The Research Proposal

Conflict is a natural and inevitable process in all interpersonal relationships (Kurdek, 1994; Wilmot & Hocker, 1998; Wood, 1999). When people care for one another and directly affect each other as they do in romantic relationship, disagreements are unavoidable. Researchers have found that how couples resolve conflict is more important than the fact that conflict is present overall relational satisfaction (Sillars, Pike, Jones, & Redmon, 1983), fewer studies have emerged concerning conflict and how it is managed in interracial relationships. This preliminary qualitative investigation examines conflict, and how conflict is managed in interracial relationships taking race and gender into account.

Individuals within any romantic relationship have their own cultural/ethnic values. When involved in an intercultural relationship, participants’ values may differ from one another. “Intercultural dating or marriage is fertile ground for culture clashes and shocks.” (Ting Toomey & Oetzel).

The highest rate of intermarriage occurs between European American males and Asian American females, and the lowest rate is that between European American males and African American females (Wehrly, Kenney, & Keney, 1999). According to Wehrly, Kenney, & Keney majority of intercultural relationships are European American/Asian American; coincidently, the three dyads used in this study consist of European with Asian individuals.

When an individual is able to understand how culture plays a role in their partner’s life they will develop a sense of sensitivity to cultural conflict. At times, people see conflict as harmful to their relationship; what they fail to understand is that conflict
within an intercultural relationship is not an indication of an incompatible relationship. The quality of the relationship is judged by how one manages relational obstacles with cultural sensitivity. Ting-Toomey & Oetzel discuss that, “the hidden dimensions of intercultural conflict often stem, in part, from differences in cultural values”, which explains why partner’s of an intercultural relationship have different approaches to managing conflict. The orientation of value differs nation to nation. Intercultural lessons revolve around two main cultural frameworks, individualism-collectivism and power distance.

This investigation will use research regarding how cultural background and gender play a role in conflict management strategies within intercultural relationships. Children, regardless of sexual orientation [or cultural background] are socialized on the basis of their sex. Boys tend to learn masculine orientations toward interaction, whereas girls are socialized toward feminine styles of interaction (Wood, 1994). Every culture has social norms regarding gender roles, majority of cultures posses the traits previously mentioned by Wood. This preliminary investigation strives to contribute to the small, but growing, body of research on conflict in intercultural relationships. The specific relationship challenges within interracial couples are of interest not only to people concerned with intercultural communication, but also to those who study other interpersonal relationships.

The study of interpersonal relationships from a communication perspective is warranted because the primary activity of relationships is communication. Wood (1982) discussed the importance of studying interpersonal relationships from a communicative approach. She stated that: “Communication constitutes human relationships” (p. 75).
Communicative behaviors also play a large part in creating the cultural norms of each relationship. These cultural norms provide the systems of definitions, values, and rules required for coordinated interpretation of verbal and nonverbal messages and they allow people to create and participate in intimate bonds.

The theoretical framework of this conflict study stems from Oetzel, Dhar, & Kirschbaum’s (2007) social ecological framework. They identify this framework as one that studies the relationship between organisms and their environment. Social ecology is the study of the “relationship between organisms and their Environment” (Brofenbrenner, 1979). The framework emphasizes that the environment has multiple levels or contexts. In relation to this specific study, cultural background and gender are the dimensions that create a theoretical lens for individuals involved in an intercultural conflict. Integrating Oetzel, Dhar, & Kirschbaum’s framework to that of this study is necessary to fully understand conflict communication in context.

Investigating conflict in intercultural relationships, as part of the relational cultural, from a qualitative perspective allows partners to explain the events and interactions of their relationships in their own words and without researcher-imposed labels, categories, and constructs. By examining a few cases very intensely, researchers can uncover themes, or patterns, and gain a more holistic understanding of the phenomena (Moon, Dillon, & Sprengle, 1990). This investigation hopes to uncover how intercultural couples define conflict in their relationships, how they manage their conflict, and the role gender socialization, background culture and/ or power play in their management strategies. Last, this paper looks at additional barriers intercultural couples face in the management of their conflict.
**Literature Review**

This review of literature analyzes the body of research that exists about interracial couples, conflict, areas of conflict, and conflict management strategies in interracial relationships as they compare to information about couples. This review starts from the general understanding of conflict in relationships and moves into more specific areas of management strategies and communicative aspects of management strategies in interracial couples. From this review of literature, several research questions emerge from the existing literature on communication and interpersonal relationships as it relates to conflict, and conflict management strategies. Literature has been examined from journals and books from the academic areas of Communication Studies, Interpersonal Communication, Marriage and Family Therapy, Counseling, Psychology, Sociology, and Women’s Studies.

