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## Review

## Case studies on interethnic conflict: A theoretical integration

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## ABSTRACT

The present research analyzes qualitative case studies to provide holistic insights into the phenomenon of interethnic conflict. Kim's (2005) contextual theory of interethnic communication (CTIC) is used as an etic, broad-systems theoretical framework for analyzing a wide range of interdisciplinary case studies focusing on interethnic conflict. The CTIC offers an organizing structure for combining emic and etic approaches to characterize and classify the primary and secondary factors underpinning interethnic conflict into communicator, situation, and environment layers. This paper applies the CTIC to organize a varied and extensive sample of 101 case studies according to conceptual definitions, research methods, language use, type of case study, and previous inclusion in interethnic conflict research. Findings show the primary factors underpinning such conflict (e.g., institutional inequity; relative ingroup strength; environmental stress; power imbalance; and resource scarcity) appear with relative consistency across case studies. More specifically, institutional inequity—functionally operating both within governments and mass media—is identified as perhaps the most critical factor in the generation, maintenance, and exacerbation of interethnic conflict.

Conflict between ethnic groups has been a persistent problem throughout human history. Evolutionary biologist Bradley Thayer (2004) notes how conflict is ubiquitous to the human experience, with clear evidence of intergroup warfare dating back at least 10,000 years. From prehistoric to present times, interethnic conflicts—which are more prevalent than interstate wars (Čehajić-Clancy, Efron, Halperin, Liberman, & Ross, 2011)—remain a perpetual problem. More recently, research has examined interethnic conflict across diverse contexts such as decreased workplace productivity (van Marrewijk, 2011), neighborhood segregation (Healy, 2006), community violence (Jaoul, 2012), psychological trauma (Bradbury, 2012), and genocidal attacks targeting specific ethnic groups, which have claimed more than five million lives over the past 60 years (Goldhagen, 2000; Harff, 2003).

Given the gravity of the subject, interethnic conflict has generated great interest within the social sciences, with scholars using case studies as one means of investigating the multiplicity of its manifestations across a range of disciplines. A case study is defined as “an in-depth, multifaceted investigation, using qualitative research methods, of a single social phenomenon” (Orum, Feagin, & Sjoberg, 1991, p. 2). Case studies on interethnic conflict date back more than 75 years (see Brenman, 1940) and provide a diverse body of research literature. However, many rich insights that could be gleaned from the broad range of cases remain dispersed and concealed across disciplines due to inconsistent terminology, theoretical disagreements, varying perspectives, and the sheer volume of cases.

The purpose of the present research is to analyze qualitative case studies to provide holistic insights into the phenomenon of interethnic conflict. To identify patterns across the diverse body of cases, we employ Kim (2005) contextual theory of interethnic communication (CTIC) as a sensitizing frame. Although predictive theories are not typically associated with case study research, Giddens (1984) suggests that gathering qualitative case studies together in large numbers may allow researchers to assess the

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“typicality” of findings (p. 328). Similarly, Kim (2005) describes the CTIC as an “intellectual guide for case studies” designed as an analytic framework capable of surveying the entire field of interethnic behavior (p. 341). Using Kim’s CTIC, we seek to analyze case studies on interethnic conflict as a means of organizing a disparate body of information in a theoretically practical way. In doing, we seek to identify some of the key patterns recurring across this diverse body of studies that may offer resources for future researchers by providing practical, holistic insights useful in refining the literature.

The specific method of theory application used in the present research combines both emic and etic approaches. Emic research is concerned with conceptual schemes and categories considered meaningful and suitably appropriate by the entity or culture under study (Lett, 1990). Qualitative case studies are emic in nature as they examine specific socio-cultural cases. On the other hand, an etic approach addresses the conceptual schemes and categories considered appropriate by the greater scientific community (Lett, 1990). Kim’s CTIC is utilized as an etic, sensitizing lens through which emic case studies on interethnic conflict can be organized and analyzed. Generally, emics and etics are considered separate epistemological constructs; however, Jones (1979) outlines the use of emic analysis for systematic comparisons in cross-cultural research. Along similar lines, the present study seeks to organize and analyze emic cases using etic conceptualizations to systematically identify observable patterns of interethnic conflict.

