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Cultural diversity within couples: Risk or chance? A meta-analytic review of relationship satisfaction

Maximiliane Uhlich[1] | **Tamara Luginbuehl**[2] | **Dominik Schoebi**[1]

[1]Department of Psychology, University of Fribourg, Fribourg, Switzerland

[2]Department of Psychology, State University of New York at Stony Brook, Switzerland

Correspondence
Dominik Schoebi and Maximiliane Uhlich, Department of Psychology, University of Fribourg, Rue P.A. de Faucigny 2, 1700 Fribourg, Switzerland.
Email: dominik.schoebi@unifr.ch and maximiliane.uhlich@gmail.com

Abstract

Previous research has suggested that couples with different sociocultural backgrounds (DISC) are less stable and less satisfied than culturally homogeneous couples, putatively because of the stressors these couples face, for example, discrimination. However, a review of the literature suggests that findings across studies are somewhat mixed, and correlates of different sociodemographic variables are potentially important. We identified and reviewed 20 studies that examined relationship satisfaction in couples with different and homogeneous sociocultural backgrounds so that comparisons between the two groups were possible and effect sizes could be computed. Overall, our meta-analysis found no evidence for DISC couples being less satisfied than culturally homogeneous couples, challenging this assumption. Only a few effect sizes, with large confidence intervals,

Statement of Relevance: This review summarizes the current literature on relationship satisfaction in DISC couples. To our best knowledge, it is the first review summarizing the evidence on this growing population. This work contributes to the understanding of intimate relationships of this significant minority and helps in reducing stereotypes by contextualizing the evidence.

suggested lower relationship satisfaction in DISC couples than in culturally homogenous couples, and these differences may be explained by demographic correlates. Based on our findings, we provide recommendations for relationship researchers conducting research on DISC couples.

KEYWORDS

intercultural couples, marital quality, non-Western, relationship satisfaction

1 | INTRODUCTION

In many countries, the frequency of couples with partners of different sociocultural backgrounds (DISC) has been rising in the past two decades (e.g., Hiew et al., 2015a; Joyner & Kao, 2005). In the United States, for example, in 17% of all marriages, partners are from DISC (Pew Research Center, 2021). The overall number of such socioculturally mixed couples within a society is likely to be even higher when unmarried couples are also taken into account (Lewis & Ford-Robertson, 2010).

Nevertheless, the current literature on intimate relationships is predominantly based on studies investigating mixed samples, likely consisting of a majority of culturally homogeneous couples and a small proportion of socioculturally diverse couples, but without specifically reporting on or examining this subgroup. In light of the growing number of socioculturally diverse couples, it should be of general interest to investigate the quality of these relationships, and whether they differ from culturally homogeneous relationships. Of particular importance is knowledge on relationship satisfaction, a key indicator of relationship functioning and a central factor contributing to the stability of a relationship (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

The goal of this report is, first, to review existing literature that compared levels of relationship satisfaction between socioculturally diverse couples and socioculturally homogeneous couples. Second, we examine whether and in which way cultural heterogeneity within a couple is relevant to intimate relationship quality. To this end, we report a meta-analysis of group comparisons of relationship satisfaction between socioculturally diverse versus socioculturally homogeneous couples. In addition, we review effect sizes of group differences in relationship satisfaction between socioculturally diverse couples and the respective culturally homogeneous subgroups of each of the partners.

In the remainder of the introduction, after clarifying issues of terminology, we discuss potential implications of culture and cultural differences for relationship processes. We then review research on culturally variant norms, values, and sociodemographic correlates that have been discussed as (potentially) impacting intimate relationships.

1.1 | Terminology

Multiple labels have been used to describe couples in which partners have diverse sociocultural backgrounds. Some authors used the expression *interethnic* (e.g., Gaines et al., 2015), others

intercultural (e.g., Lainiala & Säävälä, 2013), *mixed marriage* (Skowroński et al., 2014), *intermarriage* (Obúcina, 2016), *binational* (Klein, 2001), *bi-ethnic* (Pereyra et al., 2015), or *interracial* relationships (e.g., Bratter & Eschbach, 2006). Most studies did not specifically define the terms culture, race, and ethnicity, and often studies relied on participants' self-identified culture or race. Scholars such as Phinney (1996) refer to ethnicity as encompassing race as well as culture, although the terms *race* and *ethnicity* are here sometimes also used interchangeably. However, in general, the term *ethnicity* is considered broader than race or culture (Markus, 2008) and it usually incorporates several racial or cultural groups (Landrine & Klonoff, 1996), such as Chinese, Korean, or Japanese, identifying as Asian Americans (Craig-Henderson & Lewis, 2015). The term *race* is mostly used as a social category based on apparent physical differences, such as skin color, and involves a certain overlap with biological heritage (Gaines et al., 2015).

For this review, we define couples with DISC broadly as unions composed of partners who identify, or are identified, as having a cultural, racial, or ethnic background that differs from the partner's cultural, racial, or ethnic background. We contrast these couples with couples in which both partners share similar cultural, racial, or ethnic backgrounds, and we will use the term *culturally homogeneous couples* throughout the paper when referring to them. Although, the term *Western* is used inconsistently in different contexts, referring to geographical locations, regions with a certain historical background ("the occident"), or more narrowly to cultural contexts with predominant roots in Western Europe, we use "Western" when referring to North America, the majority of Europe (specifically countries belonging to the European Union), and Australia.

1.2 | Culture and its implications for relationship processes

Culture can be defined as a collective programming of the mind, which differentiates members of one group from another group (Hofstede, 2011) and is passed on from one generation to the next (Matsumoto et al., 2008). It comprises a collection of meanings and practices that inform and guide individuals in their interactions with their social environments (Campos & Kim, 2017; Kitayama et al., 2002), and thus shapes individuals' experiences and behaviors in the social domain, including in the formation, regulation, and maintenance of intimate relationships (X. Fu et al., 2001; Kalmijn & Van Tubergen, 2006). If two relational partners hold divergent culturally shaped norms, values, and practices that concern core processes in an intimate relationship, this is likely to impact their activities as a couple, their interactions, and their relational experiences more broadly. The literature emphasizes several such dimensions that shape social organization and interaction. The most common among them tend to be individualism versus collectivism (Hofstede, 2011;Triandis, 2001), or independence versus interdependence (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Although these have served well to contrast Western from some other cultures, recent approaches in cultural psychology emphasize that considering different blends of culturally variant dimensions within the broader cultural categories is necessary to adequately describe and characterize cultural variation, allowing for important differentiations within broad dimensions, such as harmony collectivism and convivial collectivism (Campos & Kim, 2017). Moreover, cultural variation along similar dimensions also exists *within* broader regions and countries and may coincide with other sociocultural factors such as socioeconomic status or religion (Campos & Kim, 2017). Therefore, the findings reviewed here should be interpreted through a lens of multifaceted cultural diversity.

