

No Secret to a Successful Multicultural Relationship

By Wendy Williams

As the author of a book about multicultural romance and marriage (soon to be a bestseller actually, but I am not one to boast), I am frequently asked for The Secret to a successful relationship. Multicultural relationships, let's be frank here, are challenging. It seems that a lot of people in what I call GloLo relationships (yes, just like J-Lo, who is herself multicultural) are looking for a magical trick, a formula or even potion perhaps that, when administered, leads multicultural husbands and wives into happily ever after. As part of the research for *The Globalisation of Love*, I interviewed multicultural couples from all over the world, in dozens of national and cultural constellations. Based on this experience, glum though it is to write and at the risk of instantly losing readership, I concluded that there is in fact no such secret.

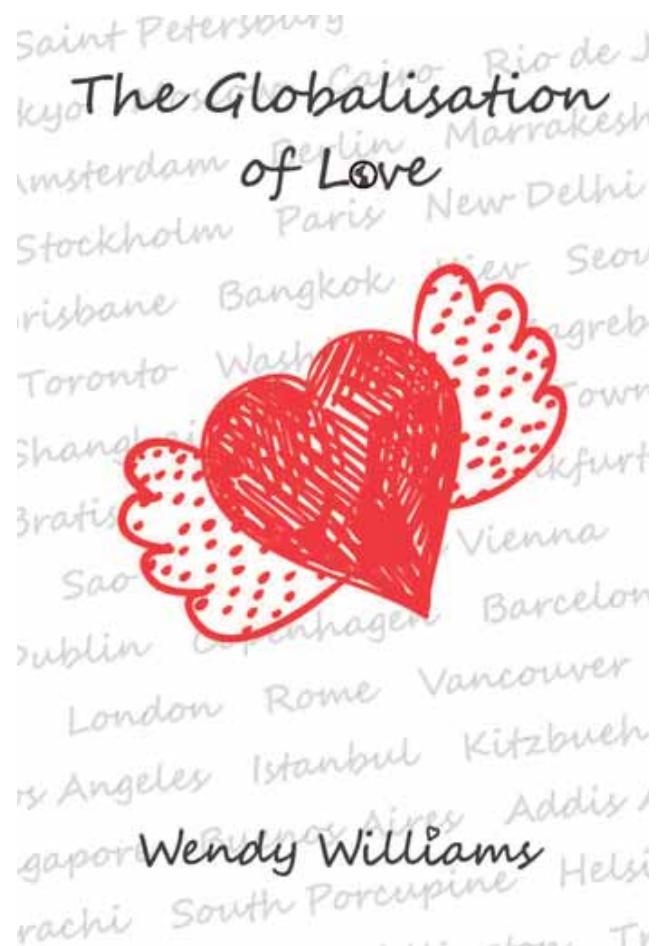
What I observed in multicultural relationships is that there is no magic formula or wand waving abracadabra that guarantees happiness and therefore success and longevity of the couple. What I saw instead were three common conditions in the GloLo dynamic that do not necessarily guarantee success when present, however will pretty much guarantee failure when absent, if that isn't too cup-is-half-empty for you. I'd like to call the conditions 'secrets', patent them and live off the royalties, but it is really my journalist as well as humanitarian duty to share the observations and live off, well, my day job.

Without further ado then, my observations on the **common conditions for a successful GloLo relationship, and probably any relationship really, are as follows:**

1. Willingness to Adapt
2. Being Yourself
3. Readiness for a Lifetime of Negotiation (yes, lifetime)

Willingness to Adapt

Whether your GloLo relationship started as a foreign fling on a random business trip, a covertly designed international sting operation to snag yourself a Euro-man (okay, I admit, that was me) or if you inadvertently stumbled into multicultural love in your own backyard (or so your spouse has you believe), a GloLo relationship requires, above all, the willingness and ability to adapt. That's right, you heard it right here, love is not enough!



Sometimes adapting in a multicultural relationship is a natural development, a joyful process and an enriching experience. For example, your partner from Swaziland taught you how to speak his native language and now you speak Swati at home. How cool is that! Or maybe your name is Gerhard, pronounced with a hard 'G' but your GloLo wife calls you 'Jerry'. Cute! Or maybe at Christmas you eat carp, a dreary fish that tastes like cardboard instead of a buttery turkey with trimmings and cranberry sauce (oops, my personal bias, sorry), but at least you try it.

