaves insufficiently explored how conflict is lived, negotiated, and normalised within the everyday interaction of bicultural couples. Accordingly, this article approaches conflict not as an indicator of cultural incompatibility, but as a form of everyday relational work through which partners negotiate expectations, recalibrate shared norms, and sustain intimacy over time.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine how bicultural couples negotiate difference in everyday interaction and how such negotiation contributes to the maintenance of intimacy over time. Given the study's focus on lived experience, meaning-making, and relational processes, a qualitative approach is particularly well suited to capturing participants' own interpretations of communication, conflict, and intimacy as they unfold within ongoing relationships. Rather than seeking representativeness or statistical generalisability, the study prioritises analytic depth and conceptual insight into interactional processes that are difficult to access through variable-driven methods.

The analysis is informed by an interpretive and phenomenological orientation, treating participants' accounts not as transparent reflections of reality but as situated narratives through which relational experience is made meaningful. This orientation aligns with the study's theoretical framing, which conceptualises culture, conflict, and intimacy as relationally accomplished through interaction rather than as fixed attributes of individuals or groups.

3.2. Participants and Research Context

The empirical material for this study is drawn from semi-structured interviews with three bicultural couples residing in France. The couples differed in terms of relationship duration, linguistic repertoires, and everyday living arrangements, allowing for variation in relational trajectories and experiences of negotiation over time. All participants were adults engaged in long-term intimate relationships at the time of the interviews.

Participants were recruited through the researcher's personal and professional networks and via referrals. While this network-based recruitment strategy facilitated access to couples willing to discuss intimate aspects of their relationships, it may also favour participants who are relatively reflective, communicatively engaged, or positively disposed toward discussing relational processes. This potential bias is acknowledged, and the study does not claim representativeness of bicultural couples more broadly.

France serves here as an empirical context rather than as a bounded national case. As a social setting characterised by sustained international mobility, linguistic diversity, and transnational intimate relationships, it provides a context in which bicultural partnerships are both visible and socially embedded. However, the analytical focus of the study is not on French cultural norms per se, but on the interactional processes through which difference is negotiated within intimate relationships. The findings are therefore not intended to represent bicultural couples in France as a population, but to illuminate relational dynamics that may be analytically relevant across diverse bicultural contexts.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted individually with each partner rather than jointly as couples. Each participant took part in one interview lasting approximately two hours, and interviews were conducted online between February and April 2021. Interview prompts focused on participants' experiences of communication, misunderstanding, conflict, and everyday negotiation within their relationships. Rather than eliciting abstract opinions about cultural difference, questions encouraged participants to reflect on concrete situations, interactional episodes, and relational practices through which difference became salient or was managed in daily life.

All interviews were conducted in English, and the excerpts reported in Section 4 reproduce participants' original wording. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

3.4. Data Analysis and Analytic Transparency

The data were analysed using an inductive thematic approach, guided by close reading and iterative comparison across interview transcripts. Analysis proceeded through multiple rounds. An initial cycle involved open coding of transcripts to identify recurring topics related to misunderstanding, conflict, negotiation, and relational adjustment. In subsequent cycles, codes were refined, grouped, and compared across couples to identify broader thematic patterns capturing shared and divergent relational processes.

Throughout the analytic process, analytic memos were maintained to document emerging interpretations, coding decisions, and shifts in thematic focus. These memos functioned as an audit trail, supporting transparency by making visible how analytic categories were developed and refined over time.

To strengthen analytic coherence, the evolving thematic structure was discussed in one supervisory consultation to test the clarity of theme boundaries and explore alternative readings, without functioning as formal inter-coder reliability.

Rather than coding for predefined cultural categories, the analysis attended to participants' own orientations and interpretive frameworks. Particular attention was paid to moments in which cultural difference was explicitly invoked, backgrounded, or reinterpreted, as well as to the communicative practices through which relational norms were negotiated over time. Themes were refined through repeated engagement with the data, moving iteratively between individual accounts and cross-couple comparison to ensure analytic coherence and conceptual depth.

