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Final thesis, 2023

# **THE ART OF TALKING**

**Creation of modules for an online course about intercultural communication**



## ABSTRACT

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THE ART OF TALKING: Creation of modules for an online course about intercultural communication

April 2023

Diaconia University of Applied Sciences

Bachelor`s Degree programme in Social Services

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The aim of the development-oriented thesis was the production of three modules for a self-study online course about intercultural communication.

The thesis work arose from the observation that by learning to communicate more effectively, people can be more constructive in their problem-solving, gain more satisfaction and as a result increase their overall well-being in their social relationships.

The modules include information about three subtopics of intercultural communication, visual aids for better understanding, additional learning material and exercises for each topic to support the application of the learned concepts and methods. The basis of the material was academic research, personal experiences and contribution from professionals of the work-life partner organization. The phases of this thesis included planning, implementation and evaluation of the project.

The major output of the thesis was the completion of the self-study online course that is now available on the website of the work-life partner, which has full ownership of the content. The evaluation results suggest that the content of the developed modules is useful in romantic relationships and can promote higher satisfaction and well-being of the partners.

Keywords: Intercultural relationships, intercultural communication, well-being, conflict resolution, love languages, nonviolent communication

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

All humans are social beings; therefore, they naturally possess a need and high interest to form relationships and connect with others. Communication is a way in which we interact with each other daily and establish, build and maintain relationships. Cultural differences of individuals in a romantic relationship can cause so-called stumbling blocks that can lead to communication difficulties (Barna, 2017).

The most obvious one is a difference in language, including semantics, pragmatics, terms and context as well as body-language. These differences can cause misunderstandings on both sides. Communication defines and sustains intercultural romantic relationships, yet it is usually influenced by intercultural couples' ethnocentrism and subjective assumption of cultural behaviour. Communication difficulties are often the root of further problems that might evolve in the relationship.

Familia ry is an NGO in Finland that strongly supports and offers a wide range of services to intercultural couples and families to help them with their struggles. One crucial service that the organization offers is counselling for intercultural couples to promote the well-being of the partners in relationship and family life. One common challenge that has been observed in the sessions is the lack of communication skills of one or both partners (Helmanen, E. 2021). The counselling sessions offered by Familia ry are holistic and general and a lack of information about communication as a topic has been observed.

Intercultural communication was chosen to be the topic for this thesis to address the needs of intercultural couples in Finland.

This thesis is a development-oriented thesis with the objective to create tools for intercultural couples to improve their communication and eliminate conflicts, promoting happiness and well-being in the relationship.

## 2 STARTING POINTS OF THE THESIS

This chapter will explain the purpose and aim of the thesis and review the specific objectives. It follows a description of the work-life partner and target group that are involved in the project process, their roles, characteristics and responsibilities.

### 2.1 Purpose and aim of the thesis

The purpose of this thesis was to increase well-being and support people in intercultural relationships with their communication challenges by researching topics of intercultural communication and conducting a project that can be used as a tool.

The specific objectives were the creation of three modules for a self-study online course about intercultural communication. These modules contain information about communication topics (nonviolent communication, love languages, conflict prevention and resolution) based on academic literature and experiences from experts and intercultural couples. The module topics were chosen to support course participants in developing increased understanding for their partner, promote higher sensitivity and create awareness of each other's differences that have created conflicts in the past. With the new knowledge, future conflict can be avoided.

Each module contains 1-2 practical exercises to help the participants to reflect on and improve their communication. Additionally, each module contains visual aids (picture/video/diagram) and further learning material. Due to the Covid-19 situation, for easy accessibility and long-term availability, the course was chosen to be a self-study online course.

## 2.2 Work-life partner

Familia ry is a Finnish association that has been established in 1988. Their main purpose is to support integration of immigrants in Finland, as well as people who were born in Finland. They are functioning as experts and advocates for intercultural families (Familiar ry, 2022). The organization offers a variety of activities, including Finnish language courses, peer support groups, counselling sessions, trainings and workshops.

Familia Info is a service counseling for intercultural families that gives free support and advice in Finnish as well as English. Whenever someone needs advice concerning intercultural relationships, encounters migration issues such as bureaucracy, or has employment questions, they can contact Familia Info by E-Mail or phone.

A variety of Finnish courses and discussion groups are offered under the guidance of professional teachers and volunteers, to support clients and members of the association in their language learning, as well as provide them with useful information about Finnish society. While the courses usually take place in Familia ry's office located in Helsinki, some are held online.

Other valuable services offered by Familia ry during the Covid-19 pandemic are online lectures, webinars and workshops. The topics cover a wide range of useful information about e.g., family life or multiculturalism, cultural balance, stress management and many more. An extensive selection is available in English as well as Finnish, facilitated by different professionals at different times of the day. Many of the lectures and webinars are recorded to be reviewed according to the client's own schedule.

Familia ry's observation about the lack of communication skills in intercultural couples provided the foundation and starting point of this thesis. The observed need for improvement and wish for collaboration made the student choose the organization as her work-life partner. Familia ry's role as work-life partner for this thesis is the provision of support, information and expertise, guidance and supervision in the project development as well as the thesis

process. Furthermore, the organization provides the platform for the online course. The main supervisor from Familia ry is their project manager, with whom the primary communication is taking place.

According to the student's observation during other collaborations with Familia ry, the organization seems to put a lot of value on strength-based leadership and management approaches. Strength based leadership is the ability to identify and make the best use of someone's own and their team members' strength (MindTools, n.d.) and is considered a powerful way to lead.

### 2.3 Target group

The main target group consists of individuals in an intercultural relationship, of which at least one partner is of non-Finnish origin. Demographically, a wide range of ages, genders, cultures, ethnicities, education and employment status is covered. In 1995, the numbers of families in Finland where one spouse is of foreign origin was counted to be 25.800, which was 1,9 per cent of all families living in Finland. In 2009, there were 60,500 of those families in Finland counted (Statistics Finland, 2010), which shows a high increase in intercultural marriages and co-habiting relationships. Hereby it needs to be noted that the statistics included single-parent families as well.

In 2019, the statistics reported 63300 relationships and families, in which one spouse is Finnish and the other a foreign citizen (Tilastokeskus, 2020). The statistics show well how the ratio between married/registered couples and co-habiting couples has changed in the last 3 decades. There has been a significant increase in intercultural couples who live together but are not married or in a registered partnership.

In addition to the registered relationships where one partner is Finnish, an addition of 56.000 couples, where both partners are of non-Finnish origin citizen has been counted (Tilastokeskus, 2020). The definition of the term 'intercultural couple' used in this thesis includes couples where two partners are

foreign. Taking this into consideration, as well as the fact that in case of poly-amorous relationships there are more than two people in a relationship, the estimated number of individuals in the target group for the online course is more than 240.000.

The target group has reading ability, access to the internet and flexible time available to discuss issues and do the exercises alone or with their partners. In the ideal case, the individuals have recognized challenges in their relationship and a common interest is the desire and willingness to learn and improve communication. Nevertheless, everyone generally interested in intercultural relationships and communication is welcome to participate in the course. One reason why the course about intercultural communication was chosen to be an online course, is the fact that the target group involves people with very different, individual schedules. Some people are working full-time, others are stay-at-home parents who mostly have time during evenings or weekends. Some are students who have classes to attend.

There are many reasons why it is difficult to get a big group of participants in a course that is held in person. By doing the course online, a bigger part of the target group can be reached, because people can complete the course in the comfort of their homes, on the bus, while waiting at the airport; they can read material during their lunch break at work or while watching a sleeping child at home.

Family is located in Finland and the course is mainly target to individuals living in Finland. Nevertheless, communication issues are not bound to any location, therefore the course could be taken from outside of Finland as well. When defining intercultural relationships, it is noteworthy that marriages or intimate relationships can even be intercultural, when partners come from the same country, since culture is not necessarily bound to a certain location.

The number of registered intercultural couples and families that are living in Finland has increased significantly over the last few decades. There are currently about 70 000 intercultural couples living in Finland, which is three times more than 20 years ago (Duo library, 2015). Estimations show that these



rates will continue to grow steadily in the future. According to Kotthoff, Spencer-Oatey, and Knapp (2007, p. 344), the increase of intercultural intimate relationships can be directly linked to globalization. The aspects of globalization that are relevant to this increase are improved international mobility, increased international data flow and increased international cultural exchange.

Since the divorce rate is slightly higher in intercultural relationships than monocultural relationships, there is a high need in researching the factors that lead to these divorces, as well as gathering tools and support for intercultural couples. Communication problems are among the main reasons for intercultural divorces (as well as monocultural divorces), together with unmet expectations, lack of intimacy, infidelity, different priorities and inability to resolve conflicts (Duo library. 2015).