**Defining an intercultural relationship**

Before explaining what “intercultural” is this study need to establish the meaning of a personal relationship. Ting-Toomey depicts a personal relationship as any close relationship that exhibits a certain degree of relational interdependence, commitment, and positive sentiments (p.64). They go on to explain that an intercultural-intimate conflict is defined as any antagonistic friction or disagreement between two romantic partners due, in part, to cultural or ethnic group membership differences. The context in which the term “culture” is used is defined as a “learned set of shared interpretations about beliefs, values, and norms, which affect the behaviors of a relatively large group of people” (Lustig & Koester, 1999, p.30).

**Defining Conflict**
Researchers have proposed many definitions of conflict. Meesan & Mikesell (2000) state: “interpersonal conflict involves individual attempts to accomplish goals that may interfere with another person’s goals” (p.22). Wilmot & Hocker (1998) define conflict as, “an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals” (p.34). Pondy (1967) states conflict is, “a series of episodes including latency, feelings, perception, and aftermath.”

All people posses imagined trajectories of conflict. Negative trajectories involve behaviors such as arguing, fighting, physical violence, and at times the end of a relationship. These negative trajectories critically influence our perception of what conflict is, a horrible thing. Every relationship has conflict, how healthy the relationship is depends on the manner of which they handle the conflict, positively or negatively. Conflict, that is utilized in a positive manner, can help clarify rights, establish power within roles, distinguish boundaries, give an “open door” policy to communication, and provide an emotional outlet for the expression of negative feelings (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1993). Pearson (1993) explains how both parties must be aware that a conflict actually exists. If only one communicator is aware there other is oblivious and confident that there is no problem. If a participant is unaware of their involvement in a conflict it is difficult for either partner to extract anything positive from the conflict.

When it comes to intercultural conflict the term cultural variability must be added to the terminology of this study. As previously stated, cultures vary from nation to nation. Cultural values definitely play an integral role in formulating one’s own personal paradigm. People from different cultures develop different worldviews because they are
shaped by different cultural influences. Fisher-Yoshida further describe worldviews as the set of beliefs we possess that create meaning for object, feelings, and in this case, conflict strategies. Relate different “world views” to this study, as the degrees of diversity increase, the level of complexity increases as well, causing communication to be more challenging, which is not to say that it is insurmountable (Fisher-Yoshida).

Conflict, as an interpersonal, communicative event is often part of relationships and therefore, should be defined by lesbian couples in their own words. That brings us to the first research question posed by this study:

**Research Question 1:** How do individuals involved in interracial relationships define conflict?

**Conflict Management Strategies**

Conflict is common and normal in relationships, and managing conflict is one of the most important aspects of maintaining relationships (Gottman, 1994). Researchers found that how couples resolve conflict is paramount to overall relational satisfaction (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). Competent conflict management requires us to communicate adaptively and flexibly in diverse conflict situations. Intercultural conflict requires us to be sensitive to the differences and similarities across a wide range of cultural and situational factors that affect the intercultural conflict episode (Ting-Toomey).

There is research that explains two different types of conflict management strategies, personal and interactional or relational. Kilmann & Thomas (1975) identified five personal styles of conflict management: collaboration, accommodation, competition, avoidance, and compromise. To effectively negotiate conflict demands, participants must be mindful of our own ethnocentric biases when making hasty judgments of other
people’s conflict styles. This research lacks in regard to it asks participants to report preferences of style in general, ignoring that there may be variable change in preferences when taking relational/cultural context into account.