Other changes are more significant and require you to dig a bit deeper into your cultural adaption attaché. You might move to the country where they speak Swati, for example, and find it difficult to relate to local cultural norms. Or you've been a no frills Calvinist all your life and then you find yourself singing and swaying in prayer with the Southern Baptists. Or you eat a vegetarian diet although you grew up on a cattle farm and privately ask yourself at every meal, "where's the beef?" There are countless of these cultural compromises happening all the time.

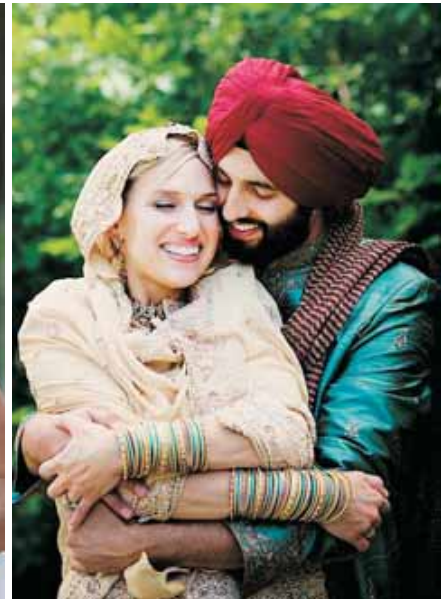
The fact is that a GloLo relationship is a merger of two or more cultures, depending on what the couple bring together. It is not one *or* the other but one *and* the other. Both parties have to find a way to mix and match and merge these two cultural frameworks into one family culture. That requires the willingness to adapt from both sides.

"So I sleep on a futon on the floor," Irish Dylan said of his way of adapting to marriage with Azami from Japan. "I believe a proper bed has a box spring on legs, a mattress with coil springs and a headboard, but Azami likes to lie on a piece of what I call foam, close to the floor," he explained, "so I adapt." Sweet GloLo dreams for Dylan and Azami.

Adapting in the multicultural context is necessary for peace and harmony on a daily (read: short term) basis. What is ironic perhaps is that for the long haul, you need to do something that seems almost contrary to adapting, which is to be yourself.

Be Yourself

If you adapt and change too much in any relationship, even non-GloLo



relationships, you risk losing your authentic self. This cautionary titbit rings particularly true for the so-called 'imported spouse', the 'foreigner' in the relationship who gave up career, cat and flat to live in GloLo wedded bliss with their international man/woman of mystery. Anyone who has lived outside their home country for any length of time will recognise that there is a period of adjustment where you search for that fine balance between the current you and the reality around you and how these two things fit together.

Sometimes being yourself and fitting into your new multicultural world is relatively harmless and without self-sacrifice. Now you eat pizza with a knife and fork, for example, or you regularly watch football (soccer) even though you think hockey is more action packed and a way better sport. It's not like you are suddenly enthralled by watching Boules (you know that French lawn bowling) for Pete's sake! GloLo spouses may take on the national dress of their new culture, relinquishing their personal style and donning a traditional outfit. I was really encouraged, for example, when my husband said I looked pretty cute in an Austrian dirndl (oops, too much information) until my sister saw me and asked, in alarm I might add, why I was mixing flower prints and gingham and wearing a skirt *with clogs*, in winter no less (come on, the dirndl is so comfortable you could eat a whole pie and still not feel snug around the waistband, but I digress in self-defence). I wasn't being my authentic self. I was trying to be an Austrian

version of myself which was silly and slightly embarrassing, even if I did enjoy a lot of pie during that phase.

The danger of adapting is when the change is so great and so internalised that the new multicultural you is no longer really you. For example, do you now scorn eating pizza slices without cutlery even though you won Most Loyal Customer of the Year *several years running* for ordering the most pizza as a student? Do you speak your native language *viz uh Vrenj axe ant* because your new love Francois and your Francophilia in general have replaced your cultural and linguistic hard drive? Do you wear that bust enhancing dirndl with woolly socks *every single day*? Are family and friends wondering about the new you and do you still resemble the person in your passport photo? When a GloLo partner adapts too much within the relationship and suppresses too much of their own culture and personality, they simply lose themselves too.

