Conflict in Multicultural Classes: Approaches to Resolving Difficult Dialogues

Stephen Burton and Susan Furr

Survey data are presented from instructors (N = 114) regarding how they would hypothetically use conflict management interventions within multicultural courses. Findings indicate that participants had more difficulty dealing with conflict directed at the instructor than with cognitive conflict, which involved students' ideas or beliefs. In addition, higher preferences were associated with the use of relationship-building interventions across all types of conflict.

Counselor educators experience challenges when helping counseling students to develop multicultural sensitivity and awareness (Fier & Ramsey, 2005; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009; Sue, Torino, Capodilupo, Rivera, & Lin, 2009; Watt, 2007). Adding to the complexity of this task is the intersecting diversity that students and instructors bring in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, age, religious and spiritual affiliation, and sexual orientation (Choudhuri, 2009). When asked to examine personal biases and prejudices, many counselor educators indicate that the contentious reactions of students can contribute to an increase in their concern about handling conflicts and disagreements that arise in class (Choudhuri, 2009; Sue, Torino, et al., 2009). With the ultimate goal of helping future counselors to develop skills in broaching topics related to race, ethnicity, and culture with clients (Day-Vines et al., 2007), it is essential that counselor educators model behaviors of how to infuse cultural understanding into discussions about uncomfortable topics.

Various researchers (Choudhuri, 2009; Sue, Rivera, Capodilupo, Lin, & Torino, 2010; Sue, Torino, et al., 2009) have stated that there is a gap between instructors’ depth of conceptual understanding of multicultural issues and their skills and abilities in responding to challenging interactions with students. Gloria, Rieckmann, and Rush (2000) emphasized how important it is for multicultural course instructors to have previous teaching experience (e.g., coteacher or teaching assistant) in diversity-related courses as a way of gaining the insight needed regarding class and individual dynamics that are specific to multicultural classes. As with the discomfort students feel in multicultural classes, Abrams and Gibson (2007) asserted that multicultural
course instructors must be prepared to feel discomfort as it arises while they teach and raise issues related to difficult multicultural topics.

Types of Conflict and Interventions

Intergroup conflict and tension have been cited as a challenge for professors, and the need to create safe environments has been emphasized (Reynolds, 2011). In addition, conflict can be directed at the professor when students’ personal views are challenged in the classroom; this is an issue that is particularly faced by faculty of color (Sue et al., 2011). Skillful use of de-escalating and mediative strategies and interventions is necessary to ensure positive student outcomes in the critical area of multicultural development (Choudhuri, 2009; Sue, Torino, et al., 2009; Young, 2003). To better conceptualize the variety of response options or interventions, we identified three themes for 12 interventions from the literature: (a) de-escalation only (Burgess & Burgess, 1997), (b) supportive confronting (Sue et al., 2010; Sue & Sue, 2008), and (c) protective confronting (Reynolds, 2011; Young, 2003). These interventions and strategies are used as a basis for the strategies counselor educators applied to hypothetical situations in the current research study.

De-Escalation Only

Burgess and Burgess (1997) defined de-escalation as a reduction in intensity of a dispute that has occurred rapidly after a situation has occurred in which neither side can win but where all individuals are being harmed by the dispute. Four interventions have been found in the literature that conceptually fit this category and have been suggested for mediating emotionally laden student reactions and reestablishing emotional balance. First, accurate listening and reflection involves an instructor’s use of reflection as well as summarization of all perspectives of students involved in a conflict (Choudhuri, 2009; Gloria et al., 2000; Sue et al., 2010; Sue, Torino, et al., 2009; Young, 2003). Second, acknowledging the difficulty of being in the course is a technique for normalizing the emotional reactions students may experience in confronting certain topics and issues covered in multicultural classes (Jones, Sander, & Booker, 2013; Sue, Torino, et al., 2009). This approach may be seen as similar to broaching (Day-Vines et al., 2007), wherein the instructor addresses the cultural meaning students attach to discussions in the classroom. Third, modeling humility involves the use of the professors’ anecdotal experiences to model that “it’s okay to be wrong.” It is based on the premise that instructors’ sharing of personal assumptions and biases regarding course materials has the effect of humanizing the classroom and engendering trust (Gloria et al., 2000; Sue et al., 2010), validating diversity acceptance (Hill, 2003), and encouraging students to become more involved in the learning process through class participation (Sue, Lin, et al., 2009). Finally, using humor is possibly the riskiest of instructor conflict interventions because it can be seen as lighthearted and also can be misinterpreted as a personal attack. The literature recommends not using humor until trust and
safety have been established in the classroom (Choudhuri, 2009; Martin, 2010; Provine & Emmorey, 2006).