Differential orientations along with the broader dimensions of independence versus interdependence and individualism versus collectivism are likely relevant for how partners in a couple negotiate their relations with each other, their families of origin, and their social group (Hofstede, 2011;Triandis, 2001). Individualistic or independent orientations emphasize the uniqueness of a person, while the collectivistic, interdependent self emphasizes the social connectedness of an individual (Triandis, 2001). Whether an individual holds a more independent or interdependent orientation is likely to have implications for how close partners relate to each other in relationships (Boiger, 2019).

When partners hold more independent orientations, they value their autonomy within the relationship. In such relationships, prioritizing the own needs is considered healthy (Heine et al., 1999), and individuals create closeness and intimacy through self-disclosure (Kito, 2005). Negotiating and resolving conflict is viewed as an important mechanism to balance these individual, and sometimes conflicting, needs (Canary et al., 1995). At the same time, partners are relatively free to leave the relationship, and it is therefore especially important to signal commitment regularly (Schug et al., 2010).

This contrasts with a more interdependent orientation, which places more attention on the needs and expectations of others, such as the parents and siblings, but also the extended family and other individuals of the broader social network. Adjusting the relationship in accordance with these needs and expectations is considered functional (Morling et al., 2002). This manifests as loyalty and a sense of obligation toward family members and other important individuals from the broader social group (Rothbaum et al., 2002), and the family's approval of the relationship is highly valued (Dion & Dion, 1993). Some forms of collectivism favor conflict avoidance to maintain harmony (Rothbaum et al., 2002). This contrasts with Western societies, where conflicts regarding the interference of the family of origin is a more frequent cause of distress and a reason for divorce (Hawkins et al., 2012). These contrasting norms regarding the relations with partners' families of origin bear conflict potential for DISC couples.

Similar culturally variant preferences for intimate interactions can lead to misunderstandings if discrepant and are thus potentially relevant to relationship satisfaction in DISC couples. Westerners tend to favor direct and explicit communication, whereas individuals from some collectivistic backgrounds prefer to use more implicit and indirect ways of communicating (Gudykunst & Matsumoto, 1996). Such divergent communication preferences may make it more difficult to interpret each other's intentions and interests in the context of DISC relationships. As a consequence, divergent norms for how to negotiate conflict and interact with each other could be a challenge for DISC couples. Divergent behavioral norms may also be nested in divergent endorsement of central values. What is considered constructive communication in Western couples (e.g., Gottman & Krokoff, 1989) may have a different impact in arranged marriages in India (Yelsma & Athapilly, 1988). For instance, a recent study demonstrated that what is considered constructive communication differs between socioeconomically well-situated couples and couples with low socioeconomic status (Ross et al., 2019). Similar differences could also exist between culturally homogeneous couples and DISC couples, depending on the specific context they live in.

1.3 | Value distance and DISC relationships

One important part of culture shaping moral beliefs and promoting norms for intimate relationships and sexuality is religion (Laumann et al., 1994; Wilcox et al., 2004). A study among women

with DISC partners found Christian religiosity of the wife to be associated with lower relationship satisfaction and less intimacy when their spouse belonged to a different religion (Abu-Rayya, 2007). Thus, differences in religious norms may undermine relationship satisfaction in couples.

It is possible that DISC couples benefit less from a shared meaning space that facilitates understanding each other's expectations (X. Fu et al., 2001) and helps to find consensus in decision making (Kalmijn et al., 2005). The potential importance of developing a shared reality as a couple has been pointed out by Rossignac-Milon and Higgins (2018). Although some aspects of creating a shared reality may be independent of different cultural backgrounds (e.g., shared feelings about an artist), others may be impacted by cultural differences such as when co-constructing the reality through conversations. A similar language style in the initial phase of relationship formation has been found to predict later relationship stability (Ireland et al., 2011). Furthermore, DISC couples may lack benefits conferred by people's tendencies to choose partners who are similar to themselves regarding personality (McCrae et al., 2005), values, interests, cultural background, and education (Kalmijn, 1998), which may benefit relationship functioning (e.g., Gonzaga et al., 2007). Indeed, in DISC couples, the similarity between the values in the host country and the values endorsed in the partner's country of origin was found to be associated with higher relationship satisfaction (Lainiala & Säävälä, 2013). In both DISC and mixed samples, more discrepancy between spouses' values was associated with a higher risk for separation or divorce (Dribe & Lundh, 2012; Kalmijn et al., 2005) and lower relationship satisfaction (Acitelli et al., 2001). Moreover, couples with more discrepant values may also experience more conflict (Hohmann-Marriott & Amato, 2008).

Yet, dissimilarity could also be appealing, in that people are attracted to what they perceive as different or exotic (Yancey, 2003), and this may boost self-expansion experiences in developing relationships (Ketay et al., 2020) and confer a sense of unity, uniqueness, and identity as a couple.

1.4 | Gender differences and discrepant gender role orientations in DISC relationships

The gender constellation may be of importance in DISC couples, that is, if the gender of the DISC partner is relevant for the level of relationship satisfaction. The tendency for women to report lower relationship satisfaction (Hendrick et al., 1998) and to initiate relationship dissolution more often than men (Pettit & Bloom, 2012) extends to DISC couples (Dribe & Lundh, 2012). Moreover, women's relationship satisfaction was lower in DISC relationships than their counterparts in culturally homogeneous relationships (X. Fu et al., 2001). The observation that the level of women's acculturation, but not that of men, predicted relationship satisfaction (Abu-Rayya, 2007; Kim et al., 2012) points to the potential importance of gender roles. Indeed, acculturation was found to be associated with less conservative gender role attitudes among immigrants in the United States (Negy & Snyder, 2000), and it may be that advanced acculturation reflects less discrepancy in gender-relevant values. However, immigrants and refugees are more frequently male than female, and therefore more first-generation DISC relationships include a foreign man and a local woman (Neyrand & M'Sili, 1998). Because men tend to benefit more from traditional gender roles, they may be reluctant to adapt to more egalitarian gender attitudes, which may lead to more discrepancy and hence more conflict in DISC relationships with a relatively egalitarian partner in Western society. Women, in contrast, tend to

adapt more easily to a new culture and exhibit higher acculturation levels than men (Kim et al., 2012). Whether the wife or the husband in a DISC couple has a foreign background may thus make a difference in Western societies, and maybe more generally. Studies on relationship satisfaction and stability in DISC couples support this view, suggesting that when a man rather than a woman is the foreign spouse, DISC relationships are less satisfied (Dribe & Lundh, 2012) and less stable (Bratter & King, 2008; Neyrand & M'sili, 1998; Zhang & Van Hook, 2009).