Interview excerpts presented in Section 4 are drawn from verbatim transcripts and linked to anonymised participant identifiers (e.g., A1, B2). These identifiers allow internal analytic consistency across excerpts without implying traceability to participants' real-world identities or disclosing identifying information.

3.5. Trustworthiness and Reflexive Practice

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis. First, analytic decisions were revisited across multiple rounds of coding and theme refinement, allowing interpretations to be tested against the full dataset rather than single excerpts. This iterative process supported consistency while remaining open to alternative readings.

Second, reflexive review formed part of the analytic process. Emerging interpretations were critically re-examined in light of the study's theoretical commitments and the researcher's positionality, with attention to avoiding overgeneralisation or culturally deterministic explanations. This reflexive stance functioned as a form of analytic self-audit, strengthening interpretive accountability.

Third, while participants provided consent for recording and the use of anonymised excerpts, they were not asked to review transcripts or validate the final thematic interpretations. This decision is acknowledged as a limitation, and the study therefore treats reported episodes as narrated accounts shaped by recall and retrospective sense-making.

Given the multilingual nature of bicultural relationships, particular care was taken in handling language and quotation. Because interviews were conducted in English and excerpts are presented in the original language of the interview, no translation was applied to the quoted material in this article.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Given the personal and potentially sensitive nature of discussing intimate relationships and conflict, interviews were conducted with care, allowing participants to pause, redirect, or withhold details as needed.

To protect confidentiality, all names and identifying details have been anonymised, and references to specific locations, institutions, or personal circumstances have been omitted or generalised where necessary. These measures support transparent presentation of empirical material while minimising the risk of participant identification.

3.7. Participants Overview

For analytic clarity, the three couples are referred to as Couple A, Couple B, and Couple C. Participants ranged widely in age and were engaged in long-term intimate relationships of varying duration. This variation allowed the study to capture different relational stages and trajectories of negotiation over time.

Across the three couples, partners came from different national and linguistic backgrounds and were either studying or working as professionals. While these background characteristics provided contextual grounding for participants' experiences, they were not treated as explanatory variables in the analysis. Instead, they served to situate relational accounts within broader life circumstances without presupposing demographic determinants of interaction.

The couples differed in relationship history, daily living arrangements, and professional situations, contributing to diversity in communicative experiences and relational practices. This heterogeneity supported a comparative qualitative reading across cases while maintaining a focus on interactional processes rather than categorical background differences.

Table 1 provides an overview of the participants' demographic information, including age, gender, nationality, relationship duration, and occupational background.

Table 1. Overview of the Interviewees.

Couple	Participant	Nationality	Age	Gender	Relationship Length (Years)	Occupation
Couple A	A1	French	49	F	14	Research assistant
	A2	Indian	54	M		Associate professor
Couple B	B1	French	54	F	22	Biostatistician
	B2	German	61	M		Scientist
Couple C	C1	French	23	M	4	Office clerk
	C2	Dutch	23	F		Master's student

Note: Participants are referred to using pseudonyms (e.g., Couple A, Couple B, and Couple C).

4. Findings

4.1. Theme 1: Language Difference, Misunderstanding, and Communicative Repair Across Couples

4.1.1. Language Difficulty as an Everyday Relational Challenge

Across the three couples, language repeatedly emerged as a site where difference became visible in everyday interaction. Rather than functioning solely as a technical barrier, language shaped how emotions, assumptions, and relational expectations were expressed and interpreted. Participants across all couples acknowledged that communicating in a non-native or shared language could complicate expression, particularly when conveying nuanced thoughts or emotions.

