

THE EFFECTS OF VERBAL AND NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION ON RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION IN THAI-GERMAN COUPLES¹

Martina Beg²

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มุ่งศึกษาวิธีการสื่อสารของคู่สมรสชาวไทย-เยอรมันด้วยวจนภาษาและอวจนภาษา ซึ่งอาจทำให้คู่สมรสไม่พอใจกันและกันในชีวิตประจำวันได้ โดยวิเคราะห์ความพอใจในการสื่อสารกัน ว่ามีสหสัมพันธ์กับความพอใจในความสัมพันธ์ทั่วไประหว่างคู่สมรสหรือไม่ อย่างไร ในการเก็บข้อมูลผู้วิจัยใช้วิธีการหลายแบบผสมกัน ข้อมูลทั้งหมดได้มาจากการแบบสอบถาม 544 ชุด และบทสัมภาษณ์ของผู้บอกภาษา 11 คน ส่วนการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลใช้วิธีการทางสถิติสำหรับข้อมูลเชิงปริมาณ (แบบสอบถามสองชุด) และการวิเคราะห์ด้วยบทสำหรับบทสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึก ผลการวิเคราะห์แบบสอบถามแสดงให้เห็นความสัมพันธ์เชิงบวกอย่างชัดเจนระหว่างความพอใจในการสื่อสารกับ

ความพอใจในความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างคู่สมรส คือ $r(531) = +.62, p < .001$ ในขณะที่ผลการวิเคราะห์บทสัมภาษณ์ช่วยตีกรอบผลลัพธ์ให้แคบลงโดยทำให้เห็นปัญหาเฉพาะเจาะจงของการสื่อสารระหว่างคู่สมรสชาวไทย-เยอรมัน เช่น ปัญหา ทักษะทางภาษา การเน้นเสียง การออกเสียงและไวยากรณ์ (ซึ่งมีทั้งการสื่อสารทางตรงและทางอ้อม) รวมทั้งการแสดงออกทางอารมณ์ที่มีต่างกันหลายวิธี ส่วนความแตกต่างที่มีนัยสำคัญที่พบ ได้แก่ การใช้อารมณ์ขัน การสบตา การยิ้ม การสัมผัสใกล้ชิดและการเว้นช่องว่างระหว่างบุคคล นอกจากนั้น งานวิจัยนี้ยังพรรณนาให้เห็นการจัดการความขัดแย้ง และปรากฏการณ์ซ่อนของตัวตนทางวัฒนธรรม ตลอดจนการสร้างภาษาที่สามขึ้นเพื่อใช้ในการสื่อสาร ปรากฏการณ์เหล่านี้พบในคู่สมรสที่มีความพอใจในความสัมพันธ์

Abstract

This study aims to explore the ways in which Thai-German couples perceive their mutual verbal and nonverbal communication as causing them dissatisfaction in their daily lives. Furthermore, it investigates the extent to which the partners' mutual communication satisfaction is correlated to the general satisfaction with their relationship. A mixed-methods approach was used for data collection. The data were collected from 544 questionnaire respondents and 11 interviewees. Data analysis employed statistical analyses for quantitative data (2 sets of questionnaires),

¹ ผลของการสื่อสารด้วยวจนภาษาและอวจนภาษาต่อความพอใจด้านความสัมพันธ์ของคู่สมรสชาวไทย-เยอรมัน

² (มาร์ตินา เบก) M.A. student, English as an International Language, Kasetsart University, Kamphaeng Saen Campus

and text analysis for the individual in-depth interview. The survey results indicated a strong positive correlation between communication satisfaction and relationship satisfaction: $r(531) = +.62$, $p < .001$, while the interviews narrowed down the specific communicational problems for the Thai-German couples. These included linguistic skills, accent, pronunciation, grammar, different styles of communicating (direct vs. indirect communication), and differences in emotional expressiveness. Meaningful contrasts were found in the use of humor, eye contact, smiling, intimate touch and personal space. Patterns of conflict management were described, as well as the phenomena of double cultural identity and third language building, which were present in successful relationships.

Introduction

It is well known both in popular (Stickman 2014) and academic circles (Cohen 2003; Duangkumnerd 2009; Howard 2009) that Thai-foreigner marriages tend to be very socio-culturally heterogamous since the partners come from very different cultures, and that a significant amount of conflict in Thai-foreigner marriages can be traced back to the differences in their respective cultures. Different cultures are often characterized by different communication styles (Duangkumnerd 2009; Howard 2009; Matsumoto 2009; Renalds 2011), which can cause misunderstandings and lead to a “culture clash.” Furthermore, researchers have observed that in Thai-foreigner relationships language often surfaces as the main problem for satisfaction in the relationship (Cohen

2003; Duangkumnerd 2009; Howard 2009). When studying German-Thai couples, Duangkumnerd (2009) found that among 17.4% of Thai women who reported suffering from family violence, the main cause of violence was found to be communication and the third biggest reason was culture. Still, today most Thai-foreign couples communicate predominantly in English (Cohen 2003), which can be especially problematic when one or both of the partners have low English skills.

