1

Intimate Relationships across Ethnic (and Other) Borders

This book is about the kind of intimate relations across ethnic borders that are gaining attention academically and politically as well as in service provision at international levels. It explores the dynamics of such relations, especially intermarriages between visibly ethnically different couples, characterised by differences in phenotypes such as physical and facial characteristics, skin colour and hair type. This book includes primarily an empirical study (Singla & Holm, 2012), in which one partner is Danish and the other originates from South Asia (India or Pakistan), at times also implying marriage between citizens and non-citizens.

Both study and book were motivated by my search for studies of ‘mixedness’ – partnering and parenting across different ethnic backgrounds which, in a Danish context, was almost futile and indicated a very limited availability of research. The exploratory study covered in the book attempts to answer questions related to intermarriage dynamics and to the negotiation of ‘mixedness’ by couples. Inspired by international studies of these phenomena, the objective is to explore new concepts and understandings of ‘mixedness’ and ‘intermarriage’, which have been relatively ignored in studies of diversity, migration, minority-majority relations as well as in family science in Denmark. A further motivation for this book was the lack of attention given to intermarried couples and the absence of their own voices in public and academic discourses. Thus the main research question I tackle is how ethnically intermarried couples negotiate their everyday lives and the parenting of their children.

Intermarried couples are often seen as problems mainly because their own voices are not heard. As A. Barbara stated in Marriages Across Frontiers, ‘Cross-cultural marriages have the advantage of giving advance warning of what every couple must eventually face – that they are
different from each other’ (Barbara, 1989, in Breger & Hill, 1998, p. 186). Partners in all marriages are different from each other, while couples marrying across ethnic borders may be different on some dimensions and similar on others. My goal is to create a nuanced picture of how it is to be an intermarried couple and what kind of dynamics, harmony and struggles they experience. This is an attempt to go beyond ‘problematisation’ to a more balanced and context-sensitive consideration of the dynamics in the nexus between intimate relations and ethnic boundary crossing. Drawing from studies in other parts of the world, especially from Asia, this book challenges the Eurocentrism of the emerging field which intersects Family Studies, Global Studies, Counselling, Psychotherapy and Migration Studies, generating new insights. My aspiration to increase awareness of these intimate relationships across borders has resulted in this book, which covers a relatively new area of study and uniquely expands the remit of research into the applied fields of teaching and practice.

Ethnic ‘mixedness’ is a subject related to the experiences of couples who have formed intimate partnerships across ethnic borders. It focuses on their experiences as parents and weaves in concern for their mental health and wellbeing. I perceive ethnicity as an axis of differentiation and identification, with social, historical and personally felt aspects; aptly termed as ‘ethnicity in the head’ and ‘ethnicity in the heart’ by Banks (1996 in Verkuyten, 2005). This concept is developed further in Chapter 2.

The terms ‘intermarriage’ and ‘mixed marriage’ are used in this book since they are recognised in most of the literature from the UK and Europe and it is accepted that no one term is used by couples who are married across these borders; the issue of terminology is discussed further in the next chapter.

One of the basic premises of this book, inspired by the science of intimate relationship (Fletcher et al., 2013), is that individuals are alone and incomplete but that isolation can be banished or at least ameliorated when humans pair off and experience the intimacy that can only be gained in close, emotionally connected relationships. Giles (2006) invokes the concept of sexual desire as a response to our gendered human conditions. Such intimacy can be experienced as highly romantic, sexual relationships. One understanding is that for most people the goal of forming a permanent or long-term, sexual liaison with another person is a pivotal goal in life in which a massive outlay of energy is invested. The conditions for the search for an intimate partner have changed due to the current process of globalisation, especially the