### 3 KEY CONCEPTS

The topic for the thesis project is advanced intercultural communication. The project will focus on three subtopics, which are non-violent communication, love languages and conflict resolution. In this chapter, some previous studies on intercultural communication and the relevant key concepts for this thesis will be described. In order to understand why the chosen project is needed, it is important to comprehend the definition of terms and concepts that will be used. Defining the target groups and studying their daily-life challenges in their relationships helps to understand the high need for improved communication skills. While searching for literature, the following key words have been used: Intercultural communication, communication, well-being, and culture.

Scollon (2012, p. 2-4) points out that talking about culture as a phenomenon can be quite problematic, since there are many different ways to define culture and most people have their own subjective understanding of the term. For some people, culture is something that we have, or possess, similar to intelligence, whereas others mean a country, a region or a specific place when they refer to it. Many incorporate a set of beliefs, values and mental patterns into their definition of culture, therefore for those, a culture is a group of people sharing those same values, independent of their ethnicity, background or current residence.

For some, culture seems to be a set of rules or guidelines that people choose to follow, comparable to a set of rules in a game. Another approach to view culture is the unconscious habits that guide people without their realization. For some, culture can be found in museums and books, whereas for some, culture is found in the daily life of people, groups as well as individuals. Culture can bring us humans together; it can also drive us apart. Each definition of culture opens new ways to reflect on groups and individuals and open fruitful pathways (Scollon, (2012, p. 2-4).

In this thesis, culture is defined by someone's national origin, if that origin brings cultural aspects with it that could possibly collide with cultures of other national origins. The student herself prefers not to define culture at all, because culture and intercultural conflicts are complex and there is a great risk of falling into stereotypes or even discrimination. Every person should decide their cultural identity for themselves and how they personally think culture brings challenges into a relationship. Nevertheless, since most studies, as well as Familia ry's material about intercultural relationships are defined by national origin, the focus of this thesis lays on couples where one person is of Finnish and one person of non-Finnish origin.

### 3.1 Previous studies about the topic

For many years, researchers have studied communication, culture and the effects that these can have on the well-being of people in relationships. Therefore, there is a lot of information available to learn about the key concepts. Canary and Dainton (2002) discuss in their book communication as a measure to maintain close relationships. One chapter focuses specifically on cultural variations. The book collection is intended for people studying interpersonal communication and personal relationships. Knowing how well-being is affected by interpersonal communication is an important aspect of this thesis, since the main goal is to improve the well-being of intercultural couples by helping them to communicate more effectively. People who possess good communication skills usually have higher hopes and perceive stress on lower levels compared to those with poor communication skills (Segrin and Taylor, 2007, p. 637–646). The results of studies like these are the reason why communication was chosen as a topic for this thesis.

Tili and Barker (2015) conducted a study in which communication in intercultural marriage was examined. The purpose was to find out how intercultural spouses communicate, what the communication is influenced by and how they deal with conflict. 18 individuals from intercultural marriages (made of one Caucasian-American and one Asian partner) were interviewed in-

depth. The perceptions about their effectiveness and competence of communication and how they resolve conflicts was examined. A variety of strategies are proposed to address conflicts constructively. Among those are for example change of perspective, mutual respect, open-mindedness and self-awareness. These concepts are vital in order to resolve conflicts in a relationship, which is why they are a part of the thesis project. One module in the online course will be about resolving and avoiding conflicts, which involves these strategies.

Although often underestimated, culture has a significant impact on someone's personality, e.g., being introvert/extrovert, impulsive/cautious, emotional/logical. These differences influence personal communication styles and therefore lead to communication difficulties, feeling or resentment and conflicts. Cools (2006) focuses in her qualitative study on the same target group that is used in this thesis, being intercultural couples in Finland. In the study, six heterosexual intercultural couples living in Finland were interviewed to give insight about questions like "what cultural issues are relevant in the couples' relationship?" or "What intercultural relational dialectics do the intercultural couples experience in their relationship?"

The results, which were recorded, transcribed and analyzed, reflect well with the insight that the student who was writing this thesis received from the workers at Familia ry. Therefore, the study served as an additional foundation to examine the needs and struggles of the target group.

### 3.2 Interpersonal communication

Interpersonal communication is simply the transfer of information from one person or a group to another. Involved are usually a sender, a recipient and a message that is being transferred. The transmission of messages can happen in many forms, including verbal, nonverbal, written or visualized. Even though it sounds simple, communication is a very complex issue. The successfulness of the transmission is affected by a range of factors, including culture, emotion, location or the chosen way to communicate. For several

reasons, communication has become a major theme of our age (Cushman and Cahn, 1985. p. 5) and the issue of communication in human relationships is more relevant than ever. As communication is the main root of many difficulties in close relationships, communication competence is crucial to form and sustain these relationships.

Figure 1. Transmission of a message between sender and receiver



Language is ambiguous by nature (Scollon, 2012, p.12) and it is impossible for us to always control the meanings of what we write and say to other people. The meanings we exchange in our communication consists of partly our given words and sentences, but also partly constructed by the listeners or readers interpretation. Therefore, all participants of communication are responsible for the building of meaning.

Because of the different interpretations, there can never be an absolute and complete agreement about semantic ranges in e.g., colors. What one person perceives as blue is not necessarily the same for other speakers of the same language. This is why it is often more beneficial to give extra clearance about the intended meaning, instead of assuming that the communication partner views everything the same.

### 3.2.1 Intercultural communication:

Culture is an ever-present part of any communication activity but is also often taken for granted. It is nevertheless, though not always, influential with a fluid and encompassing nature. Scholars from different disciplines with diverse perspectives have long taken interest in culture and communication, approaching and studying the subject in different ways, recognizing the relationship as a process of interaction at multiple levels. In keeping with its interdisciplinary root, communication scholars have carried out their exploration with more of a communication focus while building upon and extended from earlier works in human science and humanities. The study of intercultural communication (IC) is thus also quite interdisciplinary in nature. (Chen, 2017, p. 16)

Karandashev (2011, p.11-12) points out that the emphasis of culture on collectivism and individualism can greatly affect the subjective experience of individuals in a romantic relationship. Certain cultures are seen as individualistic cultures, e.g., the United States, Great Britain, Australia, Canada, northern and Western Europe. Those cultures tend to put their focus more on self-interest, personal autonomy and the making of one's own, independent decisions.

On the other hand, certain cultures are seen as collectivist cultures, under which category fall many African and Latin American nations, China, Greece and the Pacific islands. Those cultures focus more on the groups' interest, being loyal while encouraging interdependence and valuing group choices over individual choices. Something like making choices, which is often seen as a simple aspect, can cause difficulties in a relationship when the fundamental principles of decision making, dependence and interest differ between individuals in a relationship.

Cools (2006, p.232-234) suggests in a study that in order to understand intercultural couples' relationships, it might be helpful to conceptualize culture as part of a process, in which communication between partners forms a discursive intercultural. It is noteworthy that communication has here been looked at

as interaction, bonding process, knowledge sharing, networking and mutual learning. In the studies, Cools observed that the participants of the study (intercultural couples in Finland) were very focused on constant negotiations that were internally as well as externally. Decision making and compromising about issues such as holidays, friends, non-verbal communication, traditions and celebrations, upbringing of children, education, values and gender issues is on the daily agenda of intercultural partners in a romantic relationship.

Further struggles the couples go through are, among others, language barriers, difficulty of language learning, needing to find a common language or adaptation of a language, managing multiple languages in the home, the ache of language loss and interdependence. Cools puts strong emphasis on the need of advanced communication to manage these struggles, avoid misunderstandings, make decisions together, as well as recognize, understand and manage cultural differences. Cools points out that communication is a vital tool for all kinds of relationships but does acknowledge the increased need in intercultural relationships.

### 3.2.2 Influence of culture on communication

Fitzgerald (2002, p.209) reinforces the need for cross-cultural awareness and intercultural communication training. Furthermore, it is stated that prejudice is not the barriers of effective communication, but simply ignorance of cultural differences. Besides that, 2/3 - 3/4 parts of our overall communication consist of the way we behave and that every person is culturally conditioned since birth (Novinger, (2001. ix). Therefore, the actual language, grammar or words of another person can be learnt, but makes up only a small part of our daily communication and interaction.

Individuals in intercultural relationships need to understand the cultural differences as a challenge, as well as an opportunity to learn and grow together. One of the biggest challenges is ethnocentrism, the subjective assumption that one's own culture and behavior is the "correct" one and the other person is "wrong", which often leads to conflicts.

Scollon (2012, p. 13-14) emphasizes that not every misunderstanding must necessarily be related to culture and describes one of the most famous international disagreements in the last few decades. In 2001, a US spy plane was illegally flying in Chinese airspace, collided with a Chinese fighter jet, causing an accident that killed the pilot. In a letter, which was later worldwide known as “letter of two sorries”, the regret of the missing pilot and a “feeling sorry” for entering Chinese air space has been expressed. For many, this was not seen as true apology and taking of responsibilities for the death of the pilot. While many see this as intercultural miscommunication between Chinese and North American culture, Scollon (2012) states it was rather about the ambiguity of language.