It is important not to forget that communication encompasses not only verbal but also nonverbal communication. Nonverbal communication has been positively correlated with relationship satisfaction in numerous studies over the years (Carambio 2014; Gottman and Porterfield 1981; Hinkle 1999; Koerner and Fitzpatrick 2002; Sabatelli, Buck and Kenny 1986; Schachner, Shaver and Mikulincer 2005; Scherer, Banse and Wallbott, 2001; Spitzberg 2008; Yost 1980). Nonverbal communication skills have been consistently associated with social adjustment, relationship satisfaction (Scherer, Banse and Wallbott 2001) and successful managing of personal relationships (Mehrabian 1971). Misunderstandings in nonverbal communication, on the other hand, can lead to conflict, which results in relationship dissatisfaction (Noller and Feeney 1994).

When it comes to transnational couples, the issue of mutual communication becomes even more complicated due to an additional variable: culture. Adler and

Rodman (2006:285) claim that cultural differences have a “subtle yet powerful effect on communication,” and that “cross-cultural differences can damage relationships without the parties ever recognizing exactly what has gone wrong” (Adler and Rodman 2006:160).

According to Cohen (2003), among the voluminous literature on intercultural marriages, there has been an evident lack of research based on direct investigation of intercultural couples. The present study thus serves not only as an insight into the intercultural variable of verbal and nonverbal communication and satisfaction in couples, but also as a pioneer study in the nonverbal field of intercultural relationship communication in Thailand. Furthermore, previous research that has been done on Thai-German relationships focused almost exclusively on the Thai partners’, or more specifically, Thai women’s perspectives. The current study provides a balance by representing equally both the Thai and German sides of the couple.

The sample for this study needed to be narrowed down to a specific nationality due to the difficulties in sampling “foreigners” as a general concept. Since the researcher herself lived in Germany, she was well acquainted both with the language and culture of the German participants. Furthermore, there has been previous research on Thai-German couples in Germany but in Thailand there is an apparent lack of such studies since most of the Thai-foreigner studies were conducted in the Western “host” countries

(Angeles and Sunanta 2009), which is also why a German sample was chosen.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of mutual communication of Thai-German couples on their relationship satisfaction, as well as to identify the specific verbal and nonverbal behaviors that might be a source of dissatisfaction in these intercultural relationships. This purpose was achieved by using questionnaires and interviews as the preferred data collection procedures, in order to answer the following two main research questions:

1. To what extent is the partner’s satisfaction with the communication in his/her relationship correlated to the overall relationship satisfaction?
2. In what ways do the partners perceive their mutual verbal and nonverbal communication as causing dissatisfaction or problems in their daily lives?

The research hypothesis of this study is stated as follows:

H1: The partner’s perception of satisfaction with communication in his/her relationship (IRCQ survey) is positively correlated to the relationship satisfaction (RAS survey).

While the null hypothesis states that:

H0: The partner’s perception of satisfaction with communication in his/her relationship (IRCQ) is not correlated to relationship satisfaction (RAS).

“Relationship satisfaction” was defined as the partner’s perceived global satisfaction with his/her current relationship, as reported on the Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick 1988) used in this study.

This study has identified common problems in nonverbal and verbal communication of Thai-German couples (concerning, for example, linguistic skills, accent, pronunciation and grammar, humor, eye contact, etc.) and ways of tackling these issues. This knowledge can help Thai-German couples improve their intercultural communication skills, which is significant since the findings of this research show that higher satisfaction with mutual communication is correlated to a higher overall satisfaction with the relationship.

Research Methodology

Participants

The subjects of this study were individuals who are currently involved in a Thai-German relationship. By means of a non-probability voluntary sampling technique, the participants for the questionnaire were recruited through Internet sources such as social media websites (e.g., Facebook), expat forums (e.g., ThaiVisa) and expat magazines (e.g., *Der Farang Magazine*) where a link to the online survey was posted. The researcher additionally collected the questionnaires in paper form from the attendees of a German language course at the Goethe-Institut in Bangkok, as well as from their German partners.

Secondly, interview participants were gathered either by voluntarily leaving their email contact at the end of the survey, or through snowball sampling, i.e. being identified as prospective research subjects by other participants.

There were 11 interview participants, out of whom five were Thai nationals and six were German nationals. In the Thai sample there were four females and one male, while all of the German sample was male.

The total number of participants in the questionnaire was 544, out of whom 392 respondents were German and 152 were Thai. There were stark (although expected) differences in the genders of these two samples, considering that 98.5% of the German sample was male and 92.8% of the Thai sample was female. The age of the participants was another factor in which the sample differentiated greatly. 88.6% of the Thai sample was between 15 and 44 years old, while 84.5% of the German sample was 45 years old or older. These data support the general impression that exists about Thai-foreigner couples, namely that the male foreigners are often much older than their female Thai partners. A large number of both Thai and German participants had at least a high school degree, 41.6% and 61.4% respectively. Many of the participants also had a university degree: 45% of the Thai sample and 35.2% of the German sample.

