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PREVIEW

**EXPLORING DIFFERENCES IN PROTESTANT-CATHOLIC MARRIAGES:  
A COLLECTIVE CASE STUDY ANALYSIS**

by

Susan Davison Meyerle

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Interdepartmental Area of  
Major: Human Resources and Family Sciences

Under the Supervisor of Professor  
John DeFrain

Lincoln, Nebraska

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DISSERTATION TITLE

Exploring Differences in Protestant-Catholic Marriages: A Collective Case Study

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# EXPLORING DIFFERENCES IN PROTESTANT-CATHOLIC MARRIAGES: A COLLECTIVE CASE STUDY

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University of Nebraska, 2002

Advisor: John DeFrain

Much of the literature concerning interfaith marriages has been problem-focused. Historically, research has found that couples in interfaith marriages are more likely to divorce, have decreased levels of marital satisfaction, and often result in one spouse converting to the other's religious faith. Recently, research on interfaith marriages, specifically Protestant-Catholic marriages, has begun to appear again after a 30-year hiatus. Even with the new studies, however, the focus has remained on the problems identified in interfaith marriages. No research has focused on the strengths interfaith marriages may possess.

This study sought to approach interfaith marriages as a viable marital relationship. It is through a qualitative, collective case study approach that we can begin to understand the complexities of Protestant-Catholic marriages, the issues associated with them, and ways to help partners with different Christian faiths. Four couples were interviewed using semi-structured questions. Family members and clergy were interviewed to provide a broader perspective. Additional sources of verification were employed.

Themes were identified through the interview material and other data sources. A with-in case analysis was conducted for each couple. All data collected was then analyzed for common themes, presenting a cross-case analysis. Through these levels of analysis, issues were identified and assertions were drawn from the data.

Six key interpretations were developed from the analysis. Interfaith couples: 1) Have strengths, and a shared set of values and sense of spiritual well-being can deepen their bonds; 2) Are committed to their faith, often having the experience of deepening their faith as they learn about their own and their spouse's beliefs; 3) Are committed to their marriages; 4) Are influenced by their families, as are other couples; 5) Can benefit from premarital guidance to assist them in resolving their differences; and 6) Are likely to renegotiate resolution of faith differences at various life stages. This study is significant, not only for its contribution to family strengths literature, but also because it proposes that Protestant-Catholic marriages can be rewarding and happy marriages.

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Most of all, thank you to my wonderfully patient husband, Jerry, who has encouraged me and grounded me through my academic journey. Thank you for never doubting that I would finish, given enough time. To my daughter, Anastasia, and son, Andrew, thank you for making me laugh and enjoy life.

Susan Davison Meyerle, Ph.D.

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PREVIEW

## Chapter I. INTRODUCTION

The sun is brightly shining. It is a beautiful fall Sunday morning in the Heartland. My husband is driving us to church in his sporty black Honda Prelude. He's dressed casually in a polo shirt, jeans, and loafers. I am wearing a new purple and black dress, black heels, and gold jewelry. He left his hair wet and added some styling gel, completing the "casual look". I, on the other hand, did the "full hair and makeup".

He pulls over to the curb to let me out. I stand on the corner, looking longingly toward him, watching him drive away. After a few minutes, I enter the tall building behind me and find a comfortable place to sit. I know his plans – he'll stop and get a Sunday paper and park down the block. After a few minutes, he'll walk a half block to yet another tall building. He'll enter and find a place to sit as well.

After about an hour, we'll meet at the fountain in the park separating our two churches. Sitting on that park bench, I stop to think about our differences, and a cloud floats past, briefly shadowing the sun. When we started dating, a friend pointed out a song to us, "Meet in the Middle," which was about physically crossing the distance between two places, but now it seems so much more.

This is another typical Sunday morning in our lives. I attend the First Christian Church (a Protestant denomination) and my husband attends St. Mary's Catholic Church. The differences seem as apparent as the way we are dressed. Sometimes I wonder how we'll survive these differences. I have to believe there are other couples who experience these same struggles. Being involved in an interfaith relationship can be confusing and trying. This research began as a personal quest for guidance in my own relationship and

a desire to find these differences as enriching as other differences we experienced.

Through premarital counseling in both a Catholic and a Protestant church, I felt that our religious differences had not been resolved. I wondered how other couples approached their differences, how they managed to thrive in their relationships.

