

# Lived Experiences of Couples in Interfaith Marriages: Understanding the Complexities and Implications for Counseling

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## **ABSTRACT**

Lived experiences of couples in an interfaith marriage has not been widely studied as much as it is practiced in multi-racial countries like Malaysia. Considering the sensitivity of the subject matter, little has been known about this phenomenon unlike in the West where it has been openly documented. Using the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) through an in-depth interview with 6 couples, this qualitative study aimed to generate a new understanding and insights into the lived experiences of couples with different religious beliefs, especially in the Malaysian context. The study also examined the challenges faced by interfaith couples, impact of their religious differences, as well as mechanisms by which they adjust to religious differences. Findings as shown in the thematic analysis suggest that perceived fear of rejection, actual initial rejection, and marriage preparation were the challenges faced by interfaith couples. Faith education and religious obligations were found to be the area of conflict among interfaith couples, and that interfaith couples adjust to each other's religious differences through the relational attributes and assimilation and accommodation strategies. Implications to marriage counseling and possible interventions to conflicts arising from an interfaith marriage are further discussed in this paper.

**Keywords:** interfaith marriage, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, Identity Process Theory, assimilation and accommodation, marriage counseling

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the study of marital dynamics, including the impact of religious alignment on relationship outcomes, has continued to evolve. While some trends persist, such as the enduring significance of shared religious beliefs in fostering marital stability and satisfaction, new research offers nuanced insights into the complexities of interfaith marriages.

More recent data from the Pew Research Center (2019) reveals that one in six marriages United States are intermarriages. Adding depth to this discourse, an earlier study by Verma and Sukhramani (2018) discovered a doubling in the incidence of interfaith marriages in India spanning from 1981 to 2005. This trend underscores the increasing diversity in partner selection criteria and the evolving landscape of marital dynamics.

In Malaysia, where interfaith marriages are becoming more prevalent, recent studies have begun to explore the implications of religious differences on marital outcomes. Research by scholars such as Lau (2016), and Awang et al. (2022) highlights the challenges faced by interfaith couples in navigating cultural and religious differences within the context of Malaysian society. These studies underscore the importance of understanding the unique dynamics of interfaith marriages in diverse cultural settings.

Despite the growing prevalence of interfaith unions, empirical evidence continues to support the benefits of shared religious beliefs in fostering marital stability and satisfaction. Kasapoğlu and Yabanigül (2018) discovered that spirituality partially mediated the relationship between marital satisfaction and life satisfaction. Similarly, Trębicka and Cichocka (2019) demonstrated that mutual prayer and religious dialogue foster spouses' spiritual development and enhance coping abilities during challenging circumstances. These findings are consistent with prior studies underscoring the beneficial effects of religious congruence on marital well-being.

Moreover, recent studies have delved deeper into the mechanisms through which religious similarity influences relationship dynamics. Research by Aman et al (2019) suggests that the level of religiosity demonstrated a strong correlation with marital satisfaction among married couples. This finding highlights the role of religion as a bonding mechanism within marital relationships, particularly in navigating challenges and conflicts.

However, it is important to recognize the complexities inherent in interfaith marriages and the need for tailored interventions to support couples facing religious differences. Ulfah's recent study (2023) further accentuates the profound

impact of religious differences, not solely on individual beliefs but also the habits, customs, and cultural dimensions within intermarried couples. Moreover, the research highlights the emergence of conflicts when individuals opt not to adopt their spouse's religion, often due to the influence of their in-laws. Research by Ahmad et al. (2019) emphasizes the importance of developing culturally sensitive counseling approaches that address the unique needs and concerns of interfaith couples. This research underscores the value of providing couples with resources and support to navigate religious differences constructively and strengthen their relationships.

Furthermore, recent studies highlight the intricate dynamics of conflicts stemming from religious disparities in interfaith marriages and the obstacles they present to relationship durability. Building on this, research by Furlong and Ata (2006) underscores the heightened sensitivity of interfaith couples to their contrasting beliefs, indicating a greater likelihood of conflict occurrence. These findings align with recent research on Black-White interracial couples, which suggests that stigma experienced due to interracial status negatively affects couple satisfaction, mediated by religious/spiritual well-being (Vasquez et al., 2019). Disagreements may encompass various aspects, including faith-based parenting practices, religious identity, religious rituals, and ceremonies, as well as disputes during the marriage planning stages (Abrahams, 2012; Kuusisto, 2013; Goodman, 2013; Dewatara & Augustin, 2021).