One participant from Couple C articulated this difficulty directly, noting that "sometimes it's really difficult to explain your ideas in the language that is not your native language" (Couple C, Participant C2). This experience was not unique to Couple C. In Couple A, language barriers became especially salient in family interactions, where limited shared language reduced verbal exchange. Reflecting on a visit to her partner's mother, one participant recalled that they "were physically together, just communicated very little, cuddling… it was very nice" (Couple A, Participant A1). Here, reduced linguistic communication did not prevent relational closeness but instead reshaped how intimacy was enacted through non-verbal means.

Similarly, Couple B described how language competence varied across interactional contexts, particularly in communication with extended family members. Although one partner spoke fluent French, interaction with his father relied on a combination of German, gestures, and technological mediation. As he explained, "if you want to communicate, even if you don't know the language, you find a way to communicate if you really want to communicate" (Couple B, Participant B2). Across cases, language difficulty was framed not as relational breakdown but as an everyday challenge embedded in shared life.

4.1.2. Misunderstanding as a Site of Cultural Reflexivity

Beyond linguistic difficulty, moments of misunderstanding prompted reflection on implicit cultural assumptions. While all couples experienced communicative challenges, Couple C offered particularly explicit accounts of how misunderstanding made taken-for-granted norms visible. One participant observed that "your culture defines a lot of your thought… things that you think are normal are not in another country" (Couple C, Participant C2).

This dynamic was illustrated through a discussion of birthday practices, initially described as "really weird" but later reframed through mutual explanation and reflection (Couple C, Participant C2). In this way, misunderstanding functioned not merely as miscommunication, but as a site of cultural reflexivity through which partners articulated and compared assumptions that might otherwise remain implicit.

4.1.3. Communicative Repair as Relational Work

Across all three couples, communicative repair emerged as central to managing misunderstanding and sustaining intimacy. Rather than avoiding difficult moments, participants described slowing down interaction, taking distance when necessary, and returning to issues through discussion. As one participant summarised, this involved "taking a step back, thinking about it, and talking with each other" (Couple C, Participant C2).

Similar adaptive practices appeared in Couples A and B, especially in family and social contexts where translation, gesture, or technological mediation played a role. One participant described "translating all the time" when interacting with her partner's parents (Couple A, Participant A1), while another reported using "Google… and gestures" to address language difficulties (Couple B, Participant B2). These practices illustrate how communicative effort extended beyond the couple itself to sustain wider relational networks.

4.1.4. Theme 1 Summary

Taken together, these accounts demonstrate that language difference in bicultural intimate relationships operates as a dynamic site of relational negotiation rather than a fixed obstacle to intimacy. Misunderstanding becomes relationally meaningful not through its occurrence, but through partners' practices of explanation, translation, and repair.

4.2. Theme 2: Conflict as Everyday Relational Work and Negotiation

4.2.1. Conflict as Situated in Everyday Life Rather than Cultural Clash

Across all three couples, conflict was described as an ordinary and recurring aspect of intimate life rather than as an exceptional or destabilising event. Participants did not typically attribute disagreements to cultural incompatibility. Instead, conflicts were embedded in everyday routines, emotional responses, and practical arrangements.

In Couple C, disagreements were associated with daily tasks, misunderstandings, and situational pressures rather than national or cultural identity. As one participant explained, tensions often emerged from "daily life tasks" and "language misunderstand[ings]" rather than from cultural difference itself (Couple C, Participant C2). Similarly, in Couple B, conflict was framed through relational familiarity rather than cultural opposition. One participant noted that "usually we forget that we are not from the same country… it's more about personality than culture" (Couple B, Participant B1).

4.2.2. Negotiation and Expectation Adjustment Over Time

In Couple B, conflict was described as part of long-term relational adjustment rather than cultural tension. Reflecting on earlier phases of the relationship, one participant noted that unmet expectations about future plans initially generated frustration. Over time, she described a shift toward a more pragmatic orientation, explaining that she learned to "live in the moment and not overthink about the future" (Couple B, Participant B1). Conflict was thus associated with adjustments in expectations over time rather than with the reassertion of cultural difference.