### Statement of the Problem

As America continues to grow more diverse and increasingly mobile, interfaith marriages are becoming more and more common. Many individuals report that religion and spirituality are integral parts of their lives. As many as 95% of American adults express a belief in God (Hoge, 1996), and 86% state religion is important or very important to them (Gallup & Casteli, 1989). According to Crohn (1995), "Overall about 33 million American adults live in households with someone of another religious faith" (p.13). Based on current population measures, this is approximately 12% of the US population. The Center for Marriage and the Family (1995) reported that 39% of couples involved in marriage preparation in the Catholic Church were interfaith.

Some of these interfaith marriages last, others don't. Research has shown that religious differences are one of the leading indicators of couples who divorce (Markman & Stanley, 1998). Numerous studies have been conducted that indicate problems associated with interfaith marriages (Heaton, 1990; Baber, 1953; Alston, McIntosh, & Wright, 1976). Interfaith marriages are more likely to end in divorce than same-faith marriages (Bahr, 1981; Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993).

Frequently, it has been noted, interfaith marriages have been associated with lower levels of marital satisfaction. Heaton (1990) noted that marriage within the same faith perpetuates the association between religion and the family which may lead to

somewhat lower rates of divorce and higher levels of satisfaction. Therefore, an inverse relationship between exogamous marriages and marital satisfaction may be extrapolated. Marriages where persons are of different faiths may lead to higher rates of divorce and lower levels of satisfaction.

Alston, McIntosh, and Wright (1976) concluded that “interfaith marriage is associated with lower church participation and with lower levels of perceived family satisfaction” (p. 261). Baber (1953) furthermore, suggested that religious issues are a major factor in divorce because of the conflict and tension that seems to be inherent in such relationships.

Conflict seems to be a central theme in interfaith marriages. Prince (1962) reported sources of friction including: 1) conflict over which religion the children will follow; 2) conflict over which church to attend; 3) conflict over interference of in-laws in religious matters; and 4) conflict over the size of the family and spacing of children. Most couples reported they had experienced one or more of the problems listed. Three out of five couples reported their major area of conflict was friction over the religious faith the children would follow.

However, the research does indicate some mixed results. Prince (1962) found that more than half the spouses who contracted interfaith marriages stated they were either very much satisfied or entirely satisfied with their marriage. The data showed no relationship between degree of satisfaction with interfaith marriage and the religious combination of the couple. Spouses who contracted interdenominational, intrafaith marriages tended to report a higher degree of satisfaction with the marriage than did those with interfaith marriages. The data show that couples who had maintained their own

religion tended to be less satisfied with their mixed marriage, or interfaith marriage, than were couples who had resolved their religious differences by one spouse adopting the faith of the other. Almost half of the husbands and more than one-third the wives were willing for their children to marry outside the faith. The data show that two out of three spouses would marry outside the faith a second time (Prince, 1962).

Many studies have focused on the issue of interfaith relationships. The majority of studies have illustrated the differences and inherent struggles in Jewish-Catholic and Jewish-Protestant marriages. Very little research has focused specifically on the issues inherent in Protestant-Catholic marriages. Most of the research conducted thus far specifically on these marriages has been part of a larger study, typically quantitatively focused on traits of persons entering into interfaith marriages.

Christensen and Barber (1967) found a greater tolerance for interfaith relationships by Catholics than Protestants, by males than females, by young high school students than older college students, by low church attenders than frequent attenders, and by those currently experiencing interfaith relations. They concluded that interfaith marriages tend to involve: members of religious minorities, previously married persons, persons in high status occupations, and persons residing in urban areas.

### Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study was to explore strong Protestant-Catholic marriages, learning how couples of different religious faiths have strong marriages. This study sought to identify strengths of Protestant-Catholic marriages. What are strengths in interfaith marriages? What differences in their faiths do Protestant-Catholic couples experience? How do couples overcome their religious differences to have strong

marriages? What were the premarital experiences like for these couples? What was helpful? What could have been more helpful?

### Research Questions

Despite some evidence to the contrary, many interfaith marriages are successful. How do some of these marriages survive and thrive? How do they overcome the religious differences of the partners? How is premarital counseling helpful with interfaith marriages? How could it be more helpful? And ultimately, how can interfaith couples have a strong marriage in spite of the religious differences they have?