On the other hand, the sample diverged greatly on the occupation variable, since the number of unemployed Thais (27.6%) was 15 times greater than the number of Germans (1.8%). The data suggest an

importance of the German partner having a steady income, since 95.4% of the German sample are either working or have a pension, in contrast with the Thai sample of whom 58.5% are either unemployed or working as a housewife. Furthermore, when it comes to monthly salary, 43.2% of the Thai sample claimed that they have no personal income. In contrast, the number of German subjects with no personal income was 13 times smaller, standing at only 3.4%. The largest percentage of Germans (32.2%) earned between 80,000 and 120,000 THB per month, while the biggest percentage of employed Thais earned between 8,000 and 12,000 THB (11.6%). This means that the most common salary range for the Thai sample was 10 times less than the most common salary range for the German sample. Regarding sexual orientation, 93.4% and 92.2% of the Thai and German sample, respectively, claimed to be heterosexual, while 5.3% and 5.4% were homosexual. There was a slightly higher number of bisexuals in the (mostly male) German sample (2.3%), in comparison to 1.3% of the Thai sample.

Data Collection

A sequential explanatory design, which triangulates the findings by gathering first quantitative and then later qualitative data, was the preferred mixed methods approach chosen for this study. The first stage of data collection included a self-administered questionnaire. The original version was written in English, while additional translations in both Thai and German were available as well. The survey could be obtained online through a

professional web-based survey builder *Typeform*, or in paper form at the Goethe-Institut. The questionnaire comprised three separate parts: a demographics survey, the Intercultural Relationship Communication Questionnaire (IRCQ) developed by the researcher herself, and the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS) developed by Hendrick (1988).

The second stage of data collection employed individual in-depth interviews which were semi-structured in nature, consisting of 32 questions, most of which were also included in the IRCQ questionnaire. There were also additional probe questions designed to gain deeper insight into the answers to the main questions.

Research Instruments

The IRCQ survey comprised 25 close-ended questions with four categories of 7-point Likert-type scales (Table 1) and was designed specifically for this study due to its idiosyncratic cultural context. The IRCQ was used to assess the positive, neutral or negative perceptions of the verbal and nonverbal communication in the participant's relationship. To ensure the validity of the new instrument, the researcher submitted the instrument for expert validation at her university. Furthermore, cognitive interviews, which determine the way in which potential subjects interpret the items on the survey and make sure that their interpretation matches the survey designer's intentions, were used as well (Artino, La Rochelle, Dezee and Gehlbach 2014). The Cronbach's α reliability analysis was

conducted afterwards as well, and was found to be very good ($\alpha = .829$).

The RAS survey, on the other hand, is a 7-item questionnaire to which respondents can answer on a 5-point Likert scale. The scale ranges from smaller numbers which carry an answer with a lower value (such as “not much” or “hardly at all”) to higher numbers which have a higher value (such as “very much” or “completely”). It was invented by Hendrick in 1988, and it is used to assess an individual’s overall satisfaction with his/her relationship (Hendrick, 1988). A mean satisfaction score is calculated from the respondent’s

answers to the questions. In the current study the RAS had an acceptable alpha reliability of .770. The original structure of the RAS questionnaire was preserved, except in questions 3 and 5 where the wording was slightly changed in order to make them more easily comprehensible for the nonnative English participants in the study.

The interviews were conducted both in person, as well as through Skype and Facebook (written form) in cases where the participants were currently living in Isan or Germany. An audio recorder was used with oral interviews and all of the interviews were conducted in English.

Table 1 IRCQ Likert scale types and corresponding items on survey

Scale type	Scale values						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
QUALITY (items 1-2)	Very poor	Poor	Fair	Good	Very good	Excellent	Exceptional
FREQUENCY (items 3-13, 17-22)	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Sometimes	Frequently	Usually	Always
QUANTITY (items 14-16)	Far too little	Too little	Slightly too little	Just right	Slightly too much	Too much	Far too much
SATISFACTION (items 23-25)	Completely dissatisfied	Mostly dissatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Mostly satisfied	Completely satisfied

Data Analysis

The qualitative data from the interviews were transcribed and then analyzed using text analysis (Creswell, 2009), which focused on gathering common themes and unique responses. The quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed by means of the statistical software SPSS by separating the Thai and the German samples

so that comparisons based on nationality/culture could be drawn. Descriptive analyses were conducted, indicating the mean, median, mode and standard deviation of every variable. Furthermore, Pearson product-moment correlation was conducted to determine if a positive relationship exists between the independent variable, i.e. satisfaction with the relationship communication (IRCQ), and

the dependent variable, i.e. overall relationship satisfaction (RAS). Cronbach's α test was also employed in order to assess the reliability of both the RAS and the IRCQ survey.

Communication and Relationship Satisfaction

To answer the first research question, correlations were examined. The results of the Pearson product-moment test showed that there was a strong correlation between satisfaction with the communication (IRCQ) and overall relationship satisfaction (RAS)

in a positive direction, $r(531) = +.62$, $p < .001$, 2-tailed. The following scatter plot (Figure 1) summarizes the results of the correlations. A positive gradient can be observed, meaning that the values have a positive linear association. In other words, the more the partners were satisfied with their mutual communication, the happier they were with their relationship in general. Thus, the initial null hypothesis, that the partner's perception of satisfaction with the communication in his/her relationship (IRCQ) does not correlate with the relationship satisfaction (RAS), was successfully rejected.