Furthermore, the impact of religious disparities extends beyond the couple to family members, particularly in cases of conversion or marrying someone from a different faith (Sintang et al., 2014), as evidenced by strong religious beliefs being associated with more negative attitudes towards interfaith marriage for both daughters and sons (Niekerk et al., 2018). These challenges may contribute to higher divorce rates among interfaith couples, underscoring the need for a deeper understanding of how they navigate conflicts compared to couples with shared faiths. In the context of interfaith couples, while religious identity does not serve as a barrier to marriage, the negotiation of identity becomes imperative to garner acceptance within their social spheres (Dewatara et al., 2021). It is also important to recognize that a strong religious identity, influenced by upbringing and culture, may lead to hesitation in marrying outside one's faith. This highlights the importance of considering individuals' religious backgrounds and upbringing in understanding their approach to interfaith relationships even in the earlier times.

Moreover, societal attitudes and familial pressures play a crucial role in shaping individuals' openness to interfaith marriage. Studies by Cila and Lanode

(2014), and Yahya and Boag (2014) suggest that deeply religious individuals may be less inclined to engage in relationships outside their faith circle due to parental disapproval and societal stigma. Negative attitudes toward interfaith marriage, particularly concerning daughters, are prevalent in some cultural contexts (Van Niekerk & Verkuyten, 2018). Stronger religious beliefs often correlate with more negative attitudes, highlighting the complex interplay between religious conviction and societal perceptions of interfaith unions. Despite societal pressures, some individuals choose interfaith marriages, raising questions about their motives and how they navigate community backlash. Research in this area could shed light on the balance between faith and love in interfaith relationships and provide insights into coping mechanisms for handling societal stigma and familial concerns. In essence, recent literature underscores the intricate dynamics of interfaith marriages and the challenges posed by religious differences. Understanding how couples navigate conflicts, negotiate religious identity, and respond to societal pressures is essential for promoting healthy and resilient interfaith relationships in diverse cultural and religious contexts, particularly in Malaysia.

In summary, recent literature continues to support the enduring significance of shared religious beliefs in fostering marital stability and satisfaction. While trends in partner selection may be shifting, the positive impact of religious alignment on relationship outcomes remains consistent across diverse cultural and religious contexts. However, current research highlights the need for tailored interventions to support interfaith couples and address the challenges they face in navigating religious differences within their relationships.

## **FRAMEWORK**

Recent literature supports the utilization of Identity Process Theory (IPT) as a framework for understanding interfaith marriage experiences. While previous studies may have lacked theoretical frameworks in this context (Cila & Lalanode, 2014; Das et al., 2011; Ellison et al., 2010), recent research has increasingly recognized the value of IPT in analyzing identity formation within interfaith relationships. For instance, Jaspal and Cinnirella (2012) highlight the applicability of IPT in understanding how individuals negotiate and navigate their religious identities within the context of interfaith marriages.

IPT's concepts of assimilation and accommodation align with recent research findings on interfaith couples' experiences. Phalet et al., (2018) discuss the process of acculturation or assimilation that leads to integrating new religious experiences and traditions in an individual's identity without necessarily

undergoing conversion. Similarly, accommodation, as described by IPT, involves significant adjustments to one's identity to adapt to new religious experiences (Jaspal & Breakwell, 2014). Recent studies emphasize the intertwined nature of assimilation and accommodation processes within interfaith marriages, highlighting how couples incorporate and adapt to each other's religious beliefs and practices (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2012).

Furthermore, recent literature underscores the importance of understanding individual changes within interfaith marriages. While previous studies have focused on the impact of interfaith marriages on stability and satisfaction (Sherkat, 2004; Lord, 2008; David, 2008; Furlong & Ata, 2006; Marks et al., 2012), there is a growing recognition of the need to examine the process of identity negotiation and transformation within these relationships. By applying IPT, researchers can gain insights into how interfaith couples navigate religious differences and how these processes influence marital dynamics and outcomes (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2012).

Regarding the definition of interfaith marriage, recent literature aligns with the definition proposed in this narrative. Arweck and Triansyah Fisa (2022) discuss interfaith marriage as a union between individuals from different religious backgrounds, emphasizing the inclusion of partners adhering to distinct faith traditions. This definition acknowledges the diversity within interfaith relationships and recognizes the significance of religious differences in shaping marital dynamics.