Interactional or relational management styles have been categorized into three main categories. While different researchers have labeled them with varying terms, they are essentially the same three categories. A widely cited study of interactional conflict styles by Sillars (1980) sheds light on interpersonal conflict resolution strategies among college dormitory roommates. Open-ended descriptions of specific conflict experiences were recorded and then a typology was formed. The three main categories of management strategies were as follows: integrative tactics, which are cooperative and offer disclosure; distributive tactics, which are competitive and antagonistic; and avoidance tactics, which seek to diffuse the discussion of conflict.

Noller & Fitzpatrick (1993) classify conflict management strategies into these three main categories. The first strategy involves avoidance tactics that minimize conflicts. When utilizing this tactic individuals may deny the existence of conflicts, change the topic, or “beat around the bush” about the conflict. Using this strategy may indicate a lack of concern for the relationship, or for one’s self. A second strategy, known as distributive tactics, is competitive and often aggressive. Communicative activities such as criticism, faulting, threats, and rejection are used, putting one’s own concerns above the relationship and having minimal to no concern for the other person’s feelings. As mentioned earlier, when distributive tactics are utilized the positive side of a conflict is lost. The third strategy uses integrative tactics that are cooperative and problem solving
oriented. This strategy depicts partners having equal concern about one another in conflict situations.

Research in gendered patterns of conflict management strategies have also emerged. Specifically, men and women tend to differ in terms of the conflict management behaviors they use. Much of this research is controversial because inconsistencies in the replication of this research have been found. However, one consistent gendered pattern continues to emerge. Christensen & Heavey (1990) found that married couples followed the demand/withdrawal (pursuer-distancer) pattern in marital conflict where overall, men withdraw more and women demand more. And if a husband continues to be withdrawn, defensive and stubborn, the marriage suffers (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). Kubek (1995) found that both husbands and wives expressed low marital satisfaction when the wife used conflict engagement and the husband withdrew. A second finding suggested that the use of withdrawal as a conflict resolution style operated differently for husbands and wives. Men were more dissatisfied when they withdrew and their wives continued to engage but women who used the withdrawal style were generally more dissatisfied (p.161). The lack of continued engagement from the men was displeasing for the women. Canary, Cunningham, & Cody (1988), in a secondary conclusion, found that women are more likely to select strategies that maintain positive feelings and relationships.

Other researchers presented similar conclusions. According to Blumstein & Schwartz (1983), gender socialization explains far more than sexual orientation when examining the differences between partners’ responses to conflict. Women view talk as a primary path to intimacy and resolve for relational conflict. By contrast, males talk less
about relational issues and are more likely than other types of couples to exit the relationship when problems arise (Wood, 1994). On the contrary, other researchers have found that gender differences tend to diminish once people are studied in relational contexts. Canary, Cupach & Messman (1995) found more similarities than differences between men’s and women’s conflict behaviors (p.131). Noller (1994) also found no gender differences.

In summary, Wilmot & Hocker (1998) state, “to preserve of a good relationship while pursuing a goal that appears incompatible with that of another person, collaborative tactics are needed” (p. 146). For the purposes of this investigation, a second research question emerges:

**Research Question 2:** How do heterosexual partners manage conflict in their relationships?

**Conflict Management in Intercultural Relationships**

Conflict management strategies among interracial couples have been found to be more similar than different to couples with the same racial background. If couples who frequently used positive problem solving, and infrequently used conflict engagement and withdrawal, they are more likely to experience high relationship satisfaction.

Ting-Toomey & Oetzel illustrate a cultural variability perspective as emphasizing the value variations between people of either individualistic or collectivistic cultures. This and power distance and how these dimensions influence conflicts management processes. Individualistic cultures emphasize promoting the individual’s and his/her immediate family’s self-interest. The traits people from an individualistic society revolve around individual initiative, personal identity and independence. Collectivistic societies,
on the other hand, emphasize loyalty to the group, while the group in turn cares for the well being of the individual. People of a collectivistic culture tend to emotionally depend on groups and organizations. Darwish & Huber (2003) state that collectivistic cultures believe that a group decisions are superior to individual decisions. They go on to explain that an understanding of personal identity is knowing one’s place within the group.

