

**UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF IMMIGRATION ON MARITAL
RELATIONSHIPS: THE PERSPECTIVE OF EMOTION-FOCUSED THERAPY-
COUPLE**

**Understanding the Impact of Immigration on Marital Relationships: The Perspective of
Emotion-Focused Couple Therapy**

by

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Abstract

This capstone project explores the impact of the immigration experience on marital relationships, focusing on how attachment and identity needs are disrupted during the adaptation process.

Using Emotion Focused Therapy for Couples (EFT-C) and the theory of acculturation as guiding frameworks, the study examines how immigration-related stressors, such as role shifts and identity conflicts, affect the emotional bonds and interaction cycles between couples. Failure to address these core needs can diminish marital satisfaction and, in severe cases, lead to marital breakdown. By incorporating intersectional perspectives, this research broadens the scope of interventions available to counselors, offering effective strategies to address immigrant couples' unique challenges while considering the complexities of the acculturation process. The findings aim to equip practitioners with nuanced approaches to fostering resilience and nurturing relationship bonds in immigrant couples.

Keywords: acculturation, immigrant couple, marital satisfaction, Emotion Focused Therapy-Couple

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Chapter One: Introduction

Overview of the Topic

The immigration experience is a transformative process that profoundly affects individuals and families. Among these impacts, the intersection of immigration, mental health, and marital relationships has emerged as a critical area of study. Immigration inherently disrupts established social networks, economic stability, and cultural norms, creating challenges that place significant strain on an individual's mental health and, consequently, marital and family relationships (Delara, 2016; Helms et al., 2014; Hyman et al., 2008; Sanchez, 2021; Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993). Research indicates that immigrants face unique stressors during the acculturation process, including discrimination, employment challenges, language barriers, shifts in gender roles, and limited access to mental health services (Chowdhury et al., 2021; Guruge et al., 2010; Hyman et al., 2008; Kisselev, 2010; Shirpak et al., 2011). These stressors can lead to emotional distress, exacerbating marital conflicts and reducing relationship satisfaction (Helms et al., 2014). Additionally, the concept of ambiguous loss, a type of loss that is unclear, lacks closure, and creates prolonged uncertainty, making it difficult to resolve or grieve (Boss, 1999), sheds light on the grief immigrants experience upon separation from their homeland and loved ones. This disenfranchised grief—often unrecognized or unsupported—further strains marital relationships by fostering emotional disconnection and unresolved emotional injuries (Sanchez et al., 2021; Woldarsky Meneses and Gibb, 2024). Children of immigrants, too, may vicariously experience intergenerational loss, witnessing their parents' struggles with ambiguous grief and mourning the absence of extended family ties. This cumulative distress impacts their

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developmental outcomes and emotional well-being (Sanchez et al., 2021). Since marriage is often a cornerstone of family stability, addressing the psychological and relational challenges associated with immigration is essential.

Within marriage, a key factor in cultivating a fulfilling relationship is the partners' ability to address each other's attachment and identity needs. This fosters positive emotions and promotes satisfactory interaction cycles (Greenberg & Goldman, 2013). Positive couple interactions strengthen the couple's capacity for co-regulation, enabling them to support each other in overcoming difficult emotions and transforming them to nurture and reinforce their relational bond (Greenberg & Goldman, 2013).

Many new immigrants face a lack of family and social support during the initial stages of settlement (Guruge et al., 2010). This absence often amplifies feelings of helplessness and heightens the need for attachment to soothe psychological discomfort. Research shows that immigrant women are particularly vulnerable to these stressors, with their marital satisfaction being strongly influenced by their own and their husbands' depressive symptoms and marital negativity (Delara, 2016; Helms et al., 2014). Conversely, husbands' marital satisfaction appears less sensitive to contextual stressors and their wives' psychological states, revealing a gendered disparity in the transmission of stress. While acculturation challenges may strain marital satisfaction, strong marital bonds can serve as protective factors. For instance, Cheung (2008) found that long-term marital satisfaction facilitated immigrant couples' adjustment to immigration by improving intimacy, mutual reliance, and conflict management, demonstrating resilience in the face of acculturation stress.

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The interplay between mental health and marital relationships in immigrant populations has significant implications for family stability and social integration. Marital distress can lead to higher rates of separation and divorce, disrupting family cohesion and negatively affecting children's development (Schwartz et al., 2010). Additionally, unresolved mental health issues within marriages can hinder immigrants' ability to adapt and thrive in their new environment, perpetuating cycles of isolation and stress (Straiton et al., 2023). Examining this intersection not only deepens our understanding of immigrant well-being but also provides valuable insights for designing targeted interventions to support immigrant families with a culturally appropriate lens.

Purpose Statements

The primary purpose of this work is to explore the intersection of immigration and marital dynamics, with a focus on understanding how the challenges of immigration influence marital satisfaction and relational well-being. This study seeks to contribute to the field of counseling by examining these experiences through the lens of EFT-C and developing practical tools for therapists to better support immigrant couples. Specifically, the objectives of this work include:

1. To explore the nature of immigration and its associated challenges, particularly how these experiences shape the dynamics of marriage.
2. To examine the correlation between marital satisfaction and the multifaceted impacts of the immigration experience.
3. To understand the unique marital challenges faced by immigrant couples through the theoretical and practical framework of EFT-C.

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4. To outline a framework for a marital program for therapists working with immigrants, and to integrate this with the EFT-C approach.

By addressing these objectives, this capstone aims to explore how acculturation progress and the associated ambiguous loss influence the marital dynamics of immigrant couples. The project seeks to inform culturally responsive interventions that promote emotional connection, resilience, and stability within immigrant couples, ultimately enhancing their ability to navigate the complex challenges of integration.

Immigration and migration are often used to describe the movement of people across geographical boundaries, with immigration typically referring to the movement into a specific country and migration encompassing both internal and international relocations. In this capstone project, the terms will be used interchangeably, reflecting the varying usage within the reviewed literature to ensure alignment with the context and sources analyzed.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study explores the intersection of immigration and marital dynamics, emphasizing how immigration-related challenges influence marital satisfaction and relational well-being. Guided by the principles of EFT-C, this framework helps identify negative interaction cycles that arise in immigrant couples. EFT-C focuses on enhancing couples' capacity to understand and respond to each other's emotional needs, fostering relational resilience and intimacy (Greenberg & Goldman, 2013). This approach provides a comprehensive structure to address the nuanced and multilayered lived experiences of immigrant

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couples, offering valuable guidance for navigating the challenges of acculturation and building emotionally fulfilling, stable relationships in the face of immigration-related stressors.

Contributions to the Field

Understanding the dynamics of immigrant marriages and their satisfaction is crucial, particularly in the context of Canada's evolving demographic landscape. With a long history of immigration, Canada continues to attract millions who choose it as their new home. Statistics Canada projects that immigrants could comprise 29.1% to 34.0% of the total population by 2041 (Government of Canada, 2022). Nearly 1.9 million children under 15 have at least one foreign-born parent, representing almost one-third (31.5%) of all children in Canada, up from 26.7% in 2011. This growing demographic underscores the importance of understanding immigrant family dynamics. Additionally, over 1 in 10 recent immigrants are youth or young adults, and the majority (64.2%) fall within the core working age group of 25 to 54, contributing significantly to Canada's economy and society (Government of Canada, 2022). Their mental well-being and family stability are critical for fostering a prosperous, inclusive, and harmonious society.

Research has shown that immigrants arrive in Canada with better health than native-born individuals, a phenomenon known as the Healthy Immigrant Effect (HIE) (Vang et al., 2016). This initial health advantage is attributed to Canada's selective immigration policies, which prioritize health and human capital factors, as well as cultural practices such as healthier diets and community-oriented lifestyles (Government of Canada, 2024; Vang et al., 2016). However, this effect is often temporary, with health outcomes declining over time due to acculturation,

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systemic barriers, and the stress of adapting to a new environment (Ahn et al., 2018; Delara, 2016; Vang et al., 2016). Immigrants frequently reported lower emotional well-being and higher levels of mental health challenges compared to their Canadian-born counterparts, largely due to multi-layered challenges and barriers in accessing mental health services (Chowdhury et al., 2021; MHRC, 2023).

Over time, exposure to the host country's environment often leads to acculturation, where immigrants adopt less healthy behaviours such as poor dietary habits and reduced physical activity. Structural challenges like underemployment, economic hardship, and racial discrimination contribute to chronic stress, further eroding health outcomes (Ahn et al., 2018; Hyman, 2009; Vang et al., 2015). Limited access to culturally appropriate healthcare and social support exacerbates these declines. Systemic barriers, including restrictions in healthcare for certain immigrant groups, also undermine well-being, with health outcomes converging with—or even worsening compared to—those of native-born Canadians (Hyman, 2009; Vang et al., 2016).

Research on immigrant marital satisfaction is particularly relevant in this context. Studies consistently highlight the positive correlation between health and being in a partnership, as well as the protective effects of supportive marriages in navigating challenges (Cheung, 2008; Fang et al., 2021; Huntington et al., 2022; Næss et al., 2015). However, not all marriages provide these benefits. Unsatisfying marital relationships may pose equal or greater health and mortality risks compared to those who are unmarried, divorced, or separated (Lawrence et al., 2018).

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The Government of Canada invests substantial funds in settlement services, with approximately two billion allocated annually to support newcomers in their integration journey (IRCC, 2023). These funds are directed toward essential services such as language training, employment assistance, and community connection programs, all of which aim to ease the transition into Canadian society (IRCC, 2024). While broader settlement services may indirectly benefit families, the absence of targeted support for marital relationships undermines the potential positive outcomes that a fulfilling marriage can contribute to the settlement process. Strong marital bonds can provide emotional stability, enhance decision-making, and foster resilience during the often-challenging integration period. By integrating family and marital components into settlement initiatives, the government could maximize the effectiveness of its substantial investment in creating stable and thriving communities.

Existing research often highlights the differing pace of acculturation between partners but lacks integrated clinical approaches tailored to their needs (Dion & Dion, 2001; Noh et al., 1992; Phinney, 1996; Rudmin, 2003; Spiegler et al., 2015). This study aims to deepen the understanding of couple dynamics shaped by the immigration experience and to design effective, intersectional interventions that address the unique challenges faced by immigrant couples. These interventions will foster resilience, strengthen marital bonds, and support successful integration into their new homeland.

Understanding these dynamics is vital for several reasons. Clinically, it highlights the importance of culturally sensitive counseling practices that address the unique challenges faced by immigrant couples. From a policy perspective, this is particularly relevant for Canada, a

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nation built on immigration and committed to a multicultural framework that supports diverse populations in maintaining strong family bonds while navigating acculturation (Government of Canada, 2024). Exploring how acculturation challenges affect immigrants provides valuable insights into strengthening marital and family systems, which are cornerstones of societal stability and economic productivity (Berry, 1997). Strong marital relationships promote better integration outcomes, enabling immigrants to contribute more effectively to Canada's social and economic landscape (Cheung, 2008). Furthermore, examining gender dynamics in acculturation and marital adjustment sheds light on unique challenges, aligning with Canada's broader commitment to gender equity and social inclusivity (Guruge et al., 2010). This research aims to inform policies and interventions that enhance the well-being of immigrant families, fostering resilience and harmony in Canada's diverse and growing population.

Personal Intersectionality and Relevancy of this Research

This research topic holds deep personal and professional significance, shaped by my social location and intersectionality as a cisgender, married, able-bodied, new immigrant Chinese woman who arrived in Canada in 2020 with my husband and two dependent children. As an immigrant, I have firsthand experience navigating acculturation stress, systemic barriers, and the challenges of establishing a sense of belonging in a new homeland. These experiences have profoundly influenced my understanding of how immigration can reshape self-identity and disrupt relational dynamics, both on an individual and family level. They have also strengthened my appreciation for how strong marital bonds can serve as a source of resilience and support during such transitions.

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My professional background as a social worker specializing in individual and marital counseling, coupled with my personal journey, uniquely informs my perspective on this research. During my undergraduate years, I witnessed my parents' prolonged marital struggles, which deeply influenced my views on intimate relationships and marriage. Their negative interactions and eventual breakdown fostered skepticism and doubts about the potential for healthy, fulfilling relationships. However, my career as a social worker in a family service center that valued marriage and family-building work marked a turning point in my understanding of intimate relationships. My colleagues, who were well-trained and compassionate, modeled how fulfilling marriages could promote personal growth, authenticity, and compassion. For the first time, I was able to see the positivity and transformative potential of marriage. My preference for couple work and the EFT approach continues to grow, motivating me to deepen my knowledge of EFT. I have attained accreditation as an EFT Couple Therapist, and this professional training has significantly shaped my perspective on couple therapy. It has also enhanced my competency in assessing couples' struggles and implementing interventions best suited to their needs. Through this work, I also began to heal wounds from my family of origin, gaining greater self-understanding and awareness that allowed me to soften my blame toward my parents and acknowledge their limitations and struggles.

On a personal level, my own marriage has been a cornerstone of strength and growth. Entering a fulfilling and supportive marital relationship allowed me to experience firsthand how a nurturing partnership can foster self-awareness, emotional regulation, and resilience. My husband and I have supported each other through the myriad challenges of immigration,

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including navigating systemic barriers, cultural transitions, and the stress of building a new life. Our robust marital bond has been a vital resource, enabling us to co-regulate during times of stress and maintain positive relational interactions. This mutual support has created a safe and nurturing environment for our family, instilling hope and positivity as we adapt to life in Canada. These experiences have deepened my understanding of the critical role that marriage can play in supporting individuals through adversity. Immigrants often face immense challenges that can shatter their sense of self, stemming from systemic inequities, cultural dissonance, and the loss of familiar support networks. I resonate deeply with the emotional toll these challenges can take, and I am keenly aware of the importance of strong relationships in providing stability and healing. My personal and professional journeys have shown me that a fulfilling marital relationship can serve as a foundation for navigating these difficulties, fostering resilience and growth for both partners.