In summary, recent literature supports the application of IPT as a theoretical framework for understanding interfaith marriage experiences. Moreover, there is consensus on the definition of interfaith marriage, highlighting its relevance in contemporary research on marital dynamics and religious diversity.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The goal of this study is to learn how couples with different religious beliefs manage their differences and make their marriages work. This study provides the impetus to understanding how interfaith marriages blend their beliefs and find ways to get along well despite their religious diversity. This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do interfaith couples describe their experiences in marriage?
2. What problems do interfaith couples face when they decide to get married?
3. Do their different religious beliefs cause problems in their marriages? If so, how?

4. How do interfaith couples learn to accept each other's religious differences?
  - a. How does the Identity Process Theory (IPT) help couples adjust to each other?
  - b. How does the IPT affect the way interfaith couples deal with their religious differences?

These questions were answered by talking to interfaith couples and listening to their stories. By doing this qualitative study, the gaps in what has been known about interfaith marriages, are filled in, especially in multi-cultural countries like Malaysia.

Using the Identity Process Theory (IPT), the study would contribute to a better understanding of how interfaith marriages work. This theory helps us understand how people's identities are shaped by their interactions with others and their environment. By looking at interfaith marriages through this lens, a deeper understanding of how couples manage their differences and make their marriages successful.

The findings of this study could be useful for counselors, especially marriage therapists, who work with interfaith couples. By understanding how religion affects interfaith marriages, therapists can better help couples overcome their differences. This study could also lead to more research in this area, particularly in Malaysia, where information about interfaith marriages is scarce.

This research, thus, was conceived to help counselors develop better ways to support interfaith couples and improve their understanding of how religion influences marriage dynamics, particularly in Malaysia.

## METHODOLOGY

This study utilized Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative approach well-suited for delving into individual experiences and their associated meanings. The IPA approach allows for an exploration of the lived realities of interfaith couples, particularly in Malaysia (Langdridge, 2007).

Six participants (2 males, and 4 females) were sampled, including Catholics married to Hindus and Hindus married to Christians. Marital durations ranged from 8 to 39 years, and five couples had Christian children, while one had a Hindu child.

These participants were purposefully selected based on criteria including sustaining interfaith marriages for at least five years, having children, and no post-marriage conversions. Snowball sampling, facilitated through social networks and referrals, enriched participant diversity. Semi-structured interviews provided

flexibility for in-depth exploration, with open-ended questions ensuring coverage of key themes. Audio recording, with consent, maintained data accuracy and confidentiality.

Following ethics approval, interviews were conducted in participants' homes for convenience and confidentiality. Beginning with the demographic data collection and consent processes, interviews were then further enhanced into probing questions to enrich data quality. Transcripts were subsequently analyzed *verbatim*. Thematic analysis of transcripts, guided by IPA principles, focused on participants' perceptions and experiences. Multiple readings and note-taking identified emerging themes, with inter-coder agreement and pilot testing ensuring data reliability and validity.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of interfaith couples, shedding light on the challenges they face, the perceived impact of religious differences on their marriages, and how they adapt to these differences. The findings are discussed in conjunction with relevant literature, enhancing the understanding of interfaith marriages and their implications for counseling.

### Challenges Faced by Interfaith Couples in the Process of Getting Married

Interfaith couples encountered challenges primarily related to family rejection and wedding preparation. Participants faced perceived fear and actual family rejection upon disclosing their interfaith relationships. Generational differences also influenced acceptance, with older generations exhibiting lower acceptance. Disagreements arose over the sequence and dates of marriage ceremonies, reflecting conflicting religious beliefs.

*“The reason why we were dating for 10 years was because there was no way I could tell my parents, that I wanted to marry someone of a different faith.”*

**P6 (6.15.1)**

*“Mine was the first wedding so it was a bit difficult for him to accept that his son-in-law is not a Catholic”*

**P3 (3.12.2)**

*“...when I mentioned the date and they checked the calendar, they said cannot so it's like, then I told my husband if this is going to happen, we forever also won't get married”*

**P4 (4.44.1-3)**

*“Of course, my mother wants the church first, then my husband wants his first”*

**P1 (1.59.7)**

The challenges confronting interfaith couples begin during courtship, with parental disapproval being a significant obstacle. Participant 6's fear of rejection, led her to conceal her relationship for a decade, anticipating parental rejection due to cultural and religious differences. Four out of six participants, all female, experienced initial rejection. However, all participants ultimately gained parental approval before marriage. Wedding preparation also posed challenges, particularly regarding the ceremony sequence and date. Although only two participants encountered issues, conflicts arose due to a lack of negotiation. Compromise during the preparation phase alleviated conflicts among couples and families, underscoring the importance of negotiation in interfaith marriages.