Similarly, in Couple A, conflict was shaped by mobility, family contexts, and everyday responsibilities. Participants described balancing transnational family relationships, linguistic limitations, and practical constraints. While these factors occasionally complicated interaction, conflict was not framed as evidence of cultural incompatibility. Instead, effort, patience, and communication were emphasised as central to relational stability. As one participant explained, "when there are problems, we talk a lot and try to understand where it comes from" (Couple A, Participant A1).

Accounts from Couple C further illustrate negotiation as an ongoing process of expectation adjustment. Reflecting on periods of uncertainty and future planning, one participant noted that "we very often talk about the future… when we have different perspectives on stuff, we try to find all the options that exist, and there is usually one that fits for both of us" (Couple C, Participant C1). These accounts highlight negotiation as a recurrent feature of how uncertainty was addressed within the relationship.

4.2.3. Conflict as Relationally Productive Work

Across all couples, negotiation emerged as the primary means through which conflict was managed. Participants repeatedly stressed the importance of discussion, reflection, and mutual consideration. One participant in Couple C reflected that disagreements could become constructive for the relationship when they were discussed openly and handled with care (Couple C, Participant C1).

Negotiation also extended beyond the dyad to include family members and social networks. In Couple A, participants described putting sustained effort into communicating with both sides of the family despite linguistic and geographical challenges (Couple A, Participant A1). These accounts indicate that managing disagreement often involved communicative effort distributed across multiple relational contexts.

4.2.4. Theme 2 Summary

Across the three couples, conflict was consistently described as part of everyday relational life rather than as a cultural clash. Participants' accounts emphasised negotiation, discussion, and adjustment as recurring ways of handling disagreement within ongoing relationships.

4.3. Theme 3: The Emergence of a Shared "Couple Culture" Over Time

4.3.1. Diminishing Salience of Cultural Difference

Across the three couples, participants described relational change as a gradual process shaped by time, shared experience, and repeated negotiation. While cultural difference was more salient in early stages, its everyday relevance diminished as partners developed shared routines and expectations.

In Couple B, partners described having moved beyond actively thinking about cultural background in daily life. Interaction was guided instead by familiarity and shared priorities developed through long-term cohabitation (Couple B, Participants B1 and B2). This diminishing salience was also articulated in Couple A, where one participant noted that "after some time, you don't really think about the fact that you are from different cultures anymore—it's just your life together" (Couple A, Participant A1).

4.3.2. Negotiation as the Basis of Shared Relational Norms

Negotiation played a central role in the formation of shared relational norms. Across all three couples, repeated discussion, compromise, and mutual reflection shaped everyday routines, emotional expression, and decision-making. In Couple C, negotiation was explicitly framed as relational learning, with one participant describing how stepping back from immediate reactions and talking issues through contributed to relational strengthening (Couple C, Participant C2).

Over time, negotiation increasingly operated at the level of routine coordination rather than explicit conflict. One participant in Couple C described how everyday practices gradually settled into a workable balance developed through repeated discussion and adjustment, indicating how shared ways of doing things emerged through ongoing interaction (Couple C, Participant C1).

4.3.3. Consolidation of a Relational "We"

For longer-term couples in particular, participants described a growing sense of relational unity expressed through a collective orientation. Interaction was increasingly framed in terms of shared decision-making rather than individual preferences, which appeared to reduce anxiety around misunderstanding or disagreement. A

participant in Couple B noted that decisions were increasingly oriented toward what worked for the couple as a unit rather than for either partner individually (Couple B, Participant B1).

This collective orientation was also evident in Couple C, where everyday adaptation was described as mutual and ongoing rather than individually driven. One participant emphasised that relational adjustment was achieved through sustained communication and shared effort, highlighting how unity was enacted through continuous interactional work (Couple C, Participant C1).

Importantly, participants continued to recognise differences in background, language, and experience. However, these differences were not typically foregrounded in their accounts of everyday interaction.