This research, therefore, is not only an academic inquiry but also a deeply personal exploration. It seeks to bridge my lived experiences with my professional expertise to better understand how therapists can support immigrant couples in navigating acculturation stress and systemic barriers. By focusing on cultivating co-regulation and mutual support within immigrant relationships, I aim to contribute to the development of tools and frameworks that promote resilience, hope, and relational health in the face of immigration's challenges.

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Definition of Terms

Acculturation

Acculturation refers to the process by which individuals or groups from one cultural background adopt the practices, values, norms, or behaviours of another culture, often due to prolonged contact or interaction. It involves cultural exchange and adaptation while maintaining, modifying, or integrating aspects of one's original cultural identity. This term was first introduced by Redfield and his colleagues in 1936 (Berry, 1997, p. 7).

Acculturation Stress

Defined as "a stress reaction in response to life events that are rooted in the experience of acculturation" (Berry, 1997, p. 19). This term is preferred over "culture shock" because it aligns with psychological stress models and emphasizes moderate rather than solely negative experiences (Berry, 1997, p. 13).

Ambiguous Loss

A type of loss that is unclear, lacks closure, and creates prolonged uncertainty, making it difficult to resolve or grieve. It occurs in two primary forms: Physical Absence with Psychological Presence; Psychological Absence with Physical Presence (Boss, 1999).

Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT)

A form of psychotherapy that emphasizes the role of emotions in human functioning and therapeutic change. EFT aims to help individuals and couples identify, experience, and process emotions to better understand their needs, resolve emotional difficulties, and create positive change (Greenberg, 2011).

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Heritage Culture

Refers to the culture of origin of the acculturating individuals or groups. This culture influences the practices, values, and identity that individuals bring into the acculturation process and may be maintained to varying degrees depending on the chosen acculturation strategy, such as integration, assimilation, separation, or marginalization (Berry, 1997, p. 6, 9, 13).

Hosting Culture

Refers to the culture of the society in which the immigrant or acculturating group settles. This culture sets the context for adaptation and may influence the type of acculturation strategy adopted by individuals or groups (Berry, 1997, p. 6, 9).

Marital Satisfaction

Marital satisfaction refers to an individual's subjective evaluation of the quality and overall happiness within their marital relationship. It encompasses aspects such as emotional intimacy, communication, conflict resolution, shared goals, trust, and fulfillment of individual and relational needs. Marital satisfaction is influenced by personal, relational, and external factors, including life transitions, cultural influences, and stressors, and serves as a key indicator of relational stability and well-being (Fowers & Olson, 1993).

Primary Emotions

Primary emotions are immediate, unmediated reactions to events and are evolutionarily derived to promote adaptation and survival. They are intuitive responses that reflect core needs, such as sadness at loss or anger at violation. These emotions provide critical information about the situation and guide adaptive action (Greenberg, 2024, p. 6).

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Secondary Emotions:

Secondary emotions are reactions to primary emotions or cognitive processes. They serve as a defense mechanism to mask intolerable primary emotions, such as anger masking shame or fear of one's own sadness. Secondary emotions typically obscure the core emotional response and can complicate therapeutic work (Greenberg, 2024, p. 7).

Outline of the Remainder of the Capstone

Chapter Two reviews the literature, both quantitative and qualitative, thoroughly elaborating on the dynamic interplay between immigration, mental health, and marital satisfaction, with a focus on the Canadian context. Guided by the EFT-C framework, this chapter discusses how marital relationships are impacted by the nuanced contextual experiences of immigration, which lead to an escalation of unmet attachment and identity needs within a couple's interaction cycle. The concept of ambiguous loss is incorporated to deepen understanding of immigrants' difficulties in processing the sadness associated with their immigration experiences. Chapter Three outlines a marital program specifically designed to address the unique challenges faced by immigrant couples. The program aims to provide counselors with practical tools to guide immigrant couples in acquiring a comprehensive understanding of the expectations and transitional challenges associated with the acculturation process, helping them make sense of their experiences and depersonalize the struggles arising from the structural challenges of immigration. The integration of EFT-C principles is central to the program, emphasizing emotion-focused work to enhance the couple's capacity to recognize and respond to each other's emotional needs. This approach promotes the development of a

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positive interactional cycle, helping couples move away from patterns of conflict and disconnection toward greater emotional intimacy and support. By addressing both the structural and emotional dimensions of immigration challenges, the framework supports couples in creating a stable, fulfilling relationship that facilitates successful integration into their new homeland.

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Chapter Two: Literature Review

In this chapter, the nature of immigration and its dynamics on marital relationships will be discussed. Immigration represents a profound transition that affects various aspects of life, including marital relationships. As couples embark on the journey of moving to a new country, they encounter a myriad of challenges and opportunities that can reshape their relationship dynamics. Understanding these influences is crucial for supporting couples through the acculturation process and fostering resilient, adaptive partnerships.

The Immigration Challenges of Couples

Amidst multifaceted life stressors, the challenges posed by the migration experience have intensified and shaped multifaceted marital encounters within a compressed time frame. Berry (1997) introduced the concept of “Acculturative stress”, depicting the various challenges an individual adapts to in new cultural contexts. De-professionalization and de-skilling emerge as the most salient challenges for new immigrants joining the workforce in their new residential country (Yakushko, 2013). In the couple context, the consequential change in socioeconomic status results in financial strain, alterations in gender roles, and shifts in family structure, particularly impacting the self-identity of male counterparts (Guruge et al., 2010; Kisselev, 2010; Shirpak et al., 2011). Language barriers and other acculturation difficulties hinder new immigrants from community integration, inducing feelings of isolation and helplessness. Immigrants with acculturation difficulties generally report lower levels of marital quality in association with the change and re-negotiation in gender role expectations (Boyd, 1990; Dion & Dion, 2001; Kisselev, 2010; Sim et al., 2021). Many new immigrants encounter a lack of family

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and social support in the initial stage of settlement (Guruge et al., 2010) which reinforces feelings of helplessness. In particular, immigrant women commonly reported more emotional, physical health issues (Ahn et al., 2018; Miskurka et al., 2012) and declare high marital strain as a result of acculturative stress. Despite the challenges, immigration can create an opportunity to foster mutual reliance between couples that positively enhance marital satisfaction (Cheung, 2008). The myriad challenges faced by couples during the immigrant adaptation process have the potential to create a notable imbalance in the attachment and identity interaction pattern. Failing to address the partner's attachment and identity needs is viewed as diminishing the emotional bond between the couple (Greenberg & Goldman, 2013).

Acculturative Stress and Spousal Mismatches

The concept of acculturation was initially understood as a one-dimensional process where maintaining one's heritage culture and adopting the new culture were seen as two opposing points on a single continuum (Gordon, 1964). This model suggested that as immigrants embraced the values, practices, and beliefs of their new country, they would inevitably give up those from their original culture. Berry (1997) developed a model of acculturation that views hosting culture and heritage-culture retention as independent dimensions. According to Berry's model, these two dimensions intersect, resulting in four acculturation categories based on the acculturation strategies individuals adopted over their journey in immigration: assimilation (adopting the receiving culture while discarding the heritage culture), separation (rejecting the receiving culture while maintaining the heritage culture), integration (embracing both the receiving and heritage cultures), and marginalization (rejecting both cultures). Berry's (1997)

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model is challenged by its overgeneralization of all types of immigrants, and ignoring the complexity regarding how the immigrant's entry status, culture, and ethnicity contributed to the acculturation strategies an individual would adopt in their acculturation progress (Schwartz et al., 2010). Culture and ethnicity play an important role in acculturation, for the degree to which immigrants' heritage culture, set of values, beliefs, and customs are more similar to the host culture, they may experience less stress in the acculturation process (Phinney, 1996; Rudmin, 2003). The influence of acculturation discrepancies among family members was initially focused on the parent-child relationship (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993). Previous studies in this area indicated that mismatches in cultural adaptation between parents and children can lead to conflict and stress within the family, resulting in dysfunctional interaction patterns that may result in youth conduct disorders. The gap between parents and children becomes apparent as young people often acculturate more quickly to the mainstream culture, while parents tend to remain more attached to their traditions. This difference in acculturation progress challenges the parent-child relationship, as youth strive for autonomy while parents seek to maintain connectedness (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993).

Acculturation Gap in the Context of Cultural Integration

Current studies of how the acculturation gap influences family have been expanded to the spousal context. Numerous studies showed that acculturative stresses can affect couples differently, with one partner potentially experiencing more strain than the other, and the spouse's own level of acculturation could have a significant influence on their partner's level of acculturation (Dion & Dion, 2001; Noh et al., 1992; Spiegler et al., 2015). For instance, in a

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study of Turkish immigrant couples in Germany, maintaining heritage culture in the host culture created more stress on the husband in particular if the wife was more adapted to the host culture (Spiegler et al., 2015). Sim et al. (2021) conducted pioneering research examining Mexican-origin immigrants in the United States, focusing on spousal (mis)matches at different levels of cultural adaptation and their associated marital outcomes. The study found that immigrants tend to report lower levels of marital quality and face higher rates of relationship dissolution compared to natives in both their home and destination countries in association with incongruence in cultural adaptation.

Acculturation Gap in the Context of Language Skills

Language skills in the host culture are observed to be significantly associated with marital satisfaction. Due to the fact that North America is the most preferred region for immigration when compared to Europe, Asia, Asian African, and South American settings, immigrants's competence in English speaking is most studied (Berry, 1997). Ample studies showed when couples were more mismatched in host language proficiency, both husband and wives encountered more relationship conflict and reported more marital dissatisfaction (Flores et al., 2004; Kanat-Maymon et al., 2016; Sim et al., 2021). Of particular interest, when the wife is acculturated faster than the husband, particularly in the domain of language acculturation, greater marital distress was observed (Dion & Dion, 2001; Kisselev et al., 2010). Scholars interpreted this phenomenon in association with the challenges of the shift in societal gender role expectations along with the difference in language competency in the host society. Kisselev et al. (2010) summarized that language is considered a primary task in the complex and

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multidimensional acculturation process. Language acculturation indicates opportunities in securing promising employment, accelerating social integration, and navigating multi-contexts regarding the social system in the host countries that enable the immigrant's family to have access to adequate social resources. Wives who have better language acculturation than their husbands are provided with more job opportunities and acquire more economic power that may challenge the traditional male-dominated gender role and decision-making power in the family. The change may particularly induce more stress for many husbands, especially for those coming from a culture that embraces traditional values in gender roles (Dion & Dion, 2001; Kisselev et al., 2010).

Acculturation Gap in the Context of Gender Roles

Boyd (1986) noted that early research on immigration experience focused mainly on male counterparts, and little is known about women's experience and their experiences tended to be stereotyped. The gap is later filled with research findings indicating that women are more at risk and vulnerable due to their entry status as dependents, whether under the visa of their spouse or in the category of family unification; women with less education and labour market skills are particularly vulnerable (Boyd, 1986). Dion and Dion (2001) summarized that the social construct of gender roles generates more stress on female immigrants than males, particularly when they encounter difficulty in balancing their traditional gender role and employment. The phenomenon was illustrated in a study by Noh et al. (1992), who examined the rates and factors related to depression and the contribution to gender differences on the issue among Korean immigrants in Toronto, Canada. The results were that female immigrants were almost eight

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times more likely than their male counterparts to exhibit depression, and it most apparently affected the most advantaged group (higher income and education level) in the study. Noh et al. (1992) interpreted the findings as a result of the double burden, which is a role overload between the gender-expected roles and employment. Since women are preoccupied with their caregiver responsibilities in a family context, they would be more stressed than their spouses in terms of failing to balance the dual roles, eventually negatively affecting the mental well-being of women (Noh et al., 1992).

Mental Health and Well-being

Navigating to a new environment creates substantial stress that can highly impact an immigrant's mental and emotional well-being. Studies showed that acculturative stress is positively associated with mental health among both immigrant men and women and plays a significant role in association with marital satisfaction (Ahn et al., 2018; Fang et al., 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2016). In particular, immigrant women were more prone to experience depressive symptoms around the childbirth stage when compared to native-born women as a result of encountering adverse contextual risk factors associated with immigrant experience such as high marital strain, lack of social support, poverty, and an unfavourable living environment (Higginbottom et al., 2013; Miskurka et al., 2012). Ahn et al. (2018) conducted a study on immigrant women in South Korea, revealing that these women often face barriers to healthcare related to accessibility, language, affordability, and medical coverage tied to their residential status. The study found that higher levels of acculturation were linked to increased social support, greater marital satisfaction, and more health-promoting behaviours. Conversely,

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acculturative stress and lower levels of acculturation were associated with mental health challenges (Ahn et al., 2018). Similar results and phenomenon interpretation were found in another study in the Canadian context, where immigrant women in Quebec were more vulnerable and presented antenatal depressive symptoms when compared to native-born Canadian women (Miszkurka et al., 2012). Straiton et al. (2023) found that mental disorder is strongly associated with an increased likelihood of marital separation for both migrant and non-immigrant women, while the context of migration adds complexity since migrant women often face additional challenges that exacerbate the effects of mental disorders on marriage. It is worth noting that research has consistently shown that immigrants generally arrive in better health compared to the native population, but their health tends to decline the longer they stay in the foreign country. This phenomenon is commonly understood as "Immigrant Paradox", suggesting that the decline is contributed to by various aspects related to challenges in acculturation, such as exposure to racism and discrimination, and negative social, economic, and environmental conditions over time (Ahn et al., 2018; Schwartz et al., 2010). The additional burden of navigating both cultural adaptation and mental health struggles can significantly lower marital satisfaction in immigrant couples (Ahn et al., 2018; Fang et al., 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2016).