**Supportive Confronting**

This category of interventions consists of mediative techniques that are thought to have the dual effect of de-escalating difficult classroom dialogue coupled with the prospect of helping counseling students in their development of multicultural personal awareness, knowledge, and skills (Sue et al., 2010; Sue & Sue, 2008). Exploring and challenging student positions and beliefs that are incongruent with multicultural counseling competency is the focus of these interventions. First, cognitive challenge, also known as confrontation, involves summarizing student perspectives of the conflict (Choudhuri, 2009). Carter (2003) noted the importance of confronting students in this challenge through instructor feedback coupled with an emphasis on professional development and counseling skill development. Second, linking to the broader issues of counseling involves processing student interpretations when conflict arises and then deflecting or tying the process to the larger issues of multicultural counseling. During difficult multicultural classroom dialogue, the instructor shifts the focus from how an issue has emotionally triggered student or class reactions to how the issue relates to understanding and working with similar or related issues that affect clients (Choudhuri, 2009; Sue & Sue, 2008). Third, reflective assignments are thought to allow students to voice their opinions and feelings regarding difficult dialogue and issues in the relatively safer context of writing as well as in the less intimidating space of smaller groups of classmates. Reflective assignments include 1-minute journaling (Locke & Kiselica, 1999), breaking into smaller groups for discussion (Sue, Torino, et al., 2009), and inviting individual research on difficult topics (Choudhuri, 2009). Finally, a gentle reminder of ground rules requires laying down ground rules early in the course (e.g., speak one at a time, own your opinions, focus on the topic and not the person, speak for yourself and not the group) and then gently reminding students when rules have been broken or ignored (Choudhuri, 2009).

**Protective Confronting**

There is a need to protect students and professors from debilitating levels of classroom conflict that have the potential to derail positive student learning outcomes as well as inflict emotional harm and injury on those participating in multicultural activities and instruction (Reynolds, 2011; Young, 2003). The following four interventions focus primarily on protecting students as well as maintaining the safety of classroom learning environments. First, shutting down the dialogue involves taking whatever steps are necessary for stopping intentionally harmful and discriminatory speech or behavior and letting it be known that it is unacceptable (Choudhuri, 2009, Sue et al., 2010). Second, protecting the lone outlier consists of taking whatever steps are necessary to protect a student, whether that student is being attacked or is the attacker,
from being “mobbed” by other students (Choudhuri, 2009). Generally, the literature refers to the use of this intervention as a way of protecting students from verbal forms of attack or intimidation (Richman, 2005). Third, time-out involves stopping contentious dialogue, acknowledging the conflict, and stating that it will be revisited later (e.g., at the beginning of the next class, in conjunction with a reflection assignment, after the topic is covered in depth in a subsequent class session). Choudhuri (2009) emphasized that when this technique is used, it is important for the instructor to invite the class “to take a break to regain their emotional balance, and the conversation restarted [later] with instructions on how to proceed” (p. 168). Finally, asking to meet privately with a student makes use of the relationship between student and instructor by asking to meet privately with a student one-on-one (possibly with another professor present) to resolve a conflict or issue outside of class. The literature supports the use of this intervention as a valuable tool for confronting difficult and contentious dialogue and issues related to maintaining an environment that supports multicultural competency training (Gloria et al., 2000). However, research also indicates that caution should be used in applying this technique so that it does not become a tactic or strategy for ignoring, dismissing, or avoiding difficult multicultural issues that arise in the classroom (Sue et al., 2010; Sue, Torino, et al., 2009).