1.5 | Minority stress and sociodemographic correlates in DISC relationships

Immigrant status not only increases divergence in culturally shaped values and norms in a relationship but also comes with specific stressors. Minority stress theory suggests that belonging to a minority exposes one to additional stressors associated with legal, social, and financial disadvantage, which impact mental and physical health outcomes (Meyer, 2003). Familiarity with such stressors is elevated in DISC couples (Gagliardi et al., 2010). Some suggest that a local partner may perceive engaging in a relationship with a partner from a foreign minority as an added investment or burden when compared to alternative local partners, which may then contribute to lower stability of DISC couples (Troy et al., 2006). This is in line with interdependence theory (e.g., Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Van Lange & Balliet, 2015), which suggests that relationships persist because of high levels of satisfaction due to a balance between costs and rewards, poor alternatives, and investments in the relationship. Not only the foreign partners but also the local partners in DISC couples experience more negative reactions, rejection, prejudice, and other forms of racism from others (Herman & Campbell, 2012; Solsberry, 1994), including their families (e.g., Shenhav et al., 2017). Although acceptance levels are rising with the increasing number of DISC couples in Western societies such as the United States (Joyner & Kao, 2005), negative attitudes toward DISC couples still persist (Z. Qian, 2005). Disapproval and receiving less support from friends, family, and the public is associated with lower relationship satisfaction in DISC couples (Shibazaki & Brennan, 1998) and constitutes a risk factor for DISC relationships.

DISC couples differ from culturally homogeneous couples, particularly those of the locally predominant cultural group, in sociodemographic characteristics, such as lower level of education, lower income, higher unemployment rate, more past relationships, and higher probability of remarriage (e.g., Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Dribe & Lundh, 2008). Several of these factors may increase the risk for relationship distress (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Interestingly, several studies that adjusted for such sociodemographic correlates found no disadvantage in terms of relationship satisfaction or stability of the relationship for DISC couples compared to culturally homogeneous couples (Feng et al., 2012; Hohmann-Marriott & Amato, 2008; Van Mol & De Valk, 2016; Weller & Rofé, 1988; Zhang & Van Hook, 2009). Specifically, factors such as limited availability of social support by family and friends and complex relationship histories with former partners accounted for differences in relationship satisfaction (Hohmann-Marriott & Amato, 2008), and lower socioeconomic status in DISC couples was predictive of lower relationship satisfaction (Weller & Rofé, 1988). Still, although DISC couples may overall be more likely to feature such risk characteristics, this is not a uniform group, and the particular cultures involved, as well as the level of acculturation and cultural diversity of the society in which they live in, play a relevant role. For example, in one study, no significant differences in perceived social support have been found between DISC couples and culturally homogeneous couples (MacNeil & Adamsons, 2014).

It is further possible that higher rates of psychological distress in immigrants may also contribute to difficulties in DISC relationships. Turkish partners in a DISC relationship with British spouses, for instance, had higher levels of depressive symptoms associated with the experience of more cultural differences in their relationship (Baltas & Steptoe, 2000). Finally, DISC couples seem to get married at an earlier stage of their relationship, which can be considered a risk factor for the relationship during the first years of marriage (Kalmijn et al., 2005). When younger age at marriage is controlled for, differences between DISC couples and the general population, regarding relationship stability, diminish (Feng et al., 2012).

1.6 | Relationship instability in DISC couples

The increased risk, stressors, or disadvantage that cultural diversity within couples may confer may take its toll on the functioning of DISC relationships and render them less satisfied with their relationship. Lower satisfaction was reported to be a reliable predictor of relationship dissolution (see e.g., Karney & Bradbury, 1995), and being in a dissatisfactory relationship may be one factor contributing to partners taking steps toward separation or divorce and the instability of a relationship (Schoebi et al., 2012). At the same time, cultural differences exist in standards regarding marriage and divorce (X. Fu, 2006). Indeed, marriages with different cultural backgrounds have been reported to be at a higher risk of divorce (Kalmijn et al., 2005). Even in Hawaii, with a high percentage and high levels of acceptance of DISC couples (X. Fu, 2006), these relationships are less stable than culturally homogenous relationships (X. Fu et al., 2001). Lower relationship stability was also found in younger DISC couples: DISC relationships in adolescents were less stable in comparison to culturally homogeneous relationships of adolescents (Wang et al., 2006).

These findings suggest that the relationship stability of DISC couples, as a result of low relationship satisfaction, tends to be lower than that of culturally homogeneous couples. However, the evidence regarding differences in relationship satisfaction between DISC couples and culturally homogeneous couples is far less clear.

2 | THE CURRENT META-ANALYTIC REVIEW

To approach the research question of whether DISC couples are less satisfied than culturally homogeneous couples, we conducted a meta-analysis, allowing us to combine the results of multiple scientific studies addressing this topic. Specifically, to examine differences between DISC couples and culturally homogeneous couples in relationship satisfaction, we screened the literature for studies that included group comparisons between DISC couples and culturally homogeneous couples on measures of relationship satisfaction (or dissatisfaction). More specifically, we sought to determine the magnitude, reliability, and direction of a group difference in relationship satisfaction by calculating a pooled estimate across studies. As each individual study tends to have some degree of error, applying meta-analytic techniques (such as a funnel and forest plot) will lead to a more accurate estimate of the overall effect (Field & Gillett, 2010). Owing to the heterogeneity in methodologies, in the measurement of relationship outcomes, and in the statistical information provided in the studies, we computed several different effect size estimates. We report Cohen's *d* to reflect the size of a group difference whenever possible (Cohen, 1988). In studies with major differences in sample sizes, we also report Hedges *g* (Hedges, 1981).

3 | METHOD

3.1 | Literature search

The literature search led to a total number of $N = 377$ articles. We used Google Scholar and Ovid to search for relevant studies, using any of the keywords *intercultural, interracial*, and *interethnic*, in combination with any of the terms *couples, relationships, marriage, relationship satisfaction*, *relationship quality*, or *relationship functioning*. We also checked the references of included studies for additional papers (see Figure 1 for more details regarding the selection process).

