Conflict is an inevitable part of the human experience (Roloff, 1987). Consequently, people in relationships find themselves in conflict on a regular basis (Guerrero & La Valley, 2006). When in conflict, individuals often demonstrate preferences for certain communication styles, something that is oftentimes learned within various cultural contexts (Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997). For instance, according to Collier (1991), an individual’s racial and ethnic background, coupled with social interactions with family and friends, impacts how they are taught to deal with conflict. In short, race, ethnicity, and culture are frames through which we view, experience, and perceive conflict (Ribeau, 1995). Given the history of race relations described in Chapter 2, conflict, power, and inequality are present in current-day interactions. Because of this, interracial and interethnic communication is commonly seen as a site of struggle (Moss & Faux, 2006).

Communication scholars have studied social conflicts for the past 30-plus years (Putnam, 2006). This chapter draws from this research with a particular focus on interracial and interethnic conflict. According to Ting-Toomey (2000), conflict is “the perceived and/or actual incompatibility of values, expectations, processes, or outcomes between two or more parties . . . over substantive and/or relational issues” (p. 388). We adopt this definition and apply it specifically to individuals from different racial and ethnic groups within the United States. Consistent with the focus of the book, we differentiate between *interracial conflict* (conflict between members of different races, i.e., African American/Asian American) and *interethnic conflict* (conflict between members of different ethnic groups, i.e., Cuban Americans/Puerto Rican Americans). This chapter is designed to provide students with a background on the sources of conflict, as well as different conflict styles. Following these descriptions, we discuss some of the limitations of existing research and offer some practical examples on how some groups have created interracial unity within their organizations.

Research on intercultural conflict generally, and interracial and interethnic conflict specifically, is a rapidly growing area of study (Orbe & Everett, 2006). The vast
majority of research on culture and conflict, however, has focused on comparison studies of conflict styles among people from different countries (M.-S. Kim & Leung, 2000). The same could be said for research on interracial or interethnic conflict (Houston, 2002). At times, it is the different cultural styles of individuals, and not necessarily the content of the conflict itself, that creates problems within the conflict episode (Ting-Toomey, 1988). Other times, the focus of the conflict could be over personal, social, or professional issues; oftentimes racial and ethnic differences complicate the conflict. Before discussing different conflict styles, we begin by describing how interracial and interethnic conflict is oftentimes the result of existing context issues.

Contextual Sources of Conflict

Interracial/ethnic conflict is a dynamic process; any one episode is typically the result of multiple sources of conflict (H. Waters, 1992). In other words, conflict can simultaneously involve personal and cultural issues. In order to provide insight into how conflict often becomes racialized, we describe various sources of interracial/ethnic conflict.

Present-Day Social Inequality

As covered in Chapter 2, ingroup/outgroup tensions have existed since the origins of the United States. These historical tensions continue today, and a present-day social inequality between groups serves as a contextual source of interracial and interethnic conflict (Stephan & Stephan, 2001). In a capitalist society, such as the United States, people oftentimes find themselves competing for limited resources. Social inequalities—in terms of health, housing, employment, income, and education—exist and become a key source of frustration because people are not able to participate on a “level playing field.” What is especially frustrating for marginalized groups (most often people of
color) are recent attempts to ignore that social inequality exists and advocate for colorblind communication (Tierney & Jackson, 2002).

Despite the attempts to mend a history of oppression and discrimination, the U.S. population continues to be divided in terms of “haves” and “have-nots”—a division that oftentimes occurs largely along racial lines. For example, according to Rudman, Ashmore, and Melvin (2001), African Americans continue to suffer from oppression in employment, housing, and health care. African Americans do not have equal opportunity in the area of the justice system or police protection, and although they have equal access to public education, the quality of education is highly unequal (Rudman et al., 2001). In research on face-to-face interactions between Korean immigrant retailers and African American customers, Bailey (2000) concluded that social inequality in the United States shapes the local context in which interracial encounters occur. Specifically, he found that social inequality fueled social assumptions that storekeepers and customers brought to the stores, the result of which were interracial episodes grounded in misunderstanding and mistrust.

Similar social inequalities are at the root of tensions between African Americans and Latino/as. Historically, African Americans and Latino/as oftentimes found themselves in communities of color, and/or alternatively in contexts where they are in the distinct minority (Rios, 2003). Solidarity between Latino/as and African Americans is well documented (Rowe & Ramos, 2003). In some instances, however, both groups find themselves in conflict over limited resources or struggles with social standing. The forms of this type of interracial conflict vary depending on historical context and geographical location (Rowe & Ramos, 2003). For example, in the Northeast, tensions between African Americans and Puerto Rican Americans have centered on bilingual education and competition for jobs and political clout. Similar tensions have existed between Cuban Americans and African Americans in southern Florida. In the Southwest and California, tensions have emerged amid debates about legalizing immigration. Given all of this, it is important to note that some scholars, like Ryoo (2005), described these widely publicized tensions as exaggerated.