Individuals that are born and raised within different culture are brought up to have different standpoints. Wood describes that a standpoint emerges from symbolic conditions that shape the group’s actions and experiences that they are involved with. A standpoint theoretical lens manipulates how an individual would approach managing a conflict. To be better prepared on how to approach managing an intercultural conflict participants should be mindful of the values their partners have. Partners on an intercultural relationship must make a conscious attempt to understand their partner's values. “By involving ourselves in Communication that enlarges others’ awareness and revises cultural practices we assume active roles in creating personal and collective lives that are fairer, more humane, and infinitely more enriching than what might otherwise be possible” (Wood, 2005).

In summary of conflict management strategies, findings suggest that men and women may employ particular conflict management strategies that stem from their gendered patterns of communication. These gender patterns contribute to their higher-reported relational satisfaction, as compared to couples whose participants who have the same racial background. Research also indicates that being aware of cultural difference within a relationship leaves partners more informed on how to approach an intercultural conflict.
After integrating Ting-Toomey and Oetzel’s information regarding power distance, with Wood’s theories of gender socialization, another question rises within the research:

**Research Question 3:** How do gendered socialization patterns of communication issues of power influence conflict and conflict management styles in interracial relationships?

**Gender, Power, and Conflict Management in Interracial Relationships**

Gendered pattern of communication have been found to support the belief that women seem to be able to tolerate conflict better than men, and that they let it affect their relationship satisfaction less (Metz, 1994; Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986). Tannen (1990) states that women are socialized to be more supportive and cooperative in conversations rather than more competitive and dominant.

Wood (2005) states that, “Both sexes engage in instrumental and expressive modes of building and expressing closeness”. They both have different tactics of building a relationships but if the methods differ and controversial to another’s comfort zone they may lead to conflict.

The masculine mode of expressing affection is instrumental and activity-focused, whereas the feminine mode is expressive and talk-focused.

On the other hand, Howard, Blumstein, & Schwartz (1986) found power generally determined which partner used strong autocratic and bullying tactics, and which used the weaker tactics of supplication and manipulation, regardless of cultural background. Moreover, Falbo & Paplau (1980) found that the partners who perceived themselves as more powerful tended to use more powerful communication, and the partner with less
perceived power more often withdrew or used emotion to influence the other. Individuals, especially women, who originate from Asian influenced cultures, tend to possess the “less powerful” communicator role. Many Asian cultures involve

Kollock, Blumstein, further supports power-based conversational dominance & Schwartz (1985), who found that more powerful partners interrupted more frequently than did less powerful partners. Women had the lowest rate of attempted interruptions, perhaps because they find such controlling strategies unacceptable. This supports the gender-based argument that men are more competitive and women are more supportive (Tannen, 1990). In sum, Kollock et al. (1985) found that women in relationships used conversational strategies that maintained a balance of power in their relationship.

Tannen (1990) discovered that men are more comfortable with challenging others in comparison to women. Some women may associate challenges with personal attacks or serious conflict. Taking that into account, women tend to avoid them however much possible.

This willingness, or inability, for women to challenge their partner clearly makes problem solving difficult in all relationships. Clunis & Green (1988) argued that because assertiveness is discouraged in women, they may be reluctant to express their own wants and needs. To avoid hurting their partners and losing support, women may be less direct with their male partner, inhibiting problem solving. Instead, they may handle conflicts superficially, particularly in the early stages of relationships, only to find that they resurface later. It’s the classic story of bottled up emotions, if one does not disclose concerns the problem would remain unchanged and would cause the individual to
eventually explode and revert to using distributive conflict management tactics instead of cooperative ones.

