

The Diversity of Love Journal

Can Touch and Intimacy Sustain Love in Bicultural Marriages in Japan?

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In bicultural marriages, intercultural partners face numerous obstacles when trying to establish and maintain love. For example, culturally specific attitudes towards touch and intimacy are important to sustain love in bicultural marriages in Japan.

I went over the main issues that bicultural marriages between Japanese and American partners face in one of the earlier blog articles. Through observation and interviewing, I delved into those instances of third-culture marriage in Japan.

Using *kotowaza*, which are sayings and proverbs that shed light on the values underlying cultural interactions, I aim to clear up any misunderstandings. When spouses in a *Third-Culture Marriage* work together to understand each other's core values, they are better able to adapt their understanding of each other's actions to be more compatible and harmonious.

Takashiro and I recently expanded on the eight main characteristics of third-culture marriage interactions in [chapter 51](#) of the *International Handbook of Love* ([Clarke & Takashiro, 2021](#)), which occur when spouses decide to build an intercultural marriage together.

Earlier on this blog, I presented some [general principles of how Japanese and Americans sustain love in bicultural marriages](#), in particular, [how assertion and hesitation help sustain love in Japanese bicultural marriages](#) and [how sensitivity and humility work in bicultural marriages in Japan](#).

Here is one more piece of observation: how the lack of touch and intimacy challenges bicultural marriages in Japan.

What Is the Decline of Skinship and Intimacy Syndrome?

Bicultural couples usually encounter major variations with their partners in the context of touching and intimacy. Skinship or *sukinshippu* (Japanized English) before and after marriage has been explained as ‘first... you feel it; then... you don’t’. They may be unclear about the causes, but not about the consequences.

The decline in skinship and intimacy syndrome reported by most of our US male husbands with Japanese wives has many explanations, but it is the perceptions and interpretations that raise concerns. Most studies on the subject of relationship closeness are culture-comparative, such as Rothman, Pott, Azuma, Miyake, and Weisz’s (2000) and McFadden & Moore’s (2002). These do not assess actual intercultural interactions. Others are culture-specific studies, such as Alexy & Cook (2019) and Tahhan (2010), which are examples of intimacy and skinship in Japan.

Why Do Japanese Avoid Public Displays of Affection

One study based on interviews of nine bicultural couples mentioned the natural issues that occurred between husband-and-wife vis-à-vis public

displays of affection when going out as a couple or in front of their children. Most Japanese were resistant to holding hands in public or showing affection in front of their children. Given that the interviewees were living in Japan, the dominant behavior was to avoid any shows of affection in either situation (Yamamoto, 2010).

The public recently supported a gathering with signs saying, “Stop public displays of affection, it hurts our feelings.”

Further, the influence of parental models without expressions of love may be a factor that limits expression and other behaviors even within marriage households as well as outside in public. Touching in public (PDA—public displays of affection) is an issue in part due to *Uchi–Soto* consciousness regarding demonstrations of *uchi* behavior in *soto* places (Kincaid, 2019). Such behavior lacks respect for and consideration of others, the killjoys, from the American perspective.

The Private and Public Expressions of Love in Japan

The *uchi* (inside the home) and *soto* (outside in society) concepts represent values and determine what is ‘appropriate’ behavior in a conforming culture. These two terms have much broader applications, but they are also relevant to this situation. *Uchi* can refer to members of any social organization beyond the family, i.e., one’s company, social club, sports team, and others. Children learn behaviors specific to these locations or contexts, such as *honne*, or private talk, and *tatemaie*, or public talk (Barnlund, 1976).

One more source for understanding this attitude of avoiding a public showing of affection as well as demonstrating a minimal amount of affection in the home may be found in the literature on sexual

relationships in Japan, which suggests that this is something that occurs in private settings between men and not their wives. Often, the model of love has been represented as that between a man and his mistress, not his wife. Expressions of love are mostly heard in movies and TV dramas. With this perspective, marriages are primarily initiated for other reasons than love, i.e., children, security, and to have a homemaker or a breadwinner.

The Challenges of Modern Marriages in Japan

Due to more modern gender role issues and the current economic situation regarding salaries, the percentage of marriages in the country has shrunk to the point that the average age of a reducing number of marriages has increased from 25 up toward 35, with an increasingly larger percentage avoiding it altogether.

Men without an adequate income consider themselves unlikely to ever get married. Women who desire security and modern roles at home do not express interest in marriage until men acknowledge their desire for equality at home.

In bicultural marriages, American males report in one unpublished study that of 22 such men, none of them had sustained sexual intimacy after their first child was born, due to their spouses' dedication to the role of raising their children.

The Absence of Physical Intimacy in Bicultural Marriages

The absence of physical intimacy between bicultural couples seems to be a common phenomenon in bicultural marriages (Yamamoto, 2010). Engaging in this subject matter within the home may be difficult for

couples who wish to construct a third-culture marriage, it seems, but it is worth the effort if it continues to be an unacceptable situation for one partner or the other.

A further indication of the societal norm against rapid changes in household role relationships in Japan is that the government's strongest-in-the-world support for workplace marriage leave for new parents has received only 5 percent support from working males. Lastly, on the subject, the majority of working women in Japan still anticipate returning home to motherhood when the couple has their first child.

See other articles on related topics in the rubrics of [cultural values](#), [equality](#), [intercultural relationships](#), [Japanese love](#), [love in different cultures](#), [marriages in cultural contexts](#).