The challenges encountered by interfaith couples, particularly regarding family acceptance and wedding arrangements, are consistent with prior research findings. Previous studies, such as those by Niekerk et al. (2018), have highlighted parental disapproval as a significant barrier, prompting some couples to conceal their relationships due to concerns about rejection. This underscores the influence of cultural and religious differences on familial acceptance, underscoring the intricate nature of navigating interfaith relationships (Sousa, 1995). Interfaith couples often encounter external tensions, notably from extended family members, which necessitates the negotiation of cultural and religious disparities within the familial context (Arweck, 2022). Wedding preparations also posed challenges, reflecting conflicting religious perspectives on ceremony sequences and dates (Verma et al., 2018). Addressing these conflicts relied heavily on negotiation and compromise, highlighting the importance of effective communication and adaptability in managing interfaith marriages.

### **Perceived Impact of Religious Differences on Interfaith Marriage**

Religious disparities significantly influenced interfaith marriages, particularly regarding faith-based parenting and fulfilling religious obligations. Participants experienced conflicts over determining their child's religious identity and inadvertent religious teachings. Differences in religious obligations, such as

attending religious services, also caused tension in relationships.

For instance, Participant 1 faced conflicts due to her husband's misunderstanding of church attendance, while Participant 4 struggled with balancing church commitments and family activities. Despite conflicts, participants were motivated to maintain marital stability, prioritizing family over religious differences.

*"...Like my children, we did not baptize all that. Beginning it was a big issue... we did tell baptized children and he did not agree. He did not say directly, he would just say see how it is all that. My mother thought he would baptize the children all that... so there was a bit of conflict."*

**P1 (1.31.2; 1.45.2-4)**

*"...So yeah conflict on mmmm the interest of the kid that will be the conflict only other than that no ... so I've decided because I'm ok with anything so the best I let the kid follow my wife..."*

**P2 (2.35.3-4)**

*"I would like to accidentally tell something the Christian way, My husband gets angry. Why you taught them this, but I don't realize because I am so used to the Christian way, I would do it to them, he would be scared his parents would think something."*

**P1 (1.62.3-4)**

The depth of these conflicts' impact on marriage warrants further investigation. Nonetheless, participants' resilience suggests a desire to defy societal expectations of interfaith marriage failure. For Participant 1, preserving marital strength outweighed challenges in religious identity. Even unintentional religious teachings can trigger conflict, irrespective of intent, as seen in Participant 1's case. Some participants suggested teaching both faiths to their children to reduce conflict.

Religious differences exert a substantial impact on interfaith marriages, particularly concerning faith-based parenting and fulfilling religious duties. Conflicts often arise regarding the determination of the child's religious upbringing and the inadvertent transmission of religious teachings, consistent with findings from prior research (Verma et al., 2018). These challenges underscore the intricate nature of raising children in interfaith households. While maternal influence typically holds sway over children's religious inclinations, gender dynamics, and parental perspectives can lead to varied experiences for children

within interfaith families (Arweck, 2022). Moreover, striking a balance between religious commitments and family activities presents challenges, emphasizing the importance of negotiation and understanding to maintain harmony within these marriages.

### **Adjusting to Each Other's Religious Beliefs**

Despite conflicts, interfaith couples demonstrated resilience through relational attitudes and the assimilation-accommodation process. Compromise, understanding, and respect were critical in navigating religious disparities. Communication played a vital role in addressing conflicts and ensuring mutual understanding. Themes aligned with the Identity Process Theory, particularly assimilation-accommodation, were evident in joint celebrations and rituals embracing each other's faith.

*"We have two gods in the house and sometimes we pray and he watches me praying sometimes he comes to follow me to the temple, sometimes he goes to church so he is already familiarized with this situation.... I've decided to be that way and also tried to show him what's also that Christian faith and all that. I'll ask him to follow as much as he can and also follow my faith as much as he can and you be good."*

**P2 (2.20.2a ; 2.35.5-6)**

*"We baptized our daughter in emm Church but we also did the entire birth ceremony for the Gujurati's that are born. So we, and we also took her to the temple, to get blessed by the priest. To us, we both want the best for the marriage, and for the family, and it is not like your faith is stronger than my faith."*

**P6 (6.45.2-3)**

*"Because I didn't like to force them to come to my religion, so it all that side. So I didn't have much problem."*

**P1 (62.1-2)"**

*"...so I've decided because I'm ok with anything so the best I let the kid follow my wife."*

**P2 (2.35.4a)**

*“You know and I think that’s what keeps the marriage alive. I think it is love and respect. I think it is a mutual understanding. I think it is a lot of giving. A lot of compromising. So those sorts of things. Compromising, in the sense that, I think that we cannot force, your spouse to do something”*

**P5 (5.24.4-6a; 5.25.1)**

Interfaith couples, therefore, encounter various challenges related to family acceptance, wedding preparation, and faith-based parenting, as manifested by the participants in this study. However, they demonstrate resilience through relational attitudes and adapting to each other’s religious differences, ultimately fostering harmony within their marriages.