Overall, a complicated mix of gender, socialization, culture and power influences the communication process for interracial couples in their styles of managing conflict. Combined, these studies strongly suggest that culture and gender exert separate and combined efforts on the conflict management strategies incorporated in interracial relational communication patterns. A final research question emerges from this review or literature:

**Research Question 4:** What causes conflict for intercultural couples in their relationship?

**Areas of Conflict for Intercultural Couples**

The culmination of this review of literature on conflict and conflict management styles along with the role gender issues and culture play in interracial relationships suggests that areas of intercultural conflict arise when partners are not sensitive to the differences of values and beliefs. While majority of intercultural couples do fall under the presumed gender roles mentioned earlier, this group also possesses characteristics that are unique to the nature of their relationship. In sum, the intent of this preliminary qualitative research project is to uncover: (a) how do individuals within a relationship define conflict, (b) How do couples manage conflict in their relationship? (c) What is the role of gender socialization and power in conflict among intercultural couples, and (d) what things cause conflict for intercultural couples.

Based on our own beliefs, we have certain expectations of others that they may or may not meet. Here is where there may be intercultural conflicts as a result of the
perception of conflicting worldviews. Our intentions may not match the impact we have on others causing misunderstanding and reactions that differ from what was anticipated.

Like all cross-cultural communication, it requires compassion, flexibility, and patience, as well as the effort to understand the context. Two main areas of intercultural conflict mentioned by research are (1) Differences in discourse strategies, and (2) differences in the depth of cultural background one carry around with them to form personal worldviews.

Differences in discourse are illustrated through speed/tempo, volume, eye contact, and vocabulary. Gumperz (1982) claims that job interviews between speakers of British English and speakers of Indian English end badly for the Pakistanis and Indians because of differences in discourse strategies. Indeed this example does not directly relate to romantic relationship but does directly give details in to what aspects of discourse may lead to intercultural conflict.

Along with utilizing different discourse strategies individuals from collectivistic cultures uphold traditional values and beliefs that they have been brought up with. Scollon (1995) supports this statement by stating that, “Perhaps the clearest difference between East Asian cultures and so-called western culture is that East Asians have a sense of having long, continuous, and unified traditional history, whereas westerners tend to emphasize the shorter-term political organizations which have arisen since the Renaissance.”

Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, emphasize the cultural influences in face-to-face interaction. They describe culture as a “boundary condition”. The contextual meaning of something resonates differently in various minds. This is true because meaning is significance that is conferred on experiences and phenomena Wood (2004). The
memories, beliefs, or lived experiences one has play an important role in how they interpret meaning.

To develop our competencies in managing differences in an intercultural conflict episode, we should learn to attune to the primary orientation factors that create the initial conflict condition. To achieve understanding of intercultural conflict in relationships this study revolves around four main research questions:

1. How do individuals in relationships define conflict?
2. How do heterosexual partners manage conflict in their relationships?
3. How do gendered socialization patterns of communication issues of power influence conflict and conflict management styles in interracial relationships?
4. What causes conflict for intercultural couples in their relationship?

Method and Analysis

A Case Study Approach

This preliminary study researches conflict, and conflict management strategies within intercultural relationships; to obtain information three intercultural couples were interviewed. Because I was trying to understand a specific issue using the three couples, the cases, as specific illustrations. Creswell defines this particular approach as “the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system” (Creswell, p.73). My goal is similar to other case study researcher, “to develop an in depth description and analysis of multiple [intercultural relational conflict] cases”.

Case Study is an approach that serves well in the social science community. It provides a method of educational growth in areas such as psychology, medicine, and
political science. Scholars such as Hamel, Dufour, and Fortin (1993) constructed a study using case study methodology to “trace the origin of modern social science”.

To answer the four research questions proposed by this study, I am going to apply the case study methodology by interviewing three separate intercultural couples as dyads. This step ensured that each couple’s responses would be grounded within the context of a unified view of their relationships. The couples consisted of (A) Cambodian female & White male, (B) Japanese female & White male, and (C) White female & Japanese/Mexican male. Informational interviews, observations and data collection were conducted at the homes of each intercultural couple.

**Participants**

For the sake of respecting the couple’s privacy I will be giving them John Doe names. Mr. & Mrs. Tradition live on the second floor of my apartment building; the participants are my neighbors and friends. I gained access into the research setting because we have formed a friendly, neighborly relationship over the years. This bond is a necessary step to develop the level of trust we have toward each other.