The type of questions being addressed in this investigation are best studied using qualitative methods. Qualitative research by definition is a more comprehensive, in-depth analytic approach to research, building a “complex, holistic picture” (Creswell, 1998, p. 15). Focusing more on the “hows” rather than the “whys” is typical of the qualitative tradition of inquiry. As Stake (1995) states, “Qualitative researchers have pressed for understanding the complex interrelationships among all that exists” (p. 37). Stake further identifies case studies as opportunities to seek a “greater understanding,” to appreciate the uniqueness and complexity, and its “embeddedness and interaction with its contexts.” This follows with the belief that the whole is more than the sum of its parts, a hermeneutic assertion. Rather than identify what characteristics are common among persons in interfaith marriages, this researcher sought to understand more fully the intricacies of interfaith marriages, specifically Protestant-Catholic interfaith marriages. A case study approach was used to provide a rich, thick description of the issues associated with Protestant-Catholic marriages.

### Significance of the Study

According to a recent article in *USA Today* (December 26, 2001), most Americans (61%) say religion is “very important” with an additional 24% indicating that religion was “fairly important”. A sampling of 1,500 adults responded to this question posed by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. With approximately 85% of Americans indicating religion is an important aspect of their lives and the growing diversity of the U.S. population, this leads us to question how interfaith couples reporting a strong religious faith resolve differences.

Much research has focused on Jewish-Catholic and Jewish-Protestant interfaith marriages, presumably because the differences in these faiths appear greater than Catholic-Protestant marriages. The Dovetail Institute was founded to support mixed marriages for marriages in which one person was Jewish. The institute has recognized that mixed Jewish marriages need materials and support to help their marriages succeed.

Marinelli and McDonough (2001) estimated that approximately 30% of couples registering for Pre-Cana programs through the Catholic church are “interreligious” couples (Protestant-Catholic). The Catholic bishops in *Faithful to Each Other Forever*, identified Protestant-Catholic marriages as interreligious marriages, noting that they share the same Christian faith. Yet many interfaith marriages end in divorce. Some researchers have begun to address how this trend can be reversed, including identifying key components of premarital education (Williams & Lawler, 2000, Lawler, 2000, Williams, 2002).

Yet, no studies to date have focused on the strengths of interfaith marriages. How do these marriages survive and are they just surviving or are they thriving? Can marriages



between Catholic and Protestant spouses be strong? Can these couples be happy? What allows couples to stay married? What works? We have ample research illustrating the drawbacks and pitfalls of interfaith marriages but only one study (Williams & Lawler, 2000) before this one that considered blessings or rewards in interfaith marriages.

### Theoretical Perspectives

Systems theory provides a holistic perspective which serves as the overarching theory to better understand family relationships. Human ecology theory also influenced the development of the study. In addition, a family strengths framework serves as the basis for this exploration of interfaith marriages.

### Systems Theory

“General systems theory” was developed by von Bertalanffy in 1950, the result of combining social systems that impact and interact with the larger society. This interpretive framework was applied to families, which provides a basis to understand families as complex, ever-changing living systems of interactive components. The family is a social system of interacting personalities that typically behave according to accepted societal norms. Four core assumptions relevant to the nature of this dissertation will be forwarded.

One of the core assumptions of systems theory is that the system is an ongoing, dynamic process. Change is viewed as constant and necessary to fully comprehend the complexities of the components. The system is not stagnant, as if time could stand still, but is consistently evolving, components impacting and interactive with one another.

A second core assumption of systems theory is that norms govern the system. These norms may change over time but there are agreed upon, perhaps unwritten

expectations that guide behavior within the system. Acting outside of the norms places tension on the relationships governed by the system. This tension can lead to alternative norms that dictate how the changed relationship will continue. Sometimes, not following the norms can lead to being ostracized from the system.

Another core assumption of systems theory is that no single act will always have the same result. Similarly, different causes may produce similar or the same results. Due to the complexity of the system, a cause and effect relationship cannot easily be determined. One situation or trait might impact the system very differently given the context of the situation. The impact may not be the same on all components of the system. Likewise, different causes may influence a similar outcome. Injecting different situations onto individual components may produce similar results.

A final assumption of systems theory is the circular nature of the model. The model allows for, and actually depends upon, interaction, feedback, and subsequent change to the system. This further underscores the system as continually changing, serving as a dynamic process. Relationships are inherently dynamic given this final assumption.