### 3.3 Advanced communication topics used in the project

For the thesis project, the student chose three advanced communication topics, which were chosen based on the perceived need of these topics that became clear in interviews with Familia ry’s professionals, as well as previous feedback from the target group. The three topics are nonviolent communication, conflict resolution and love languages which will now be shortly explained.

#### 3.3.1 Nonviolent communication

Nonviolent communication (NVC) is a well-known theory by the psychologist Dr. Marshall Rosenberg and has been proven to be an effective tool to solve interpersonal conflicts. The goal of nonviolent communication is honest and authentic expression and listening with empathy, while respectfully dealing with conflicts. The three most valid aspects of awareness in nonviolent communication are self-empathy, empathy for others and honest self-expression (Rosenberg, 2003). Rosenberg suggests four phases in communication that can be applied in all conflict situations. These phases are the following (Familia ry, 2021):



1. Observation – The objective description of the situation lies at the base. People need to separate their own judgments and evaluations as they observe. Stating observations without interpretation makes it easier for the communication partner to listen without getting defensive.
2. Feeling – After factual observation has been done, the feelings can be determined and communicated. While doing that, one needs to distinguish between a “pseudo-feeling” and a “real feeling” (such as anger or fear) because feelings are neutral.
3. Need – Instead of expecting the communication partner to assume or guess a need, it is everyone’s own responsibility to crystallize the need out of the feeling and communicate it in a constructive way.
4. Request. After the feeling and the need have been defined and communicated, the individual can formulate a request that can be accepted or rejected. If the four steps have been communicated in a constructive way, there is a high chance of the request being accepted, instead of turned down with judgment or blame.

As can be noted, the non-violent communication, or NVC, places the emphasis on deep listening, of oneself and one’s needs as well as of the other person.

Especially in intercultural relationships, different communication styles are being used by the partners, which can lead to conflict. Intercultural communication does not work differently than other types of interpersonal communication (PuddleDancer press, 2022) but the techniques need to be adapted to intercultural settings, during which cultural differences are recognized.

Using the NVC model can help and support the awareness of different cultures and increase the ability to engage with others beyond cultural differences. Therefore, the model was chosen to be one of the three topics that were created for the self-study online course.

### 3.3.2 Conflict resolution

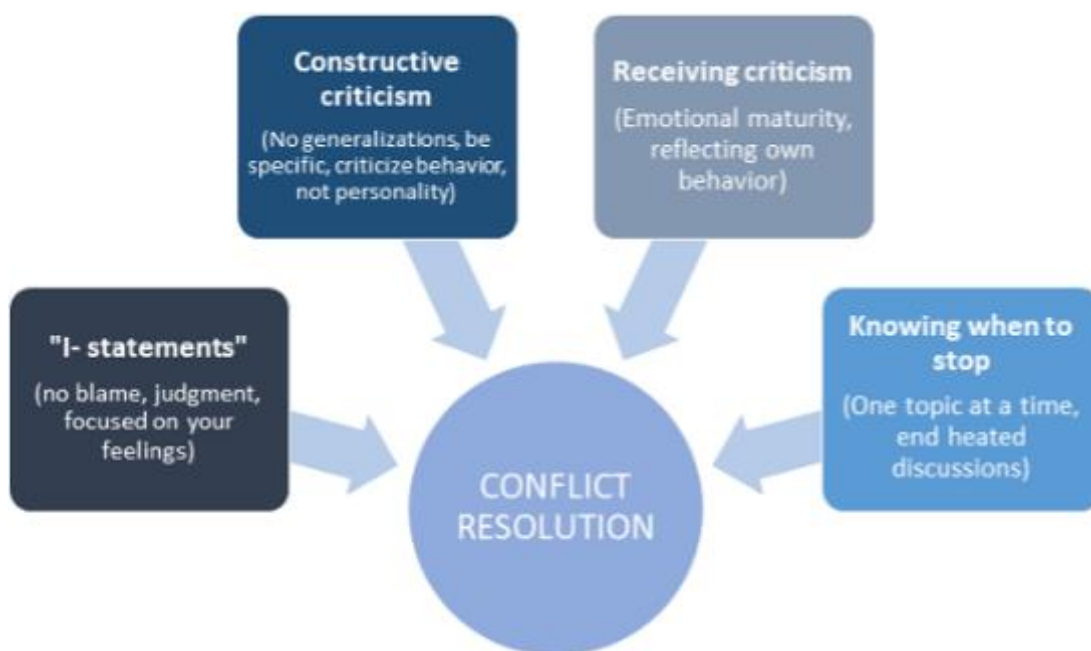
Some people believe conflicts to be an essential part of life, promoting the growth of the individual, whereas others seek to avoid dealing with it at any cost. Many people see conflict resolution as either a win-or-lose situation or a having to always compromise. Yet, with the right skills and techniques, people can learn to deal with conflicts in a way that respects individual and cultural differences. (Lambert & Myers, 1999, p. vii).

There are many ways to deal with conflicts and depending on the situation, different conflict resolution strategies are necessary. To achieve successful conflict resolution, some key aspects are recognizing communication styles, empathy, meeting needs of everyone involved, knowing one's own emotional triggers, awareness of constructive or destructive communication, as well as recognizing the responsibilities of everyone involved in the conflict.

Being in an intercultural relationship can increase the chance of rising conflicts, already merely because due to the fact people's ideas on how to deal with conflict are often culturally bound. Furthermore, divergent views on topics concerning money, work, goals, gender roles, child-raising etc. can easily add to struggles and frustrations in the couple's daily communication.

The strategies that will be described in the online course will combine and review some aspects of the stage one online course, e.g., listening and communication styles.

Figure 2. Four tips of conflict resolution as portrayed in the online course



The online course focuses on four strategies, which are the use of I-statements, constructive criticism, receiving criticism and knowing when to stop a conversation.

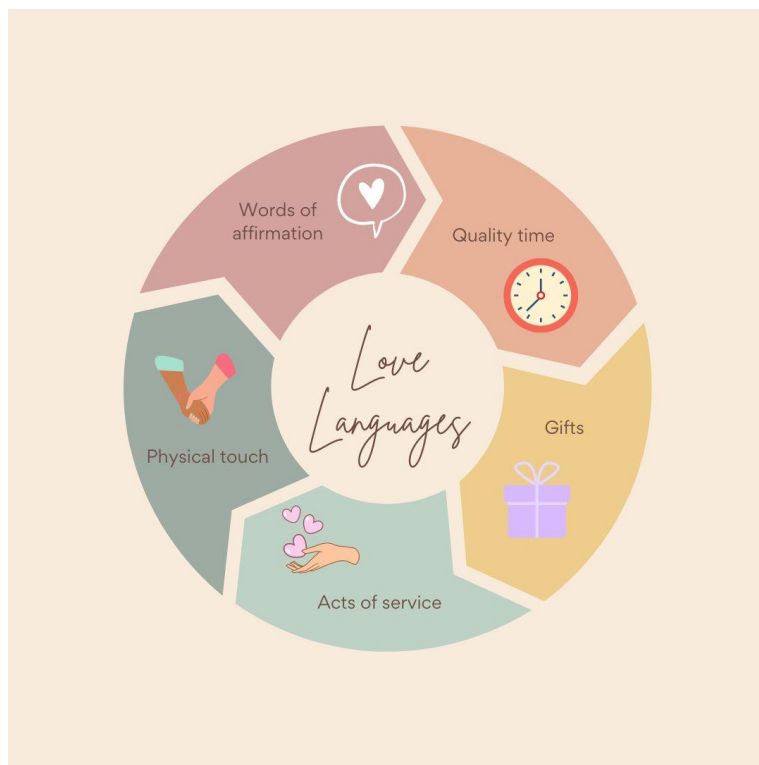
### 3.3.3 Love languages

The principle of love languages by Dr. Gary Chapman is believed to be a key to successful communication in a relationship. In his book, Chapman (1995) outlines five different languages of love or tools of communication that couples can use when they are expressing love to their partner. Figure 3 serves as a representation of these love languages. The love languages are described in the online course as the following:

1) Words of affirmation: The way to give and receive love through words. People with this love language appreciate verbal expression of affection to feel loved and valued. Negative or insulting words hurt the partner and can result in disconnection.

2) Acts of service: According to the motto “Actions speak louder than words”, people with this love language express their love by doing things they know their partner would appreciate. This can be little actions of kindness, while having the partner’s happiness in mind.

Figure 3. The five love languages



3) Gifts: While not always having to be materialistic, gifts can show love that makes people feel appreciated, loved and thought about in the daily life of the partner. Getting flowers without any special occasion is a way to tell someone that they are loved, appreciated and cared about.

4) Quality time: Undivided attention, time away from screens and distractions is what many people value in their romantic relationships and see as a way of being loved. Spending attentive quality time together can create a feeling of connection and intimacy, while cancelling plans or not being present can be hurtful.

5) Physical touch: People with physical touch as their primary love language feel more loved, connected and safe in a relationship, when that love is expressed by physical actions, such as holding hands or kissing. Without the physical display of love, partners may feel unloved or rejected.