4.3.4. Theme 3 Summary

Participants' accounts suggest that, over time, couples developed shared ways of relating that reduced the everyday salience of cultural difference. These shared orientations were described as emerging through repeated negotiation and accumulated relational experience.

5. Discussion

This study examined how bicultural couples make difference workable through everyday interaction, and how this ongoing negotiation contributes to the maintenance of intimacy over time. Rather than treating "culture" as a background variable that mechanically produces (mis)communication, the analysis foregrounds relational practice: how partners mobilise language, interpretive frames, and interactional routines to stabilise a shared sense of "us" amid difference. The discussion therefore focuses less on what the couples experienced (reported in Section 4) and more on what these patterns suggest for theorising intercultural intimacy as an interactional accomplishment.

Taken together, the findings advance a set of interrelated conceptual moves. Specifically, the study theorises difference-work as a set of routinised interactional procedures through which partners manage misunderstanding, negotiate expectations, and sustain intimacy over time. Within this framework, culture is reconceptualised as interactionally relevant rather than continuously causal, conflict is specified as relational labour rather than relational failure, and "couple culture" is articulated as an emergent interaction order rather than a form of cultural blending. These concepts offer analytic tools for examining how difference becomes workable in intimate relationships without reifying cultural background as a deterministic explanatory factor.

5.1. From Cultural Difference to Interactional Relevance: When "Culture" Matters

A key implication of the findings is that cultural difference is best understood as interactionally relevant rather than continuously causal. Partners did not treat cultural background as a standing explanation for relational difficulties; instead, "culture" surfaced selectively—often in moments where everyday interaction required extra interpretive work (e.g., clarification, repair, reframing). This supports process-oriented approaches that conceptualise culture as emergent, situational, and invoked through practice, while adding an important relational nuance: in intimate contexts, cultural categorisations are not merely discursive resources but are shaped by emotional stakes, shared histories, and the need to preserve relational continuity. In other words, what becomes culturally salient is not simply "difference," but difference that becomes consequential for intimacy in a particular moment of interaction.

5.2. Conflict as Relational Labour: Negotiation as Maintenance Work

The findings also invite a shift from viewing conflict as relational risk to conceptualising it as relational labour—a routine form of maintenance work through which partners calibrate expectations and keep the relationship functional. This does not romanticise disagreement; rather, it highlights that for bicultural couples, conflict episodes frequently operate as sites of alignment: partners clarify priorities, adjust temporal horizons (e.g., future planning), and re-affirm workable norms. Theoretically, this extends relational perspectives by showing how intimacy is sustained not through the elimination of tension but through the development of repeatable negotiation practices that make tension manageable, as reflected in participants' narrated accounts of recurrent disagreements and repairs. In this sense, stability is not the absence of conflict but the availability of interactional procedures for handling it.

5.3". Couple Culture" as an Emergent Interaction Order

Finally, the notion of "couple culture" can be specified as an emergent interaction order rather than a blended set of traditions. Here, "interaction order" is inferred from participants' narrated routines and reported recurrent

ways of handling tensions, rather than from direct observation of interaction. Over time, repeated negotiation produces locally meaningful routines—ways of speaking, deciding, repairing misunderstandings, and framing disagreements—that become taken for granted within the relationship. This "couple culture" is not reducible to either partner's cultural background, nor is it simply the midpoint between two national cultures. Instead, it is a relational achievement: a durable set of shared expectations and communicative habits that lowers the everyday cost of difference-work. Conceptually, this reframes bicultural intimacy as a process of micro-institution building—partners gradually construct a shared normative environment that can hold difference without constantly naming it.

5.4. Implications for Intercultural Communication Research

These findings point to three broader implications. First, they support moving beyond background-variable models toward analyses that foreground interactional trajectories and the contingencies of cultural salience. Second, they suggest that bicultural relationships should not be approached primarily through a deficit lens; the crucial analytic question is not whether difference is difficult, but how couples develop practices that make difference workable. Third, the study underscores the value of experience-near qualitative inquiry for capturing relational processes—particularly those that become invisible when "culture" is treated as a stable explanatory category.