3.2 | Inclusion criteria

We screened all articles written in English or German for inclusion (because of the language skills of the collaborators doing the screening). In a first step, we excluded all qualitative publications, cross-cultural comparisons between couples, as well as all studies that did not examine relationship satisfaction as the outcome variable. We checked unpublished dissertations,

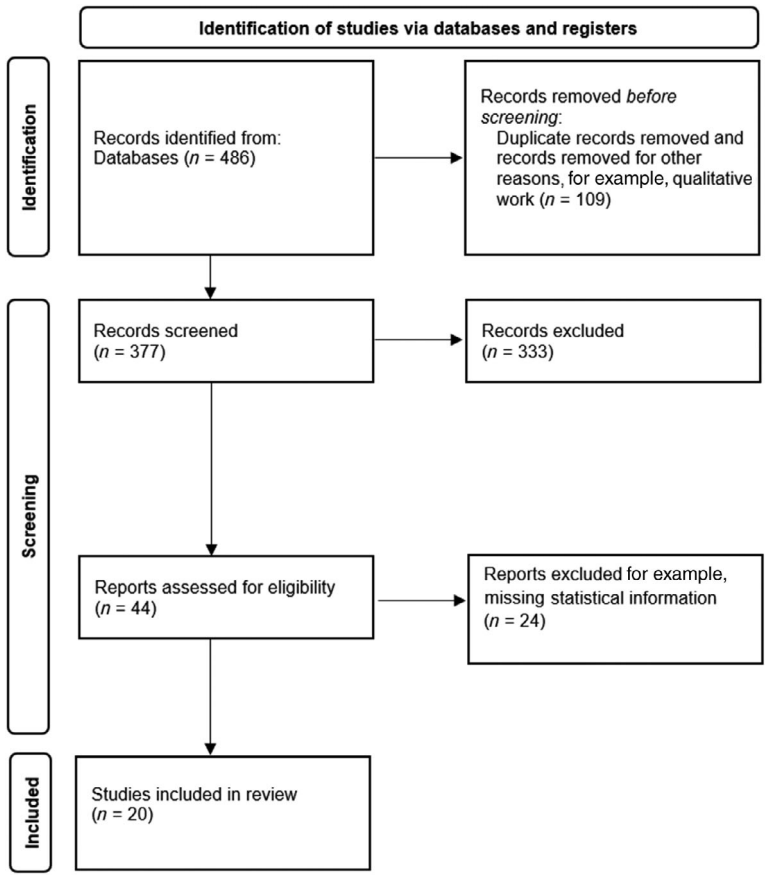

FIGURE 1 Adapted PRISMA flow diagram (Page et al., 2021) to illustrate the selection process of included studies for the meta-analytic review

reviews, as well as books (and book chapters) and included all studies published after 1980 that included comparisons between a sample of culturally homogeneous couples and a sample of DISC couples regarding relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, the studies needed to report relevant statistical information regarding the sample and outcome of interest to be able to compute effect sizes. This resulted in a total number of $n = 20$ studies, which featured considerable heterogeneity regarding sample size and country of origin of the partners (see Table 1). We first report findings from the meta-analytic comparisons between DISC couples and culturally homogeneous couples. Furthermore, we additionally report results from several subgroup analyses of DISC couples with both culturally homogeneous reference groups as well as differences between DISC couples depending on the specific gender constellation.

3.3 | Coding process and interrater agreement

Studies were coded for statistical information regarding the computation of effect sizes (e.g., mean, SD, *F*-values of ANOVAs), the size of the subsample, as well as the type of sample (individuals vs. dyadic data of couples), and descriptive data such as the involved sociocultural backgrounds and the specific instrument used to assess relationship satisfaction. We included studies measuring satisfaction as well as dissatisfaction.

To assess inter-rater agreement, all studies were first selected and coded by one person; afterward, a second person rated again the studies based on a randomly selected subsample of studies (35%). An inter-rater agreement of 93% was achieved, and any disagreements were resolved by discussion.

3.4 | Measures

Most studies used well-validated measures such as the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988), Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976) and the Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (R-DAS; Busby et al., 1995), Marital Satisfaction Inventory (MSI; Snyder, 1981) and Marital Satisfaction Inventory-Revised (MSI-R; Snyder, 1981) which measures global distress or in other words relationship dissatisfaction, Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI; Funk & Rogge, 2007), Marital Adjustment Test (MAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959), Relationship Satisfaction Scale (RSS; Heyman et al., 1994), Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (KMS; Schumm et al., 1985), the RELATionship Evaluation Questionnaire (RELATE; Busby et al., 2001), and the Personal Relationship Questionnaire (PRQ; Braiker & Kelley, 1979). The remaining studies used items measuring overall relationship satisfaction that have been used in other studies before or the authors constructed a scale themselves (X. Fu et al., 2001).

3.5 | Statistical procedure

A total of 20 studies provided relevant details to estimate a total of 41 effect sizes. For each effect size, we computed the corresponding confidence interval and *p*-value. In Table 1, we report all effect sizes including relevant subgroup comparisons (e.g., comparisons between DISC couples with both reference groups of culturally homogeneous couples).

TABLE 1 Effect sizes for comparisons between DISC couples and culturally homogeneous couples regarding relationship satisfaction

	Author	Outcome variable	Sample	Comparison (*N*)	*p*	Effect size *d*	SE *d*	CI (95%)	Effect size	Interpretation
1	Burke (2015)	Relationship satisfaction	i	DISC (1268): Non-DISC Latino (147)	.15	.07	.21	[−.11, .24]	-	No effect
2	**Canlas et al. (2015)**	**Relationship satisfaction**	**cd**	**DISC (239): Non-DISC all (409)**	**.99**	**−.14**	**.09**	**[−.30, .02]**	**-**	**No effect**
2.1	Canlas et al. (2015)	Relationship satisfaction	cd	DISC (239): Non-DISC Western (263)	.07	.09		[−.08, .27]	-	No effect
2.2	Canlas et al. (2015)	Relationship satisfaction	cd	DISC (239): Non-DISC Asian (146)	1.00	−.38		[−.59, −.17]	Small	DISC couples more satisfied than Non-DISC Asian couples
2.3	Canlas et al. (2015)	Relationship satisfaction	cd	DISC-M (77): DISC-W (162)	.18	.09		[−.18, .36]	-	No effect
3	**Chung and Lim (2011)**	**KMS**	**i**	**DISC wives (409): Non-DISC wives (474)**	**.16**	**.05**	**.08**	**[−.08, −.18]**	**-**	**No effect**
4	**Contreras et al.** (1996)	**RAS**	**c**	**DISC (54): Non-DISC all (114)**	**.47**	**.15**	**.21**	**[−.26, .56]**	**-**	**No effect**
4.1	Contreras et al. (1996)	RAS	c	DISC (54): Non-DISC Western (60)	-	.17		-	-	No effect
4.2	Contreras et al. (1996)	RAS	c	DISC (54): Non-DISC Latino (54)	-	.18		-	-	No effect
4.3	Contreras et al. (1996)	DAS	c	DISC (54): Non-DISC all (114)	-	.16		-	-	No effect
4.4	Contreras et al. (1996)	DAS	c	DISC (54): Non-DISC Western (60)	-	.18		-	-	No effect