**Ingroup/Outgroup Tensions**

Within a historical context of domination, slavery, colonization, and military conquests, it is no surprise that ingroup/outgroup tensions exist among European Americans and different racial and ethnic groups (Dovidio, Gaertner, et al., 2002). The long history of mistreatment, discrimination, and racism has fostered a general sense of mistrust and suspicion of European Americans among some communities of color (Akiba & Miller, 2004). At times, individual knowledge of the history of mistreatment of one group at the hands of another increases the negativity between racial and ethnic groups—something that can trigger conflict (Gallois, 2003). In addition, community conflict is often generated by an influx of new racial and ethnic groups (Oliver & Wong, 2003) who are perceived by residents as a threat (M. H. Ross, 2000). Within this context, the majority group may feel that their economic and social privilege is threatened; such, reportedly, has been the case for some European Americans and African Americans who have felt threatened by the economic power of Asian Americans (Oliver & Wong, 2003). The end result is increased ingroup/outgroup tension, which typically results in increased communication apprehension during interracial interactions (Toale & McCroskey, 2001).
Historically, much of the literature on race, ethnicity, and conflict has focused on tensions between European Americans and different racial/ethnic groups. However, according to Shah and Thornton (1994), one of the most tense relationships between different racial and ethnic groups exists between African Americans and Latino/as. Because of the political inroads that have been gained by the Latin community, and the new Latin immigrants taking low-paying jobs, African Americans believe that Latino/a success has come at their expense (D. M. Rowe & Ramos, 2003). Latino/as counter the African American’s argument stating that African Americans are insensitive to Latino/a needs and that African Americans do not want to share their resources with other minorities (Shah & Thornton, 1994).

**BOX 10.2**

**MIGRATION TRENDS AND RACIAL AND ETHNIC TENSIONS**

For centuries, the South has been defined by the color line and the struggle for accommodation between African Americans and European Americans (Calafell, 2004). In the first half of the 20th century, hundreds of thousands of African Americans migrated to the north and Midwest (Frey, 1998). In the last 10 years, a reverse migration has occurred with African Americans returning to Georgia, North Carolina, and Florida in record numbers (Frey, 2001, 2004b). However, the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Latino/a immigrants in the past 5–10 years has changed the dynamics of race in many towns across the South (Swarns, 2006). These demographic shifts have resulted in some tensions between Latino/as and African Americans who compete fiercely for working-class jobs and government resources. An effect of this, according to some Latino/as, is hostility, insults, and ethnic slurs from African Americans (Swarns, 2006). Growing anti-immigration sentiment has been understood by some as covertly reflective of racial and ethnic tension (Domke, McCoy, & Torres, 2003).

- What other examples of interracial and interethnic tensions exist that relate to recent patterns of migration and/or immigration?
- Can you also identify examples of unique interracial unity that has also occurred as a result of population shifts?

Another form of ingroup/outgroup tension reportedly exists between some Korean Americans and African Americans in urban areas across the United States. According to Jo (1992), the tension began when Korean Americans moved into the African American communities and established residences and businesses in the area. African Americans accuse Korean Americans of overcharging, rudeness, taking over African American businesses, and siphoning money out of the community without putting it back in (Jo, 1992). Korean Americans argue that the African Americans are wrong, and that the misunderstanding comes from conflicting cultures and miscommunication. For instance, Jo (1992) explained that the reason Korean Americans are less likely to exchange pleasantries is because of their unfamiliarity of the English language, not rudeness. Also, Korean Americans are less likely to hire African Americans in their stores because they cannot afford to pay well, so they employ their own families who will work for a lot less than the average employee. In the end, Cho
(1995) argued that Korean Americans, like their African American counterparts, face ingroup/outgroup tensions with different racial and ethnic groups on varying levels (e.g., Korean American/European American).

**Perceptual Differences**

Members of different racial and ethnic groups define and perceive conflict differently (Hecht et al., 2003). From a person of color’s standpoint, it is not always clear if the conflict is a function of race or some other issue (e.g., personality differences). In addition, when conflict arises, people of color are left wondering if the conflict was malicious (reflective of racial bias) or more indicative of naiveté, miscommunication, or misperceptions (H. Waters, 1992). European Americans, in comparison, often misunderstand the degree of offense that oftentimes accompanies unintentional, subtle forms of racially biased statements and questions (K. T. Warren, Orbe, & Greer-Williams, 2003). Perceptual differences also exist in terms of expectations. What is appropriate when engaging in conflict? The answer to this question can be quite different when asked of different racial and ethnic groups. If individuals do not recognize that “appropriate” behavior can be relative oftentimes results in a polarized conflict situation where trust and respect are lacking (Buttny & Williams, 2000). Such situations only work to further distort perceptions of other groups (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001).

Communicating styles and values can be misinterpreted by individuals who are not a part of the same race (Houston & Wood, 1996). For example, certain common practices that are valued within the African American community (e.g., verbal dueling) can be misperceived as attacking by members of other racial groups (Kochman, 1990). Another example involves instances when European Americans view African American styles of communicating as rude and African Americans see European American styles as cold and unfeeling (Houston & Wood, 1996). Generally speaking, African Americans have a tendency to be more expressive with their feelings, while European Americans tend to be more reserved and believe that feelings should be more contained (Speicher, 1995). Accordingly, when interracial encounters do occur in the context of differing interests, values, and norms, there is a sense of psychological distance, which inhibits the ability for different races to reach common goals (Orbe & Everett, 2006).

---

**BOX 10.3**

**PERCEPTUAL DIFFERENCES OF CONFLICT**

Reality-based television has, in many ways, come to dominate television. MTV’s *The Real World* was one of the first shows to show “seven strangers, picked to live in a house, and have their lives taped to show what happens when people stop being polite and start being real.” The success of this show, as well as all reality-based television, was connected to the amount of conflict between cast members. Researchers Kiesha Warren, Mark Orbe, and Nancy Greer-Williams (2003) used a clip from one of the early reality-based television programs, MTV’s *The Real World*, to study the perceptions of individuals from different cultural groups.