Mr. & Mrs. Experience consists of an older couple that has two children. Their sons plays hockey at Logitech Ice in downtown San Jose. Above the ice rinks there is a sports bar and restaurant where you can watch the games from above; I work at that restaurant. Over weeks of serving them we have developed a mild relationship and they invited me to their home to perform the interview. I feel the invitation was a symbolic representation of trust.
Mr. & Mrs. Newbie do not live together but the interview was performed at the male participants house. I have been friends with the male participant for the past year and have met his girlfriend when they started dating a few months ago.

This investigation of conflict in intercultural relationships was conducted using qualitative interviewing methods. The aims of interviewing are to explain naturally occurring events, actions, and interactions within the specific context and perspective of the participants involved in the conflicts. Also, using interviewing methodologies can uncover particular themes or patterns, which gives the researcher a better insight in understanding the phenomena. A great deal of data is collected through in-depth interviews and participant observation (i.e., social interaction between researcher and participants). Direct quotes and observation of interactions between participants add to the research collected regarding conflict and conflict strategies within intercultural relationships.

**Interview Protocol and Analysis**

The interview protocol was designed to collect self-reports of conflict in intercultural relationships. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher stated that conflict is a normal aspect of all relationships and that the quality of the relationship was not being judged. The researcher then assured the subjects that the intent of the inquiry focused on conflict, and the communicative strategies used to resolve these differences in their relationship.

Each couple was first asked to define conflict, as it exists in their relationship in their own words. Issues regarding equity were then introduced as a launching point for discussing issues of power that may or may not contribute to satisfying or dissatisfying
aspects of the relationship. The topic of equality and power was apparent throughout the interviews with the “Experience’s” and the “Newbie’s”. Mr. & Mrs. Traditional agreed that upholding cultural traditions is more of an area of conflict rather than competition of power control. Mrs. Experience illustrated dissatisfaction with her husband’s approach to solving personal problems when stating:

“The women of my family and culture have been raised with strict Japanese values. I have been taught to handle confrontational issues in a more conservative manner in comparison to “American” techniques of upbringing. I feel that because he states his concerns at a higher volume with larger hand gestures the importance of my concerns are lost in the performance of his argument.”

When looking back on the literature previously presented in this study, Tannen (1990) states that women are socialized to be more supportive and cooperative in conversations and/or arguments rather than competitive and dominant. This is proven to be true with the “Experience’s”; the male participant is the dominant one and this interview could have been an opportunity for the female participant to speak her piece. Also, this particular case deals with cultural gender roles. This is a generalization made toward an individual that is based off of the concept of gender roles and how they relate to a specific culture. After explaining one area of conflict, couples were prompted to further discuss other satisfying and dissatisfying relational aspects.

As interviews progressed, the participants introduced new topics that were then explored. Couples were then asked to explain the strategies they used to manage relational conflicts. While discussing conflict management strategies with the “Newbie’s”, a barrier to communicative progression arose from the conversation. The
female participant of this relationship has made her want to move in with the male quite obvious. The male explains his disagreement with moving in by stating:

“School is an important thing to my family and I. I do not have the slack to lose sight of my goals. I need to maintain a mental equilibrium and if we were to move in together I would have nowhere to escape and recollect my thoughts. So my reasons are, family and personal expectations along with the want to privacy when I feel overwhelmed”.

Mr. Newbie’s answer elucidated two major areas: (A) the influence of culture on goals and (B) gender pattern assumptions of male withdrawal. Mr. Newbie is Japanese.

Coming from a collectivistic culture it is understandable that he feels the pressures of family and community acceptance. Along with providing reasoning for how culture influences decision making, Mr. “Newbie’s” response demonstrates predicted actions in relation to gender and conflict management strategies. He feels the need to privacy, and the need to withdrawal when conflict occurs. This ties in with Christensen & Heavey’s (1990) study that found that married couples followed the demand/withdrawal pattern in marital conflict where overall, men withdraw more and women demand more. Indeed, this couple is not married, but they are having similar conflicts.

One method used in each of the interviews was to ask couples to think back to their last argument and recall what happened. This technique was very successful. Participants not only remembered conflicts in vivid detail but their original emotions also resurfaced which caused several of the participants to relive the argument.