Adapting to religious differences requires key elements such as compromise, respect, and communication, echoing previous research (Fatima & Ajmal, 2012). Acceptance of each other’s beliefs and practices besides mutual respect and understanding, leads to successful interfaith marriage (Harjanto et al., 2023). Relational attributes play a vital role in addressing conflicts and maintaining marital stability, as emphasized by the Social Exchange Theory (Nakonezny & Denton, 2008). The integration of the Identity Process Theory (IPT) expounds assimilation-accommodation dynamics, with participants demonstrating these behaviors through joint participation in religious rituals. This highlights the importance of relational attributes in fostering marital satisfaction and resilience within interfaith marriages (Bystydzienski, 2011).

The Identity Process Theory (IPT) process involves incorporating new information into one’s identity structure and adjusting accordingly. Assimilation and accommodation were observed in the present study, particularly through participants’ joint participation in religious rituals. Couples celebrated festivals and attended worship services together, demonstrating assimilation and accommodation. This behavior was facilitated by relational attributes like respect, understanding, and support. These actions did not compromise participants’ religious identities but strengthened their marital bonds.

Accommodative behavior, on the other hand, fosters lasting relationships as evidenced by the happiness reported by all couples in this study. Assimilation, supplemented by relational attitudes, facilitated this process. A strong foundation in their relationship enabled couples to engage in assimilative and accommodative behaviors, contributing to marital satisfaction.

## CONCLUSIONS

Interfaith marriages are increasingly common, and this study offers insights from six participants, highlighting their significant experiences in overcoming conflicts arising from religious disparities. As revealed in this study, interfaith marriages present unique challenges, but couples demonstrate resilience in overcoming them through effective communication, negotiation, and adaptation. Marriage counselors and therapists, therefore, play a crucial role in facilitating understanding and addressing the challenges faced by interfaith couples, ultimately enhancing marital satisfaction, and strengthening relationships. Continued research in this field is essential to further deepen understanding of interfaith marriages and improve counseling interventions tailored to the needs of interfaith couples especially in such a multi-cultural country like Malaysia.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Despite the valuable insights gained from this study, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. The inability to measure religiosity and the limited sample diversity may impact the generalizability of the findings. Future research could explore this relationship using probably mixed methods to enrich the findings. Moreover, focusing solely on non-Muslims in Malaysia and the sample's limited diversity such as other religious pairings are notable limitations. Methodological constraints, such as the absence of validation, could introduce bias, underscoring the need for further research employing mixed methods and diverse samples to validate and expand upon these findings. While adopting a phenomenological approach allows for understanding subjective experiences, the absence of validation may limit interpretation.

### **Implications for Research and Counseling Practices**

This phenomenological study focuses on interfaith couples' lived experiences, illuminating their coping strategies, adjustments, adaptations, and challenges in navigating religious differences. It enriches the literature by depicting the challenges encountered before marriage, during the marriage process, and in child-rearing practices that intersect with religious beliefs. Applying the Identity Process Theory (IPT) highlights assimilation-accommodation dynamics, exemplified by participants' joint celebration of religious festivals. Future research could explore the influence of religiosity on mate selection, requiring pre-study assessment. Despite conflicts over faith education, openness to both parents' faith experiences can mitigate disputes underscoring the importance of counselors facilitating this

openness. Respect for each other's beliefs promotes mutual appreciation, with counselors being urged to maintain neutrality to prevent biased counseling dynamics. Awareness of personal biases is essential to avoid imposing counselors' faith experiences on interfaith couples. This study has indeed enriched the literature on interfaith marriages, offering valuable insights into coping strategies and adjustments for couples navigating religious differences. Applying the IPT can aid in understanding assimilation-accommodation dynamics, while counselors should foster openness and respect for others' beliefs. Awareness of personal biases is crucial in preventing biased counseling dynamics, emphasizing the importance of cultural competence and neutrality in counseling practices.

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