(Continued)
Stereotyping/Lack of Exposure

Although the United States is attempting to move toward a nation that is racially integrated, most races tend to live apart rather than together (Maly, 2005). Racial segregation in neighborhood communities, worship centers, educational institutions, and social organizations increases the chance for misunderstanding (Y. Y. Kim, 1994). One of the primary reasons for this is that racial segregation increases the likelihood that stereotypes and false generalizations will make interracial/ethnic interactions potentially volatile (Oliver & Wong, 2003). In the least, it results in greater caution on the part of diverse individuals (Orbe & Everett, 2006). At worst, it creates an increased sense of relational inequality that makes effective intercultural encounters difficult (Gallois, 2003).

Y. Y. Kim (1994) recognized stereotyping, and a lack of interest in communicating with other racial and ethnic groups, as a source for conflict. When different races are trying to uplift their own race while other races hold stereotypes against them, it can cause serious conflict between the two groups (Habke & Sept, 1993). For example, according to Oliver and Wong (2003), in some contexts Asian Americans are likely to view Latino/as as having a lack of intelligence and being welfare dependent. Alternatively, Blacks and Latino/as both may view Asian Americans as difficult to get along with. Both stereotypes, given the competition for limited resources, typically result in conflicts between these racial and ethnic groups (H. Lee & Rogan, 1991). In

Specifically, they presented a video clip from the first season of the show (New York) to diverse groups of people (African Americans, European Americans, and Latino/as). The clip showed an argument between Julie, an 18-year-old European American woman from Alabama, and Kevin, a 24-year-old African American man from New Jersey. Participants in the study were then asked to discuss their perceptions of what happened, who was at fault, and what could have been done to avoid the conflict.

The results were extremely interesting, especially in how they relate to the perception differences between cultural groups. In fact, although everyone saw the same video clip, the perception patterns were clearly different for each of the three groups examined. African American women saw race as the main factor in the conflict. Specifically they pointed to the potential role that interracial sexual attraction and racial stereotyping played in Julie and Kevin’s argument. In comparison, European American women saw gender as the distinguishing marker in the conflict. Their perceptions focused on how a man, Kevin, attempted to aggressively use his body and voice to intimidate Julie.

European American men saw the conflict as a result of personal differences. Race and gender were only addressed in limited ways. Instead, the focus of the discussion was on how Kevin and Julie’s personalities were at the root of the conflict. And what about African American men? Many defined the conflict as one where race played an issue; however, they also saw how other factors—like age, socioeconomic status, and upbringing—came into play as well.

Interestingly, Latino/as consistently described the conflict in terms of being simultaneously about personality, gender, and race differences. Within a person’s comments, for instance, she or he would begin by talking about the conflict as a personality conflict, but then conclude by pointing out the ways in which the interaction was also layered with racial and gender (mis)perceptions.

(Continued)
addition, Romer, Jamieson, Riegner, and Rouson (1997) noted that ethnic tension may also be ongoing because many Latino/as still have negative feelings and hold negative stereotypes toward African Americans. Interestingly, metastereotypes—the perceptions that racial and ethnic groups have concerning the stereotypes that others have for them—appear to be more prevalent than the actual stereotypes themselves (Sigelman & Tuch, 1997). Therefore, the perceptions of outgroup stereotypes by racial and ethnic group members may actually exacerbate tensions that are not as salient as assumed (Stephan & Stephan, 2001).

Media also play a role in accelerating stereotypical images of racialized others (e.g., Orbe, Warren, & Cornwell, 2001), especially when they have little or no contact with individuals from that particular race (Bramlett-Solomon & Hernandez, 2003). Shah and Thornton (1994) found that African American and Latino/a communities were represented as inner city, Black ghettos, and Hispanic districts, and positioned as isolated from other communities. The neighborhoods of African Americans, for example, were portrayed in the media as neighborhoods of destruction and danger (Shah & Thornton, 1994). By naming the neighborhoods in this manner, it created a psychological distance from the European American community. Not surprisingly, journalists who report to mainly European American audiences frame minority stories as interracial conflicts to make the stories more newsworthy (Romer, Jamieson, & de Coteau, 1998). When negative images are constantly placed in the media, individuals who have not had contact with the different racial and ethnic groups may either have their stereotypes that they hold against these ethnic groups reinforced, or new stereotypes and negative feelings may emerge (Oliver & Wong, 2003). In either case, the result is a public image that perpetuates interracial and interethnic conflict as the norm (Viswanath & Arora, 2000).

Conflict Styles

Racial/Ethnic Conflict Styles

As stated earlier, intercultural conflict researchers have primarily focused on the conflict styles of U.S. and non-U.S. cultures (Ting-Toomey et al., 2000). This body of research has largely used traditional conflict frameworks and measures of individualism/collectivism as a means to identify patterns of conflict strategies (M.-S. Kim & Leung, 2000). In similar ways, interpersonal conflict researchers in the United States have tended to use similar concepts to inform their research on race, ethnicity, and conflict. The result has been research that stems from individualistic/low-context and collectivistic/high-context value systems regarding communication generally, and conflict specifically.