Impact of Immigration on the Dynamics of Marriage

Immigration is a profound life event that significantly influences marital relationships, particularly for couples transitioning from patriarchal societies to more egalitarian ones (Guruge et al., 2010). While the quantitative research findings above provide a broad understanding of how acculturation challenges affect marital satisfaction, the qualitative research detailed below

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reveals the nuances of changes in couple dynamics related to immigration challenges. These studies highlight the challenges faced by various ethnic groups, specifically in the context of immigration to Canada. The gender roles and marital dynamics they once knew are challenged. This adjustment often triggers a redefinition of identities and relationship structures. The changes in gender roles, social support, and economic status that couples experience post-migration are central to these dynamics.

Role Adjustments and Identity

Immigrants come from traditional patriarchal societies, for instance, Iranian, Ethiopian, Sri Lankan, and Chinese, and the change in couple dynamics resulting from immigration to Canada often challenges traditional gender roles and responsibilities (Guruge et al., 2010; Hyman et al., 2008; Shirpak et al., 2011). In a study about immigration impact on Ethiopian couple immigrants to Canada, the majority of the participants, regardless of men or women, indicated that the reverse of gender roles and responsibilities contributed to separation or marital breakdown (Hyman et al., 2008). In their home countries, men typically occupied the dominant role as the primary breadwinners, while women were expected to manage the household and childcare. Regarding role reversal, men often experience a loss of authority and social status, particularly when their professional qualifications are devalued in the new country, leading to underemployment or unemployment. Economic challenges, particularly resulting from de-skilling and de-professionalization, are common experiences for immigrant couples. The downgrading of skills and qualifications often leads to financial strain, which can further destabilize traditional gender roles. Men in particular may find it difficult to cope with the loss

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of their breadwinner status, leading to increased stress and conflict within the marriage. Women, on the other hand, may take on new economic roles, which can shift the power dynamics within the relationship. This shift can create identity crises and marital tensions as men struggle to adapt to their diminished role as providers while women are overwhelmed to fulfill the dual roles as both caregivers and financial contributors (Hyman et al., 2008). These findings were supported by another research targeting Iranian couples in Canada, as the interviewed participants considered role reversal contributed to marital distress (Shirpak et al., 2011). Along with the increase of financial power, women often experience a newfound sense of freedom and independence in Canada. They are no longer bound by the restrictive social norms of Iran, where their dress, behaviour, and decisions are heavily controlled. Men might not accept it but consider it to be an inevitable compromise to the host culture (Shirpak et al., 2011).

Loss of Social Networks and Support Systems

The loss of extended family is another critical factor that influences post-migration marital dynamics (Guruge et al., 2010; Hyman et al., 2008; Shirpak et al., 2011). In patriarchal societies, extended family plays a vital role in providing emotional and practical support to couples, as well as mediating marital conflicts. After migration, couples coming from a patriarchal background often find themselves isolated from the family support system, which can lead to both positive and negative outcomes. On the positive side, the absence of family interference can foster greater intimacy and mutual reliance between spouses, encouraging them to make decisions together and strengthen their bond. However, the lack of extended family support can also heighten feelings of loneliness and exacerbate marital conflicts, particularly

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when couples face financial or social stressors (Guruge et al., 2010; Hyman et al., 2008; Shirpak et al., 2011). In the absence of family support, the availability of social support in the new country plays a significant role in marital stability. Couples who build strong support networks and engage with their new community experience less isolation and greater emotional well-being (Guruge et al., 2010; Rodriguez et al., 2016). A study by Fang et al. (2021) found that social support is particularly important to men and significantly influential in reducing acculturative stress among male counterparts.

Communication and Resilience

Effective communication emerges as a crucial factor in navigating these post-migration changes. Couples who can communicate openly about their challenges and negotiate new roles tend to build resilience (Guruge et al., 2010; Rodriguez et al., 2016;). This resilience is key to adapting to their new environment and maintaining a stable marital relationship. From another perspective, a lack of communication can lead to marital distress and breakdown (Guruge et al., 2010; Shirpak et al., 2011). Cheung (2008) found that long-term marital satisfaction served as a protective factor for immigrant couples' adjustment to immigration and integration. Couples exhibited better adjustment to the change in gender roles after immigration, increased intimacy and mutual reliance, and the ability to manage conflict and compromise differences, demonstrating positive resilience in the immigration process (Cheung, 2008).

Ambiguous Loss in Immigrants

The majority of research on immigrant couple adaptation mainly focuses on mismatches in areas such as culture, language, finances, and changes in gender roles in the host society.

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Little attention is given to the loss immigrant couples experience and its impact on marital satisfaction. Boss (1999) developed the concept of “ambiguous loss”, addressing a unique form of loss that differs from traditional grief because it lacks clarity, resolution, or closure. There are two primary types of ambiguous loss:

Physical absence with psychological presence. This occurs when a person is physically missing but still present in the minds of those left behind. Examples include a family member being lost in war, going missing, or being separated due to migration. The uncertainty of whether the person will return creates ongoing stress and grief.

Physical presence with psychological absence. This happens when a person is physically present but emotionally or cognitively unavailable, as in cases of dementia, Alzheimer's disease, or severe mental illness. Here, the person is still "there," but their emotional or psychological connection is lost.

Immigration involves a profound sense of loss. Boss (1999) described this as a "crossover" encompassing both types of ambiguous loss (Sanchez, 2021). Falicov (2005) further elaborates on this concept, identifying ambiguous loss in immigrants as comprising Physical absence with psychological presence and Psychological absence with physical presence, reflecting the intertwined emotional challenges of migration. The physical separation from one's homeland, family, and cultural environment, which remains psychologically present, leads to homesickness, nostalgia, and guilt, particularly for undocumented immigrants who are unable to return for significant events such as funerals or family milestones. Conversely, Psychological absence with physical presence occurs when immigrants physically reside in their host country

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but feel emotionally disconnected, preoccupied with the losses they endured and the possibility of returning home (Falicov, 2005). This psychological absence hinders their ability to engage fully with their new environment and immediate relationships. Together, these two forms of ambiguous loss create profound emotional strain, disrupt family dynamics, and challenge immigrants' ability to adapt, underscoring the need for interventions that address both types of loss to support emotional resilience and well-being (Falicov, 2005).

Ambiguous loss is difficult to cope with because it resists traditional forms of closure and resolution (Boss, 1999). People experiencing it feel stuck in a state of uncertainty, not knowing whether to move on or hold onto hope. This can lead to feelings of helplessness, guilt, and chronic stress. Perez and Arnold-Berkovits (2019) studied the ambiguous loss experienced by Spanish-speaking immigrants, and many of the respondents indicated that the emotional experience of the loss resulting from immigration is difficult to comprehend, verbalize, and understand. A study by Solheim et al. (2022) reported that the ambiguous loss in immigrants is related to family boundary ambiguity. This concept refers to the uncertainty that family members experience regarding who is in or out of the family system, and arises in situations of family stress or transitions, for instance, the death of a family member in the heritage country, where roles, responsibilities, and relationships to deal with the stresses are unclear (Falicov, 2005). This ambiguity can lead to confusion about family roles, strain on relationships, and challenges in maintaining family cohesion (Solheim et al., 2022). It can also affect decision-making and communication within the family. The degree of boundary ambiguity can impact family functioning and individual well-being, particularly when roles and relationships are

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unresolved or continuously shifting. While Solheim's study focuses on immigrant families experiencing separation sadness due to deportation and residency, this concept is highly relevant to understanding the distressful experiences immigrant couples encounter, even though not living apart, during the process of acculturation. Numerous previously established assets, both tangible (financial power, de-professionalization) and intangible (loss of family and social support) are diminished as a result of immigration. Immigrants endure challenges in pursuit of better prosperity in their new country, uncertain if they will eventually succeed. Beloved family members, support networks, and the accomplishments they built remain in their home country. These assets are still present but inaccessible. The emotional losses and feelings of sadness can be difficult to acknowledge, comprehend, and process.

Marital Relationships from the Perspective of Emotion-Focused Therapy for Couples

As presented above, the myriad challenges faced by immigrants in the adaptation process have created significant distress, both at the individual and dyad levels, and as a result significantly impact the couple's relationship and marriage stability. In the following section, through the lens of EFT-C, the essential elements in contributing to a satisfactory marital relationship are explored to understand the acculturation challenges in the dynamics of marriage relationships from an EFT-C perspective.

Essential Elements Contributing to a Satisfactory Relationship

According to EFT-C, a satisfactory marriage is characterized by emotional connection, secure bonding, and effective communication between partners. Central to this model is the concept of emotional bonding, where both partners feel understood, valued, and emotionally

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safe, fostering trust and intimacy (Greenberg & Goldman, 2013). Attunement plays a key role, as partners are responsive to each other's emotions, acknowledging and validating each other's feelings. Effective communication is essential, as it allows couples to express their emotions, needs, and vulnerabilities openly. In a satisfactory marriage, partners are emotionally accessible and responsive, ensuring that each feels supported and secure. In EFT-C, the fundamental factor in cultivating a promising and fulfilling relationship is the partner's competence in addressing each other's attachment and identity needs, thereby fostering positive emotions that enhance satisfactory interaction cycles. Positive couple interaction extends the couple's strength in co-regulation, supporting each other in overcoming difficult emotions and transforming them to nurture and cultivate relationship bonds (Greenberg & Goldman, 2013). In distressed relationships, conversely, couples get stuck in negative interaction patterns which can create emotional distance and shatter bonding.

Theoretical Principles of Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT)

Greenberg (2021) considered emotion as the basic datum of human experience. Emotions are vital for human survival as they serve adaptive functions that guide and protect us. Emotions act as signals, alerting us to important events in our environment and preparing us for action (Greenberg, 2021). It was embodied as a primary signaling system echoed by our bodily expression of emotion that helps us nonverbally communicate with others. For instance, when fear is activated, we will flee from the scene as an action tendency. We express our fear in physical actions, while the sense and appraisal of danger derived from fear

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are not in words but in our emotions. In EFT, emotion is seen as essential information and a guide to individual needs.

By facilitating individuals' awareness of, attending to, and corresponding to the emotion-associated action tendency, people develop healthy inner resources and self-agency to reach a positive emotional state and well-being (Greenberg & Watson, 2022).

Emotion can be understood as healthy (adaptive) or unhealthy (maladaptive), primary, secondary, and instrumental (Greenberg, 2024). Emotion is described as a fundamental and complex state that drives physical and psychological changes, influencing both thought and behaviour (Greenberg, 2024). Emotions carry the essence of our most basic needs, which have evolved over time to help individuals survive and grow. They arise from bodily sensing and are critical in directing actions and understanding personal experiences. Emotions are central to therapeutic work because they highlight core human needs and guide behavior in meaningful ways (Greenberg, 2024).

Primary emotions are immediate and unmediated reactions to external or internal stimuli. They reflect core, evolutionarily adaptive responses, such as sadness signaling the need for comfort after loss or anger indicating a violation of boundaries. These emotions provide direct and reliable information about the individual's environment and needs. They are irreducible and do not require cognitive mediation, making them fundamental to human survival and emotional processing. Primary emotions, when adaptive, help individuals navigate challenges effectively and organize their responses to meet situational demands (Greenberg, 2024).

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Secondary emotions are more complex and arise in reaction to primary emotions or cognitive evaluations. These emotions tend to obscure the original emotional response and can complicate adaptive functioning. For example, anger may surface as a defense against the vulnerability of shame, or hopelessness may mask feelings of inadequacy. Secondary emotions can shield individuals from experiencing primary emotions directly but hinder emotional clarity and resolution. In therapy, distinguishing between primary and secondary emotions is crucial, as the latter may mask core emotional needs that require attention (Greenberg, 2024).

Instrumental emotions are those expressed intentionally or unconsciously to influence others' behaviours or feelings. They serve a strategic function rather than reflecting genuine emotional states. For instance, anger might be used to intimidate others, or sadness might be displayed to elicit sympathy without openly asking for support. These emotions are manipulative by nature and result in long-term relational challenges. Understanding and addressing instrumental emotions in therapy can help clients align their emotional expressions with their authentic experiences and needs (Greenberg, 2024).

Adaptive emotions are immediate and contextually appropriate responses that help individuals navigate their environment effectively, such as fear prompting escape from danger or sadness eliciting support after a loss. These emotions provide valuable information and guide constructive actions aligned with the individual's needs (Greenberg, 2021). In contrast, maladaptive emotions are lingering or inappropriate reactions rooted in past trauma or unresolved experiences. They fail to promote effective coping and may cause distress or dysfunction, such as shame triggered by neutral situations or chronic fear unrelated to present

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threats. In EFT, psychotherapy focuses on transforming maladaptive emotions into adaptive responses to foster emotional well-being and resilience. EFT proposed that emotion is changed by emotion. By facilitating emotional awareness, acceptance, and affect regulation, the maladaptive emotions and destructive beliefs would be transformed to more healthy and adaptive primary emotions. A new narrative to the presenting problems and positive meaning-making would emerge. These help people construct a new and positive self-organization (Greenberg, 2021).