Usually, people communicate dominantly with only one or two of these languages, which might not be the same one that the partner is using. This can easily lead to misunderstandings and frustration as a result of unfulfilled needs.

Chapman emphasizes the importance of communicating one's own primary love language to the partner clearly, which is not always easy, since many people have internalized from their childhood experiences that communicating and expressing desires is unwanted or not appropriate (Chapman, G. 1995, 64-65).

## 4 PROCESS DESCRIPTION

This chapter will give a detailed process description of the project, including the planning phase, implementation phase and evaluation phase. The planning phase includes crucial project management aspects such as mapping out stakeholders involved, resource planning and overall schedule for the thesis. Furthermore, this chapter will explain and justify operating and working methods, as well as describe the risk assessment process.

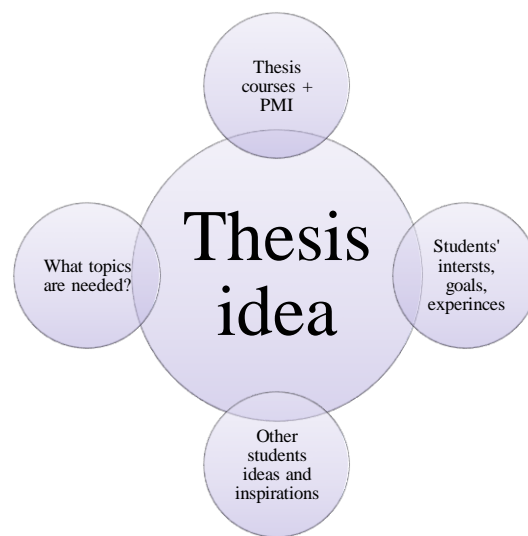
### 4.1 Planning phase

Hyttinen (2017. p.17-18) points out that dividing a project into phases can simplify the project process and guide the leadership in a good direction. Five different project process groups are defined and described: Initiating, planning, execution, monitoring and controlling, and closing. In this thesis project process, these phases were followed to ensure systematic and efficient use of time and other resources, as well as to always have an overview about the process. In the initial phase of the process, an idea was explored and elaborated.

#### 4.1.1 The thesis idea

During the initiative phase, the student had to explore the possible topics within social work, which covers a wide range of bigger topics and subtopics. The student's interests, strengths, own experience as well as future working fields in social work were taken into consideration. Possible areas that were lacking research and projects were taken into consideration, as well as inspirations from other students in the thesis course class. Figure 4 shows how different components are to be considered when brainstorming ideas and choosing a thesis topic.

Figure 4. Mind map: Aspects considered in the search for the thesis idea



Thesis courses and lectures offered by Diaconia University of Applied Sciences (Diak) played an important role in learning about the thesis process in general, different stages and procedures in thesis courses, the criteria and requirements for a thesis, as well as useful tips to find a topic and thesis writing in general. Being a practical person, the student decided very early in the thesis process that the thesis would be project-based.

At first, the student planned to work on a different topic together with two other students as a group, but because of differences in their individual study and graduation plans, the group decided to split up and work on their theses individually.

The idea for this thesis then originated from the Project Management and Innovation (PMI) course at Diak. The project that the student did with two other students was the creation of a pilot version of the self-study online course about intercultural communication. The group of students held interviews with professionals from Familia ry and created the first 3 modules of the online course. (Appendix 2). The professionals gave very valuable input for the self-study course and got the chance to review the content after the course development completion.

The evaluation of this project showed that there would be great benefits in further developing it. Survey results demonstrated that users of the pilot version wished for more modules to be included in the course and more visual aids to be used. Therefore, this project gave the motivation and starting point to advance the topic of intercultural communication and complement the pilot version that has been developed during the project management and innovation course.

Together with the supervising teacher from Diak, the student was discussing how feasible the idea is to expand the course and how the separation between the PMI course and the thesis would be clearly determined and distinguished. In the planning phase, the work-life partner was chosen to be Family and a thesis agreement has been made. Other stakeholders and parties involved were determined, the target group defined, and a broad project plan and schedule created.

#### 4.1.2 Planning of the thesis project

Having a schedule plan helps the project developers to stay focused on the process, have an overview about the plan and divide the time resources accordingly. The plan and schedule were updated with time. Due to a year of absence of studies as well as personal circumstances, the original schedules have significantly changed. Nevertheless, the changed schedule didn't have a significant impact on the end result of the project or the outcome of the thesis writing process.



In table 1, the stages of the thesis project and the tasks to be done can be viewed, as well as the date when the task was completed.

Table 1. The thesis project schedule

Stages of the project	Tasks to be done	Date
Project planning	Create a detailed plan, contact with work-life partner, create a shared vision with the work-life partner, set specific goals, create schedule	February - March 2021
Project implementation	Review the pilot version, review the feedback thereof, research literature, create course content, create visual aids, create feedback link, hand over the material to the organization	April 2021
Project management evaluation	Assess planning and implementation goals, conduct feedback session with the work-life partner	May-October 2021 Second evaluation February 2023
Course impact evaluation	Analyze feedback link results, evaluation session with work-life partner	Spring 2023

The project planning includes the elaboration of ideas, search for a work life partner and creation of a detailed plan. The idea was initiated in February, the plan created in March 2021. The implementation includes research (10.-16.4.) and the creation of course content (16.-30.4.).

The course material was handed over to Familia ry in the beginning of May 2021. The project process was evaluated after the upload of the content on the Familia ry website in autumn 2021, by assessing own efforts and the implementation of goals, individually, as well as together with the work-life partner. The feedback from the target group got evaluated twice, but only the second evaluation is relevant for this thesis.

The following table 2 describes the stakeholders - all the interested parties in the project, the people who affect and influence the project, as well as those who were and are affected by it. Through brainstorming with the manager of Familia ry, the stakeholders that were found include students, Familia ry clients, the manager of Familia ry, experts, IT specialist and developer, and other clients who might not directly be involved with Familia ry events. They were then mapped or aligned in accordance with their interests, influence, and involvement.

According to table 2, external stakeholders are the primary clients - intercultural families working with Familia ry already, or other clients who might visit the website for information to improve their romantic relational communication. The couples or individuals on an intercultural relationship are crucial stakeholders to the project, as they provide the insight about the need for the project. Through counselling sessions with Familia ry, as well as feedback to the pilot version of the online course, the necessity for more information about communication became clear and the idea to make this project-based thesis was created, formed and executed.

Table 2. Stakeholders involved in the thesis

Type	Stakeholder	Interest	Roles
Main Project developer	Student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Learn new knowledge</li> <li>-Develop and enhance project management skills and competence</li> <li>-Learn to better organize and plan</li> <li>-Act as researchers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Has direct influence on the project</li> <li>-Provides skills</li> <li>-Plans, implements, and evaluates the project.</li> <li>-Organizes and schedules meetings for the project</li> <li>-Carries out literature reviews</li> </ul>
Other Team members	Manager of Familia ry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Smooth running of the project to successful end</li> <li>-Provides needed support to clients</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Provides resources and information about the organization and clients.</li> <li>-Attends meetings</li> <li>-Approves/disapproves suggestions, gives feedback</li> </ul>
	Teacher supervisors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Share experiences and expert advice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Supervise, monitor, and evaluate the overall project and thesis process</li> </ul>
External	Individuals from the target group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Self-learning</li> <li>-Beneficiary of the project</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Act as participants to the online course</li> <li>-Provide the background and need for the project</li> <li>-Give feedback</li> </ul>
	Experts/ professionals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Work with Familia Ry's manager</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Outline necessary challenges before the course is being uploaded</li> </ul>
	Clients from Familia ry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Self-learning</li> <li>-Seeking for information</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Utilize the online course for own benefit</li> </ul>
Other stakeholders from Familia ry	IT specialist and developers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Online-course development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Provide software applications</li> <li>-Ensure that the final course is published accurately online</li> <li>-Update online course when needed</li> </ul>
Indirect stakeholders	Group of students (Andreas Galler, Godfred Gyimah, Nathalie Ihalmo)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pilot version development of the online course, developed during the project management and innovation course at Diak</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Provide the background and starting point of the thesis</li> <li>-Create the idea to complete the course with extra modules</li> <li>-Provide their course material and research data</li> </ul>

Internal stakeholders are the Family manager Elina Helmanen, who gladly agreed to receive more content about communication for the organization to use on their website in the course. Helmanen acted as a facilitative leader throughout the whole thesis and project process, which made it very comfortable to work with her.

The facilitative leader approach suggests that the effectiveness of a group is directly related to the efficacy of its process (Breshears and Volker, p.2). In the cases where the group is highly functioning, the leader does not intervene much, but is held back, until the group is low functioning (experiencing conflict), during which the facilitative leader intervenes more and directs the group to a smoother process running. This approach was very much appreciated by the student writing the thesis.

Additional internal stakeholders from the organization might be other workers who are interested in the final completion of the online course.