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	Author	Outcome variable	Sample	Comparison (*N*)	*p*	Effect size *d*	SE *d*	CI (95%)	Effect size	Interpretation
4.5	Contreras et al. (1996)	DAS	c	DISC (54): Non-DISC Latino (54)	-	.19		-	-	No effect
5	**Durodoye (1997)**	**MSI**	**c**	**DISC (19): Non-DISC (19)**	**.01**	**−.57**	**.33**	**[−.34, 1.49]**	**Medium**	**DISC couples more dissatisfied**
6	Forry et al. (2007)	PRQ	c	DISC-M (52): DISC-W (24)	-	.35		-	Small	Corresponding mean values not reported
7	**X. Fu et al. (2001)**	**Relationship Satisfaction**	***c***	**DISC (146): Non-DISC (130)**	**.49**	**.00 (g* = .00)**	**.12**	**[−.23, .24]**	-	**No effect**
8	**Halford et al. (2018)**	**CSI**	**cd**	**DISC (67): Non-DISC all (130)**	**.59**	**−.02**	**.08**	**[−.32, .27]**	-	**No effect**
8.1	Halford et al. (2018)	CSI	cd	DISC (67): Non-DISC Western (64)	<.001	.42		[.08, .77]	Small	Non-DISC Western couples more satisfied than DISC couples
8.2	Halford et al. (2018)	CSI	cd	DISC (67): Non-DISC Asian (66)	1.00	−.47		[−.81, −.12]	Small	DISC couples more satisfied than Non-DISC Chinese couples
9	**Hiew et al. (2015a)**	**CSI**	***cd***	**DISC (54): Non-DISC all (69)**	**.45**	**.02**	**.18**	**[−.34, .37]**	-	**No effect**
9.1	Hiew et al. (2015a)	CSI	cd	DISC (54): Non-DISC Western (33)	<.001	.41		[−.03, .85]	Small	DISC couples less satisfied than Western Non-DISC
9.2	Hiew et al. (2015a)	CSI	cd	DISC (54): Non-DISC Asian (36)	1.00	−.45		[−.87, −.02]	Small	DISC couples more satisfied than Chinese Non-DISC
9.3	Hiew et al. (2015a)	CSI	cd	DISC-M (17): DISC-W (37)	.11	.05		[−.53, −.62]	-	No effect
10	**Johns et al. (2007)**	**MAT**	**c**	**DISC (28): Non-DISC all (102)**	**.69**	**−.08**	**.15**	**[−.49, .34]**	-	**No effect**

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	Author	Outcome variable	Sample	Comparison (*N*)	*p*	Effect size *d*	SE *d*	CI (95%)	Effect size	Interpretation
10.1	Johns et al. (2007)	MAT	c	DISC (28): Non-DISC Western (89)	.66	−.10		[−.76, .56]	-	No effect
10.2	Johns et al. (2007)	MAT	c	DISC (28): Non-DISC Latino (30)	.62	−.05		[−.48, .37]	-	No effect
11	V. **Lee (2010)**	**DAS**	**c**	**DISC (18): Non-DISC all (228)**	**.07**	**.29**	**.15**	**[−.20, .77]**	**Small**	**DISC couples less satisfied than Non-DISC couples**
11.1	V. Lee (2010)	DAS	c	DISC (18): Non-DISC Korean (162)	.18	.16		[−.32, .65]	-	No effect
11.2	V. Lee (2010)	DAS	c	DISC (18): Non-DISC American (66)	.01	.58		[.05, 1.11]	Medium	DISC couples less satisfied than Non-DISC American couples
12	**S. Lee (2013)**	**R-DAS**	**i**	**DISC (43): Non-DISC Asian (49)**	**.57**	**−.03**	**.25**	**[−.44, .38]**	**-**	**No effect**
13	**MacNeil and Adamsons (2014)**	**RAS**	**c**	**DISC (10): Non-DISC (10)**	**.07**	**.48**	**.08**	**[−.78, 1.73]**	**Small**	**Non-DISC couples more satisfied than DISC couples**
14	**Morrison (2014)**	**DAS**	**i**	**DISC (109): Non-DISC (130)**	**<.001**	**.29**	**.21**	**[.03, .54]**	**Small**	**DISC couples are less satisfied than Non-DISC couples**
15	**Negy and Snyder (2000)**	**MSI-R**	**c**	**DISC (72): Non-DISC all (141)**	**.32**	**.05**	**.17**	**[−.24, .33]**	**-**	**No effect**
15.1	Negy and Snyder (2000)	MSI-R	c	DISC (72): Non-DISC Latino (75)	<.001	.35		[.02, .68]	Small	DISC couples lower global distress than Non-DISC Mexican couples

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	Author	Outcome variable	Sample	Comparison (*N*)	*p*	Effect size *d*	SE *d*	CI (95%)	Effect size	Interpretation
15.2	Negy and Snyder (2000)	MSI-R	c	DISC (72):Non-DISC Western (66)	.99	−.26		[−.60, .08]	Small	DISC couples more global distress than Non-DISC Western couples
16	**Okai (2017)**	**DAS**	**i**	**DISC (43):Non-DISC (78)**	**.84**	**−.13**	**.07**	**[−.51, .24]**	**-**	**No effect**
17	**Ro (2007)**	**RELATE**	**c**	**DISC (264):Non-DISC all (466)**	**.92**	**−.09**	**.13**	**[−.24, .06]**	**-**	**No effect**
17.1	Ro (2007)	RELATE	c	DISC (264):Non-DISC Asian (166)	.89	−.08		[−.27, .12]	-	No effect
17.2	Ro (2007)	RELATE	c	DISC (264):Non-DISC American (300)	.88	−.07		[−.27, .91]	-	No effect
18	**Shibazaki and Brennan (1998)**	**DAS**	**i**	**DISC (44):Non-DISC (56)**	**.11**	**.17**	**.17**	**[−.23, .57]**	**-**	**No effect**
19	**Troy et al. (2006)**	**RSS**	**c**	**DISC (32):Non-DISC (86)**	**1.0**	**−.46**	**.45**	**[−.87, −.05]**	**Small**	**DISC couples more satisfied than Non-DISC couples**
20	**Van Mol and de Valk (2016)**	**Relationship satisfaction**	**i**	**DISC (224):Non-DISC (674)**	**.27**	**.03**	**.20**	**[−.13, .18]**	**-**	**No effect**

Note: Some studies used individual and other dyadic data. Comparisons in bold were included in the meta-analysis.

Abbreviations: c, couples without accounting for dependence; cd, dyadic data accounting for dependence; *d*, effect size estimator according to Cohen (1988); CIS, Couples Satisfaction Index; DAS, Dyadic Adjustment Scale; DISC, couples with different sociocultural backgrounds; DISC-M, within the dyad the husband is from a different sociocultural background; DISC-W, within the dyad the wife is from a different sociocultural background; g*, effect size estimator with corrected variance according to Hedge (1981); i, data from one person of the dyad; KMS, Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale; MAT, Marital Adjustment Test; MSI, Marital Satisfaction Inventory; Non-DISC, couples with similar/same sociocultural backgrounds; PRQ, Personal Relationship Questionnaire; RAS, Relationship Assessment Scale; RELATE, RELATionship Evaluation Questionnaire; RSS, Relationship Satisfaction Scale.