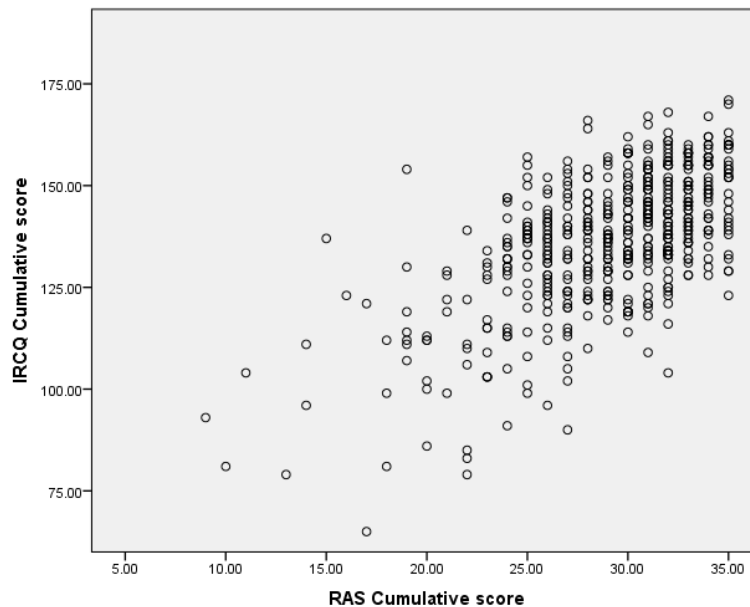


Figure 1 Correlations Scatter plot

*The Effects of Verbal and Nonverbal Communication on
Relationship Satisfaction in Thai-German Couples*

The interview and survey data were analyzed in order to answer the second research question. It was found that the interview data supported the findings from the correlations. Namely, *the participants citing more communicational problems in the relationship, were also those who seemed to be least satisfied with the relationship in general.* Both the interview and the survey questions revealed the

specific areas of communication that were problematic for the partners, and thus the interview and the survey data were interpreted in the context of each other. In the current paragraph the most pertinent quantitative results from the IRCQ and the RAS questionnaires are presented in the form of two tables (Table 2 and 3) and will be discussed in connection to the interview data in the subsequent paragraph.

Table 2 Summary of the IRCQ Results
(Satisfaction with the Communication Results)

Variable	Thai Sample		German Sample	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
How do you rate your own skills in the primary language of communication with your partner?	3.78	1.146	4.69	1.205
How do you rate your partner's skills in the primary language of your communication?	4.50	1.264	4.03	1.078
Do you have problems understanding your partner when he/she speaks?	3.22	1.271	3.03	1.206
Do you consider that your partner has problems understanding your humor?	3.31	1.470	3.13	1.479
Do you feel that your partner shows disrespect towards your culture either with his/her words or behavior?	1.73	1.179	1.70	1.187

Do you consider that your partner avoids discussing the problems in your relationship?	1.99	1.485	3.23	1.644
Do you consider that your partner hides information from you?	2.03	1.397	2.69	1.448
Do you consider that your partner suppresses his/her emotions?	2.15	1.389	2.60	1.454
Do you consider that your partner appropriately mirrors your own emotional expressions (shows empathy)?	5.36	1.605	4.69	1.514
Do you think that your partner uses an appropriate amount of intimate touch in order to communicate closeness and love to you?	4.19	.660	3.63	.901
Do you feel comfortable with the amount of time that your partner spends looking you directly in the eyes while you are having a conversation, or do you feel that he/she uses too much or too little eye contact?	4.18	.543	3.83	.606
How often does it happen that your partner misreads or misinterprets the meaning of your smile?	2.75	1.510	2.46	1.121
Do you feel that your partner respects your mutual agreements regarding time?	4.77	2.273	5.02	1.733

*The Effects of Verbal and Nonverbal Communication on
Relationship Satisfaction in Thai-German Couples*

Do you feel that your partner respects your personal space in public?	5.01	1.961	5.02	1.900
How satisfied are you with the way your partner's voice sounds?	5.37	1.288	5.33	1.850
Finally, how satisfied are you with the overall communication with your partner?	6.02	1.013	5.24	1.580

In the following table (Table 3) the results of the complete RAS survey are reported.

Table 3 Summary of the RAS Survey Results
(Overall Relationship Satisfaction Results)

Variable	Thai Sample		German Sample	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
How well does your partner meet your needs?	4.06	.918	4.02	.927
In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?	4.30	.872	4.11	.986
How good is your relationship compared to most other relationships?	4.22	.821	4.29	.964
How often do you wish you hadn't gotten in this relationship?	1.78	1.060	1.59	1.022
To what extent has your relationship met your original positive expectations?	4.08	.941	3.99	1.087

How much do you love your partner?	4.56	.730	4.44	.820
How many problems are there in your relationship?	1.83	1.143	2.53	.963

Verbal Communication

As expected, the majority of both Thai and German respondents use English as their primary language of relationship communication, 69.1% and 48.6% respectively, while the second most common language is German. The interviews showed that the reality is not as black and white though, since some intercultural couples go through a process of *third language building*. Gerhard (German, male) mentioned that he uses English and Thai words in the same sentence, a “personal slang of the couples” which he calls “Tinglish.” Other various aspects of verbal communication were analyzed as well:

Language Skills

In general, the German participants’ *language skills* were rated as better than the Thais’ language skills, both by Germans themselves ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 1.2$) and by Thais ($M = 4.5$, $SD = 1.26$). The score for the Thai sample’s skills was somewhat lower, with the German partners giving them a mean score of 4.03 ($SD = 1.08$), and the Thais rating themselves $M = 3.78$ ($SD = 1.15$). In the interview though, differences in linguistic skills were more observable, and none of the respondents had a native-like fluency in English. Thus, most of the

intercultural Thai-German couple communication seems to be based on *ungrammatical communication*. There were two major ways identified for coping with grammar: *correction* and *simplification*. On the one hand, some of the partners choose to help their companions with their grammar by correcting their speech. Others have decided to simplify their own speech by “bringing it down” to the linguistic level of their partner, through shortening their sentences and omitting complex grammatical forms. For the participants of this study, grammar seemed to be unimportant: as long as the partners can understand each other well, the grammatical mistakes do not seem to have a major effect on relationship satisfaction. What is important is only the capability of the couple to communicate.

Language Perception

Thais had slightly more problems understanding when their partners speak ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.3$), while Germans a bit less ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 1.2$). Two major causes of misunderstandings surfaced from the interviews: *misunderstandings due to language* and *misunderstandings due to culture*. The most common linguistic misunderstandings that the participants mentioned were due to *pronunciation*,

accent and *grammar*, while the two most often mentioned cultural differences in communication were *direct vs. indirect communication* and *discussing vs. letting go*.

The Pragmatic Aspect

The participants often mentioned the contrast between the Thai indirectness and the Western direct and more straightforward style of communicating, which would sometimes lead to misunderstandings. It was found that the Thai participants would often prefer not to say “no” directly and would also not criticize their partner openly. Direct communication in Thai culture is sometimes avoided in order to preserve the friendliness and easy-goingness of the social situation. This notion was supported by differences in the answers to the following survey question: Do you consider that your partner avoids discussing the problems in your relationship? Germans answered more often positively ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.64$), while Thais consider that their German partners only rarely avoid discussion ($M = 1.99$, $SD = 1.49$).

Sometimes connected to indirect communication is the *letting go* approach that Thais were said to use when they don’t understand something or they don’t want to bother going too deep into a discussion. Anong (Thai, female) gives her own view on this issue: “As you know, Thai people always say yes and smile even they do not know or not listen to what you ask.” Sometimes this was identified as problematic, for example when the German partner would catch their Thai partner ignoring a misunderstanding. Furthermore, this type of *mai pen rai* (“doesn’t matter”)

attitude was occasionally perceived as insensitive and could even lead to not discussing relationship problems.

There were three common *conflict management patterns* that surfaced from the interview data. Those are *silent treatment vs. discussion*, *the delaying of the discussion* and *not discussing in front of others*. The term *silent treatment* refers to a passive approach to conflict management, usually coming from the side of the Thai partner, during which he/she prefers to avoid conflict by not saying anything, while Germans were found to prefer to talk right away. The silent treatment usually leads to *the delaying of the discussion*, which was found in couples who were successfully dealing with conflict. Since for Thai people, losing their temper equals losing face, many of the couples realized that the best solution is to delay the argument until the situation becomes less negatively charged. This idea is reflected in the Thai value of *jai yen*, which praises a “personal calm” attitude in life (Punyapiroje, 2007, p. 61). Another successful conflict management technique was *not discussing in front of others*. Arguing in front of other people is not common or desirable in Thai culture, while among Westerners this practice is more common. This concept exists in close relation to another Thai value: *kreng jai*, which demands consideration of others: no embarrassment, no criticism or coercion (Punyapiroje, 2007).

When it comes to *hiding information*, Germans think that their Thai partners in general hide information more often ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 1.45$), than Thais do ($M = 2.03$, $SD = 1.40$). The two most common problematic areas were identified as *family*

and *money*. Sometimes the Thai women admitted to being ashamed to ask their husbands for money to help their families, because they noticed that their husbands didn't understand the strong filial connections which are important in Thai culture. This is closely related to the concept of a "daughter's duty" (Angeles & Sunanta 2009), according to which Thai daughters (even more than sons) bear the responsibility of taking care of the Thai family.

Nonverbal Communication

Regarding *vocalics*, both the German ($M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.85$) and Thai participants ($M = 5.37$, $SD = 1.29$) were on average somewhat satisfied with their partner's voice. On both sides, though, there were a couple of interviewees who expressed a level of dissatisfaction, mainly claiming that Germans speak in a harsh and aggressive way due to their accent, and are also often quite loud (as if trying to show power). Germans had no complaints about their Thai partners' voices when they speak English, but some did mention that when their partners speak Thai to their family or close friends they can sound angry, loud or agitated.

When it comes to *oculesics*, there was a perceived tendency for the German sample to answer towards too little eye contact ($M = 3.83$, $SD = .6$), while the Thai sample tended to answer towards too much eye contact ($M = 4.18$, $SD = .54$). In the interviews the participants emphasized the differences between Thai and Western cultures which concerned the *amount* and *perceived importance* of eye contact. Westerners were said to be engaging in more intensive eye

contact and were said to give more importance to eye contact in communication in general. In Thailand, on the other hand, sometimes less eye contact is used since it can be perceived as too direct and disrespectful, while in the West it's associated with paying attention to the speaker.