EFT for Couples

Besides individual work, Greenberg also developed EFT couple counseling by integrating a systemic approach. He saw emotion as the primary communication between couples, and the negative interactional cycle blocked the couple from mutually accessing each other's emotional needs and responding to them adaptively. He worked with his graduate student Susan Johnson to develop Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy. Johnson later developed the therapy with a strong emphasis on attachment (Goldman, 2019). Greenberg, working with his graduate student Rhonda Goldman, continued to develop couple therapy with emotion-based principles, naming it EFT-C, with emphasis on circular interactions around closeness (attachment), identity (dominance and influence), and Attraction and Liking (Greenberg & Goldman, 2013). EFT-C views attachment bonds as a central form of affect regulation, governing both emotional arousal and approach and avoidance. Affect regulation is seen as a core motive that leads to attachment. Enhancing self-soothing is important in

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stabilizing a couple's relationship as it helps restructure emotional bonds and ensures an enduring change.

EFT-C integrates process-experiential, humanistic, and systemic approaches (Greenberg & Goldman, 2013). It has been shown empirically to be an effective approach to help distressed couples resolve relational conflicts and emotional injuries by strengthening the couple's dyadic affect regulation (Greenberg & Goldman, 2013; Greenberg & Woldarsky Meneses, 2019; Johnson & Greenberg, 1988; Kula et al., 2022). EFT-C combined techniques from systems theory in working with couples' interactional cycles and heightening experience in enactments drawn from Gestalt therapy. In EFT-C therapy, the emotional bond between the couple landed in three aspects: Attachment and Connection; Identity Influence; Attraction and Liking. Relational distress among couples resulted from rigid and repeated maladaptive interactional cycles that unsatisfied attachment and identity needs in the intimate relationship. The negative interactions of the distressed couple was often presented with one partner being the pursuer, who gets frustrated with the unmet needs in attachment and closeness, shifting the primary sadness into secondary anger, blaming and criticizing the distancer partner's inadequacy in emotional response. The distancer, overwhelmed with secondary fears of fighting with the dysregulated blaming partner, would stonewall and withdraw in an attempt to de-escalate the heat to avoid the trigger of the painful primary feelings of shameful identity resulting from the humiliated experience that occurred in the conflictual relationship (Greenberg & Goldman, 2013).

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The EFT-C therapist would act as an emotional coach to guide the distressed couple to access their emotional needs and express vulnerabilities, promoting forgiveness to heal emotional injury (Dailey et al., 2023; Greenberg & Woldarsky Meneses, 2019) in the couple context. The couple would be supported to listen and comprehend the disclosure from their partner and respond with compassion and empathy (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008; Johnson & Greenberg, 1988). By attending to the primary emotion underneath the reactive secondary emotion that was often predominately activated in the negative interactional cycle of the couple, the core pain would be revealed and restructured subsequently with a new positive narrative that resulted from the partner's mutual compassionate response that nurtures a positive interaction cycle with secure attachment and bonding in the couple relationship (Kula et al., 2022; Vanhee et al., 2018).

Understanding Immigrant Marital Dynamics through the Lens of EFT-C

Couple conflict can be seen as a result of a dysregulated state in both co- and self-regulation of affect. Negative interaction cycles arise when core identity and attachment needs are not met (Greenberg & Goldman, 2013). In immigrant couples, these conflicts could be understood as accumulated emotional injuries that are contributed by profound loss and unrecognized attachment and identity hurt in association with the acculturation process. Woldarsky Meneses and Gibb (2024) incorporated Ambiguous Loss theory into EFT-C to explore the challenges faced by immigrant couples. In this context, particularly for couples experiencing ambiguous losses, such as disconnection from their homeland, family members; impeded identity due to economic instability, loss of social status, shifting gender roles,

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immigration-related griefs and losses can be profound and difficult to process due to their ambiguous nature. When both partners are overwhelmed by their sadness and loss, they may become emotionally unavailable to each other, resulting in a negative cycle of isolation and criticism. This intensifies unmet attachment and identity needs, weakens the couple's emotional bond, and creates emotional injuries (Greenberg & Woldarsky Meneses, 2019).

Woldarsky Meneses and Gibb's (2024) research on expatriate couples, viewed through the lens of EFT-C, suggests that accompanying spouses who prioritize their partner's career sacrifice their own professional development, experiencing significant losses in status and identity. This pain is unseen or invalidated by the lead spouse, damaging the intimate bond and creating emotional injuries. The same perspective may apply to immigrant couples, where one partner may withdraw from the workforce to support the family or adjust their gender role because the other partner has better employment opportunities due to faster acculturation. Zhou et al. (2020) studied Chinese immigrant women in Canada who encountered marital breakdown, supporting the assertion that a loss of self-identity due to the acculturation process can shatter the marital bond. Their study shows that many immigrant women, particularly those from professional and middle-class backgrounds, face a significant threat to their identity as they experience "re-domestication"—returning to traditional gender roles as the primary caregiver in response to post-immigration employment difficulties, such as lack of access to childcare, de-professionalization, and low-paid jobs. These women are caught in an intersectional dilemma, stressed by the need to contribute to the family both financially and domestically while fulfilling their expected gender roles as caregivers. When their struggles and sacrifices go unseen or

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unvalidated by their partners, the challenges of the settlement process and the mismatch in acculturation pacing between couples reveal the perceived "incompetence" and "flaws" of their husbands, further intensifying marital dissatisfaction and leading to breakdown (Zhou et al., 2020).

Migration processes challenge marital stability due to changes in family structure and the possibility of geographically split households. As immigrants are one of the intersectionally marginalized groups in Canadian society, those who are restrained in employment opportunities may experience separation reluctantly. In a study of Chinese immigrants in Canada, many were found to experience financial hardship due to a lack of job opportunities or being underpaid. The husband, perceived as the breadwinner, is forced to return to their homeland to work in order to support his wife and children, who remain in Canada for education and to meet residency requirements for permanent status (Zhou et al., 2022). This geographically split household may experience long-term separation, which strains attachment in intimate relationships, as both partners become both physically and emotionally inaccessible to each other during a time of high stress in the settlement and adaptation process.

These shifts in the couple's dynamic can shatter personal identity and require a heightened capacity to address each other's emotional needs. However, this can be challenging when emotional needs are misinterpreted as complaints or intrusions.

Attachment Challenges: Emotional Disconnection

In EFT-C, attachment is viewed as a core motivational system that shapes emotional bonds between partners. Goldman and Greenberg (2013) emphasize that attachment is driven by

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the need to regulate emotions, particularly through seeking safety, security, and comfort from a partner. This bond is crucial because emotions like fear, sadness, and joy are deeply connected to attachment, especially in response to connection or separation from loved ones (Goldman & Greenberg, 2013). Building on Bowlby's (1988) attachment framework, EFT-C suggests that early emotional experiences with caregivers shape adult attachment styles. Insecure attachment, resulting from unmet emotional needs in childhood, can manifest as anxiety about rejection or avoidance of closeness in adult relationships. These dynamics lead to pursue-distance cycles, where one partner seeks emotional closeness (pursuer) while the other withdraws (distancer). A critical addition in EFT-C is the concept of self-soothing, which complements the attachment bond. Self-soothing refers to an individual's ability to regulate their own emotions, especially when a partner is unavailable or when emotional wounds are rooted in past experiences. EFT-C teaches partners to develop self-soothing skills to address personal emotional pain, allowing them to calm themselves rather than rely solely on their partner for emotional regulation. This capacity for self-soothing is important in creating a more balanced relationship where both partners can maintain emotional stability and respond to each other in healthier, more secure ways (Goldman & Greenberg, 2013).

EFT-C outlines the concept of negative interaction cycles that develop when partners are trapped in their emotional struggles. One common pattern in chasing unmet attachment needs is the "pursue-withdraw" cycle, where one partner, the more emotionally expressive one, seeks connection through criticism, demands, or emotional outbursts. The other partner, feeling overwhelmed or unable to meet these needs, withdraws, shuts down, or disengages emotionally

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as a strategy to protect personal boundaries (Woldarsky Meneses & Gibb, 2024). The pursuer often approaches gently in the first place, while hostility comes up when they feel consistently rejected by their partner. They may perceive the withdrawal of their partner as dangerous and at risk of relationship breakdown. This perceived relational threat triggers more anxiety and escalated more pursuing behaviour that further stressed the distancing partner and heightened the escalation of the negative interaction cycle.

Using the perspective of EFT-C, incorporated with the previous discussion on how couple dynamics are impacted by spousal mismatch in acculturation (Ahn et al., 2018; Fang et al., 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2016; Solheim & Ballard, 2016), it is conceivable that immigrant couples' relationship challenges can manifest when one partner feels overwhelmed by their sense of loss and frustration with their current circumstances and begins to criticize their spouse for not providing enough support as a strategy to have their underlying attachment needs met. Couples experiencing geographical distance have challenges in responding to each other's emotional needs leading to feelings of isolation (Zhou et al., 2022). Spouses living together may experience dynamics resulting from different pacing in the acculturation process. The spouse encountering more difficulty in acculturation may feel isolated, grieving their loss of status and social connections, and seek validation or support by demanding more emotional engagement from the spouse who has better acculturation. However, the seemingly well-adjusted spouse may also be struggling with stressors such as being underpaid, de-professionalization, experiencing integration difficulties, being unfairly treated as a marginalized group in the workplace, or feeling guilty about not being able to support the family in the heritage country,

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and may withdraw emotionally to seek solace. This withdrawal heightens the other spouse's feelings of abandonment and loneliness, thus escalating the conflict. The more one partner pursues, the more the other withdraws, leading to a deeper emotional divide and creating a negative interactional pattern. As a result, both partners remain locked in their own sadness and pain, each feeling misunderstood and invalidated. This cycle erodes trust and intimacy, leaving emotional injuries unresolved.

Identity Challenges: Reconstruction of Gender Roles and Acculturation Progress

In EFT-C, identity refers to a person's sense of self, self-esteem, and how they view their worth in relationships. Identity is shaped by the need for validation, recognition, and maintaining a sense of autonomy and agency. When identity is threatened in a relationship, it often leads to dominance struggles, with partners trying to assert control or defend their sense of self. Emotions such as shame, fear, and anger typically surface when individuals feel their identity is being undermined (Goldman & Greenberg, 2013).

In a couple's relationship, identity is important because how partners view themselves and feel about their self-worth directly impacts their interactions. When a partner's identity needs (such as feeling respected, valued, or competent) are not met, it can lead to conflicts and emotional distancing. EFT-C highlights the importance of addressing these identity concerns, helping couples move beyond dominance struggles and identity threats to foster mutual respect and emotional intimacy. By working through identity issues, couples can strengthen their bond, improve communication, and create a healthier dynamic (Goldman & Greenberg, 2013).

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The identity cycle involves one partner being dominant or controlling, while the other is submissive. The dominant partner, typically in an over-functioning state, makes decisions and defines reality within the relationship. In the case of the accompanying spouse in expatriate couples, the accompanying partner often experiences a profound threat to their sense of identity, stemming from the loss of professional status, social connections, and the ability to pursue their own goals. This loss can lead to feelings of insignificance, inadequacy, and frustration (Woldarsky Meneses & Gibb, 2024).

In immigrant couples, the threat to identity is particularly significant when there is a shift in gender roles. For example, previous research showed that when a wife acculturates faster than her husband, particularly in language acquisition, this can increase marital distress. The wife may access better job opportunities and gain more economic and decision-making power in the family, challenging traditional gender role divisions (Dion & Dion, 2001; Kisselev et al., 2010). This shift can be perceived as an identity threat to the husband, who faces the loss of power or the need to renegotiate power dynamics with his wife. If the wife is unable to address her husband's identity hurt, or if her own capacity for empathy is limited by her sadness and grievances over the acculturation process, she may not be able to respond to or validate his identity needs. Instead, she may act critically to pursue proximity to soothe her primary sadness of loss of connection and need for support. In a circular manner, the husband may feel attacked, invalidated, and shamed at feeling diminished, and that triggers his negative self-appraisal that impacts self-worth and feelings of agency and influence. This primary shameful feeling drives the action tendency to hide and disengage, while the wife interprets it as a threat of disconnection

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and abandonment that triggers secondary anger with an action tendency to express hostile emotions in an attempt to control and draw her husband back; the husband may respond reactively with defensiveness and stonewall as a way of emotional protection, and this may result in further escalation in the interaction cycle.

Attraction and Liking

Goldman and Greenberg (2013) emphasize that attraction and liking are vital components in maintaining emotional bonds between couples. These positive feelings, such as admiration, excitement, and warmth, help sustain intimacy and connection. Couples who engage in activities that stimulate attraction and liking build a reserve of positive emotions that can mitigate future conflicts. The fondness and admiration system plays a key role in this process, as it encourages couples to cherish and appreciate each other, which strengthens their emotional bond. Goldman and Greenberg (2013) argue that without these positive feelings, relationships may remain functional but lack the depth needed to thrive over time. Therefore, fostering attraction and liking is essential for relationships to not only survive but flourish (Greenberg and Goldman, 2013). For immigrant couples, the concepts of attraction and liking are crucial in supporting them to cultivate positive feelings like admiration, warmth, excitement, and cherish each other's strengths and resilience during tough times, ensuring that their bond remains not only functional but emotionally fulfilling. This emotional reserve becomes particularly important for immigrant couples as they navigate complex external environments while relying on the emotional security of their relationship.