The project team includes a student, Nathalie Ihalmo the manager of Family, and two teacher supervisors from Diak who utilized their skills, contribution, and supervision of the project. Through frequent communication and provision of updates, the student has kept in contact with the manager to work on the course content, as well as contact to the teacher supervisors, who approved the project content, scope and provided all the necessary help for the overall thesis process.

Another possible stakeholder is the IT person at Family, who was responsible for the upload of the course content on Family's website, as well as the specific layout and design. A few additions have been made to the content course, e.g., the provision of extra sources and material about the chosen topics, so that the clients can dive even deeper into the topics.

For the thesis, several operating and working methods were planned for the thesis writing process as well as the project development process. The project planning was done by applying common project management strategies, to ensure efficient planning, implementation and evaluation of the project. The content of the modules was written by gaining knowledge from literature,

websites and reflection on previous interviews that have been conducted with Familia ry's professionals. One interviewee brought up love languages and nonviolent communication as suggestions on how to deal with intercultural communication issues. Since the professionals working at Familia ry have much experience of working with intercultural topics, it is thought that their suggestions and input are of high validity for this online course.

Concerning the layout and design of the course information, the previously received feedback from the pilot version of the online course was taken into consideration. Using feedback from the target group increased the probability of reaching the goals and objectives of the project.

Exercises were created for the couples to help them reflect on their communication and develop new skills. The reason for choosing exercises as part of the course is the fact that critical reflection and practice are the most efficient ways to improve communication. A feedback form for the three modules developed for this thesis helped to evaluate the project, as well as gain suggestions on how to improve it.

Giving participants the option to evaluate the course at the very end is a convenient way for them, as well as for the project team, while giving the participants the opportunity to stay completely anonymous.

The module content was written in a word-document and then handed over to Familia ry. For the creation of visual tools, programs and applications such as Canva and Inshot were used, giving the student the opportunity to easily and cost-freely produce material that is not bound to copyright matters.

According to Vanzant (2020, 87-90), early and frequent communication is key when executing a project. Clearly defined goals, decision tracking and possible changes to the project plan need to be discussed as a project team. Therefore, open and honest communication with the work-life partner was one of the most respected methods during the project process.

### 4.1.3 Risk assessment

In project planning, it is crucial to assess the risks thoroughly and develop strategies to overcome these risks and connected challenges, in case they might occur (Hyttinen, 2017). It is important to determine or estimate the probability of the risks to occur, as well as the impact this would have on the project development and thesis process.

According to Olson (2020. p.43), failure to identify the impact of projects is often unnoticed until the implementation of the project. At that stage, problems that are created are more difficult to deal with. It is important to consider different aspects of the project from the very beginning and predict how the project will change. Therefore, a risk assessment has been made already in the planning phase of the project and monitoring was happening throughout the whole project process.

The following main risks, probability and impact on the project progress have been evaluated. As factors, “low”, “medium” and “high” were being used.

Table 3. Risk assessment

Risk	Probability of occurrence	Impact on project/thesis development
Insufficient skills to create visual aids	High	High
Time resources not being enough for everything that has been planned	Low	Medium
Lack of IT/web designing skills	Low	high
Not enough feedback results to evaluate the effectiveness of the modules	High	medium

As can be seen from table 3, there were certain risks with low probability of occurrence, as well as high probability occurrence. A high risk that would have a big impact on the project development is the student's lack of knowledge and skills to provide high-quality visual aids. The visual aids were thought to complement the course content and make it more interesting, easy to understand and appealing.

Nevertheless, creating videos, charts or photos requires experience, skills and equipment. Therefore, the student had to choose carefully which aids to produce and to reduce the self-produced material to a minimum. After gathering feedback from the course participants as well as the work-life partner, the student reflected and noticed that their content creation skills were sufficient to create the basics for the online course.

Workers from Familia ry complemented the course material by providing extra links to further reading, YouTube videos and articles so that the course participants could choose from a wide range of material, how to learn about the course topics.

The low risk of time resources not being enough was easily eliminated by creating a realistic project plan and constantly monitoring the process and time management. The lack of IT/web designing skills did not turn out to be a challenge, because the association Familia ry used professionals who are familiar with web design and were responsible for the layout and course content upload.

The risk that there would not be enough participants to evaluate the online course was rather high and was in the student's perspective the only valid risk that turned out to be true. The feedback link on the website includes all modules and not only the ones the student developed for the thesis. Therefore, the student had to create an individual feedback link just for those modules and find individuals to review those modules. Nevertheless, the course participants gave a small insight into the usefulness of the modules, so that a broad and assumed reaching of the goal was possible.

#### 4.1.4 Resources

Fortunately, the thesis project didn't require many resources and all the resources that the student originally planned were used in the same way as they were originally intended. In the following table, the intended and used resources in the project can be seen. The "to be acquired" section refers to the stage of project planning, but those resources were effectively used during the project development.

Table 1. Resources used during the thesis process

Resource	Available	To be acquired
Human	Manager from Familia ry, work team from Familia ry, PMI course students responsible for pilot version, thesis supervisor from DIAK	Participants for the course + feedback survey, IT professional to upload the course
Time	3 months schedule (Mar.-May. 2021) for the project planning and development, ~10 months for the whole thesis process, including project evaluation, with approximately one year break in between	Time for the evaluation of course feedback
Technical	Computers, cell phones, headsets, internet connection, social media platforms	Participants need to have access to the course and internet
Knowledge	Research + literature about the topic, information on Familia ry's website, knowledge from Familia ry's manager and experts, project planning skills, creativity,	Visual aid creation skills
Budget	No budget needed	

The human resources were almost completely given already during the planning stage. The student was working in close collaboration with Familia ry's manager and received supervision from Diak's lecturers. A few participants to



the online course were found and as soon as the online-course content was finished and Familia ry handed it over to the professionals who were responsible for the design of Familia ry's website. The time resources were quite unique and flexible, due to the student's personal life.

Not many technical resources were needed. The student needed to have the means to do research, create the course content and communicate with the work-life partner, which was given with basic programs, such as E-Mail, Microsoft word, internet browsers and apps for visual aid creation such as in-shot and canva. The course participants only needed a computer/cell phone and a working internet connection to be able to participate in the course.

Due to much research and online information available to the thesis topic, most of the knowledge resources were easily accessible. Basic skills in visual aid creation were helpful for the student to create the course content in a more interesting way. This thesis project used no budget.

#### 4.2 Implementation phase

A project often has several execution phases (Patzak & Rattay, 2012, p. 23), which usually depend on the individual project plan, as well as agreed breakdown of work and distribution. During the execution phase, which is often called implementation phase, relevant info and material was gathered to provide information to the participants of the target group. The student used the expert interview material that was used for the Project Management and Innovation course as well as the feedback results from the pilot version to gain more knowledge about the target group and its needs. Furthermore, having been in an intercultural relationship herself, the student was able to reflect on own experiences and communication challenges and possible solutions for the struggles. Starting from the need of the target group, three subtopics about intercultural communication were chosen that should make part two of the online course.

During the research phase, a variety of online databases have been used to search for relevant literature on the key concepts and topics for the online course. Personal books on the student's bookshelf about e.g., love languages (Chapman, 1995) were used as well. From there, the modules were created, meaning explanatory information about the topics, written in a coherent and simple way. The student used mind-mapping as a tool to determine which tasks need to be done and which questions to be thought of.

Figure 5. Mind map: Aspects considered in the search for the thesis idea



Following the same structure and length as the pilot version, the student was writing the educational content and creating the exercises. Since one comment in the feedback form suggested that the course could use more visual aids, the student created visual aids for each of the three subtopics.

In project management, monitoring is a key factor to reach a satisfactory result (Eby, 2022). During the whole process, the student repeatedly reflected on the goal of the thesis project, carefully evaluating if the schedules are being followed, of the goals are being met and if the content that is being written does contribute to the overall goal of improving communication of people in an intercultural relationship. Frequent contact with the work life partner is being held to ensure that the common interests and goals for the thesis would be followed.

As a part of monitoring, the student was participating in thesis course lectures and seminars, submitting the thesis documents several times, receiving feedback from other students as well as the teacher. Best efforts have been made to improve in the areas that were constructively pointed out. After the written course content was finished, the material was sent to the work-life partner.

In the controlling and closing phase the feedback gathered from Familia ry was taken into consideration and necessary changes to the course were made. The organization was responsible for uploading the course material on their website and promoting it. There have been some challenges in uploading the content, but due to good and fast communication between the student and the organization, those challenges were resolved rapidly.

Despite the need for closure, Hyttinen (2017, p.18) suggests tight contact and cooperation with the organization instead of regarding a certain project as closed. Therefore, the student has kept in contact with the organization even months after the upload of the course on the website.

