

# Szeretlek or Je t'aime? A Short Insight Into the Life of Bi-National Couples



by Sibylle Ganz-Koechlin

“For us, nothing ever “goes without saying” in a very literal sense” (Nora, 54, Swiss, married to Martin from Hungary).

“It’s always give and take, adapt or resist – life in another country teaches you that” (Rosy, 48, born in Honduras, married to Robert from Switzerland).

What are the factors that make bi-national marriages work? What are the specific challenges in such relationships? Four couples, aged between 44 and 82, all married for at least ten years, one partner Swiss, all living in Switzerland, talked to me in semi-structured interviews, revealing the most crucial aspects of bi-national relationships: communication, balance of power, social background, creating their own culture, understanding each other’s languages and intercultural sensitivity.

Your place or mine ...

Rosy and Robert claim to have had the easiest circumstances: they met in Canada, which was neutral territory for both of them.

“People abroad often feel liberated, away from the expectations and scrutiny of family and friends,” they explained.

Job opportunities and their children’s education eventually brought all the couples back to Switzerland. The move was challenging: one of the partners is back in his or her natural habitat, suddenly holding all the cards: family and other social networks, inside-knowledge of daily life, mastering the local language.

“Suddenly this formal and rule-abiding man wasn’t the easy-going funny guy I had married any more,” says Rosy.

“I couldn’t even get the car serviced without my husband, because nobody at the garage understood me,” complains Amy, 44, born in the USA to British parents, married to Marc from a very international family. “The sudden imbalance of power in our relationship was a crucial moment.”

This was also the case for the other couples: if the “foreign” partner is unable to do his or her own thing, have their own social network and ideally a satisfying job, if the balance of power doesn’t shift any more, then the marriage is doomed, they say.

Your place *and* mine...

“We know that we are different, so we negotiate.”

“We talk all the time.”

“We have to communicate with care.”

Sets of values are questioned, examined, accepted or rejected, often a bit of everything. Bilingual couples create their very own culture, their “place”.

“You watch, you choose where you want to adapt and where you will not.”

The only partner who claims to have had no difficulties at all in moving to Switzerland is Jacky, an 80-year-old French countess who grew up in France and the USA. “We have the same sort of background,” she says of her Swiss banker husband Jean, 82.

Nora confirms social background as a point of reference:

“It would have been more difficult for me to create a relationship with a Swiss farmer from a remote village than with an urban Hungarian architect,” she says.

All couples understand the native languages of their partners and state this as an important factor of insight into their partners’ mindsets.

They also claim to have acquired deep intercultural sensitivity, partly through predisposition from their international childhoods, but mostly through negotiating daily life as a couple; intercultural competencies that will be passed on to their children.

“Life in our family is multi-layered. This is what the kids pick up from the beginning,” says Amy.

*This article is based on my master thesis on intercultural communication with the same title.*

*Subtitle of the thesis paper “On the intercultural competence of binational couples”, written in German.*