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Emotional Injuries and Vulnerability

EFT-C suggests that couples experiencing emotional disconnection are always accompanied with unresolved anger, pain, and sadness that accumulate to "emotional injuries"—deep wounds caused by feelings of betrayal, abandonment, or invalidation. These injuries prevent partners from expressing their more vulnerable emotions, such as loneliness, fear of inadequacy, or sadness. Instead, they engage in protective behaviours like blaming, distancing, or defensive arguments, which damage the intimate bond and restrain them from being emotionally accessible to each other (Greenberg & Woldarsky Meneses, 2019). For example, the partner who feels neglected may express their hurt as anger or frustration, which pushes the other partner further away. The key to breaking this cycle, according to EFT-C, is to create a safe space where both partners can access and express their primary emotions with the coaching of EFT-C therapists. This involves helping partners become aware of and to acknowledge their emotions, unmet underlying needs, and vulnerabilities, and guiding them to share these feelings in a non-defensive, open manner (Greenberg & Goldman, 2013). When the couple feels safe to show their vulnerabilities and are being supported emotionally and attentively for that disclosure, the intimate bond between the couple is strengthened which advances both self-regulation and co-regulation capacity.

Rebuilding Connection to Repair Emotional Injuries

EFT-C promotes emotional attunement, a state where each partner becomes responsive to the other's emotional needs. Using EFT-C as an intervention for immigrant couples encountering acculturation challenges could help resolve emotional injuries, rebuild emotional

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connections, and promote forgiveness that repairs emotional bonds (Woldarsky Meneses & Gibb, 2024). This is particularly helpful to immigrant couples who are undergoing ambiguous loss and often need help to recognize what and how their unresolved ambiguous losses—whether related to the attachment loss and sadness feelings in leaving their loved ones and homeland, or the loss of their identity associated with professional self and financial steadiness—interfere with their ability to connect emotionally, both on individual and interpersonal aspects (Woldarsky Meneses & Gibb, 2024).

Highlighting Gaps in the Literature

Existing research on immigrant couple adaptation predominantly focuses on mismatches in areas such as culture, language, employment, and shifts in gender roles within the host society (Dion & Dion, 2001; Noh et al., 1992; Sim et al., 2021; Spiegler et al., 2015). However, there is a notable gap in exploring the emotional and relational impact of the losses experienced by immigrant couples, such as separation from their homeland, social networks, and cultural identity, and how these losses affect marital satisfaction. Additionally, existing research on immigrants' experience and their emotional well-being is primarily focused at the individual level, with little attention given to couple or family resiliency (Chowdhury, 2021; Goopy et al., 2020). This individual-centered approach undermines the potential relational resources within families and fails to contextualize individual suffering within a familial framework. While many studies emphasize (Ahn et al., 2018; Fang et al., 2021; Guruge et al., 2010; Rodriguez et al., 2016) the differing pace of acculturation between partners, they lack integrated clinical approaches tailored to the unique challenges faced by immigrant couples. This gap highlights

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the need for comprehensive, intersectional interventions that address acculturation disparities not only within individuals but also at a dyadic level. Such interventions foster resilience from a relational perspective, encourage the cultivation of marital bonds that promote co-regulation, and support immigrant couples in leveraging familial strengths for successful integration into their new environment

Summary and Synthesis

Immigration significantly transforms marital dynamics, introducing stressors such as acculturative stress, gender role shifts, and language acquisition disparities that reshape spousal relationships. Research highlights that mismatched acculturation progress between partners often creates conflict, as one adapts to the host culture faster than the other. Gender role reversals, particularly when women achieve financial independence due to faster language acquisition or job opportunities, can disrupt traditional family dynamics and provoke identity crises in men. These dynamics are compounded by the emotional strain women face as they juggle caregiving and employment responsibilities, leading to heightened mental health challenges. Furthermore, the concept of ambiguous loss underscores the profound emotional toll of immigration, as individuals mourn intangible losses such as cultural identity, language, and social support systems, which can erode marital bonds and create unresolved emotional injuries. To address these complex challenges, EFT-C offers a valuable framework for mental health professionals to understand the nuanced and multi-layered difficulties immigrant couples face during the acculturation process, as well as their unmet emotional needs. By fostering emotional attunement, EFT-C helps partners become more responsive to each other's emotional

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experiences, making sense of the challenges stemming from acculturation on both individual and relational levels. This understanding supports couples in creating emotionally fulfilling and stable relationships, repairing emotional injuries that encourage the cultivation of family resilience in the face of adversity.

In the next section, I will discuss the findings derived from this research exploration and how these insights can inform the design of a marital program tailored to the unique needs of immigrant couples. The program will integrate the family life education framework to help immigrant couples map out their relational journey in their new homeland, prepare for potential changes, and equip them with tools to address challenges. It will emphasize enhancing skills in emotional attunement to foster co-regulation, identifying negative interactional cycles, and building strategies to de-escalate conflict, thereby encouraging a fulfilling and supportive marital relationship. Lastly, I will conclude by sharing my final thoughts and reflections on the topic.

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Chapter Three: Discussion, Application, and Conclusions

In the previous chapter, the immigration experience was described in relation to marital satisfaction, particularly when couples face challenges due to different pacing in the progress of acculturation. The challenges faced by immigrants can be seen from systemic and relational contexts. From a systemic perspective, immigrant couples experience challenges in multiple layers of the interplay between personal and external factors. These systemic challenges, for instance gender role reversal, cultural dissonance, financial instability, language barriers, and isolation from familiar support systems, often fundamentally disrupt the perceived family life cycle and its developmental stages, as immigrants cannot plan a stable or predictable common future that involves family members, communities, and culture (Falicov, 2019). These accumulated unexpected transitions have a profound impact on immigrants, forced to reshape family structures, roles, and relationships. These changes can induce feelings of disorientation and anxiety as a result of a disrupted family cycle and acculturative stress and can place significant strain on marital relationships, exacerbating conflicts and increasing feelings of disconnection (Delara, 2016; Helms et al., 2014; Hyman et al., 2008; Sanchez, 2021; Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993).

In response to the unique challenges faced by immigrant couples, I will design a marital program that builds on the framework of Family Life Education (FLE) (Arcus, 1995), with the highlight on adopting a cultural safety and intersectional lens and incorporating EFT-C as the main construct of this marital program. Utilizing the strength of FLE, the immigrant couples will be supported in mapping out their family journey in their new homeland systematically.

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Understanding the potential challenges helps couples to prepare and make sense of the changes and to build essential resources to cope with potential challenges effectively. EFT-C, which emphasizes strengthening couples' emotional connection, will equip immigrant couples with tools to understand and respond to emotional needs within their relationship. This will enhance emotional bonding, promote co-regulation, and foster family resilience that serve as protective factors amidst acculturation struggles.

FLE is a structured, preventive, and educational approach designed to equip individuals and families with the skills and knowledge to strengthen relationships, foster resilience, and improve overall family well-being. Rooted in a multidisciplinary framework, FLE incorporates elements of psychology, sociology, education, and counseling (Arcus, 1992; Thomas & Arcus, 1995). The earliest discussions of FLE trace back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, initially rooted in home economics and child welfare. FLE has evolved to encompass a broad range of topics, including financial management, parenting, communication, sexual education, marriage preparation, and family life-span education. FLE programs are delivered through diverse formats such as workshops, counselling sessions, community programs, and digital platforms (Arcus, 1995). Focusing on the unique challenges faced by immigrant couples, tailored FLE programs can integrate migration-related challenges to address their specific needs. Falicov (2019) advocates using the Multidimensional Ecological Comparative Approach (MECA) to understand the complex interplay of migration and acculturation processes in family life cycles. This model emphasizes four interconnected domains: migration and acculturation, ecological context, family organization, and life cycle transitions. By addressing these

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dimensions, MECA highlights how migration impacts individuals and families through stressors such as cultural dissonance, economic challenges, and altered family hierarchies, while also exploring opportunities for resilience and adaptation. MECA provides critical insights into navigating challenges immigrants face that strain marital satisfaction, which would be highly valuable to reference in designing the FLE content tailored for immigrant couples. The topics covered in the program help immigrant couples make sense of and normalize their acculturation stress, reducing feelings of deficiency and personal failure during the acculturation process. Orientation to cultural and societal norms of the host community and navigating family-related changes during acculturation can support couples in aligning their acculturation pacing. This alignment helps prevent rapid changes in one partner that could create an imbalance in the dyadic system. By participating in this program, immigrant couples also are provided opportunities to build supportive networks with others facing similar challenges, fostering a sense of community and mutual encouragement that rebuilds psychological stability. This has been proven to be a strong protective factor for immigrants in reducing acculturative stress and adapting successfully to their new homeland (Ahn et al., 2018; Berry, 1997; Schwartz et al., 2010; Sim et al., 2021; Spiegler et al., 2015).

Cultural Adaptability Considerations

Like many other Western cultural context-based psychotherapies, the applicability of EFT-C to diverse populations may be limited by inherent cultural constraints and may not fully capture the experiences or values of non-Western populations. Cultural adaptability considerations are particularly crucial in designing this marital group as the target participants

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comes from a diverse background and are experiencing acculturation challenges. Providing counselling services with a cultural and intersectional lens supports a sense of safety that encourages engagement and rapport building, which are fundamental in psychotherapy interventions. To ensure the marital group is structured with cultural safety considerations, the Cultural Lens Approach (CLA) would be integrated to navigate a necessary modification to enhance the applicability of the applied psychological theories across cultural groups (Hardin et al., 2014). CLA emphasizes identifying the cultural limitations of existing constructs in the dominant society and adapting them to be more inclusive and sensitive across cultures.

CLA consists of five steps designed to evaluate the cultural validity of psychological theories (Hardin et al., 2014). In the first step, researchers articulate how central constructs have been defined and operationalized in past research. This involves identifying key theoretical propositions and understanding the assumptions embedded within these constructs, making explicit the cultural contexts from which they were originally derived. This step ensures clarity about the theory's foundational elements before evaluating its broader applicability.

The second step focuses on identifying the cultural groups from which these definitions have been derived and those to which the constructs have either not been applied or yielded surprising results. This comparative process helps in recognizing cultural gaps within existing theories and highlights populations where the theory's assumptions may not hold true. It pushes researchers to think beyond the dominant cultural frameworks that often shape psychological constructs.

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In the third step, relevant cultural dimensions that might influence the applicability of the theory are identified. Researchers examine underlying cultural variables, such as individualism versus collectivism, power distance, or self-construal, to understand how these factors could affect the interpretation and operationalization of psychological constructs. This step emphasizes the dynamic interplay between culture and psychological phenomena, encouraging a nuanced analysis of how cultural contexts shape human behaviour.

The fourth step involves evaluating the relevance of the theoretical definitions and operationalizations within diverse cultural contexts. Researchers integrate cultural knowledge to critically assess whether existing constructs maintain their meaning across different groups or if they require modification. This evaluation helps determine if the theory is universally applicable or culturally appropriate, and it guides necessary adaptations to enhance its cultural validity.

Finally, the fifth step focuses on generating new research questions and hypotheses based on the cultural insights gained from the previous steps. This process not only tests the modified theoretical propositions but also stimulates novel inquiries that can expand the theory's applicability across cultures. By systematically applying these steps, the CLA promotes the development of culturally sensitive psychological theories that reflect the diverse experiences of global populations (Hardin et al., 2014).

Franz et al. (2023) integrated the CLA and EFT-C to design a culturally sensitive marital group for Chinese American couples, which provides a highly relatable reference and blueprint to design the marital program for immigrants for this capstone project. The key findings of Franz et al.'s (2023) study are summarized as below:

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Step 1: Describe EFT's Central Constructs and Past Research

EFT emphasizes emotional awareness, expression, regulation, transformation, and corrective emotional experiences as central constructs. EFT was originally developed within Western cultural frameworks that prioritize individual autonomy, emotional expressiveness, and self-actualization. These constructs may not align seamlessly with the collectivist values and emotional restraint commonly observed in Chinese American clients.

Step 2: Identify Groups for Which EFT Constructs Have (or Have Not) Been Applied

EFT has been tested and validated in Western populations, particularly among White, educated individuals. However, there is a notable lack of empirical research examining its effectiveness in populations across cultures.

Step 3: Analyze Relevant Cultural Dimensions Affecting EFT's Applicability

The applicability of EFT to Chinese American clients is influenced by several key cultural dimensions. Collectivism, which emphasizes group harmony over individual emotional expression, contrasts with EFT's focus on personal emotional exploration. Emotional suppression, often viewed as maladaptive in Western contexts, can serve an adaptive function in Chinese culture by maintaining social harmony and preventing conflict. Individuals may fear bringing shame to themselves or their families through open emotional disclosure. These cultural factors highlight the importance of adapting EFT to align with the values and experiences of the served population rather than imposing Western norms of emotional expression.

Step 4: Evaluate EFT's Relevance and Cultural Adaptations Needed

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To enhance the cultural relevance of EFT to individuals who prefer a more reserved emotional expression, for instance Chinese American clients, several adaptations are recommended (Franz et al., 2023). For individual therapy, incorporating psychoeducation about the role of emotions in mental health can help demystify the therapeutic process. It is important to normalize emotional suppression as a culturally adaptive strategy rather than pathologizing it. Therapists should explore emotions within the broader context of family and community dynamics, recognizing that emotional well-being is often interconnected with relational harmony. In couples therapy, attention should be given to hierarchical relationship dynamics, where one partner may dominate emotional expression. Providing opportunities for individual sessions within couples therapy can facilitate more honest emotional processing. Additionally, focusing on low-arousal emotions, such as calmness and harmony, aligns with cultural norms and can help clients feel more comfortable engaging in emotional work.