#### 4.3 Evaluation of the thesis project

Evaluation as a tool in a nonprofit organization can be important to demonstrate the organizations accountability, improve the performance, increase chances to receive funding in the future and promote the fulfilling of the goals and objectives of the organization (Zarinpoush, 2006, p. 7). It is important that the organization communicates the results of the evaluation to all stakeholders involved, such as the staff members, service users, or the public.

Zarinpoush (2006) points out though, that the evaluation efforts are wasted if the results are not being used to work on improvement in the future. If done efficiently, an evaluation of a project gives new input to further decision making, reporting or modifications to the programs of the organization. Furthermore, project evaluation can play a significant role in addressing the needs of the target group and define the progress and success of a project.

For this thesis project, a threefold evaluation was carried out. An evaluation together with the project manager of Familia ry gave insight about the satisfaction of the organization with the project, as well as how Familia ry has used the course material and plans to use the modules in the future. That evaluation has happened through E-mail contact.

Furthermore, the student evaluated her own efforts and outcomes, using SWOT analysis. SWOT analysis is an effective tool to help analyze a project's strengths (S), weaknesses (W) opportunities (O) and threats (T). The student has already through the whole thesis project process evaluated her effort and the development of the process, so the results changed throughout time and the overall result of own efforts are presented in a table.

Lastly, a feedback form sent to 10 individuals from the target group was analyzed. On the Familia ry website is a preexisting feedback form at the end of the course that helps the organization to evaluate the course as a whole. Nevertheless, the student has created a separate feedback form to evaluate the thesis project, meaning the modules 3-6, which are part of the whole course.

As previously mentioned, the form was sent to 10 individuals who are in an intercultural relationship and have familiarized themselves enough with the material to give feedback that was used for qualitative evaluation. The questions in the feedback form are open end questions, based on SWOT analysis that promote the chance to gain not only positive feedback, but also input how the modules can be improved.

The 10 individuals that the feedback form was sent to are friends and acquaintances of the student, which carries the risk of the participants being biased and not completely honest in their answers to not hurt the feelings of someone they know. An introductory text together with the feedback form stated clearly the wish for honest and constructive feedback, so that the modules can possibly be adapted to the needs of the target group. The introductory text also stated that the participants should not enclose if or when they

would fill out the feedback form. That way their anonymity was ensured, as the student only saw results in the feedback form but had no info about who participated and gave which answers. Altogether, 6 filled feedback forms were received. The evaluation results will be presented in chapter 6 of this thesis.

Some stakeholders involved in the evaluation process have more influence on the project and its development than others. The stakeholders that were directly and indirectly involved in the evaluation process can be seen in table 5.

Table 5. Stakeholders involved in the evaluation of the project

Stakeholders using the evaluation outcomes	To make improvement	To make operational decisions	To provide input to evaluation	To react	For interest only
Familia ry Manager	X	X	X	X	
Couples and <b>invdividuals</b> who used the feedback link			X		
Course design team (student in collaboration with Familia ry)	X	X	X		
IT specialists	X	X		X	
Familia ry staff		X		X	X

As can be seen in table 5, the manager from Familia ry, the student and IT specialists from Familia ry had a direct impact on the improvement of the course material and layout. Familia ry used that privilege by uploading additional reading material to the course content that was sent by the student. Hereby it needs to be noted that the student did not know during the planning or implementation phase how many members of the organization would be involved in the process and who would eventually upload the course content to the webpage.

The people who used the feedback link were the ones giving valuable input for the evaluation, giving their opinion, constructive feedback and suggestions for improving the course.

The staff members of the organization still have power to make operational decisions. Every worker of Familia ry has access to the website editing tools and can therefore make changes, if necessary. Furthermore, they have the power to decide how the course content is being used in practice in the services that are being offered by Familia ry. A good example of this is the fact that an intern at Familia ry has reached out to the student a few months after the upload of the course, because they had questions about how to implement some of the course material in their online services.

## 5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethics in research work and thesis writing are crucial to protect everyone who is involved in the process. Gothoni (2020) states that ethics in research work cover e.g., legislation and norm systems, practical action, relationships between author and participants, as well as data production, results and publication.

### 5.1 Relevant project ethics in thesis work

Research permits and consent are important aspects in a thesis process. In the beginning of the process, a thesis agreement was made with the work life partner, to mitigate possible conflict during the thesis process. Following the suggestions from Arene ry (2019, p. 6), the thesis agreement included the topic, schedule, supervision, background material, ownership rights and responsibility aspects. A research permit was not needed for this type of project.

Transparency is an important issue; therefore, participants of the course were informed about the fact that the feedback link at the end of the course aimed to improve the course content and user experience. To follow the guidelines established by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK, 2019, p.53), the most important stakeholders, meaning the students and the organization were informed about their rights, e.g., to withdraw from the process and participation at any stage.

Since the same ethical and moral responsibilities apply to the participants, students but also the work life partner, there was close contact with Familia ry throughout the entire process. To follow the ethical principle of confidentiality, data protection laws were followed strictly, and the privacy of the participants protected. The feedback link for the target group to evaluate the three modules was sent to individuals that the student personally knows. To ensure the anonymity of the individuals, the feedback link was sent together with an

introductory text that asked the participant to not let the student know if or when they have filled out the form. That way, the student was only seeing the anonymous results in the feedback form but did not know who participated and which answers came from whom.

Blair (2018, p.82) mentions the importance of following ethics while conducting online surveys. The participants need to be able to give consent to participate and have the option to draw out of the process. This principle was followed by ensuring that no questions in the survey were mandatory and that the survey could be ended at any time. Furthermore, as already mentioned, the survey was completely anonymous, not requiring the participants to disclose parts of their identity.

When research, material, results or publications is being used in theses, the guidelines in the copyright act need to be followed (Arene ry, 2019, p. 12). Plagiarism avoidance was ensured by adding the correct references and applying reference guidelines. Ideas and quotations from other sources were referred to in the text, as well as the reference list by using the APA 7 referencing style.

## 5.2 Personal values for the thesis project

Besides the basis ethics that researchers and project teams are expected to follow, the student had additional and personal values and ethics that received special attention in the thesis process. One of these was the accessibility of the online course material, which was made to be simple, easy to understand and accompanied by visual aids for better understanding of the topics.

To make the online course more appealing to the participants, the student tried to apply a writing style that conveys a friendly and inviting tone and does not put any pressure or stress on the person but rather motivates them in a low-key environment to get familiar with the topics and use the exercises to practice them.



To increase the well-being of a certain group of people, their wishes and needs need to be determined and taken into great consideration. Therefore, one of the most important values of the student was the participation of the target group in the project, without having them lose their anonymity. The experts from Family ry gave insight into the target group's struggles in relationships.

Furthermore, the feedback received from the pilot version created during the project management and innovation course played an important role. The student took the answers seriously and developed content according to the suggestions of improvement from the former feedback form. Therefore, the target group played an active role in the influence of decision making for the topics and layout of the online course.

During the thesis project, the student encountered an ethical difficulty when it comes to inclusivity and the reduction of stereotypes. Being an advocate for inclusivity, anti-discrimination, anti-racism and cultural sensitivity, the student had challenges encountering research that applied black and white thinking when it comes to these values. Inclusivity is not always given in literature and former research about the topics. Often, terms such as "man and woman", "husband and wife" "married couple", "one partner and the other partner" were used, which gives little to no room for LGBTQIA+ as well as poly-amorous relationships. To adapt to the existing course material as well as the literature used for the theoretical framework, the student used generalizing language in their writing style, while paying closer attention to being more inclusive in the thesis writing itself.

When it comes to cultural sensitivity, the difficulty of bias in research about intercultural studies is noticeable. Scollon (2012) explains the usage of stereotypical thinking in research of intercultural communication. While observing a conversation between, for example a Chinese and an American person, we tend to automatically assume that these two people are significantly different from each other and that these differences characterize the difficulties in their relationship or communication. While differences in cultures and nationalities

can definitely be observed, researchers often do the mistake of making assumptions based on too little facts and categorizing people by using stereotypes, when these are often not correct. Therefore, the student writing the thesis tried to leave it up to the person in an intercultural relationship to define which differences and issues are rooted in cultural backgrounds and which are not.

Another area in which research material slightly collides with the student's value of inclusion is the concept of love languages. Unfortunately, the part of the online course that discusses love languages is very focused on western cultures. The approach used came from Marshall Rosenberg (2003) who describes five general love languages that people use in their relationships to give and receive love. But as Kumar (2017) points out, these five languages are not entirely translatable across cultures. In some South Asian or Middle Eastern cultures, physical expression of love in public, such as holding hands is seen as an absolute scandal. Often, family members of the opposite sex (brother/sister) give each other hugs.

Besides physical touch, words of affirmation are a love language that is not dominant either, because it is perceived as awkward and unwanted. Praise and appreciation are more valued when it is expressed and communicated to and through a third party. Some expressions of love that would be seen more fitting and unique to non-Western cultures could be respecting family, traditions and food. As an example, when in Western cultures saying "I love you" to the partner can have a big impact, in non-Western cultures cooking food for the partner's parents can show love in a more effective way.