Individualism refers to the cultural values that emphasize the individual identity, rights, and needs over the collective identity, rights, and needs of the larger group. Communication in these cultures is generally more self-focused, ego-based, and self-expressive. Collectivism refers to cultural values that emphasize a group identity over an individual identity. Group obligations and needs take precedence over individual wishes and desires. In other words, collectivistic cultures emphasize a “We-Identity” more so than an “I-Identity.” Communication in these cultures typically adheres to group norms and is evaluated in the context of others’ behaviors. Another dimension
used in traditional cross-cultural research looks at the importance of context. In high-context cultures, differences can exist between what is meant and what is actually said. Communication in high-context cultures, like Japan, involves many subtle nonverbal nuances and forms of indirect negotiation. In this regard, collectivistic cultures are highly sensitive to the effect of their words on others, and weigh what they say very carefully. The role that context serves in low-context cultures is different. In low-context cultures, persons are expected to say what they mean. The norm is not to rely on contextual clues for communicating meaning but to strive for literal meaning. As you might imagine, effective communication, then, involves direct statements, linear speaking patterns, and overt forms of expression.

According to Ting-Toomey et al. (2000), the assumption is that European Americans are individualistic/low context, while Latino/a, Asian, and African Americans are collectivistic/high context (see Table 10.1). Following this assumption, research has explored how these cultural values affect the ways in which these racial and ethnic groups engage in conflict. Trubisky, Ting-Toomey, and Lin (1991) found evidence that during conflict with acquaintances, Asians tend to use higher degrees of obliging and avoiding conflict styles than European Americans. Asians also tend to use a third party more often than other racial groups (Leung, Au, Fernandez-Dols, & Iwawaki, 1992). In comparison, European Americans tend to use upfront, solution-oriented styles, such as integrating and compromising, in dealing with conflict problems (Leung et al., 1992). Mexican Americans, according to Kagan, Knight, and Martinez-Romero (1982) and Garcia (1996), utilize avoiding conflict styles as a means to preserve relational harmony when conflict arises among close Mexican American friends. Research on African Americans has concluded that they tend to use more emotionally expressive and involving modes of conflict (Ting-Toomey, 1986).

While this line of research reflects the dominant frame of traditional research on race/ethnicity and conflict, research has begun to advance conceptual assumptions beyond a simple individualistic–collectivistic dichotomy. In Chapter 5, we discussed the concept of intersectionality, an idea that points to the importance of studying race and ethnicity alongside other aspects of cultural identity. As early as the mid-1980s, research on conflict styles began to consider intragroup differences, like those related to gender. For example, Ting-Toomey (1986) found that African American women tend to use more emotionally expressive conflict styles than African American men, European American men, and European American women. Other research has utilized self-construals—one’s self-perception as being either independent or interdependent of larger group influences—to also explore additional factors predicting conflict style patterns. In a study of Latino/as and European Americans, self-construals were a better predictor of conflict styles than racial/ethnic background (Oetzel, 1998). While some have criticized the limited nature of self-construals (M.-S. Kim & Leung, 2000), it represents an advance in research beyond unilateral assumptions among race, ethnicity, and conflict styles.

Much of the research that we have drawn from thus far has come from social scientific studies that treat race, ethnicity, and culture as variables. Additional research, however, has used culturally based qualitative research designs to generate insight into conflict styles that were difficult to obtain through recall data via written surveys. For
Table 10.1  Core Cultural Differences in Conflict

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individualistic/Low-Context Cultures</th>
<th>Collectivistic/High-Context Cultures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Issue orientation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Relational/face orientation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Conflict is necessary to work out major differences and problems</td>
<td>• Conflict viewed as damaging to social status and relational harmony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Conflict is functional when it provides a way to address problems</td>
<td>• Conflict reflects a lack of self-discipline and emotional immaturity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Focus should be on specific issues; relational issues should be handled separately</td>
<td>• Topical issues and relational issues are intertwined and must be dealt with together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goal orientation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Process orientation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Focus is on achieving specific goals with an eye on the future</td>
<td>• Focus on the process and how it relates to the past, present, and future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Conflict episodes must be isolated and addressed accordingly</td>
<td>• Conflict management has no clear beginning and end</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Conflict management should follow a preset schedule with clear agenda items</td>
<td>• Conflict management is a delicate, subtle process that has no predetermined schedule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Use of formal mediator</strong></td>
<td><strong>Use of informal mediator</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Preference for formally trained mediator</td>
<td>• Preference for informal mediator, usually a well-respected elder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mediator should be impartial and not know any parties involved</td>
<td>• Mediator should know all parties involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mediator should only focus on the issue(s) at hand</td>
<td>• Mediator should attend to past events to help understand current conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tangible power resources</strong></td>
<td><strong>Intangible power resources</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Power is reflected in the ability to reward and/or punish others</td>
<td>• Power is reflected in gains or losses in reputation, prestige, or status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Struggles to gain more power happen both overtly and covertly</td>
<td>• Fewer struggles to gain more power exist; if they do, they happen covertly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Power is asserted through threats, direct requests, and aggressive defense strategies</td>
<td>• Power is displayed subtly through indirect requests, tag questions, and inferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Direct/competitive communication</strong></td>
<td><strong>Indirect/integrating communication</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Communicators have a responsibility to be open, direct, and clear</td>
<td>• Communicators have a responsibility to pick up on the hidden meaning and intentions of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Emphasis on verbal offense and defense to justify one’s position</td>
<td>• Relies on ambiguous, indirect verbal and nonverbal messages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Uses communication strategies that reflect a win/win competition between parties</td>
<td>• Uses communication strategies that reflect a win/win negotiation between parties</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
example, ethnographic studies involving various Native American nations have pointed to the importance of recognizing varying cultural values and the ways they impact conflict behaviors (Sanchez, 2001). Such qualitative research has been invaluable in recognizing that past interpretations of other racial and ethnic group behavior often missed the mark in terms of the rationale for using certain conflict strategies. For example, Basso (1990) reported that, in times of conflict or negotiation, non-Native Americans oftentimes can misinterpret the silence of Native Americans—like that which occurs within the Western Apache culture—as disinterest, a reluctance to speak, or lack of personal warmth. What cultural outsiders fail to recognize in this context is that silence itself carries multiple meanings (see also C. Braithwaite, 1990).