The meta-analysis was conducted only for comparisons of relationship satisfaction between DISC couples and culturally homogeneous couples, for which an effect size was available in 18 samples. Given the heterogeneity of effects across studies, we ran a random-effects model with a restricted maximum likelihood estimator using the *metafor* package (Viechtbauer, 2021) in R (R Core Team, 2021) implemented in JASP (JASP Team, 2020).

3.6 | Hypothesis

First, based on the theoretical propositions, we examined the assumption that partners in DISC relationships report lower relationship satisfaction than partners in culturally homogeneous relationships. Second, because DISC relationships often involve partners from immigrant populations, we also reviewed the effect sizes of comparisons between DISC relationships and the respective culturally homogeneous subsamples. For example, for Chinese American DISC couples, we computed effect sizes for Chinese as well as American culturally homogeneous couples to evaluate the satisfaction level of the DISC couples compared to the former two groups. This is not part of the meta-analysis because the existence of cultural differences within couples, as a variable, is confounded with culture and immigration status. We further explored this aspect by focusing on effect sizes of relationship satisfaction differences in studies that adjusted for demographic correlates.

4 | RESULTS

Across the 18 samples, effect sizes ranged between $d = -.46$, suggesting higher levels of relationship satisfaction in DISC couples compared to culturally homogeneous couples, and $d = .57$, suggesting lower levels of relationship satisfaction in DISC couples versus culturally homogeneous couples. The overall effect size, based on a total of $N = 5240$ participants, was small and not significant $d = .054$ (95% CI: .05, .16). The forest plot, shown in Figure 2, shows that there was substantial heterogeneity in residuals across studies ($Q[17] = 54.16$, $p < .001$; $I^2 = 62.86\%$).

Figure 3 displays a funnel plot in which the effect sizes from the different samples are plotted against the precision of the studies (standard error). Negative values indicate higher relationship satisfaction in DISC couples as compared to culturally homogeneous couples. Most effect sizes were very small or approaching zero, and positive and moderate to medium effects sizes were estimated with relatively wide confidence intervals, limiting their informative value. However, there was no evident asymmetry in the funnel plot, which might hint at publication bias (Egger et al., 1997), and a test for funnel plot asymmetry was nonsignificant (Kendall's $\tau = .20$; $p = .260$). A majority of the studies exhibited null effects. Only a few studies indicated a small to medium effect size, and among those, four studies suggested relatively low relationship satisfaction for DISC couples, and only one study suggested relatively high relationship satisfaction for DISC couples. However, of the studies suggesting lower relationship satisfaction for DISC couples, only two effect sizes emerged as significant. No clear indication for publication bias emerged.

4.1 | Comparisons between subsamples

A few comparisons between DISC couples and culturally homogeneous subgroups point to the possibility of cultural effects. For example, Asian–Western DISC couples were found to be

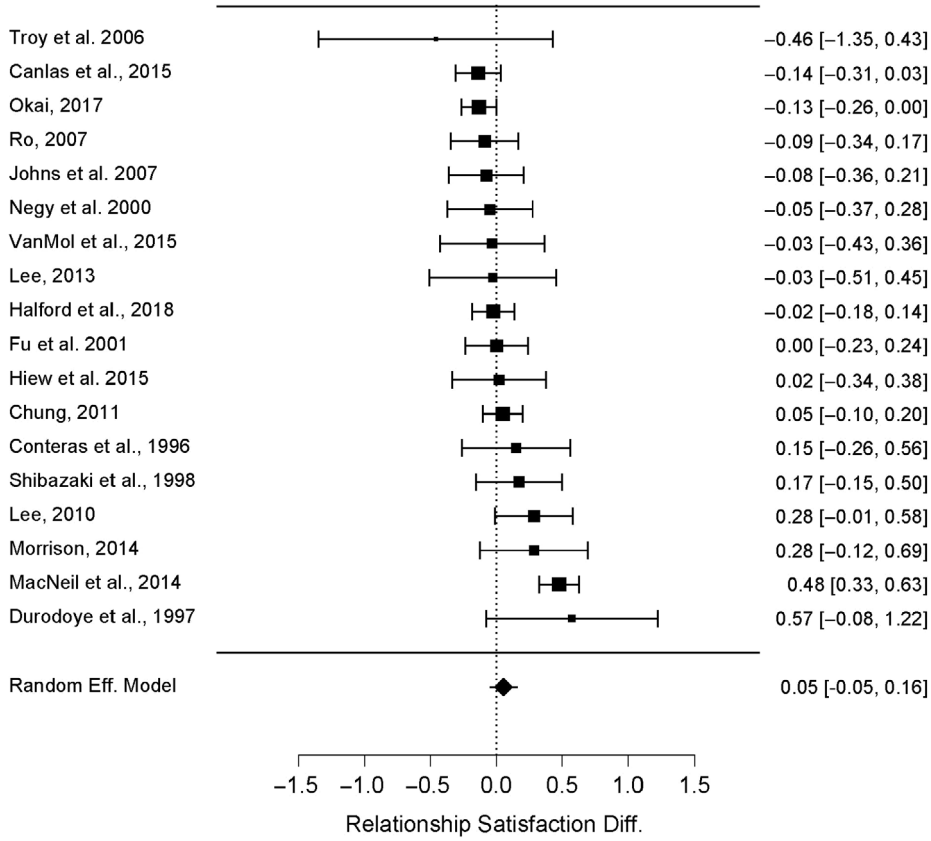

FIGURE 2 Forest plot of the effect sizes for relationship satisfaction comparing DISC couples with culturally homogeneous couples with negative values indicating lower satisfaction and positive values higher satisfaction for culturally homogenous couples

somewhat less satisfied than homogeneous Western couples but were similarly satisfied as homogeneous Asian couples (Halford et al., 2018; Hiew et al., 2015a). Also, V. Lee (2010) reported a significant medium-sized difference, with DISC couples with a Korean partner reporting less satisfaction than culturally homogeneous American couples. A comparison by Canlas et al. (2015), however, indicated only a small and nonsignificant difference for DISC couples as compared to Asian homogeneous couples.