"I had integrated too much," Danish Dorte explained to me of her multicultural marriage with Ajay and living in his native India in a rural area. "I changed language, religion and diet. I only wore a sari. My hands were raw from scrubbing the laundry and my feet were ragged from going so often without shoes. I gave up sports because it is uncommon for woman to be sporty in this region. My family was a little bit shocked when they came to visit. It wasn't that this new life with Ajay was wrong *per se*, it just wasn't me. We had to make some big changes so that I could get



back to being me,” she concluded. “Even Ajay said that I was not the Danish girl he married anymore. He missed that person. That’s who he fell in love with after all.”

Accept a lifetime of negotiation

Just when you think you have the GloLo balance between adapting and being yourself figured out, something and/or someone is going to change. Even couples who have had a fairly seamless integration process in the early days of their multicultural romance – minimal language hurdles, high food compatibility, faux-pas-free family events and even no visa restrictions! – can be blindsided when a partner wants to change the cultural dynamic.

Probably the biggest challenge a GloLo couple faces in the cultural negotiation is when one (imported) partner says these five fateful words: “I want to go home”. The (host) partner’s response is usually, “but we are home, honey” indicating the very living room where they are likely to be sitting. What is meant is that the imported partner, the one living abroad, wants to return to their homeland to live, and probably to die too (I know, it sounds somewhat morbid for what is supposed to be a cheery blog but it is a hot GloLo topic in the senior years!)

Most GloLo spouses will experience varying levels of cultural affiliation and cultural flexibility at different stages of life. A GloLo relationship is often a hard won battle with administration and bureaucracy, international wedding arrangements, and learning a new language. Once the relationship is well established however, and your international man/woman of mystery is

no longer that mysterious (dear husband, you are still a mystery to me), a partner will start making room for other priorities in life such as getting back on the career track, resuming personal hobbies and interests and making new friends, and frequently finding solace in friends from their home country. Major life events, such as the birth of a child, may instil deep urges to re-connect with the family, culture and religion of origin. An ailing parent who is far away may require care or an inheritance may alter the relative attractiveness of where and how to live.

Emily, from Australia, was always the globe trotter in the family and rarely glanced homeward over several years up to and including her marriage to German Gunter. Emily was overjoyed when her twin sister gave birth to a baby girl. Gunter was also happy to fly Down Under to meet the new family member shortly after her birth, at least for the first trip.

“Once baby Joyce was born, Emily was flying transcontinental three or even four times a year. She wanted to be part of her sister’s daily life again and she wanted to experience every milestone in the baby’s life. I was happy for my sister-in-law and brother-in-law but their little bundle of joy was bankrupting us!” he said of the expensive international flights. “With every visit to Sydney, she returned to Germany more and more Aussie-like. Culturally, she repatriated herself.”

Of course all couples deal with change. With GloLo couples however, the degree of potential change is usually larger, as cultural issues ebb and flow with changing relative importance in the collective family dynamic.

So let’s sum up the three common conditions for a successful GloLo relationship. Firstly, there must be a readiness to adapt, to go on an unexpected path in life and to do unexpected things, even if it means sleeping on the floor or eating pizza with a knife and fork. Secondly, the original partners must not change their identity so much that they become different people altogether. It’s okay to wear a dirndl once in a while, but not every day. It was the amazing differences that attracted you to each other in the first place, so it would be best to maintain some of these differences and be your authentic self. Thirdly, there must be a readiness for a lifetime, yes *lifetime*, of negotiation and change. Nothing in life remains constant, and that includes the cultural dynamic between a GloLo couple.

So there is no one big secret to a successful multicultural relationship, but there is always a bit of magic to it.

Wendy Williams is the author of The Globalisation of Love, a book about multicultural romance and marriage.



She has lived in six different countries and worked internationally for 18 years. Wendy is Canadian and has been married to an Austrian for thirteen years. They live in Vienna, Austria with their daughter.

The Globalisation of Love is based on dozens of interviews with multicultural couples from around the world. The book includes chapters on multicultural weddings, religion, race, food, language and children. It is both humorous and factual and Wendy includes personal anecdotes from her own experience in a multicultural family. Wendy coined the term ‘GloLo’ in The Globalisation of Love. She also invented the cocktail ‘GloLoTini’.