Step 5: Generate New Hypotheses and Research Questions

The application of the CLA generates new hypotheses and research questions regarding the integration of EFT with Chinese American clients. It is hypothesized that Chinese American individuals and couples who strongly identify with collectivist values may be more motivated to engage in emotional growth if it is framed in terms of collective benefits, such as family harmony. Acculturation levels are also expected to influence emotional expression, with higher levels of acculturation potentially leading to greater openness in therapy. Key research questions include how Chinese American clients perceive EFT compared to more directive therapies, the impact of acculturation stress on emotional regulation within couples, and the influence of

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gender roles on emotional expression in therapy. These hypotheses and questions underscore the need for further research to develop culturally responsive EFT interventions.

Regarding the adaptation of emotionally based couples groups for immigrants, Wong et al.'s (2017) study on Chinese immigrant couples living in Canada provides valuable insights into the necessary adaptations of Western value-based psychotherapy groups for culturally diverse populations. Wong et al. (2017) suggest that structuring the group in a psychoeducational format can create a safer environment for individuals from collectivist backgrounds, where emotional expression is often discouraged. This format helps participants engage with emotional content more comfortably, reducing the stigma commonly associated with traditional psychotherapy. Second, there is a need for additional coverage of foundational concepts, such as attachment theory and the role of emotions in adult relationships. Since these concepts are rooted in Western psychological frameworks, providing clear explanations can help participants understand their relevance to relational dynamics within their own cultural contexts.

Moreover, the integration of excerpts from religious teachings and unique cultural values can be an effective strategy to bridge potential gaps in trust toward Western-based psychotherapeutic models. This approach fosters a sense of cultural relevance and acceptance, particularly among communities with strong spiritual foundations. Lastly, partnerships with community organizations and ethnocultural groups are essential to reduce barriers related to cost, accessibility, language, and cultural stigma. Collaborating with trusted community settings can enhance a program's reach and effectiveness, ensuring that interventions are both culturally sensitive and widely accessible (Wong et al., 2017).

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Considering the findings above, the marital program will be constructed into two major themes, each with its own subthemes. The first theme will focus on psychoeducation related to immigration and the challenges that accompany it, as these concepts are knowledge-based, require limited personal and relational disclosure, and provide a safe context for the group to build trust. The psychoeducational format aligns well with the FLE construct, ensuring a smooth transition from cognitive to experiential learning and integration. This foundation also fosters mutual support among participants, preparing them for the next stage of work.

The second theme will focus on applying EFT-C's five-stage intervention framework to enhance couples' effective communication and emotional connection. Additional effort will be dedicated to introducing foundational psychotherapy concepts, such as attachment theory and emotional processing, to facilitate deeper learning, reflection, and application within couples' relationships.

Application: Workshop Proposal

Workshop Title

Rooted Together: Cultivating Emotional Bonds in a New Homeland

Workshop Overview

This workshop is designed for immigrant couples who are building their lives and relationships in a new cultural landscape. " Rooted Together: Cultivating Emotional Bonds in a New Homeland " focuses on strengthening marital bonds and enhancing communication to support couples as they navigate the challenges associated with the acculturation process.

Couples will be equipped with practical tips to manage acculturation-related challenges, adapt to

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cultural shifts, support each other through transitions, and build a shared vision of home and family life in Canada. The workshop also provides a platform to foster supportive networks and encourage community connections. Through interactive sessions, reflective exercises, and culturally sensitive discussions, couples will explore how to honour their roots while growing together in a new environment.

Workshop Objectives

- 1) Enhance couples' understanding of migration and its impact on relationships
- 2) Promote emotional awareness and regulation within couples
- 3) Foster secure attachment and strengthen emotional connection between partners
- 4) Identify and restructure negative interaction patterns in couples' dynamics
- 5) Build couples' resilience through positive emotional experiences and co-regulation
- 6) Foster the building of a mutual support network for immigrant couples to facilitate positive acculturation

Target

The workshop is designed for immigrant couples who have landed in Canada within the past seven years. Participation is based on self-referral, encouraging couples to join voluntarily based on their interest and needs. To reach a diverse range of couples, the workshop will be promoted through various channels, including settlement agencies, community centers, libraries, family drop-in programs, welcome center, school, counselling settings, and health authorities. These outreach efforts aim to connect with couples in spaces where they already seek support, fostering accessibility and awareness within the communities they are part of.

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Diversity Selection

The diversity selection of this marital group highly encourages an exclusive ethnic composition, as it is specifically designed to support immigrant couples navigating relationship challenges stemming from acculturation difficulties. An ethnically homogeneous group allows for a deeper exploration of the unique challenges these couples face, aligning with their cultural values and societal norms. Additionally, one of the goals of this program is to help immigrant couples build a strong cultural support network, fostering a sense of belonging and shared understanding within their community that supports positive acculturation.

Group Size

To ensure an optimal group experience and foster meaningful engagement, the group size is best limited to twelve participants (six couples). This size allows for a balance between group cohesion and individualized attention, ensuring that each couple has sufficient opportunities to share, practice skills, and receive support. A smaller group promotes emotional safety, as participants may feel more comfortable engaging in personal disclosures and vulnerable discussions within a more intimate setting. Additionally, this structure allows facilitators to effectively observe and respond to group dynamics, ensuring that all couples receive appropriate guidance and interventions without overwhelming facilitators or diluting the therapeutic impact.

Duration

The workshop is designed as a ten session series, with each session lasting two hours, conducted on a weekly basis. This structure allows couples to gradually develop an

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understanding of acculturation and its potential impact on relationship dynamics, while building skills to strengthen emotional bonds, enhance communication, and support each other through cultural transitions. The weekly format provides time for reflection and practice between sessions, promoting deeper integration of the concepts discussed.

For greater flexibility, the workshop can also be adapted into an intensive two day program, with each day comprising eight hours of interactive learning, activities, and discussions. This adaptable structure ensures that the workshop remains accessible and effective across various contexts and participant needs.

Participant Selection

Pre-group interview

To ensure the smooth integration of therapeutic concepts and to foster a supportive, culturally sensitive environment, a pre-interview with potential participants is highly encouraged. Both partners must express a willingness and openness to engage in the process with the goal of enhancing their family relationships. This includes a readiness to reflect on personal and relational dynamics, participate in exercises, and apply new strategies within their relationship. Motivation and willingness are key predictors of engagement and positive outcomes in group settings.

During the pre-group interview, the informed consent process will be thoroughly discussed to ensure that couples understand their rights, responsibilities, and the structure of the marital group. Participants will be informed that full engagement in the program is highly encouraged, as their active participation contributes to both their own progress and the overall

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group dynamics. While couples have the right to withdraw at any time, they will be made aware that leaving the group prematurely may impact not only their own learning but also the experience of other members. The confidentiality policy will be clearly outlined, including its limitations, such as the legal and ethical obligation to report cases of harm to self or others. Additionally, participants will be informed about the data collection process, which will be used solely for program evaluation and improvement while ensuring their privacy through secure storage. The potential benefits and risks of participating in a marital group will also be addressed, highlighting how the program can enhance emotional connection and relational skills, while also acknowledging that discussing sensitive topics may bring emotional discomfort. Couples will be encouraged to communicate openly about their experiences, and if they feel the group is not meeting their needs, they will be invited to schedule an individual consultation session with the facilitator. This will provide an opportunity to explore barriers, receive emotional support, and determine if additional counseling services may be beneficial. The pre-group interview serves as a vital step in preparing couples for meaningful engagement while ensuring ethical and informed participation.

Couple participation

The workshop requires both partners to participate, as the focus is on strengthening the marital relationship through shared experiences, mutual reflection, and collaborative skill-building. Active involvement from both individuals fosters a balanced dynamic and maximizes the effectiveness of the interventions. Commitment to regular attendance is encouraged, as consistency is vital for both therapeutic progress and the development of a peer support network.

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Screening for Current Crisis or Violence Issues

It is essential to screen out couples experiencing current crises or issues related to domestic violence, as these situations require specialized interventions beyond the scope of a therapeutic group setting. During the pre-group interview, facilitators will assess for signs of acute distress, safety concerns, or abusive dynamics. This ensures the psychological safety of all participants, as unresolved crises can not only re-traumatize the affected individuals but also negatively impact the emotional well-being of other group members. Couples in such situations will be referred to appropriate crisis services or specialized support.

Understanding Cultural Taboos and Relational Dynamics

The screening process will include an exploration of cultural beliefs, taboos, and current relational dynamics in order to gain insight into participants' perceptions of marriage and family roles. This understanding allows facilitators to adapt program content, ensuring that examples, case scenarios, and discussions are culturally relevant and respectful. Recognizing cultural nuances helps to avoid inadvertently reinforcing stereotypes or triggering discomfort, while fostering a more inclusive and engaging learning environment.

Language Capacity

Participants should have communicable English proficiency to actively engage in discussions, exercises, and group activities. It is common to use interpreters in most settlement or community group settings. However, in this marital group, language adaptation will only be encouraged if the facilitator speaks the participant's language, rather than relying on interpreters. This decision is based on several critical concerns, including the risk of misinterpretation, loss of

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emotional nuance, confidentiality issues, and cultural differences that may alter the intended meaning of participants' expressions.

Couples group dynamics are inherently complex and require an experienced facilitator to closely monitor group pacing, provide immediate adjustments, and respond to relational shifts in real time. The additional step of interpretation would inevitably slow down communication, create delays, and disrupt the natural flow of dialogue, making it difficult to maintain emotional attunement between partners and among group members. This can lead to frustration, disengagement, and a weakened group dynamic, ultimately reducing the effectiveness of the intervention.

Promoting Psychological Safety

The group will operate within clear guidelines to promote psychological safety, where participants feel respected, heard, and free from judgment. This includes establishing confidentiality agreements, setting clear boundaries around respectful communication, and creating a group culture that values empathy and non-judgment. Facilitators will proactively address potential power imbalances within couples to ensure that both partners feel equally empowered to participate.

Group Facilitator

The facilitation of this group is recommended to be conducted in co-facilitation format to effectively manage the nuances of both group dynamics and couple interactions. Given the emotional depth and complexity of working with couples, co-facilitation ensures better observation of relational patterns, provides backup support, and allows facilitators to address

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potential issues that could lead to relationship rupture if left unacknowledged. Ideally, at least one facilitator should have received training in EFT-C; at a minimum, they should have basic training in EFT or experience in couple work. This expertise is crucial for guiding couples through emotional processing, restructuring negative interaction patterns, and fostering secure emotional connections. The presence of two facilitators enhances emotional containment, allowing for more individualized attention to participants, better management of emotional escalations, and smoother session pacing that aligns with the diverse emotional needs of immigrant couples.

The use of helpers is encouraged to facilitate couple practice activities, ensuring that couples stay on track with session exercises and receive support in initiating relational communication. Helpers do not necessarily need to be trained in EFT but should have experience in group facilitation to effectively assist participants in engaging with the process. Since some couples may struggle with starting deeper emotional discussions or practicing new communication techniques, helpers can provide gentle guidance, reinforcement, and encouragement, helping to create a safe and structured environment for interaction. To ensure consistency in support, some basic training and a briefing on the session objectives, key facilitation strategies, and expected challenges are necessary. This preparation enables helpers to confidently assist couples, redirect interactions when needed, and enhance the overall group experience while allowing facilitators to focus on deeper therapeutic interventions and group dynamics.

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Group Content

This marital program is built on the framework of FLE and EFT-C, with the highlight on adopting cultural safety and an intersectional lens. The program is divided into two major themes with subthemes under each.

Theme One: Navigating Family Journey in New Homeland:

- 1.1) Introduce the concepts of Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation
- 1.2) Acculturative stress and the dynamics of marital relationship
- 1.3) Ambiguous loss in immigrants
- 1.4) Reorienting family tasks: financial management, work and interest, role division, parenting, sex, communication, family values.

Theme Two: Cultivating Emotional Bonds:

- 2.1) Introducing emotions and affect regulation
- 2.2) The three motivational systems in an intimate relationship: attachment, identity, and attraction/liking
- 2.3) Emotion in interactive cycles in couple relationship
- 2.4) Accessing and addressing underlying feelings
- 2.5) Restructuring the negative interaction
- 2.6) Consolidation and group closure

Session 1: Introduction to Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation

This session introduces key concepts around immigration, acculturation, and adaptation, helping couples normalize the challenges they have encountered while navigating their new

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environment. Immigration is more than just a physical relocation; it is a profound life transition that affects an individual's identity, roles, and relationships. Beyond crossing geographical borders, immigrants must also navigate emotional, social, and cultural landscapes, shaping their sense of belonging and connection. Facilitators will highlight that migration experiences vary widely, some individuals move voluntarily for work, education, or family reunification, while others, such as refugees or asylum seekers, face involuntary displacement (Schwartz et al., 2010). Recognizing these differences helps validate the diverse emotional responses to migration within the group.

To deepen participants' understanding of their own acculturation experiences, facilitators will introduce Berry's (1997) acculturation model, outlining four key strategies:

Integration – Balancing both the heritage and host cultures.

Assimilation – Fully adopting the host culture while disengaging from the heritage culture.

Separation – Maintaining the heritage culture while rejecting or resisting the host culture.

Marginalization – Feeling disconnected from both cultures.

While Berry's model provides a useful framework, facilitators will emphasize that acculturation is a dynamic, non-linear process influenced by personal, social, and systemic factors (Schwartz et al., 2010). Key influences include the context of reception, such as how welcoming or hostile the host society is toward immigrants, and reactive ethnicity, where discrimination strengthens attachment to one's heritage culture. Additionally, intersectionality plays a critical role, as factors such as race, language, religion, and immigration status shape individual acculturation experiences in unique ways.