Comparisons of White North American–Latino DISC couples with the respective culturally homogeneous groups of Latino or American couples yielded no significant effects across three studies (Burke, 2015; Contreras et al., 1996; Johns et al., 2007). Only in one study (Negy & Snyder, 2000), a small but significant difference between White North American–Latino DISC couples and homogeneous Latino couples was found, with DISC couples reporting less relationship distress than Latino couples but similar levels as homogeneous American couples. All remaining subgroup comparisons did not indicate any effect. Because most of these studies were conducted in Western contexts, potential effects of culture may be confounded with correlates of immigrant populations, and thus possibly also sociodemographic characteristics. A study by X. Fu et al. (2001), which adjusted for demographic correlates, yielded no significant difference. In two other studies (Hohmann-Marriott & Amato, 2008; Weller & Rofé, 1988),

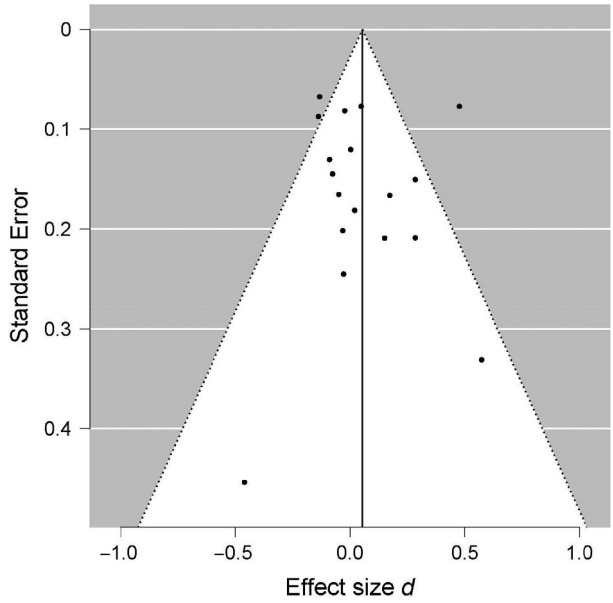

FIGURE 3 Funnel plot of standard error by effect size *d* for comparisons of relationship satisfaction between DISC couples and culturally homogenous couples

computing an effect size was not possible, but no significant differences in relationship satisfaction were reported after controlling for demographic characteristics.

Taken together, these findings do not support the hypothesis that DISC couples are less satisfied than culturally homogeneous couples, which is consistent with a large number of studies showing no significant difference; where a significant difference emerged, it was in most cases of a small size. As most studies relied on rather small sample sizes, the range of the corresponding confidence intervals tends to be quite wide, indicating considerable uncertainty of the estimates.

Finally, examination of the gender constellation of DISC couples (i.e., whether levels of satisfaction differed depending on the DISC partner being male or female) was possible in three studies only (Canlas et al., 2015; Forry et al., 2007; Hiew et al., 2015a). While in Canlas et al. (2015) and Hiew et al. (2015a), the gender constellation was not a relevant factor, a small effect resulted in Forry et al. (2007), but the reported results do not allow drawing conclusions about the direction of the effects.

5 | DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to review the current state research on relationship satisfaction in couples with DISC and to determine whether the notion of previous research holds, namely DISC couples are less satisfied than culturally homogeneous couples. The findings from a meta-analysis and a review of effect sizes suggest that DISC couples do not differ systematically in their relationship satisfaction from culturally homogeneous couples, either in a negative or in a positive direction. Although positive and medium-sized effects—suggesting lower relationship satisfaction in DISC couples than in culturally homogeneous couples—were somewhat more

frequent in studies with relatively large confidence intervals, such results of comparisons were infrequent. Furthermore, we found no clear indication for publication bias.

Several previous studies reported that DISC relationships are less satisfying than culturally homogeneous relationships (e.g., Brown et al., 2019; Durodoye, 1997; Kroeger & Williams, 2011; Sinning & Worner, 2010), and the literature on DISC couples also suggests that these relationships are more likely to end in divorce (e.g., Dribe & Lundh, 2012; X. Fu, 2006; V. K. Fu & Wolfinger, 2011; Kalmijn et al., 2005).This was explained as the result of divergent values, ideologies, or attitudes (Hohmann-Marriott & Amato, 2008; Lainiala & Säävälä, 2013; Negy & Snyder, 2000) or additional stressors, including minority stressors (e.g., Gagliardi et al., 2010), as well as negative experiences, like disapproval and rejection by the social environment (Smith et al., 2012). In some cases, DISC marriages were arranged mostly for economic reasons, or to receive a residence permit, which could partly explain why some studies found lower relationship stability among DISC couples (Kalmijn et al., 2005; Klein, 2001). However, the number of those cases is probably low (Smith et al., 2012). Furthermore, as emphasized by the investment model (Rusbult, 1980, 1983), relationship satisfaction is only one determinant of commitment and it could be that DISC couples have a different "threshold" for low satisfaction to contribute to intentions or decisions to leave a relationship, compared to culturally homogeneous couples.

The current meta-analytic review is the first comprehensive overview of existing research on the topic, indicating no difference regarding relationship quality for DISC couples and culturally homogeneous couples and challenging the view that DISC couples suffer from relationship dysfunction. We also compared DISC couples with both culturally homogeneous subgroups when possible. These subgroup comparisons show some, but inconsistent, effects of specific cultural combinations, suggesting that Asian DISC couples are less satisfied than culturally homogeneous Western couples. They also reported higher satisfaction ratings than culturally homogeneous Asian couples, but the difference did not reach significance. The general pattern is in line with the so-called convergence effect, that is, DISC couples′ level of relationship satisfaction being in between the partners' respective cultures. It is also possible that traditional norms around marriage of Asian cultures, including gender role expectations, increasingly contrast with the norms of other societies (Y. Qian & Sayer, 2016). However, we cannot exclude the possibility that this pattern reflects the tendency of Asian participants to choose responses closer to the mid-point of scales (e.g., Heine et al., 2002). DISC couples including a Latino/a partner, on the other hand, did not differ from the two reference groups in their relationship satisfaction levels based on the studies included here. Although examining such cultural patterns may bear the potential to shed additional light on relationship functioning in DISC couples, more systematic research with larger samples is necessary to determine whether reliable differences exist and which factors are driving them. Unfortunately, not all studies compared the satisfaction levels of both involved cultures, thus limiting the number of comparisons. Instead, most studies compared relationship satisfaction of DISC couples with culturally homogeneous couples exclusively from the culture where the study was conducted as a reference group.