All of these assumptions from general systems theory fit very nicely with a case study conceptualization. The complexities and interactions of the components of a case are important characteristics to consider when studying human behavior.

Systems theory was a critical foundation for this research as it recognizes the complexity of this study and inherently the diversity of couples represented by the category of interfaith marriages. Systems theory recognizes that various components have different impacts and the impacts generated are not always predictable.

Furthermore, systems theory asserts that models are continually changing and evolving, underscoring the dynamic nature of marriages and other family relationships.

### Human Ecology Theory

“Ecology is the study of how all the organisms in a system relate to one another” (Olson & DeFrain, 2002, in press). Human ecology theory focuses on the connections of the organisms to one another, creating a human ecosystem. One family influences how the community functions and the community influences how the family functions. Appendix C illustrates this connectivity and interaction.

Behavior within the system changes the structure or state of the system, resulting in adaptation (one of the concepts used in this theory). Values play a critical role in human ecology theory – the focus on what is good, right, and worthwhile is an integral part of the social-cultural milieu (McAdoo, 1997). One of the assumptions of human ecology theory is that humans can “choose, design or modify resources and environments to improve life and well-being” (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993, p 421).

Human ecology theory is holistic and interdisciplinary, being concerned with the everyday problems of families. Families do not function in a vacuum and one must consider the impact of other organisms. To study interfaith marriage using human ecology theory, organisms beyond the immediate couple need to be incorporated. This study sought to incorporate views of family members and clergy involved with the couples. Human ecology theory supports this inclusion and would deem the involvement of others as necessary to more fully understand the case.

This study seeks to include sources outside the couple that impact their marriage, religious faiths and practices, and resources available to have strong, healthy marriages.

Sources might include family support, work system support, neighborhood, or community support. Human ecology theory focuses on the couple's strengths (Connard & Novick, 1996).

One of the foci of human ecology theory is on prevention of problems through education which is ultimately a desire for continued research of interfaith marriages (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993).

### The Family Strengths Perspective

Family strengths research focuses on family systems and the characteristics that indicate family strength. Olson and DeFrain (2003) advance a positive approach looking at how families succeed rather than on why they fail. This is the essence of the family strengths perspective.

The family strengths model used in this research was developed by Stinnett and DeFrain (1985). The "Family Strengths Model" includes six major qualities that contribute to strong families. These qualities are: commitment, appreciation and affection, positive communication, enjoyable time together, the ability to effectively manage stress and crisis, and spiritual well-being.

Commitment is essential to strong families. They "make it very clear to each other and the world that their life with each other is of utmost importance." They typically will not allow other priorities to take too much time away from family. Stanley (1998) further supports the role of commitment in strong marriages. Commitment is evidenced by "trust, honesty, dependability, fidelity or faithfulness, a sense that we are one, that we are family, personal sacrifice for the good of the family, and sharing" (DeFrain & Stinnett, 2003, in press).

Members of strong families share appreciation and show affection. They care deeply for each other and they let each other know this regularly either through statements or through their behaviors. “The key is that family members are aware of the positive emotions others feel” (DeFrain, 1999). Keeping the home a positive place is important to strong families and they have techniques in order to maintain this positive atmosphere. Strong families recognize that negative interactions drain self-esteem, good feelings, and positive energy (Olson & DeFrain, 2003, in press).

Appreciation and affection is evidenced by “kindness, caring for each other, respect for each other, respect for individuality, tolerance, physical and emotional affection, playfulness, humor, the fact that put-downs and sarcasm are rare, the family is committed to helping enhance each other’s self-esteem, a feeling of security and safety, and that people genuinely like each other, and like being with each other” (DeFrain & Stinnett, 2003, in press). Also evident in strong families is humor, as noted above. Humor helps reduce anxiety and tension, helps express warmth and caring about one another, and can help facilitate conversations (Wuerrfel, DeFrain, & Stinnett, 1990).

Positive communication is a third component of strong marriages. “Although successful families are often task-oriented, identifying problems and discussing how to solve them, family members also spend time talking with and listening to each other just to stay connected. The most important communication may occur when no one is working at it – during open-ended, rambling conversations” (Olson & DeFrain, 2003 in press). Communication does not need to be purposeful, but the act of sharing that occurs in the most inconsequential discussions promotes unity and connectedness within the family.