In what follows, we first present the conceptual definitions and selection criteria we have adopted for the various cases included. A profile of our sample of 101 case studies of interethnic conflict, involving some background on the relevant investigators in conjunction with the organizing scheme used to describe them is included. Next, we explicate our guiding theoretical structure and analysis, presenting a cross-section of exemplar case studies using Kim (2005) CTIC framework. Finally, our findings are presented along with a concluding discussion. We begin by considering the utility of case studies within a general methodological approach to the analysis of interethnic conflict.

### Selection of case studies

Case study research varies greatly in procedure, perspective, and theoretical background, casting ambiguity on what, exactly, constitutes a case study (see Stake, 1995 for review). For the present research, the definition set forth by Orum et al. (1991) serves as a guide to include any social scientific research report using (a) qualitative methods to (b) examine a single social phenomenon. In terms of scope, as Stake (1988) has noted, case study research is focused on understanding a “bounded system, whether a single actor, a single classroom, or a single enterprise—usually under natural conditions—to understand it in its own habitat” (p. 256). Hence, our criteria for the scope of cases ranges from psychiatric studies to analysis of international relations.

Our conception of interethnic conflict defines “ethnicity” as both a subjective orientation towards a place of origin and an objective set of characteristics such as language, race, religion, and culture (Kim, 2005). We define “conflict” as a struggle or disagreement occurring when interdependent parties have incompatible goals (Putnam, 2013). Kim’s (2005) characterization of interethnic communication combines these definitions to describe the occurrence of struggles wherein communicators perceive themselves to be different from those with whom they are interacting, whether that be in terms of ethnic group membership or ingroup identification. For the purposes of this study, we shall designate interethnic conflict as any struggle or disagreement occurring when, or in part because, one opponent perceives another to be of differing ethnicity in terms of language, race, religion, tribe, kinship, and/or culture.

Using this definition to identify specific case studies, a selection of key terms (i.e., “interethnic,” “ethnic relations,” “interethnic conflict,” “ethnic conflict,” “community,” and “case study”) were used to search 18 electronic databases (e.g., Academic Source Premier, PsychInfo, Social Work Abstracts).<sup>1</sup> Based on the initial results, a further review of references using the same key terms was conducted to search nine journals (e.g., *American Anthropologist*, *Journal of Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *Journal of Transcultural Psychology*),<sup>2</sup> and this search was repeated several times for exhaustiveness. As a result, these multiple searches identified a sample of 254 studies, which were screened before being retained for use in the present analysis.

### Screening of selected case studies

Screening case studies involved two iterative steps. First, the 254 case studies were reviewed to determine if (a) the cases focused on interethnic conflict and (b) met the definition of a case study. Only cases meeting both criteria were retained for analysis.

In accordance with our definition of interethnic conflict, 59 cases describing cooperative behaviors were removed from analyses. Upon reading each of these 59 cases, the authors determined the primary focus of the research was on cooperation, not conflict. Our search also procured studies on interethnic conflict using quantitative methods. Of those studies, 35 matched the definition of interethnic conflict, but did not match the description of qualitative/emic case study research. For instance, Wald’s (2009) analysis of conflict between Arab-Israeli immigrants in the US was flagged for being restricted to quantitative analyses of polling data without emic, qualitative scrutiny.

Another 51 cases were excluded for not actually being case studies; that is, they were incorrectly listed in databases or described

<sup>1</sup> The full list of databases searched included: Academic Source Premier; PsychInfo; Social Work Abstracts; American Bibliography of Slavic and East European Studies; Anthropology Plus; Anthro Source; Bibliography of Native North Americans; Business Source Premier; Communication and Mass Media Complete; Econ Lit; Ergonomics Abstracts; ERIC; History of Science, Technology, and Medicine; Humanities & Social Sciences Index Retrospective: 1907–1984; Military and Government Collection; PsychARTICLES; and SocIndex.

<sup>2</sup> The full list of journals searched included: *American Anthropologist*; *Ethnography*; *Journal of Ethnic and Racial Studies*; *Journal of Intergroup Relations*; *Journal of Peace Research*; *Journal of Peace Psychology*; *Journal of Business Anthropology*; *Journal of Social Psychology*; and the *Journal of Transcultural Psychology*.

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