Furthermore, demographic correlates of partners in DISC couples could act as moderators. Some studies have found that controlling for demographic differences moderates differences in divorce risk (Feng et al., 2012; Zhang & Van Hook, 2009) and relationship satisfaction (Hohmann-Marriott & Amato, 2008; Van Mol & De Valk, 2016; Weller & Rofé, 1988) between DISC couples and culturally homogeneous couples. A mechanism that would likely dampen potential disadvantages of DISC relationships is acculturation (Kim et al., 2012). This may act

like selective pressure, with some minorities being more likely to enter DISC relationship than others, making the prevalence of DISC couples for certain cultural combinations more likely (Wu et al., 2015). For instance, larger minorities are better at preserving their values and traditions (Smith et al., 2012) and it is also easier to build and maintain necessary institutions such as schools and churches where the community teaches and passes on their lifestyle and values (Breton, 1964). This way, the minority keeps more social distance to the locally predominant population and retains more options to marry within their culture (Smith et al., 2012). Larger and more encapsulated immigrant groups are also more likely to be perceived as threatening by the society they live in (Smith et al., 2012), which may increase the potential for discrimination. In contrast, the ability to adjust to a foreign culture may decrease cultural barriers and dissimilarities. The size and cohesion of immigrant populations in a specific societal context, as well as the level of acculturation, would be important moderators to examine in future research.

Like other couples, partners in DISC couples are also likely to be attracted to each other because of perceived similarities (Byrne, 1969; Lewis et al., 1997) and many of them enter a relationship with their partner because they share characteristics, preferences, or beliefs. Although DISC couples may be different regarding apparent physical characteristics or customs, they may also be similar on a more personal level, such as having common interests (Hawkins et al., 2012). For instance, some studies did not find significant differences between DISC couples and culturally homogeneous couples regarding characteristics such as education (e.g., Hiew et al., 2015b), implying that DISC relationships can be quite homogeneous in important aspects. This is in line with the finding that higher education of a minority member raises their likelihood of being romantically involved with a native, due to a more similar level of education between the partners (Kalmijn & Van Tubergen, 2006). As immigrating Asians are often highly educated in comparison to other immigrant groups (Hiew et al., 2015b), this would support the observation that the specific cultural background of the DISC partner matters.

A multidimensional and multifaceted perspective of culture, considering the degree of acculturation (Mok, 1999) and sociodemographic characteristics that DISC partners bring into the relationship, is likely to feature important interaction effects. More refined models, both on a theoretical and on a methodological level, and considerably larger samples sizes are likely necessary to disentangle potential contributions of cultural differences from sociodemographic correlates and psychosocial factors within DISC relationships.

5.1 | Methodological recommendations for future research

On the basis of this review, we propose three recommendations for conducting research on DISC relationships. As cultural groups vary considerably regarding many psychological outcomes (Matsumoto & Yoo, 2006), it may be possible to uncover separate effects for different cultural backgrounds. As our subgroup comparisons suggest, merging DISC relationships into one participant pool for research purposes probably masks important differences between several DISC couple constellations.

A first recommendation is to consider alternative approaches to examine cultural diversity, rather than using DISC relationships, as a general category. We suggest assessing specifically cultural diversity or distance within a relationship, and relating this information to relationship outcomes, or investigating samples of DISC couples on the basis of their specific cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, to disentangle the interaction effects of two specific cultures from general effects of culture, it is crucial to study DISC couples by comparing DISC relationships with the two involved reference samples of culturally homogeneous couples.

A second recommendation is that future studies should also consider the level of acculturation, how long a DISC partner has already been living in the host country, and whether and how they have been socialized in the host country (Feng et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2012). It may also be useful to have a researcher (dis-) confirm the self-referred classification for the country of origin (Craig-Henderson & Lewis, 2015) to detect subtle differences relevant for this research.

A third recommendation is to carefully assess and incorporate demographic characteristics of DISC couples that potentially influence relationship outcomes, both in sampling and in data analysis. This includes considering also the geographic area of the neighborhood when designing research, as residential areas are segregated by culture or ethnicity (Ellis et al., 2004). Relatedly, also non-national sociocultural factors such as socioeconomic status (Campos & Kim, 2017) need to be considered.

In addition to these recommendations, attention must be paid to potential sources of bias when conducting research on DISC couples. Cultural minority individuals with a higher level of acculturation may not only be more likely represented in DISC relationships but also be more likely to participate in a study. Furthermore, when investigating DISC couples in which the DISC partner has a different native language, communication problems may arise while administering self-report tools other than in the native language (Van de Vijver & Leung, 1997).

5.2 | Strengths and limitations

The current meta-analytic review suffers from several limitations. First of all, there was a rather limited body of literature available for investigating DISC couples' relationship satisfaction. The methodological heterogeneity of the studies reviewed (e.g., different instruments assessing relationship satisfaction), inconsistencies in the definition and use of the terminology, heterogeneity in sample structure (dyadic vs. individual data) and size, heterogeneity in cultural backgrounds within and across studies, and heterogeneity in statistical models and inclusion of control variables limit the validity of a general conclusion. Heterogeneity also existed with respect to measures of relationship satisfaction. Some studies used single items to measure relationship satisfaction, and others relied on validated questionnaires, which may not necessarily feature sufficient cultural sensitivity (Durodoye, 1997). Some satisfaction measures that are widely used in relationship research (such as the Investment Model Scale by Rusbult et al., 1998) were not represented in the studies included here. In addition, most of the studies included in this review were conducted in the United States, where discrimination tends to be related predominantly to skin color (Smith et al., 2012). Based on historical differences, other ethnic and cultural minorities might be more exposed to discrimination in other Western and non-Western countries.

5.3 | Future research

Understanding DISC relationships remains incomplete when research focuses heavily on potential negative effects and difficulties. Particularly, given the current results, understanding unique strengths and resources is important, as these couples have to deal with a number of challenges identified in the literature. This could include aspects such as new experiences, perceiving oneself through different eyes, inspiration for different behaviors or thinking styles, as well as critically questioning norms, customs, and assumptions likely enriching and

empowering in unique ways (Aron & Aron, 1996; Perel, 2000). Another resource of these relationships could be that DISC partners may be pushed to develop refined communication skills and routines by the challenges posed by cultural differences in meaning and language, and possibly more frequent conflict.

5.4 | Conclusion

Despite social barriers, additional stressors, and other difficulties that DISC couples may still face (Baltas & Steptoe, 2000; Kalmijn, 1998; Lewis & Ford-Robertson, 2010; Shibazaki & Brennan, 1998), this meta-analysis yielded no evidence for DISC couples being less satisfied with their relationship than culturally homogeneous couples. Although some studies suggested lower satisfaction among DISC couples, a general effect was not confirmed, and the occasional differences may be explained by demographic correlates (Feng et al., 2012). DISC couples involve a broad variety of relationships, and the many facets discussed in this review hint at the complexity of the processes that characterize the relationships of DISC couples. Inclusion of culturally diverse relationships in general samples, and the specific study of culturally diverse relationships, will be important to add crucial information for the understanding of intimate relationships in increasingly diverse societies.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data derived from public domain resources.

ORCID

Maximiliane Uhlich https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5294-4984
Tamara Luginbuehl https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7030-6214
Dominik Schoebi https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3991-2712

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