Components of positive communication include: “open, straightforward, discussion rather than lectures, generally positive interactions, cooperation not competition, non-blaming, a few squabbles on occasion but generally harmonious behavior, consensus building rather than winners and losers, compromise, agreeing to disagree on occasion, and acceptance of the notion that differences can be a strength in the family and that everyone does not have to be the same” (DeFrain & Stinnett, 1998). These researchers emphasize that, “Communication does not always produce agreement. Differences and conflicts occur, but are addressed directly and honestly without blaming or condemning each other. Resolution is sought, but sometimes members end up agreeing to disagree” (Olson & DeFrain, 2000). Furthermore, DeFrain (1999) notes that criticism, hostility, and denial or avoidance of conflict are not common in strong families.

Also evident in strong families are good listening skills. As DeFrain (1999) notes, “Family members are adept at asking questions. They know that people’s views change over time, and regularly check out positions by asking questions” (p. 10).

A fourth component of strong families is enjoyable time together. “Good things take time, and we take time to be with each other in our family, we share quality time, and in great quantity, we enjoy each other’s company, we enjoy serendipitous good times, simple, inexpensive good times” are elements of this component (DeFrain & Stinnett, 2003, in press).

The ability to effectively manage stress and crisis is another component of strong families. They are often creative at preventing troubles before they occur and look for opportunities to grow and learn from difficult situations. According to DeFrain and Stinnett (2003, in press), “sharing both resources and feelings, understanding each other,

helping each other, forgiveness, limiting worry, seeing a crisis as both a challenge and an opportunity, growing through crises together, humor, patience, and resilience” are ways strong families effectively deal with stress and crisis.

DeFrain (1999) identified other strategies used to deal with crises which included “pulling together, helping to ease the burden of others, reframing the crisis in a more positive, manageable light, and seeking advice and help if they cannot solve the problems themselves” (p. 11). Additionally, strong families recognize and admit when they are in trouble (Stinnett, Knorr, DeFrain, & Rowe, 1981). “People who have gone through a crisis often relate how they became stronger as an individual as well as closer to their partner or family” (Olson & DeFrain, 2003, in press).

Another component of strong families, and perhaps one of the most relevant to this study is spiritual well-being. DeFrain and Stinnett (2003, in press) identified these following indicators of spiritual well-being: “happiness, optimism, hope, faith, a sense of peace, mental health, a functional religion or set of shared ethical values which guides family members through life’s challenges, oneness with God, a sense of connection with humankind, oneness with nature, supportive extended family members, a network of genuine family friends, and involvement in the community and support from the community”. DeFrain (1999) further elaborates on this component in *Strong Families Around the World*. Spiritual well-being, he argues, is about connectedness: “to each other and to that which is sacred to us in life. These beliefs help to create a caring center within each individual that promotes sharing, love, and compassion” (p. 11). Spiritual well-being was explained in depth by Stinnett and DeFrain in 1985. Otto in 1962 also identified “shared faith, religious, and moral values” as a family strength.

“In the final analysis, family strengths are intertwined. Appreciation and affection for each other make family members more likely to spend time together, and time together is enhanced by communication. Communication enhances commitment, and commitment leads to spending more time together. A feeling of spiritual well-being gives people the confidence to weather a crisis, and the ability to cope with crisis makes family members appreciate each other more” (Olson & DeFrain, 2003, in press).

DeFrain notes an apparent paradox – as individuals and as families, we are all unique and different while at the same time, as human beings, we are all quite similar:

Operating from a family strengths perspective, the focus is on strong families and how they can serve as models for other families wanting to succeed. One advantage of this positive perspective is that it tends to change the nature of what one finds in families. When one looks for strengths, they will be identified and can become the foundation for continued growth and positive change in a family and a society” (DeFrain, 1999, p. 13).

It is hoped that use of this positive family strengths model will “help us learn how to get along better with each other in our most intimate environments” (DeFrain, 1999), and provide insights for growth, particularly in interfaith families.

One of the aspects of this study that sets it apart from all others conducted is the incorporation of family strengths theory. Family strengths theory assumes that families have “pull” factors that keep them together through thick and thin. All other studies have integrated a deficit perspective when focusing on interfaith marriages, portraying an image that these marriages are in many ways inferior, or less than, same-church