Gaining the perspectives of traditionally marginalized racial and ethnic groups—outside of comparisons with European Americans—represents an important advance in existing conflict research. As such, additional research has focused on accessing ingroup racial and ethnic assumptions of communication behaviors. Of particular note is the work of Hecht and colleagues on African American (e.g., Hecht, Ribeau, & Alberts, 1989) and Mexican American (e.g., Hecht, Ribeau, & Sedano, 1990) perspectives on interethnic communication. This research does not focus solely on conflict, but instead on what each racial/ethnic group regards as satisfying interaction, a framework that is useful when looking at conflict (Ribeau, 1995). While this line of research appears especially useful in advancing existing understanding of how different racial and ethnic groups understand conflict, most of the research has compared different racial and ethnic groups (Houston, 2002).

**Racial/Ethnic Comparisons**

From the outset of scholarship in the area of race, ethnicity, and conflict, researchers have compared the conflict styles of different groups (Donahue, 1985). For instance, in his seminal research on Black and White styles in conflict, Kochman (1981) focused on direct comparisons: the “Black mode of conflicts is high-keyed, animated, interpersonal and confrontational; the white mode of conflict is relatively low-keyed, dispassionate, impersonal, and non-challenging” (Kochman, 1981, p. 18). Contrasting African American and European American conflict styles was adopted by other interracial and interethnic communication research (e.g., Hecht, Larkey, & Johnson, 1992; Ting-Toomey, 1986) and continues to frame current discussions (e.g., Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003).

Such research has provided insight into various points of particular comparison. For example, Martin, Hecht, and Larkey (1994) explored the concepts of realism and honesty among different groups. African Americans view realism as telling it like it is whether you are being positive or negative. In comparison, European Americans’ idea of realism is slightly different. European Americans use the term honesty in the place of realism (Martin et al., 1994). Honesty can be honest but unrealistic, and can become problematic when disclosing positives and negatives. For example, if an African American is too honest to a European American, the European American may get offended; similarly, if a European American is not “real” with an African American, it can produce the same results (Martin et al., 1994).
This line of research has generated additional racial comparisons between African Americans and European Americans within particular situational contexts, like organizations. Shuter and Turner (1997), for example, focused on the different perceptions of organizational conflict between African American and European American women. While both groups perceived their own attempts to reduce conflict as most effective, each enacted different strategies toward the same objective. African American women, interested in getting the conflict out on the table so it could be readily addressed and moved beyond, reported that a direct approach to conflict is most effective. In comparison, European American women used more of an avoidance strategy and felt fear or anxiety when having to approach conflict directly (Shuter & Turner, 1997).

In a study conducted by Collier (1991), three ethnic groups (Mexican, African, and European Americans) were examined to analyze conflict differences within friendships. Participants were asked to describe their definitions of friendship and conflict, and whether they felt that their friends handled conflict effectively or ineffectively in a recalled interaction. Collier found that the different races defined conflict differently. The European American males defined conflict as a difference of opinion, an attack on a person's beliefs and opinions, an unresolved situation, and an inability to compromise; African American men saw conflict as a disagreement, different views, and misunderstandings; Mexican Americans described conflict in a more relational manner. The study also examined how each racial/ethnic group perceived competent communication during conflict episodes. European Americans valued taking responsibility for behaviors, directness, equality, rational decision making, concern for others, and shared control. African Americans believed that information should be given, opinions should be credible, criticism is not appropriate, and assertiveness is important. Mexican American answers were similar to those of European Americans in terms of being concerned about the other person, but unlike European Americans, Mexican Americans believed that in some situations confrontation was appropriate (Collier, 1991).

The research of Ting-Toomey et al. (2000), which compared the conflict styles of multiple racial and ethnic groups (Latino/a, African, Asian, and European Americans), is significant for three reasons. First, it studied conflict styles of all racial and ethnic groups without placing any one at the center of the study. Second, it did not assume that racial/ethnic identity was the most salient factor related to conflict style. Instead, it examined the relationship between ethnic identity salience (how important is ethnicity to an individual), larger U.S. cultural identity (how important is belonging to a larger national culture), and conflict management styles in the four different racial/ethnic groups. Third, the research focused on acquaintance relationships, a relational context where racial/ethnic conflict styles are more likely because third-culture norms have not yet been established.

According to Ting-Toomey et al. (2000), strong identification with one's racial/ethnic group increases the likelihood of culturally orientated conflict behaviors. African Americans were found to strongly identify with their own racial/ethnic group. Interestingly, Latino/a and Asian Americans identified both with their racial/ethnic group and U.S. culture. European Americans, as discussed in the section on Whiteness included in Chapter 4, identified primarily with the larger U.S. culture. Some of Ting-Toomey et al.'s (2000) findings reaffirmed earlier research (e.g., Asian Americans use...
more avoiding than European Americans, and Latino/as use more third-party conflict styles than African Americans). However, the study made significant contributions to existing research on race, ethnicity, and conflict by providing insight into the complex ways that multiple aspects of a person’s identity influence conflict styles.