Kumar (2017) acknowledges and respects Rosenberg's five love languages as a great concept that helps many relationships, while pointing out that more efforts need to be made to make the love languages a truly global concept.

## 6 EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

This chapter describes the results of the thesis project evaluation, as well as the resulting strengths and limitations. The reliability of the thesis is explained.

To document the assessment in a systematized way, a threefold evaluation was carried out. Firstly, the student's own efforts and project management process were reflected on and evaluated. Following Posner's and Applegarth's suggestion, the following questions were kept in mind: "What went well in the project?", "What did not go well in the project?"

As first part of the evaluation, the manager from Familia ry gave feedback and furthermore held a meeting for the staff members within their own organization, to discuss design, edit and upload to their website. It became clear based on Familia ry's values, that a follow-up using a user experience survey to know our target group experiences and the value they place on the modules would be useful. Therefore, a feedback link was provided to 10 course participants and later evaluated. As the third part of the evaluation, the student measured her own project management and reflected on the goals and objectives of the project.

The results of the personal reflection as well as the feedback from the organization can be seen in table 6. "Good result" implies that the expectations set by the involved parties were fulfilled or even exceeded, "satisfactory result" implies that the expectations were mostly or partly met on a basic level, leaving much room still for things that could have gone better. "Dissatisfactory result" implies that the expectations were not met, and something did not go according to how it was initially intended.

Table 2. Threefold evaluation summary

Criteria to be evaluated	Good result	Satisfactory result	Dissatisfactory result
<b>Student's efforts:</b>			
Communication with work-life partner		X	
Communication with teachers from Diak		X	
Planning of the project		X	
Course content creation	X		
Schedule, risks, re-sources		X	
Motivation	X		
Evaluation			X
Personal learning	X		
Overall end result		X	
<b>Work-life partner:</b>			
Collaboration with the student	X		
Course content	X		
Usefulness of the course	X		
Opportunities to further develop the content	x		

### 6.1 Work-life partner evaluation

The work life partner valued the input and work from the student a lot and was appreciative and grateful for the content that has been created. Especially the chosen topics, length of the modules and content was described as "good" and appreciated. The work-life partner did not give much constructive feedback or ask for possible changes.

The manager from Familia ry worked as a facilitative leader, meaning that there was only intervention when it was necessary, but most of the time, the student was given the freedom to use their ideas and creativity according to their interests, which was well received by the organization. The course content was seen as very useful, which became even clearer, when the student received several E-Mails from individuals working with Familia ry who had questions about the modules or wanted to have a few questions answered, since they planned to create additional content (e.g., about nonviolent communication) to complement the existing modules.

## 6.2 Evaluation of the target group

For this part of the threefold evaluation, the target group's feedback was collected and evaluated. Because of limited time resources at this point of evaluation, the number of people from the target group giving feedback was very restricted. Nevertheless, the feedback gathered from the few participants was very positive, which implies that the modules were seen as very satisfactory by the target group. The feedback form is a qualitative questionnaire, using 6 questions from which most are open questions that give the participant the opportunity to give constructive feedback based on SWOT analysis questions. The questions were the following:

- 1) Do you have the feeling you learned something new about communication?
- 2) How useful are the topics to improve communication in intercultural relationships?
- 3) What did you particularly like about the modules?
- 4) What did you particularly dislike about the modules?
- 5) Was there anything that was difficult to understand or would have needed more clarification? If yes, what?
- 6) How can we further develop these modules?

The results gave helpful insight and showed general satisfaction when it comes to quality, clarity, usefulness and topic choices.

Figure 6. Responses to question 1 in the feedback form



As shown in figure 6, 5 out of the 6 responses to this question implied that that person has learned something new about communication and only one response implied uncertainty about whether that person has learned something new or not.

Figure 7. Responses to question 2 in the feedback form.

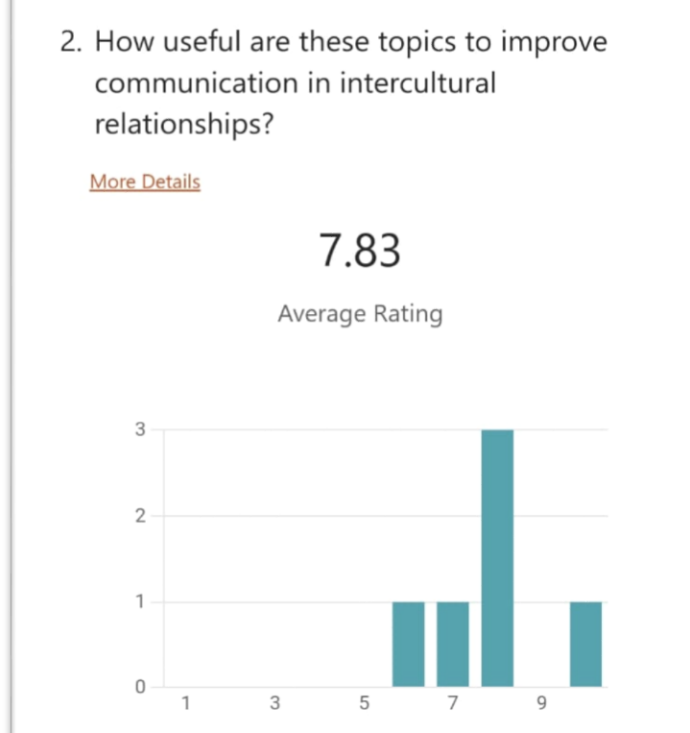
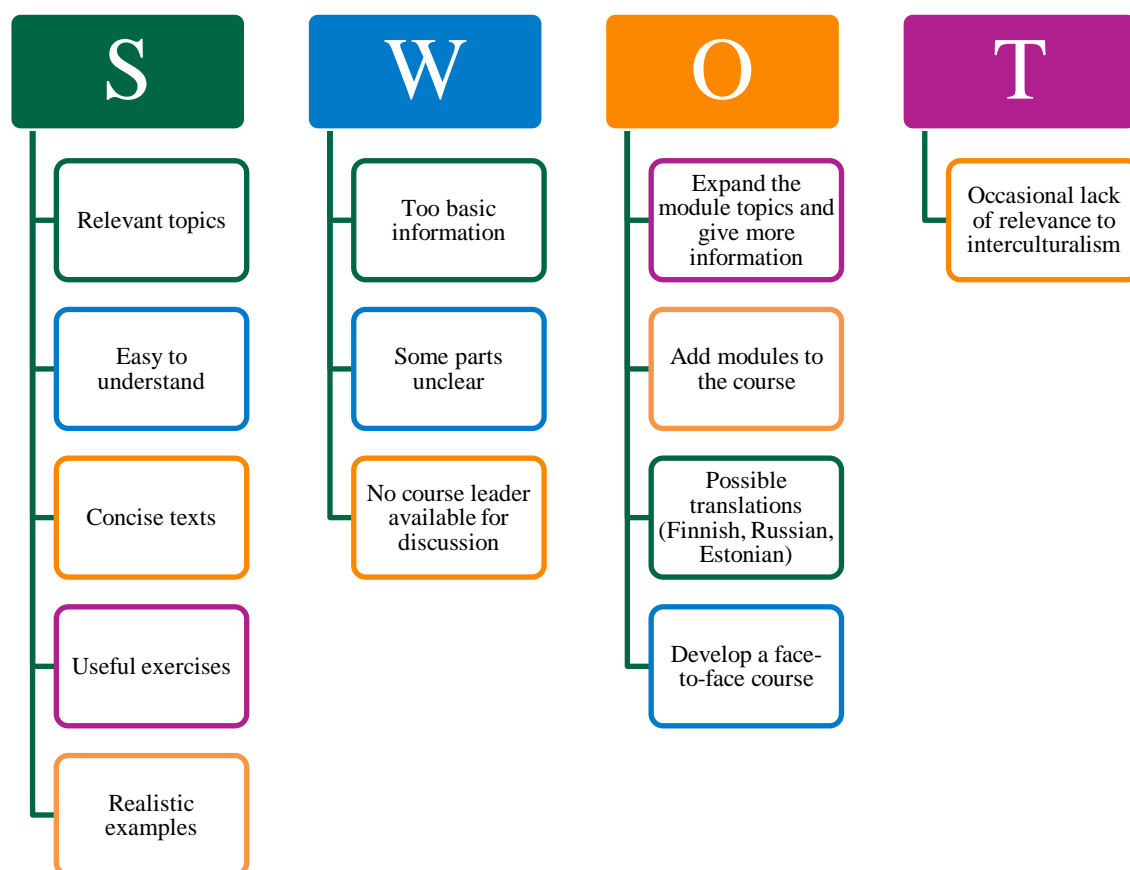


Figure 7 implies that the chosen topics for the three modules in the online course are quite useful to improve communication in intercultural relationships. Ranging from 6-10 in the responses, the average rating that the participants gave the usefulness was 7,83.