Beyond academic debates, these insights also have practical relevance for intercultural counselling, family therapy, and community-based support for migrant and transnational couples. By focusing on negotiation, repair, and the gradual formation of shared relational norms, practitioners may better support couples in strengthening interactional resources rather than framing cultural difference itself as the primary problem. While this study foregrounds interactional processes, it also acknowledges that broader sociocultural factors—such as adaptation to the host context and the positionality of partners within it—may shape relational experiences.

5.5. Limitations and Future Directions

The study is limited by its small sample and single empirical setting, and it does not aim for statistical generalisation. Its contribution lies in conceptual transferability: specifying difference-work as an interactional and relational process. In addition, because the analysis relies on retrospective interview accounts, reported interactional episodes are shaped by recall, narration, and post-hoc sense-making rather than direct observation of interaction. Future research could extend this line of inquiry through longitudinal designs, complementary data sources (e.g., diaries or interactional recordings where feasible), and comparative work across different institutional and migration contexts to examine when and how "couple culture" becomes more or less durable.

6. Conclusions

This study contributes to research on intercultural intimacy by showing how bicultural couples sustain relationships through ongoing difference-work as narrated in interview accounts of everyday interaction. By treating culture, conflict, and intimacy as relational processes rather than fixed attributes, the analysis highlights negotiation and repair as the practical means through which partners maintain a shared "we" over time. Methodologically, the study illustrates the value of experience-near qualitative approaches for capturing the situated ways intimacy is accomplished through participants' reported interactional practices. Overall, the findings invite intercultural communication research to focus less on cultural difference as a stable cause and more on the interactional practices as reported and recalled by participants through which difference becomes workable in intimate life.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Ethical review and approval were waived for this study due to the minimal-risk nature of voluntary semi-structured interviews with adult participants.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions, as the interviews contain potentially identifiable personal information.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Use of AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

No AI tools were utilized for this paper.

References

Baxter, L. A., & Montgomery, B. M. (1996). *Relating: Dialogues and dialectics*. Guilford Press.

Bustamante, R. M., Nelson, J. A., Henriksen, R. C., & Monakes, S. (2011). Intercultural Couples: Coping with Culture-Related Stressors. *The Family Journal*, *19*(2), 154–164. https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480711399723.

Collier, M. J. (2005). Theorizing cultural identifications: Critical updates and continuing evolution. In W. B. Gudykunst (Ed.), *Theorizing about intercultural communication* (pp. 235–256). SAGE.

Cupach, W. R., & Imahori, T. T. (1993). Identity management theory: Communication competence in intercultural episodes and relationships. In R. L. Wiseman & J. Koester (Eds.), *Intercultural communication competence* (pp. 112–131). SAGE.

Duck, S. (1994). *Meaningful relationships: Talking, sense, and relating*. Sage Publications.

Fincham, F. D., & Beach, S. R. H. (1999). Conflict in marriage: Implications for working with couples. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *50*(1), 47–77. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.50.1.47.

Giddens, A. (1992). *The transformation of intimacy: Sexuality, love and eroticism in modern societies*. Polity Press.

Gumperz, J. J. (1982). *Discourse strategies*. Cambridge University Press.

Holliday, A. (2011). *Intercultural communication and ideology*. SAGE.

Holliday, A. (2016). *Doing & writing qualitative research* (3rd ed.). SAGE.

Kalmijn, M. (1998). Intermarriage and Homogamy: Causes, Patterns, Trends. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *24*(1), 395–421. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.24.1.395.

Kecskés, I. (2014). *Intercultural pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.

Kramsch, C. J. (1998). *Language and culture*. Oxford University Press.

Piller, I. (2017). *Intercultural Communication: A Critical Introduction* (2nd ed.). Edinburgh University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474412926.

Ting-Toomey, S. (1999). *Communicating across cultures*. Guilford Press.