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To foster emotional safety and connection, couples will be encouraged to share their migration stories, reflecting on their personal experiences of adaptation and how they have supported each other during difficult transitions. The session will also incorporate a positive emotional experience, such as inviting partners to acknowledge one way their spouse has helped them adjust since migration.

The session concludes by reinforcing the idea that acculturation and adaptation are ongoing, transformative processes rather than rigid, one-time adjustments. While setbacks and challenges are inevitable, couples are reminded that their shared journey can be a source of resilience, strengthening their bond as they navigate their new homeland together. By understanding immigration, acculturation, and adaptation as interconnected processes, couples gain a broader perspective on their experiences, fostering growth both individually and within their relationship.

Suggested Reflective Questions:

- Where do you see yourselves and your partner on the acculturation spectrum (integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization)? How do you perceive the location of the two of you impacting the relationship dynamics?
- How have experiences in Canada shaped your connection to your original culture and your sense of belonging in your new environment?

Session 2: Understanding Acculturative Stress and Its Impact on Marital Relationships

In Session 2, participants will learn about the concept of acculturative stress, which refers to the emotional and psychological strain experienced when adapting to a new cultural

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environment. This stress can arise from challenges such as language barriers, cultural differences, discrimination, changes in social status, and shifts in traditional gender roles (Fang et al., 2021).

The session will focus on how acculturative stress can challenge marital relationships, particularly when couples experience spousal mismatch, where one partner adapts to the new culture faster than the other. This difference in the pace of adaptation can create tension, as couples may develop conflicting values, expectations, and coping strategies (Shirpak et al., 2011). Participants will explore how these different rates of acculturation can affect emotional intimacy, communication, and overall relationship satisfaction. We will discuss how shifts in family roles, such as changes in employment status or decision-making dynamics, can contribute to feelings of frustration, loss of identity, or power struggles within the relationship (Hyman, 2008).

Additionally, the session will highlight the role of social support in mitigating the negative effects of acculturative stress. Research shows that having strong support networks can help individuals manage stress more effectively, which in turn can strengthen marital bonds (Fang et al., 2021). Understanding these dynamics will help couples recognize that the challenges they face are common experiences for many immigrant families and that with awareness and communication, they can navigate these changes together.

By the end of this session, participants will gain a deeper understanding of how acculturative stress affects both individual well-being and relationship dynamics, and they will learn strategies to support each other through the process of cultural adaptation.

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Suggested Reflective Questions:

- Since migrating, what have been the biggest changes or challenges you've faced as a couple?
- What aspects of your new life feel stressful or overwhelming for you? How does that stress show up in your relationship?
- How do you and your partner typically respond to stress? Are your coping styles similar or different?

Session 3: Understanding Ambiguous Loss and Its Impact on Immigrant Couples

In Session 3, participants will explore the concept of ambiguous loss, a unique type of loss experienced by many immigrants. Unlike traditional forms of loss that involve clear endings, ambiguous loss is characterized by its lack of closure, making it difficult to process emotionally. Immigrant couples often face ambiguous loss in two key ways: through the physical absence yet psychological presence of loved ones left behind in their country of origin, and the psychological absence yet physical presence of family members who may be emotionally distant due to the stresses of migration (Solheim et al., 2022). For immigrant couples, ambiguous loss can manifest as feelings of grief and disconnection related to the people, places, and cultural identities they have left behind. Couples may struggle with a sense of "loss of homeland," grappling with questions such as, "Where do I belong?" or "Will I ever feel at home again?" This can create an ongoing sense of mourning for the life they once had, even as they try to build a new one in Canada (Perez & Arnold-Berkovits, 2019).

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A critical concept in understanding ambiguous loss is boundary ambiguity, which refers to the uncertainty about who belongs in the family system and what roles they should play. This can be especially challenging for immigrant couples as they redefine their identities within new cultural and relational contexts. For example, shifts in gender roles or parenting responsibilities after migration can create confusion and tension, as partners navigate new expectations while still holding onto past identities (Solheim et al., 2022).

To address the unsettled feeling stemming from ambiguous loss, this session focuses on helping couples recognize, validate, and process ambiguous loss as a key emotional experience in migration. Facilitators will guide couples to explore their personal experiences of loss, such as missing family, cultural traditions, or a sense of community, while also acknowledging the spousal mismatch that can arise when partners cope with migration at different paces. Through structured discussions, couples will reflect on how ambiguous loss has affected their emotional connection, communication, and ability to support one another. Special attention will be placed on creating emotional safety, allowing couples to express their feelings without judgment while recognizing that reactions to loss can vary based on personality, cultural background, and coping styles. The session will also introduce strategies for processing ambiguous loss together, including naming the loss to validate emotions, finding new meaning in their migration journey, bridging connections by integrating past and present identities, and building emotional support by fostering open and compassionate conversations. To strengthen relational bonds, facilitators will incorporate positive emotional experiences, such as

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inviting couples to express gratitude for each other at the start of the session to set a supportive tone.

Cultural sensitivity is key in this discussion, with facilitators adjusting emotional narratives to align with participants' backgrounds, using terms like "feeling embarrassed" rather than "shame" if more culturally appropriate. The session will conclude with a reflection on relational growth, where couples identify one way they can support each other moving forward, reinforcing that acknowledging and processing ambiguous loss together can strengthen resilience and deepen emotional intimacy.

Suggested Reflective Questions:

- How do you usually cope with feelings of loss or disconnection related to migration?
- Do you and your partner express feelings of grief or loss in similar ways, or do you handle them differently?
- Are there unspoken emotions related to migration that you've been holding back from sharing with your partner? Why might those be?

Session 4: Reorienting Family Tasks in the Context of Migration

In Session 4, couples will explore how migration influences their family roles and responsibilities, requiring them to reorient family tasks in alignment with their new cultural and social environment. Migration often disrupts established patterns within families, creating both challenges and opportunities for growth. This session focuses on helping couples understand these shifts and develop new strategies to maintain strong, supportive family relationships.

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Couples will learn that reorienting family tasks involves more than adapting to new routines; it requires a deliberate reflection on changes in roles, expectations, and responsibilities within the family unit. Drawing from Falicov 's (2019) multicontextual family life cycle framework, participants will examine how factors such as acculturation, socio-economic changes, and evolving gender norms influence family dynamics. For example, traditional roles around financial management may shift if one partner becomes the primary breadwinner, leading to adjustments in decision-making processes and household responsibilities.

To support this transition, the session will introduce strategies for co-creating new family roles, encouraging couples to develop a shared vision for their family while honoring their cultural values. Topics will include navigating financial pressures, adjusting parenting styles to balance cultural heritage and new norms, and establishing effective communication patterns to manage evolving responsibilities. To strengthen problem-solving skills, facilitators will guide couples in mapping out their family tasks together, identifying challenges, and exploring what has helped or hindered their ability to work as a team. Positive emotional experiences will be integrated by encouraging couples to acknowledge their partner's contributions and express appreciation for the ways they support one another, setting a constructive and collaborative tone.

Cultural sensitivity remains central to this discussion, with facilitators recognizing the emotional weight of role transitions and identity shifts. Adjustments will be made to ensure that conversations around gender roles, authority, and family leadership align with diverse cultural perspectives. The session will conclude with a reflection on relational growth, prompting

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couples to identify one small yet meaningful change they can implement to navigate family roles together with mutual respect, adaptability, and emotional connection.

Suggested Reflective Questions:

- How have your roles and responsibilities within the family changed since migrating to Canada?
- Are there any tasks you now handle that you didn't before? How do you feel about these changes?
- What family roles or routines from your country of origin do you miss or wish to maintain?
- Have there been any unexpected role reversals in your relationship? How have you both adjusted to this?

Session 5: Introducing Emotions and Affect Regulation

Starting from this session, the focus of the program will shift from the broader immigration and acculturation experience to the intimate dynamics of couple relationships. This transition requires more personal disclosure and emotional expression, which may feel unfamiliar or vulnerable for some participants, especially those from cultural backgrounds where emotions are not openly discussed. Facilitators must be mindful of this shift, ensuring that participants feel at ease with the transition while allowing space for deeper emotional exploration. Adjusting the pacing is essential, moving at a speed that respects each participant's comfort level while gently encouraging engagement in the emotional work necessary for relational growth.

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This session introduces the fundamental role of emotions and affect regulation in fostering healthy and secure marital relationships. Migration often adds layers of emotional complexity, bringing cultural adjustment stressors, identity shifts, and family role changes. Understanding how emotions function within intimate relationships provides couples with a framework to manage these challenges more effectively.

Drawing from EFT (Greenberg, 2021), participants will learn that emotions are not just abstract feelings but complex experiences involving physiological reactions, cognitive appraisals, and behavioural responses. Emotions serve three key functions:

Action tendency – preparing individuals to respond to situations (e.g., fear triggering the urge to flee from danger).

Information processing – signaling needs and environmental demands (e.g., sadness indicating a need for comfort).

Primary communication – conveyed through nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice.

These emotional signals play a crucial role in intimate relationships, as partners respond more to each other's emotional expressions than to words alone. Misinterpreting or suppressing emotions can lead to miscommunication, emotional disconnection, and unresolved tension in relationships.

Couples will also be introduced to affect regulation, which refers to the ability to manage and respond to emotional experiences in a healthy way (Greenberg, 2021). Emotion regulation is not about suppressing feelings but rather about identifying, processing, and constructively

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expressing emotions (Greenberg, 2021). This is particularly important for individuals from cultures where emotional expression is discouraged or devalued, as suppressing emotions can lead to resentment, misunderstandings, and emotional withdrawal in relationships. For many immigrants, learning how to express emotions in a new cultural environment can create tension and confusion in their relationships. Facilitators will normalize these experiences, helping participants reduce feelings of shame or inadequacy around emotional expression.

Participants will also explore the distinction between primary and secondary emotions. Primary emotions (such as fear, sadness, anger, and joy) are immediate reactions to events and often serve adaptive functions, providing valuable information about one's needs. Secondary emotions (such as guilt, shame, or resentment) are responses to primary emotions and can sometimes obscure the underlying emotional experience. Recognizing this distinction helps couples move beyond surface-level conflicts and address the deeper emotional needs driving their interactions.

By the end of this session, couples will have a foundational understanding of how emotions shape their thoughts, behaviours, and relationship dynamics. They will learn strategies to enhance emotional awareness, expression, and regulation, creating pathways for deeper connection, improved communication, and greater relational security. This knowledge will serve as a critical foundation for subsequent sessions, which will explore emotional cycles, addressing underlying feelings, and restructuring negative interaction patterns.

Suggested Reflective Questions:

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- How do you usually recognize when you're feeling a strong emotion? Are there physical signs, thoughts, or behaviours that stand out?
- Are there emotions you find easier to express? Are there others you tend to suppress or avoid? Why do you think that is?
- In your family or culture of origin, how were emotions typically expressed or managed? How has that influenced the way you handle emotions in your relationship?
- When you feel angry or frustrated, is there often another emotion underneath, like sadness, fear, or disappointment?
- Can you recall a time when sharing your feelings with your partner helped resolve a conflict or brought you closer together? What made that experience meaningful?

Session 6: The Three Motivational Systems in Intimate Relationships

In this session, the focus deepens into the core emotional drivers of intimate relationships—attachment, identity, and attraction/liking. While previous sessions built emotional awareness, this session helps couples understand the motivational systems that shape relationship patterns. Facilitators must be attuned to participants' emotional responses, ensuring they feel safe while engaging in self-reflection and open discussions. Balancing structure with flexibility is key, allowing couples to explore these concepts at a pace that respects their emotional and cultural boundaries.

In this session, participants will explore the three core motivational systems that drive emotions and behaviours in intimate relationships. Understanding these systems helps

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couples identify the underlying emotional needs shaping their interactions, particularly within the context of migration, where cultural shifts can amplify relational challenges.

According to Goldman and Greenberg (2013), these motivational systems are rooted in biological and emotional frameworks, influencing how individuals form connections, define themselves, and maintain intimacy with their partners:

Attachment is the foundational system governing the human need for security, emotional closeness, and connection. Adult romantic relationships often mirror early attachment bonds, where partners seek safety and comfort. When attachment needs are unmet, for instance, due to emotional distance or fear of abandonment, it can trigger distress, anxiety, or withdrawal behaviours. Couples will reflect on how migration-related stressors may challenge their sense of attachment security and explore ways to maintain emotional connections despite external pressures.

Identity refers to how individuals view themselves within the relationship and how they seek validation and recognition from their partner. For immigrant couples, identity may be in flux as they navigate new cultural roles and expectations. Conflicts often arise when a partner perceives a threat to their sense of self, leading to power struggles, defensiveness, or emotional withdrawal. Recognizing these dynamics helps couples understand how self-worth and autonomy influence relationship satisfaction.

Attraction/Liking encompasses the positive emotions that foster intimacy, such as admiration, fondness, and sexual desire. While attachment and identity focus on emotional security and self-concept, attraction/liking sustains the joy, excitement, and warmth in a

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relationship. This system highlights the importance of nurturing shared experiences, expressing appreciation, and fostering emotional attunement to maintain a vibrant and fulfilling connection. Building on these concepts, Timulak et al., (2019) emphasizes the importance of creating positive emotional experiences during the therapeutic process. Positive experiences in therapy can counteract patterns of negativity, providing couples with emotional "safe spaces" where vulnerability is met with empathy and support. Facilitators will integrate structured exercises to help couples identify, appreciate, and reinforce moments of positive emotional connection in their relationship.