The open-ended questions in the feedback form gave the student very good insight into the specific strengths and weaknesses of the modules. Figure 8 mentions the most relevant answers to these questions. An evaluation of the results suggests that the modules are well received as a way to improve communication in intercultural relationships and have great potential to be further developed.

Figure 8. SWOT analysis of the feedback form



The impact, meaning the long-term changes in the individuals who are taking the course, cannot be evaluated due to the limited timeframe of the thesis project work. Furthermore, it needs to be addressed, that one project alone most likely does not produce significant change by itself, therefore this thesis project will only be a part of several factors that might lead to an overall fulfillment of the goal, which is the increased well-being of intercultural couples.

### 6.3 Self-evaluation

The student is very satisfied with her own motivation and efforts during the thesis project process, as well as the project development, mainly the creation of the course material. The learning outcomes of the student were as expected and the student gained a lot of knowledge about project planning in general, collaboration with the work-life partner and knowledge about the topics of intercultural communication.

The communication with the work-life partner and the teachers from Diak was satisfactory, meaning it was enough to gain the necessary feedback and work productively on the project, but it could have been more frequent. The schedules were almost kept, considering that there was a quite long break in the student's overall thesis process.

The planning of the project could have been more tied to the thesis supervisor teacher's ideas and guidelines. This slightly affected the thesis process, timeline and outcome. One example hereof is the feedback link for the target group that got initially created for the whole online course on the Familia ry website and not just the modules that the student has created for her thesis. There were some struggles how to follow the wishes from the work life partner, the student and the university equally. Assessment of the project is mentioned in the column of aspects that provided a dissatisfactory result, but only because the assessment had to be changed and was therefore the cause for a delay in the thesis schedule. Nevertheless, the result of the assessment and overall project is satisfactory.



## 6.4 Limitations of the thesis

No matter how good the planning is, every project has certain stumbling blocks that make it less fruitful or aligns less with the originally intended version the project team had in mind. In this thesis project development, three specific limitations stood out, which were timeframe, timing of the project and lack of skills.

Considering the time frame for the thesis work, the student had a desired graduation date and therefore a given time frame in which the thesis project must be planned, developed and evaluated. Since the main goal of the thesis is to increase well-being in intercultural couples, the time frame is rather small. Developing an online course is a procedure that is being done only once, in the best case. Yet, since the course content will be available on the website even after the thesis process ends, there would be a need to continuously work on and edit the content, based on the participants' feedback.

Looking at the timing of the project, the world was in the middle of a pandemic, which brought many restrictions with it. The course was chosen to be online, so that people could participate from their homes, without having to have much contact with others. If contact with others had been safer, the course about intercultural communication could have been more like a face-to-face peer support group. That way, couples could meet other couples, talk about specific everyday challenges and find solutions.

A group facilitator could lead the couples to do exercises and by being more tailored to the specific needs of the participants, the goal to increase communication and well-being might be better fulfilled. The feedback from the course participants included people stating that they would have preferred the course to be face-to-face with a facilitator, an idea that could be kept in mind to realize in the future.

The third limitation was lack of visual aid creation skills. People learn in all kinds of different ways. Nevertheless, having visual aids complement written text makes it easier for the reader to understand the topic and not lose focus.

It is easier to concentrate on a topic, when it is embedded in pictures, graphics, videos or other material. Since the student's skills, experience and equipment (e.g., a good camera) are limited, there were only the options to have mostly text in the course, or to use outside material. The latter would complicate the process, since copyright issues need to be strictly followed and links/videos/pictures checked more frequently than for self-produced material. Therefore, the student had to use their limited skills and knowledge about applications to create a very limited amount of simple visual aids.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this chapter, a final review of the thesis project will be conducted, based on the objectives and goals as well as the evaluation of the final project. It will be discussed if the goals were met, and the objectives reached. Since the long-term effects of the project cannot be measured in the limited time frame of the thesis, the focus lies on recommendations for the future on how the project could be developed further and used by the work-life partner.

### 7.1 Reaching the project goal and objectives

The aim of this thesis is to create modules for a self-study online course about communication, to provide a tool for people in an intercultural relationship to enhance their well-being through communication.

Careful and detailed planning was one of the main personal goals for this thesis' project management process and it has been achieved. According to Hyttinen, (2017, p.60) a well communicated code of conduct made in collaboration with the involved stakeholders is recommended to guarantee reliability of a project. Working closely with the work-life partner, as well as frequent monitoring and documentation ensured a higher reliability of the project output.

Reliability in project management refers to the probability that a product will perform in a way that it was originally intended within a specific time frame or envisioned effort (Alby, 2009). All stages of planning, implementation as well as evaluation were discussed with the work-life partner to ensure their satisfaction and change direction of the process as fast as possible, if needed.

The need for the project was already clear before the start of the writing of this thesis, because during the project management and innovation course in Diak, Familia ry already voiced the wish for collaboration with students to de-

velop an online course that promotes well-being of intercultural couples. Having this need clearly stated from the work-life partner helped with the definition of purpose and goals for the project as well as focused planning from the very beginning.

The sources and research material have been chosen very carefully. The topics for the module were chosen because according to experience and professionals they lead to higher satisfaction in a relationship. The goal was to use a variety of academic books and articles as little internet sources as possible, because these tend to be less reliable.

The evaluation with the work-life partner as well as individual course participant's feedback clearly shows that the course content was perceived as interesting and useful in romantic relationships. Since most of the goals set in the planning phase were achieved, the student considers the objectives of the thesis met, including the development of three modules that contain information about communication topics, visual aids and practical exercises.

Intercultural relationships keep increasing in Finland, therefore the need for support for these relationships will still be present in the future. To conclude this thesis, it can be said that an online course to improve communication is one of many ways to offer that support and solutions to the difficulties that people in an intercultural relationship in Finland have. The course is available on the Family website (Appendix 2) accessible to everyone who is interested in taking the course.

## 7.2 Professional development

Being in an intercultural relationship herself, the student writing the thesis had a very high interest in learning about intercultural communication from the very beginning of the thesis process. The interest resulted in high motivation to learn more about the topics and create course content that is easy to understand. The project management and innovation course offered at Diak

gave the student pre-knowledge about careful project planning, implementation and evaluation. That knowledge gained was enhanced during the thesis project process, giving the student another great opportunity to put project planning skills and methods into practice.

Schedules, planning and accountability to the work-life partner and the teachers from Diak gave the student possibilities to practice self-reliance as well as responsibility. Following certain rules and requirements in thesis writing helped the student to follow guidelines and schemes, work in an organized and detailed way, which required a high level of concentration and focus.

Developing a project that the student feels passionate about and then seeing how the outcome received positive feedback from the involved parties caused a feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction in the student. Using her skills, time, passion and other resources was a pleasure.

### 7.3 Recommendations

The time frame for the project management course in Diak as well as the thesis process is very limited to fulfil the purpose of the thesis and wish of the work-life partner to increase the well-being of individuals in intercultural relationships. Since the need for support for people in intercultural relationships is so big, the student hopes that the online course will continue to be used, changed, complemented and the topics discussed, reflected and shared among individuals in the target group. By continuously putting attention and value on the target group, they can learn more about communication, reflect on their application of the topics and feel more satisfied in their relationship and personal life.

A recommendation to the individuals in intercultural relationship who have taken the course already would be to share their experiences with friends or family members, who might benefit from it as well. Furthermore, the individuals could reflect after e.g., 3 months how their overall communication in the relationship has improved since having participated in the course. They can

keep studying communication topics and make it a part of their daily life to actively improve communication with their closed ones.

A recommendation to the work-life partner would be continuous efforts to promote the online course, to use it as complementary material to their existing guides and services, to review the course material and ensure that the web-links to the additional learning material are working. Furthermore, the work-life partner could take the survey feedback into consideration and develop a face-to-face course during which the participants would discuss the topics, share experiences and do the exercises while being led by a facilitator.

As already mentioned before, the online course is not enough to significantly improve well-being. Therefore, one recommendation for the future is to keep using the material from the online course and connecting it with other services that Familia ry offers. Familia ry has already been a leading example of the recommendation to not close a project permanently but keep working on it in the future. This became clear when the student received E-Mail from workers and interns/volunteers of Familia ry who planned to create additional and complementary content to the course.

A recommendation to social service professionals would be to acknowledge the need for intercultural communication skills while working with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds. They could determine in what way the online course modules could be applied into social service settings with clients, as well as encourage their clients to develop intercultural competences and communication skills to avoid conflicts and promote connection in all kinds of relationships.

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APPENDIX 1: Visual aids for the love language chapter in the course



## APPENDIX 2: Weblinks

-Video about nonviolent communication, created specifically for the project

Available on the following website:

[https://www.familiar.fi/interculturalcommunicationcourse-nonviolent\\_communication.html](https://www.familiar.fi/interculturalcommunicationcourse-nonviolent_communication.html)

(On the right side is a video displayed)

-Link to the online course:

<https://www.familiar.fi/interculturalcommunicationcourse.html>