Regarding *facial expressions*, the participants were asked how often it happens that their partner misinterprets the meaning of their smile. This problem seemed to bother Thais ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.51$) a bit more than Germans ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.21$). The German participants recognized that it is especially easy to misunderstand the Thai smile in daily situations with strangers, since Thais use smiling for many more different reasons than Westerners, e.g. in uncomfortable situations. Too much smiling can also be confusing for the German partner, or can even make them agitated when it's used during an argument. Another misunderstanding that some participants mentioned was due to the female Thai smile being perceived as too flirtatious. Nevertheless, in the interviews only a few incidents were reported. A hypothesized reason as to why Germans have problems understanding Thai strangers' smiles, but not their Thai spouse's smile, is adaptation to the nonverbal communication of the partner, so that the whole context of the communication is considered, and not just the smile.

In relation to *haptics*, the German participants considered that their partners use slightly too little intimate touch ($M = 3.63$, $SD = .90$), while Thais considered their partners use slightly too much intimate

touch ($M = 4.19$, $SD = .66$). In the interviews it was found that often this can be a source of misunderstanding when the German partner thinks their Thai partner doesn't love them because they perceive less intimate touch than from a Western partner. This contrast can be explained in light of a study by Diniase and Gunnoe (2004) who reported the geographical regions which fall under the categories of either *high-contact* or *noncontact* cultures. Thus, according to the current study Germans could be considered comparably more high-contact than Thais.

With respect to *proxemics*, both the German ($M = 5.01$, $SD = 1.96$) and Thai sample ($M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.90$) equally considered that their partners respect their personal space. In the interviews it was confirmed that, despite the cultural differences, personal space does not pose a problem for Thai-German couples, except for the occasional initial misunderstanding at the beginning of the relationship. With time many of the Thais also adapted to their German partners by starting to use more public touching. In the beginning though, when the partners don't know each other that well, this reserved behaviour from the side of the Thai partner can be easily misinterpreted.

In regard to *chronemics*, in the survey surprisingly the Thai sample was less satisfied with their partners' respect for their time agreements ($M = 4.77$, $SD = 2.27$) than the German sample ($M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.73$). In the interviews, on the other hand, a stark contrast was identified between the *punctual vs. casual attitude towards time* between Germans and Thais. Time planning seems to be an issue in Thai – German

communication. Uracha (Thai, female) said: "I think *farang* people always on time." Philipp (German, male) agrees but adds: "Time is a very loose concept for Thai people." For example, it is common for the Thai partners to be half an hour or more late for meetings with their friends and family. The German participants, on the other hand, are generally perceived as being extremely punctual and think that being late is a sign of disrespect.

In connection to *emotional expressivity*, the German sample considered that their Thai partners suppress their emotions considerably more ($M = 2.6$, $SD = 1.45$) than Thais did ($M = 2.15$, $SD = 1.39$). A cultural contrast in the *expression vs. suppression approach to emotions* was identified. Bernhard (German, male) explains: "This is Thai style: keep calm. If you're getting loud, you're losing your face for Thai people." In contrast Gerhard says about Europeans: "If we have emotions we think we have to talk about them, we have to let them out." Most of the participants felt that Thais in general show less emotions than Germans, especially when it comes to negative emotions, and that this can sometimes cause communicational issues. Similarly, when asked about empathy from their partner, the German sample considered that their partner appropriately shows empathy less often ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 1.51$) than the Thai sample did ($M = 5.36$, $SD = 1.36$), who were more satisfied.

Intercultural Communication

Both the German and Thai participants claimed that their partners occasionally misunderstand their *humor*, with Thais

believing this to be true only slightly more ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.47$), than Germans ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.48$). Three main reasons for misunderstandings were identified, one being due to *language comprehension*, the other due to *specific cultural references* and the third due to *differences in the nature of Thai and German humor*. For example, a partner would speak in Thai or German, and the other partner wouldn't understand the joke because his/her level of comprehension was too low, or because the translation just simply wasn't funny. Furthermore, some specific cultural references wouldn't be funny for the partner because he/she did not grow up surrounded by this specific cultural information. Finally, some German participants consider Western humor to be more offensive than Thai humor, so when they joke, they have to "tone it down a little bit" (Philipp, German, male) and use a more gentle form of humor. On the other hand, the Thai participants often emphasized their view of Germans as being very serious and also mentioned that their partners often don't understand when they make jokes by calling them "bad" names such as fat, pig, giant, or similar, which in Thai are seen as terms of endearment.

In the survey neither the Thai ($M = 1.73$, $SD = 1.18$) nor the German sample ($M = 1.70$, $SD = 1.90$) had problems with their partners showing *disrespect* for their culture. There were only occasional misunderstandings at the beginning of the relationship, mainly directed towards Thai culture. Issues such as public touching, touching the head, kissing the feet or making the partner lose face (due to a too direct comment in front of others) were mentioned, as well as not

understanding strong filial connections and responsibility for the Thai family.