Additionally, culturally appropriate practices will be incorporated to enhance emotional safety. Acknowledging cultural norms around emotional expression, incorporating values from religious or spiritual traditions, and respecting diverse family structures can make discussions more relevant and comfortable for participants. This cultural sensitivity is crucial, especially for couples from backgrounds where expressing vulnerability is stigmatized or discouraged.

By the end of this session, participants will gain insight into how attachment, identity, and attraction/liking shape their relationship patterns. They will also learn strategies to cultivate positive emotional experiences, both within therapy and in daily life, as a way to deepen emotional connection, strengthen resilience, and nurture a more fulfilling relationship.

Suggested Reflective Questions:

- How has migration or cultural adaptation affected your sense of emotional security in your relationship?

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- When do you feel most emotionally connected and secure with your partner?
- Have there been moments when you felt your identity was challenged or misunderstood in the relationship? How did you respond?
- What activities or shared experiences help strengthen the emotional and physical connection in your relationship?

Session 7: Emotion in Interactive Cycles in Couple Relationships

In Session 7, participants will explore how emotions function within interactive cycles in couple relationships, focusing on how emotional responses often create repetitive patterns of interaction that can either strengthen or strain the relationship. Understanding these cycles helps immigrant couples identify how their emotional reactions stemming from the migration experience influence one another, contributing to either connection or disconnection (Woldarsky Meneses & Gibb, 2024) .

EFT-C emphasizes that emotional expression and regulation are central to relationship dynamics. In distressed relationships, couples often get stuck in rigid negative interaction cycles where unexpressed vulnerable emotions, such as fear, sadness, or shame, are masked by secondary emotions like anger, defensiveness, or withdrawal. For example, one partner might express frustration (a secondary emotion) when feeling unseen or unimportant (a primary emotion), prompting the other partner to withdraw. This withdrawal reinforces feelings of abandonment, intensifying the negative interaction cycle.

EFT-C highlights the importance of slowing down these negative interactions cycles to help partners identify and express their underlying vulnerable emotions (Greenberg & Goldman,

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2013). This process creates space for new emotional experiences that promote empathy, validation, and connection. Therapists facilitate this by helping couples recognize their patterns, access primary emotions, and practice responding to each other with emotional responsiveness rather than defensiveness.

Special attention at this stage is the importance of the therapist's role in promoting acceptance of emotions to facilitate vulnerability expression. Kula et al. (2021) emphasize that when therapists actively support partners in accepting both their own and each other's emotions, it fosters a safe environment where individuals feel less judged and more open to sharing their deeper feelings. This emotional acceptance is key to helping couples move beyond surface-level conflicts, allowing them to engage in meaningful emotional work that strengthens their connection and promotes healing.

Suggested Reflective Questions:

- When you and your partner experience conflict, what typical patterns or cycles do you notice?
- Do you tend to withdraw, shut down, become defensive, or escalate when feeling hurt or unheard?
- What emotions are often present during these interactions? Are there deeper feelings beneath the surface?
- How do these negative patterns impact your emotional connection and overall relationship satisfaction?

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Session 8: Accessing and Addressing Underlying Feelings

In Session 8, participants will focus on accessing and addressing underlying feelings, which is a core process in strengthening emotional bonds within couples. A primary mechanism of change in EFT-C is helping partners identify and express their underlying vulnerable emotions, such as fear, sadness, or shame, rather than relying on secondary emotions like anger or defensiveness (Greenberg & Goldman, 2013). These primary emotions often remain unspoken but significantly influence how couples interact, especially during conflicts.

The study of Kula et al. (2024) highlights the effectiveness of therapist-guided enactment interventions to promote vulnerability sharing between partners. Enactments involve guiding couples to directly share their emotions with each other, moving beyond surface-level issues to deeper emotional needs. Therapists play a crucial role in this process by setting a meaningful systemic context, linking emotions to attachment or identity needs, and preparing partners to express their vulnerability in ways that feel safe. This approach encourages partners to articulate feelings that are often avoided due to fear of rejection or judgment.

For example, instead of a partner expressing frustration with statements like, "You never listen to me," they might be guided to share the underlying fear of feeling unimportant or unloved. This shift fosters empathy and emotional responsiveness from the other partner, creating opportunities for healing and reconnection.

Incorporating positive interactions is equally important, especially in a group setting where therapists may not be able to address the unique challenges of each couple individually. Starting sessions with simple activities, such as inviting couples to express

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gratitude to each other for one thing from the past week, helps set a positive tone for the group. Demonstrating reframing and rephrasing techniques with supplementary worksheets can help couples express themselves in a genuine and non-offensive way, guiding conversations in a constructive and supportive manner.

Additionally, emphasizing positive emotional experiences, such as recalling moments of effective coping or times when vulnerability led to deeper connection, can help couples resource themselves emotionally. This approach builds resilience and confidence in expressing vulnerable emotions, as couples learn to associate vulnerability not just with risk but also with opportunities for growth, empathy, and closeness.

Cultural sensitivity remains essential in this process. Facilitators should be mindful of cultural norms around emotional expression, adjusting language and incorporating culturally relevant metaphors, values, or teachings to create a safe space.

Suggested Reflective Questions:

- When you feel hurt or upset in your relationship, what emotions do you notice on the surface? What deeper feelings might be underneath?
- How do cultural values or family upbringing influence how you express or suppress certain emotions?
- How can you draw on past positive experiences to support each other when facing emotional challenges in the future?

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Session 9: Restructuring the Negative Interaction

In Session 9, the focus shifts to restructuring negative interaction patterns within couple relationships. EFT-C aims to help partners break out of rigid, repetitive emotional cycles that maintain conflict and emotional disconnection. These cycles are often driven by unmet attachment needs, identity-related vulnerabilities, and maladaptive emotional responses that reinforce negative dynamics (Goldman & Greenberg, 2013).

The restructuring process involves creating new emotional experiences that foster emotional accessibility, responsiveness, and engagement between partners (Goldman & Greenberg, 2013). Facilitators will emphasize that restructuring is not just about stopping negative cycles but also about replacing them with more secure, emotionally engaged ways of relating. Facilitator will help couples recognize the positive changes they have experienced since learning and practicing the skills from this program. By reflecting on their progress, couples can see how they have successfully de-escalated conflicts by addressing each other's emotional needs with greater accuracy, enhancing their emotional connection. Facilitators will guide couples to use these positive experiences as a foundation to reconstruct negative patterns, reinforcing the idea that change is possible when partners respond to each other's underlying emotions rather than reacting defensively.

Couples will also explore how previous emotional wounds, particularly those stemming from unmet childhood needs, may unconsciously shape their relational patterns. According to Goldman and Greenberg (2013), when partners become emotionally dysregulated in response to their partner's perceived unavailability, their reactions are often rooted in past experiences

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rather than the immediate situation. This means that conflict is sometimes less about the partner's behaviour and more about how it activates deeper emotional wounds. The awareness of the need to enhance self-soothing and transform maladaptive emotional responses is another key learning in this session.

While intensive individual work would not be appropriate nor possible in a group setting, raising awareness about deep-seated childhood unmet needs and how they impact relationship dynamics can motivate couples to seek further therapeutic support beyond the group. Recognizing that some emotional struggles are tied to past experiences rather than present relational issues can be empowering, helping couples understand that relational healing is an ongoing process that may require deeper individual or couples' therapy.

Facilitators should be attuned to emotional intensity, adjusting the session's pacing to ensure that participants feel safe and supported while engaging in this deeper level of emotional work. The session will conclude with an opportunity for couples to reflect on how they can continue self-regulating emotions and creating secure interactions beyond the group setting. By the end of this session, couples will have the tools to interrupt negative cycles, regulate emotional responses, and engage with their partners in a more constructive and emotionally attuned manner. For any couples who may feel the group is not meeting their needs or who are not benefitting, they will be invited to schedule an individual consultation session with the facilitator to explore any potential barriers and challenges, and to plan for follow-up support. This sets the stage for the final session, where couples will consolidate their learning and plan for continued relational growth.

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Suggested Reflective Questions:

- How do you typically calm yourself when you're feeling overwhelmed or upset? What helps you stay grounded during difficult conversations?
- What role does forgiveness play in your relationship? How do you and your partner repair emotional injuries after a conflict?

Session 10: Consolidation and Group Closure

In Session 10, the focus is on consolidating the learning from the previous sessions and providing a meaningful group closure experience. This session helps couples reflect on their growth, celebrate progress, and identify strategies to maintain the gains achieved throughout the program. Consolidation fosters a sense of completion, while group closure honours the connections formed within the group, reinforcing the importance of ongoing emotional support in their relationships. The session tasks are listed as follows:

1. Review key concepts from the program.
2. Reflect on personal and relational growth, highlighting changes in communication, emotional connection, and conflict resolution.
3. Identify ongoing challenges and set intentions for continued growth beyond the group setting.
4. Foster group cohesion and closure, allowing participants to express gratitude and acknowledge the shared journey.

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5. This final session serves as both a celebration of growth and a launchpad for continued emotional connection beyond the group, reinforcing the resilience and strengths each couple has developed.

Ethical Considerations

Follow-Up Plan for Couples Needing Additional Support

For couples who do not seem to be benefiting fully from the group sessions, a thoughtful follow-up plan can provide reassurance, additional support, and alternative pathways to deepen their learning. First, it is important to normalize the challenges of integrating and practicing new relational skills, especially for immigrant couples managing multiple responsibilities. Struggling with immediate implementation does not indicate failure but is a natural part of the learning and adaptation process.

To offer more personalized support, couples are welcome to schedule an individual consultation with the facilitator. In these sessions, the facilitator can provide emotional support, validate their frustrations, and help them make sense of their struggles. This space allows for recognizing progress, even in small steps, and instilling hope for continued growth.

Additionally, the facilitator can explore specific barriers that may be preventing couples from fully benefiting, such as external stressors, unresolved emotional wounds, or difficulties in emotional expression. By identifying these challenges, tailored guidance can be provided to help couples adjust their expectations and implement small, manageable steps toward healthier relational patterns. If deeper emotional wounds or persistent struggles emerge, couples are encouraged to seek further professional counseling support. The facilitator can provide referrals

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to culturally competent therapists or counseling services that align with their needs.

Emphasizing that seeking professional help is a proactive and courageous step can reduce stigma and empower couples to continue working on their relationship.

To foster ongoing connection and reinforcement of learning, post-group follow-ups can be offered, such as monthly check-ins via email, virtual Question & Answer sessions, or optional booster sessions. Additionally, creating opportunities for peer connections, where couples who have successfully completed the program can share their experiences, can provide valuable encouragement and support. This comprehensive follow-up plan reassures struggling couples that they are not alone, equipping them with additional tools and resources to continue their relational journey at their own pace.

Other Considerations

Given that there may be a limited number of facilitators with experience in both couple work and working with immigrant populations, it is also recommended to adapt this program into a Train-the-Trainer format. This approach will help build the capacity of professionals to deliver the program, even if they have limited experience working with the target audience.

Conclusion and Personal Reflexivity

Writing this capstone project has been a deeply personal and transformative journey, mirroring my own experiences as an immigrant navigating the complexities of acculturation. As I wrote this in the final year of my Master's program, I found myself struggling to balance multiple commitments, constantly pulled between academic responsibilities, professional aspirations, and the demands of family life. At times, I felt on the edge of burnout, questioning

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the purpose of my relentless pursuit to re-establish my career and identity in Canada, often at the cost of my emotional well-being, my presence in my children's lives, and the quality of my marital relationship. These conflicting emotions gave rise to ambiguous loss, filling me with uncertainty and fear, making me question whether my decision to immigrate was the right one. My fully occupied schedule left little space for self-reflection, forcing me to function on auto-pilot mode, suppressing the agitation within me rather than actively processing it.

Through this lived experience, I intimately understood the intricate layers of couple dynamics within the immigration experience. My own marital satisfaction was challenged, fluctuating in response to external pressures, available resources, and the emotional states of both partners. I experienced firsthand the variability in relational resilience, recognizing how moments of dysregulation could create emotional distance, while access to the right emotional and contextual resources could facilitate positive rebounds. This nuanced and multi-layered relational process deeply informed my understanding of immigrant couple dynamics, offering me a lived perspective that enriched my academic exploration of this topic.

Surprisingly, writing this capstone provided me with an unexpected comfort zone, a space where I could step away from my own emotional turbulence and examine these challenges through a broader, more systematic and theoretical lens. This shift in perspective allowed me to make sense of my struggles as part of the larger acculturation process, rather than isolating them as personal failures. In doing so, I felt a profound sense of validation, normalization, and connection, realizing that I was not alone in this journey. This process of psychoeducation became an anchor for my own emotional regulation, offering stability amidst the restlessness of

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my ongoing adaptation. With this newfound clarity, I became more mindful of the negative interaction cycles in my marriage and more equipped to interrupt and transform them into opportunities for relational growth.

At the same time, this reflection also led me to recognize the privileges I hold within my unique intersectionality. While my identity as an immigrant presents its own challenges, I acknowledge the resources and opportunities available to me, which have shaped my ability to navigate this journey with resilience and insight. This realization helped me reframe my struggles, allowing me to approach them with gratitude rather than just hardship.

Inspired by my own experiences, I truly hope that this capstone project serves as a valuable resource for peers who are either supporting immigrant families professionally or personally going through similar challenges. It is my wish that this work contributes to a broader dialogue about the emotional complexities of migration, couple dynamics, and acculturation, fostering a supportive and inclusive community where transformation and growth can flourish.

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