Last, couples were asked if there were any other conflict related topics that hadn’t yet been covered. As topics surfaced, each was explored. The interview data in this preliminary investigation provided very rich qualitative experiences that helped explain the nature of conflict and conflict strategies in intercultural relationships.


**Discussion and conclusion**

This preliminary qualitative investigation of the nature of conflict in intercultural relationships provides greater depth and breadth of information than survey research. This data offers a rich and colorful perspective about conflict and conflict management as experienced by three interracial couples. Although this preliminary investigation only examined a limited convenience sample of three couples, considerable information was discovered that is helpful in responding to the research questions posed by this study: (1) How do individuals in relationships define conflict? (2) How do heterosexual partners manage conflict in their relationships? (3) How do gendered socialization patterns of communication issues of power influence conflict and conflict management styles in interracial relationships? (4) What causes conflict for intercultural couples in their relationship?

It is important to note that one particular limitation of this study is that the sample of three couples investigated in this research project is too small to allow the conclusions reached in this study to be generalized to a larger body of subjects. Instead, this preliminary investigation uncovered particular themes or patterns that could possibly be further investigated from the perspective of both qualitative and quantitative methods in future research.

**Findings**

**Conflict Defined**

Conflict is an interpersonal communication event that is part of most relational cultures. These intercultural couples define conflict as an interaction with one another
that consists of disagreements, power struggles, and boundary violations. They also say conflict can result from perceived incompatible goals, rather than just explicitly stated incompatibilities. These data not only suggest that conflict is normal, it may even be beneficial.

Conflict Management Styles

There were three conflict management styles identified by these intercultural partners: avoidance, engagement, and dealing with conflict openly and actively. These three conflict management styles coincide with the three relational conflict management strategies identified by Sillars (1980): integrative (i.e., dealing with conflict openly and actively); avoidance; and distributive (i.e., blowing up). Sillars’ findings were replicated in Sillars, Coletti, Parry, & Rogers (1982), and are again found to be valid in the relational context of these intercultural couples. This is significant to the social world because it illustrates how to manage conflict. If more people were aware of these results they would be better equipped to achieve a “successful” conflict.

Areas of Conflict for Intercultural Relationship

Areas of conflict for intercultural relationships have been proven to stem from, (1) differences in discourse strategies, and (2) differences in the depth of cultural background one carries around with them to form personal worldviews.

Another interesting insight to emerge from this data is the relationship between the presence of conflict and the presence of sexual activity. Both Mr. Traditional & Mr. Newbie stated that the sex with their partner’s after a fight is more “passionate”. The
energy created by conflict helps fuel sexual energy for couples. Howard & Dawes (1976) have also noted this finding. They found that sexual activity and arguments are positively related, and partners who argue more tend to have more sex. Specifically, differences between partners appear to energize relationships by providing zest and excitement for the couple. Several issues specific to gender socialization arise from the areas of shared intimacy and sex.

Conclusions & Implications

Finally, issues of cultural background, power and gender socialization exert separate and combined efforts within intercultural communication patterns and were all found to play a significant role in conflict, conflict management styles, and areas of conflict in intercultural relationships. Therefore, neither culture, gender, nor power can ever be ruled out and inclusion of all variables allows researchers to avoid both exaggerating and minimizing stereotypical cultural/gender differences.

In conclusion, this preliminary qualitative investigation of conflict in intercultural relationships represents a rich and colorful perspective about the nature of conflict and conflict management as experienced by three interracial couples. Something that I would have changed about how I conducted the research would be to record the interviews. If the interviews were recorded I would have a larger amount of sufficient evidence to look back upon while writing my report. While findings suggest that management strategies may be closely linked to same-race couples, there are some unique differences that are impacted by influences of power, culture and cultural sensitivity. When considering future research I would recommend utilizing a larger sample with a larger spectrum of
intercultural diversity. Also, interviewing the participants of each relationship separately might result in more disclosure. Overall, I have gained a better insight into how to approach quantitative study and how to manage intercultural conflict effectively.

References