Cultural adaptation, on the other hand, was found to be a significant factor for relationship satisfaction. The adaptation for the German partners ranged from simple cultural practices, such as taking off the shoes in the house or using the *wai*, to communication. For example, the German partners changed the way that they use humor (more gentle), and the way they smile (more smiling). They admitted that they have become more relaxed, more accepting and less direct, which also includes not arguing in front of other people. The Thai participants mentioned they are adapting by trying to be more punctual and by becoming more open to public touching. Some of the Thais who moved to Germany even admitted that they now speak more directly and more critically. It seems that this fluid process of changing one's own cultural behavior leads to the phenomenon of a *double cultural identity*, where a partner chooses to behave both according to their own and their partner's culture, depending on the situation. Howard (2009) points out a lack of cultural assimilation (of foreigners in Thailand) on a macro social level, due to a lack of Thai friends and moderate language (Thai) fluency. In this study it was found that on a micro social level (intimate relationships) the adaptation was more satisfactory. The German partners didn't feel that they have problems with cultural assimilation regarding the relationship itself, nor with more general assimilation. It could be hypothesized that a successful intercultural relationship itself is the key to a more complete and successful general cultural adaptation, due to constant and

intimate interaction with a partner from another culture. On the Thai side, the participants did not reveal as much cultural adaptation, possibly due to the fact that most of them consider themselves already quite westernized due to their previous contact with foreigners.

Satisfaction with Communication and the Relationship

In this study, Germans seemed to be less satisfied with overall relationship communication ($M = 5.24$, $SD = 1.58$) than their Thai partners ($M = 6.02$, $SD = 1.01$). These differences in the self-reported satisfaction were identified again when the cumulative scores for the IRCQ were calculated, where the maximum score was 171 points. The Thai sample had a mean score of $M = 139.67$ ($SD = 12.99$) while the German sample again had a lower score of $M = 135.47$ ($SD = 17.58$).

A cumulative score was also calculated for relationship satisfaction (RAS), where the maximum result was 35. Again, there was a slight difference in the mean scores in favour of the Thai sample which was overall more satisfied with their relationship ($M = 29.59$, $SD = 4.43$) than the German sample ($M = 28.75$, $SD = 4.35$). In general, both of these scores can be considered quite high, which was reflected in the interviews as well. Namely, most of the participants said that they were very happy with their relationships. The only exceptions seemed to be Jilo (Thai, male) and Josef (German, male), in whose case it seemed that a significant number of problems exists due to *cultural differences* and *linguistic barriers*, respectively. Josef said that the language

problems, which stem from his wife's lower English skills, cause him dissatisfaction in the relationship, and he cites it as their main relationship problem. Philipp, on a similar note, says that both he and his girlfriend get frustrated because communication takes longer than with a person who speaks their native language.

On the other hand, Jilo claims that he and his girlfriend have no problems with the language, but it is obvious that they do have cultural differences that bother them. These cultural differences come down to differences in their respective communication styles. For example, Jilo sometimes wishes to approach arguments with a *mai pen rai* philosophy, but his girlfriend always demands discussion. His girlfriend also often uses irony and sarcasm, but Jilo would prefer more direct and simple language. Jilo also emphasized the differences in the Thai sense of humor, differences in the use of eye contact (she uses more direct eye contact, which he considers sometimes hostile), and in smiling (his girlfriend doesn't like when he smiles in serious situations, while he would prefer if she smiled more). They also disagree on how he dresses (he has to adapt to the way that other people dress in Germany), on the outlook on life (casual friendly Thai approach vs. serious pragmatic German approach), and finally on indirect vs. direct communication styles (his girlfriend has criticized him directly, while Jilo says that in Thailand this is very offensive and that one should try to be more indirect).

In conclusion, relationship satisfaction was found to be strongly correlated with satisfaction with both verbal and nonverbal

communication, which was supported by both qualitative and quantitative findings. In successful relationships there was a strong willingness to adapt on the part of both of the partners. This finally led to building a personal and intimate *third culture of the couple*, which was a process of long-term negotiation and mutual learning from each other. Patience, flexibility and open-mindedness were also identified as important factors on which a successful intercultural and inter-linguistic relationship could be built.

Conclusion

The quantitative and qualitative data both yielded the same conclusion: satisfaction with relationship communication is strongly correlated with general relationship satisfaction in Thai-German couples. The study also identified the importance of patience and flexibility in an intercultural relationship: partners need to be supportive and willing to teach the other, and they themselves need to be willing to learn. As identified in the study, partners should focus on explaining to their partner the idiosyncratic verbal and nonverbal aspects of communication in their culture. This could lead to a deeper mutual understanding of each other's ways of communicating and ultimately to higher relationship satisfaction. Some of these common intercultural issues were identified in this study, and they can serve as a guideline for Thai-German couples.

Recommendations

The current study was exploratory and wide in its thematic scope, since it covered verbal,

nonverbal and intercultural communication, as well as relationship satisfaction. Thus, for future research it is advised to carry out more thematically focused studies which will concentrate on one of the specific fields addressed in this study.

Moreover, a theme that proved to be too wide for inclusion in its entirety was the field of impolite practices. Since too many cultural idiosyncrasies were mentioned by the participants, they could not all be covered by the current research. Thus, it is advised that further research focuses more closely on the topic of politeness and the related issues that Thai-German couples face.