**Thinking Critically About Existing Research**

As illustrated through our summary in the previous section, existing research on interracial and interethnic conflict has established a strong base of foundational knowledge. One of the objectives of this book is to encourage students to be active consumers of knowledge—this includes thinking critically about what you read. All research has limitations, and by identifying them, we hope to help students advance beyond simplistic explanations of complex ideas (see the ideas of complicity theory, covered in Chapter 6). Within this section, we highlight four of the most salient limitations of research on race, ethnicity, and conflict.

**BOX 10.4**

**AUTHOR REFLECTIONS**

People are always surprised when I tell them that my intentions for earning a Ph.D. were so that I could teach communication classes, preferably at a community college. When I started my doctoral work, my goal was to do “just enough” research to complete the degree and secure a college teaching position. This made sense given that my goal was to focus on teaching; however, to be honest, I was also not interested in research because I did not feel as if I had anything to contribute. Up to that point, the research that I had read did not “speak” to me or my experiences.

Something happened during my first year of my doctoral program, however, that changed all that. I started reading research in communication and related fields on different racial and ethnic groups. While the topics—interracial dating, biracial identity development, racial stereotypes, African American nonverbal communication—were interesting, I found the research highly problematic. From my perspective, the social scientific research did not do anything more than promote cultural stereotypes of all racial and ethnic groups. In one graduate seminar on nonverbal communication, I vividly remember talking about this issue in class. As is usually the case, I shared my criticisms with a passion and forcefulness that was perceived by some as unproductive, defensive, and overly critical. My graduate professor listened intently to my comments, validated my concerns, and then asked me: “So, what are you going to do about it? Keep reading research that you find problematic or make the commitment to advance the research?” At that point in my doctoral program, I did not have the confidence or the expertise to think that I could make significant contributions to the field of communication. However, that one scenario planted a seed that would ultimately serve as the primary motivator for conducting research on various topics related to race, culture, and communication.

- What research have you read in this text that you find problematic?
- How might you use a class project, independent study, or graduate school to help advance different research?

—MPO
The first limitation of existing research is the way in which it has generated and perpetuated cultural generalizations. According to M.-S. Kim and Leung (2000), research on racial and ethnic conflict styles pays little, if any, attention to intragroup differences. A good example of this can be seen within the work of Kochman (1981). His often-cited book, *Black and White Styles in Conflict*, has served as the foundation reference for research on African Americans and European Americans. While his findings are applied generally across contexts, he specified the particular circumstances of Blacks and Whites whom he describes in his work: “Middle-class whites, the white group I have been writing about, and Blacks whose social networks exist almost entirely within the Black community” (p. 165). Research often fails to recognize that conflict is experienced differently by racial/ethnic group members based on factors such as class, gender, age, and spirituality; in this regard it practices essentialism.

Another way that existing research has worked to facilitate cultural generalizations is through a failure to acknowledge ethnic differences among large, diverse racial groups. Earlier we discussed the value of recent research by Ting-Toomey et al. (2000) who sought to explore the saliency of other factors beyond racial/ethnic identity. While they found correlations between larger national (United States) identity and conflict styles among different cultural groups, the study remains limited because it fails to consider the differences within these cultural groups. The study, for example, grouped all Asian Americans (Chinese Americans, Filipino Americans, Korean Americans, and Asian Indians) together without considering any intragroup differences. Assuming that all members of one racial group (e.g., Asian) share common cultural values (e.g., individualism/collectivism) is dangerous (Miyahara, Kim, Shin, & Yoon, 1998).

Much of the existing research on interracial/ethnic conflict is limited in that European Americans have been studied as the normative group. That is, the norms and rules of European Americans have been the focus of study while other racial and ethnic groups have been neglected (Ting-Toomey et al., 2000). As such, the vast majority of research reviewed earlier situates interracial/ethnic conflict around the experiences of the dominant group (e.g., European American—African American conflict, European American—Latino/a conflict, and so on). Focusing on European American styles of conflict has also facilitated a Eurocentric view of other group norms for engaging in conflict. For example, M.-S. Kim and Leung (2000) have critiqued widely accepted conflict management styles that define avoidance style as reflecting a low concern for self and other. They argued that a Eurocentric bias failed to understand that the strategy, when enacted by Asians, was positively related to one’s desire to preserve relational harmony (high concern for self and other). Similar insights have been offered regarding the use of silence by Native Americans—not as avoidance but as a means to communicate uncertainty, ambiguity, or a respect for the unknown power of others (C. Braithwaite, 1990).

Another limitation of existing research is related to a focus on racial and ethnic difference, and a lack of attention to similarities (Houston, 2002). The assumption of, and focus on, racial/ethnic differences can be traced to the work of Blumenbach (1865/1973). As described in Chapter 2, his typology was the first to incorporate a hierarchical ordering into classifications of race. Existing research on race, ethnicity, and conflict, for the most part, reflects Blumenbach’s social hierarchy in several different ways. First, it continues to place European-based conflict styles in a superior position.
Second, it has focused on attending to the differences among racial and ethnic groups as distinct, separate entities. Third, and finally, interracial/ethnic conflict research has embraced the assumption that groups placed the furthest away from one another on the social hierarchy will experience the greatest amount of conflict. Giving privilege to racial and ethnic differences, while ignoring ways in which individuals are similar in other ways, “presents an incomplete picture” (Collier, 1996, p. 334) of the ways in which people communicate.

