

Intermarriage in Australia

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by Dr Janet Penny

The Sullivans and the Zefereellis are just two of 45 different stories of intermarriage in a fascinating new study commissioned and published by the Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research.

Intermarriage - A Study of Migration and Integration in Australia, was written by Dr Janet Penny and Dr Slew Ean Khoo. The authors interviewed families in which the marriages consisted of Australians and partners from six migrant communities: the American, Dutch, Italian, Lebanese, Indonesian and Chinese.

According to the 1991 Census, about one in six (16%) couple families in Australia have a 'mixed marriage' - that is they are composed of an overseas-born and an Australia-born partner. The data shows that generally, inter-married couples were better educated, more likely to have both spouses in the work force, and less likely to have an unemployed partner than couples where both partners were immigrants.

The report makes an important contribution to our understanding of intermarriage in Australia and its implications for individuals, families, ethnic communities, and the wider Australian society.

According to the report, there is a huge range of intermarriage experiences. Some families become completely Australian and the ethnic partner chooses to integrate into the Anglo-Celtic Australian majority. At the other end of the spectrum, the Australian partner may be powerfully drawn to the culture of his or her partner and become more like the overseas-born person in the partnership, the report says.

And in the middle, there are many other experiences, such as families who are Australian 'with a foreign flavour' - eating the food from the exotic culture and travelling to the other country, for instance.

The report findings show that the reasons people intermarry are as various as why they marry at all - love at first sight, common interests, the development of love from friendship.

But there are motives that distinguish intermarriage from other partnerships. 'Migrants choose to "marry out" of their birthplace community for a variety of reasons: to become an integral part of the Anglo Australian majority, or to leave behind aspects of their birthplace culture... The Australia -born, for their part, may find foreign cultures more interesting than their own, and therefore find individuals from those cultures to be exotic or glamorous.' None of the marriages studied was arranged by the couples' families.

One of the most striking patterns to emerge from the study was the wholehearted adoption of the migrant's cultural world by some Australian partners. The report suggests that the desire to integrate (either by the Australian into the migrant culture or the migrant into the Australian culture) may be the result of having undergone personal upheavals, such as divorce, or because of a dysfunctional family.

The report also says that many couples have felt free from the expectations of men's and women's roles and of the shape of family life. 'They have carefully chosen the aspects of each other's culture that suit them as a family.'

The findings challenge the simplistic view of intermarriage being a sure means of assimilation into Australian society. Instead, they suggest a

variety of ways in which intermarried couples adjust to and even adopt each other's cultures. The authors conclude that 'Mixed marriages have brought mixed results to Australia. At a personal level intermarriage has both enriched and complicated family life'.