Follow-up studies could be conducted on other foreign nationalities as well, in order to see whether meaningful nationality-based differences exist. Further research could focus also on foreigner female-Thai male couples in order to contrast their experiences with the experiences of the more common foreigner male – Thai female couples. Additionally, the percentage of the gay population in the survey was high enough (over 5%) to warrant a study of its own.

Further research could focus on the social and economic impact that these intercultural relationships and marriages bring. It would be interesting to study how the Thai society (and especially the rural Northern parts of Thailand, such as Isan) goes through a process of cultural change, Westernization and upward social mobility due to a sudden improvement in the economic status of the Thai family.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my Thesis Advisor Dr. Jirayu Tuppong, as well as my Thesis Co-Advisors Dr. Kanjana Charttrakul and Dr. Anamai Damnet for all of the encouragement, support and understanding that they have showed throughout my studies at Kasetsart University. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the Erasmus Mundus scholarship program for believing in me and helping me fund my research and studies in Thailand. Finally, this project wouldn't have been possible without Goethe-Institut Thailand which was so kind to allow me to conduct a part of my study with their Thai students and their German partners.

References

- Adler, R. B. and Rodman, G. 2006. *Understanding Human Communication*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Angeles, L. C. and Sunanta, S. 2009. Demandning Daughter Duty. *Critical Asian Studies* 41.4: 549-574.
- Artino, A. R., La Rochelle, G. S., Dezee, K. J. and Gehlbach, G. 2014. Developing questionnaires for educational research: AMEE Guide No. 87. *Medical Teacher* 36: 463-474.
- Carambio, P. 2014. Nonverbal Awareness and Relationship Satisfaction in Couples Doctoral dissertation. Massachussets: ProQuest Dissertations.
- Cohen, E. 2003. Transnational Marriage in Thailand: The Dynamics of Extreme Heterogamy. In *Sex and Tourism: Journeys of Romance, Love, and Lust*, edited by T. Bauer, & B. Mckercher, pp. 57-81. New York: The Haworth Hospitality Press.
- Creswell, J. W. 2009. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Diniase, R., & Gunnoe, J. 2004. Gender and Culture Differences in Touching Behavior. *The Journal of Social Psychology* 144.1: 49-62.
- Duangkumnerd, V. 2009. *The Intermarriage of Thai Women in Germany*. Doctoral dissertation. School of Applied Statistics.
- Gottman, J. M. and Porterfield, A. L. 1981. Communicative Competence in the Nonverbal Behavior of Married Couples. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 817-824.
- Hendrick, S. S. 1988. A generic measure of relationship satisfaction. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 50: 93-98.
- Hinkle, L. L. 1999. Nonverbal Immediacy Communication Behaviors and Liking in Marital Relationships. *Communication Research Reports* 16.1: 81-90.
- Howard, R. W. 2009. The Migration of Westerners to Thailand: An Unusual

- Flow From Developed to Developing World. *International Migration* 193-225.
- Koerner, A. F. and Fitzpatrick, M. A. 2002. Nonverbal Communication and Marital Adjustment: The Role of Decoding Relationship Relevant and Relationship Irrelevant Affect. *Communication Monographs* 6.1: 33-51.
- Matsumoto, D. 2009. Culture and Nonverbal Behavior. In V. Manusov, & M. L. Patterson, *The SAGE Handbook of Nonverbal Communication*. pp.175-187. The SAGE Publications.
http://www.sage-ereference.com/view/hdbk_nonverbalcomm/n12.xml
- Mehrabian, A. 1971. *Silent Messages*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc.
- Noller, P. and Feeney, J. A. 1994. Relationship Satisfaction, Attachment, and Nonverbal Accuracy in Early Marriage. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior* 18.3.
- Punyapiroje, C. 2007. Behind the Smile: Reading Cultural Values in Thai Advertising. *Asian Journal of Communication* 7.3: 318-336.
- Renalds, T. G. 2011. *Communication in Intercultural Marriages: Managing Cultural Differences and Conflict for Marital Satisfaction*. Master's thesis. Lynchburg, Virginia: Liberty University.
- Sabatelli, R. M., Buck, R. and Kenny, D. A. 1986. A Social Relations Analysis of Nonverbal Communication Accuracy in Married Couples. *Journal of Personality* 54.3: 513-527.
- Schachner, D. A., Shaver, P. R. and Mikulincer, M. 2005. Patterns of Nonverbal Behavior and Sensitivity in the Context of Attachment Relationships. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior* 29.3: 141-169.
- Scherer, K. R., Banse, R. and Wallbott, H. G. 2001. Emotion Inferences from Vocal Expression Correlate Across Languages and Cultures. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 32.1: 76-92.
- Spitzberg, B. H. 2008. Perspectives on Nonverbal Communication Skills. In *The Nonverbal Communication Reader*, edited by L. K. Guerrero, & M. L. Hecht, pp. 21-26. Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press inc.
- Stickman. 2014, November 16. *The Challenges of Thai / Foreign Relationships*.
<http://www.stickmanbangkok.com/StickmanWeeklyColumn2013/Thai-Farang-Relationships.html>
- Yost, K. S. 1980. Behavioral Comparison of the Nonverbal and Verbal Communication of Distressed and Nondistressed Couples (Doctoral Dissertation). Los Angeles, California.
<<http://digitalibrary.usc.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p15799coll17/id/697240>>