The fourth, and final, limitation described here relates to how research on race, ethnicity, and communication has focused on microlevel practices. While these lines of research have produced multiple studies providing significant insight, they have been criticized as doing so through an “evaded analysis of how interpersonal practices connect to larger cultural, historical, and political systems” (Houston, 2002, p. 31). Communication generally, and the ways in which individuals engage in conflict specifically, is an essential aspect of one’s culture. Yet simply focusing on communication micropractices without recognizing how they are shaped by larger macrolevel frameworks does little to advance understanding of these particular forms of communication (Ribeau, 1995). Contemporary scholars, in fact, have called for research that attends to historical power structures within society (Stephan & Stephan, 2001) that inform present-day hostile cultural distances between different racial and ethnic groups (Gallois, 2003).

We began this chapter by discussing how communication scholars have long studied conflict that occurs between different racial and ethnic groups. This research is important but, as discussed within this section, it is hampered by several limitations. One additional point must also be made: Why the focus on interracial and interethnic conflict, and not interracial and interethnic unity? Houston (2002) describes the history of race and communication research as a “story of difference.” We would extend her insights by adding that interracial/-ethnic communication research as been a “story of conflict.” In order to paint a more complete picture, we highlight one example of interracial/-ethnic unity within the next section.

### A Case Study in Interracial Unity

There is a difference between being a multiracial organization and being a multicultural organization (Bowers, 2006). The first can be achieved by simply adding more racial and ethnic diversity to a homogeneous group; however, without sufficient attention to negotiating cultural similarities and differences, sustained conflict is inevitable. A **multicultural organization**, in comparison, makes internal, structural changes to infuse diverse perspectives—based on race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, age, and so on—within its everyday functions. Based on this distinction, it should be clear that creating a multiracial group is easier than cultivating a multicultural one. In order to highlight the necessary commitment, dedication, and focus needed to create and sustain a truly multicultural organization among various racial and ethnic people, we turn to the Baha’i Faith, a spiritual community that has had racial unity as a core value since its inception.
The Baha’i Faith

Most major world religions are several hundreds, or even thousands, of years old. In comparison, the Baha’i Faith is the only world religion to emerge in the modern age. According to recent estimates, there are currently 6 million people worldwide who follow the Baha’i Faith. Drawing from multiple religions, races, ethnic backgrounds, nationalities, and creeds in the world, it is also probably the most diverse religious group. In fact, according to organizational documents, the Baha’i Faith represents more than 2,100 different racial, ethnic, and tribal groups across 182 countries. Although Baha’is celebrate their diversity, they understand that they must be firmly united in order to achieve their goals.

In particular, Baha’is have established spiritual communities in 236 countries; the largest communities are in South Asia (the largest population living in India), Africa, and Latin America (Hartz, 2002). Within the United States, there are close to 150,000 Baha’is participating in 1,200 spiritual assemblies (Garlington, 2005). The U.S. American Baha’i community dates back to the late 1800s and grew significantly during the 20th century, playing a significant role in the civil rights movements. Some of the more long-standing Baha’i communities were located in Kenosha, Wisconsin; Chicago, Illinois; Baltimore, Maryland; Sacramento, California; and Atlanta, Georgia (Garlington, 2005).

Interestingly, the Baha’i Faith, unlike most other religions, has no clergy. Instead, there is a great deal of responsibility on the individual to read the scriptures for themselves.
and apply lessons from them to their lives. In this regard, the emphasis is on personal development—both in terms of physical and spiritual needs. According to Hartz (2002), Baha’is are guided by several key guidelines, including:

- Each person must independently seek truth for him- or herself.
- All divine religions are one. Everyone worships the same God.
- Human progress does not occur through material things alone. Genuine progress comes from spirituality.
- Science and reason are in harmony with religion.
- The whole human race is one. All human beings are equally the children of God. People must wipe out all prejudices: religious, racial, political, national, and class.
- Extremes of wealth and poverty must be abolished.
- Women are the equals of men and are to have equality of rights, particularly of educational opportunity.
- All children must receive a basic education.
- There should be a single world federation with a single economy and a single language.

Of particular interest to interracial communication students (and scholars) is the principle that affirms the human race and promotes active elimination of prejudice. At the core of the Baha’i Faith is the unity of harmony—a concept that emphasizes transcending all divisions of race, nation, gender, caste, and social class. In this regard, the Baha’i Faith serves as a valuable case study in interracial harmony. In a recent analysis, Vance (2002/2003) examined the ways in which diverse racial and ethnic persons practicing the Baha’i Faith work harmoniously together to create a sense of community. The result of her work was a model of intergroup unity comprising four different “categories.” First, Vance points to the existence of social structures inherent to the Baha’i Faith that centralize “unity in diversity” as a core concept. In particular, she references key principles (Oneness of Religion, Spiritual Nature of Human, and The Writings) as providing a larger foundation within which diverse persons can come together to transcend individual differences. In other words, while racial, ethnic, and cultural differences provide diverse perspectives, they are seen as secondary to human spirituality. Within this context, Vance describes the second category, internal states as the human nature influence within the process of intergroup unity. Internal states include individual, personal, and cultural differences that can hinder group cohesiveness. As such, the process toward interracial harmony involves negotiating deeply ingrained differences against the ideals of oneness. It is important to note that, within Vance’s model, differences are seen as acceptable and desirable.

The third aspect of the model of intergroup unity is known as external bridges. Vance (2002/2003) describes this as the place where the work of unity is accomplished. External bridges are comprised of communication practices that Baha’is use as connectors to unite themselves with the larger world. At the core of this process is decentering—efforts at “extending outside of one’s own culture to apprehend the others’ viewpoints” (p. 78).

The fourth, and final, aspect of the model features multicultural communication as a means toward group unity. Reflective of building a third culture (see Chapter 6), this aspect
reflects the process by which Baha’is align different communicative behaviors toward a culture that focuses on the good of the whole. Within this context, individuals continue to work on embracing diverse perspectives and eliminating prejudices. Consultation, as described by Vance, is at the heart of the process but not the end objective:

Unity begins with consultation but needs to result in action, such as relationship formation. “Indeed, [individuals] deem working in groups toward a common goal as an activity conducive to unity. In the community depicted by [Baha’is], everyone must participate because truth lies among the group, not in any one individual” (p. 78).

The process through which intergroup unity is sought after has great potential for all multiracial organizations, not simply those grounded in spirituality. In fact, many organizations—community, governmental, corporate, and educational—have consulted Baha’i organizations to tap into their experiences in promoting racial harmony.

BOX 10.6

TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR RACIAL AND ETHNIC HARMONY

While racial unity has been at the core of the Baha’i Faith since its inception, such is not the case for most other religions in the United States. In fact, most have been segregated since Colonial times—something that largely continues in contemporary times. However, a number of churches have adopted platforms that place racial reconciliation as a top priority. A recent book (Bowers, 2006) on multicultural congregations offers 10 commandments toward that goal:

Commandment 1: Thou Shall Not Deny Difference
Commandment 2: Thou Shall Not Categorize by Cultural Grouping
Commandment 3: Thou Shall Not Practice Ethnocentrism
Commandment 4: Thou Shall Resolve Conflict by Maintaining Honor
Commandment 5: Thou Shall Practice Empathy
Commandment 6: Thou Shall Ask Questions
Commandment 7: Thou Shall Foremost Preserve the Relationship
Commandment 8: Thou Shall Practice “Gracism” (Distinct from favoritism, gracism reaches across difference to lend assistance and extra grace.)
Commandment 9: Thou Shall Not Judge Others
Commandment 10: Thou Shall Not Hoard Power

What are your reactions to each of these guidelines? What do you think each means in terms of facilitating interracial unity? What are the connections between these commandments and some of the key concepts discussed in this book? How, if at all, might they be applied to other types of multiracial organizations beyond those focusing on spirituality?
Conclusion

When you think about interracial communication, do you naturally picture scenarios that involve some sort of disagreement or conflict? The mass media—in the form of newspapers, television programs, movies, television, and so on—seems to focus more on conflict because that is what sells. This chapter was designed to cover the fundamental ideas related to interracial conflict. In particular, we introduced the reader to existing research in this area, including that which described various sources of conflict (present-day social inequality, ingroup/outgroup tensions, perceptual differences, and stereotypes due to lack of exposure) and divergent conflict styles. While this body of literature is valuable, it has several limitations. We concluded the chapter with some attention to interracial unity—an area of research that, compared to interracial conflict, is minuscule.

Throughout this chapter, we have tried to illustrate several key ideas related to interracial conflict. First, present-day interracial conflict occurs in a context that is tied to the past. Issues of trust, respect, and competition sometimes exacerbate minor issues to more significant ones. Second, not all conflict that occurs between people
from different racial and ethnic backgrounds is defined as interracial. In some instances, the conflict can be based on personal, or other cultural, aspects (e.g., gender, age, socioeconomic status). Third, given the limitations of existing research, more attention is needed in studying interracial unity. Opportunities, in this regard, exist in a number of contexts, including companies, student organizations, sports, worship centers, and community organizations.

**OPPORTUNITIES FOR EXTENDED LEARNING**

1. Select two scenarios to describe: one that illustrates an instance of interracial conflict and one an instance of interracial unity. Within your descriptions, be sure to respond to the following questions: What was the particular setting? Who was present? What was the core issue that defined the conflict/sense of unity? What types of communication were present? Once you’ve generated your descriptions, break up into small groups and try to identify common trends for examples of interracial conflict and interracial unity.

2. Use an Internet database to learn more about how different racial and ethnic group perceptions can contribute to interracial conflict. For instance, you might research the various reactions to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Try and locate comments from Mayor Ray Nagin, President Bush, former first lady Barbara Bush, rap star/activist Kayne West, among others. Analyze these comments to see how they reflect different sources of conflict described in this chapter. You might also want to check the following book: *There Is No Such Thing As a Natural Disaster: Race, Class, & Katrina* (Squires & Hartman, 2006).

3. The Association for Conflict Resolution is the largest national organization designed to promote peaceful, effective conflict resolution. Visit their Web site at http://www.acrnet.org/ and learn about some of the conflict resolution efforts across the world. Pay particular attention to how the Web site addresses issues of race and ethnicity. Is race invisible, marginalized, or central to how the organization engages in conflict resolution?

4. At times, certain political issues like ballots to eliminate affirmative action programs are explicitly related to race and ethnicity. Other political issues, like immigration (Merrill, 2006), rental laws (J. B. Miller, 2003), and voting procedures (Connaughton, 2004) have more implicit ramifications for different racial and ethnic groups. Select a local, state, or national issue and research it in terms of how it impacts different groups. Be sure to gain diverse perspectives from a variety of sources (e.g., community newspapers). Then compare and contrast your initial perceptions of the issue with those that you were able to gain from various sources.

5. Review the different theories covered in Chapter 6. Which one of the theories do you think does the best job at explaining why some interracial interactions end in conflict and others do not? What particular concepts, models, and processes are included in the theories that specifically address the sources of conflict described in this chapter?