The literature indicates that these 12 conflict interventions are important and effective methods for dealing with conflict and difficult dialogue during multicultural instruction and related training. However, we were unable to identify research that specifically points to the need for individual or conjunctive use of the interventions. We sought to identify the conflict interventions that would be chosen most frequently by instructors. We also sought to examine how the severity of multicultural classroom conflict influenced the types of conflict management techniques and interventions that instructors would choose to implement. We explored two research questions in this study: (a) Is there a perceived difference in types of classroom conflict; are some conflict situations perceived as more difficult to address than others? and (b) Will the categorical type of conflict management strategies chosen by professors to respond to difficult classroom dialogue differ according to the type of conflict addressed in hypothetical conflict scenarios? For this study, we delineated three types of conflict: Type 1 conflict is defined as cognitive conflict, Type 2 conflict is defined as student-to-student conflict, and Type 3 conflict is defined as conflict directed at the instructor.

Method

Participants and Procedure
We recruited the sample from master’s-level counselor education programs listed on the website of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). Because the exact number of instructors who currently teach or have taught multicultural courses was not known, it was not possible to identify the number of instructors who
would be eligible for this study. Previous counselor educator research has based response rate on the number of programs contacted as compared with those that responded (Neukrug, Peterson, Bonner, & Lomas, 2013; Warden & Benshoff, 2012); the response rate ranged from 29.8% to 51.7%. In conducting research that was focused on African American faculty members, Bradley and Holcomb-McCoy (2004) indicated that it can be difficult to develop a roster of counselor educators from specific groups, because there is not a database that includes detailed information about faculty members or, in the case for this research, information on teaching specialties. For other research studies involving counselor educators, the number of participants ranged from 45 (Bradley & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004) to 185 (Pérusse & Goodnough, 2001).

To ensure maximum survey response, we used a two-pronged approach wherein (a) each CACREP program director was contacted via e-mail and asked to forward a survey invitation to instructors who were currently teaching multicultural counseling courses in that program and (b) survey invitations were sent using a comprehensive e-mail list of all instructors who taught in CACREP-affiliated counselor education programs to reach instructors who may have taught multicultural or cross-cultural courses in the past. Participants who chose to respond to the survey provided their consent and were randomly assigned to one of the two parallel versions of the survey. A total of 158 professors responded to the invitation to participate in the anonymous web-based survey; 122 of the respondents met the multicultural or cross-cultural teaching experience and CACREP affiliation criteria. After eliminating respondents with missing or invalid data (n = 8, less than 7%), we obtained a total sample size of 114 for this study.

**Instrument**

Data were acquired from one administration of the web-based survey developed for this study, the Multicultural Class Conflict Intervention Survey (MCCIS), which included a demographic questionnaire as well as conflict scenarios and questions representing the study variables. This instrument elicited (a) participants’ demographic characteristics; (b) characteristics of the cross-cultural or multicultural courses in which participants taught; (c) the intervention strategies that participants indicated that they would use to deal with and resolve hypothetical multicultural classroom conflict, which were selected from a list of 12 commonly identified techniques found in the literature; and (d) the degree of challenge presented by the different types of classroom conflict. Difficulty of each type of classroom conflict was rated on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = not challenging at all, 5 = extremely challenging).

Classroom conflict scenario prompts were used as a component of the MCCIS. Conflict scenarios are defined as an imagined sequence of possible events or set of circumstances that describe a difficult cross-cultural or multicultural classroom conflict, such as the following Type 3 scenario prompt used in the MCCIS.
Imagine this scenario: In one of your multicultural class sessions, your identity (e.g., immigrant status, race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation [if you have revealed it]) has become the focus of a confrontation with a student who directly references your identity by making very disparaging and prejudiced remarks about people with your identity and then angrily tells you “I don’t think it is right that you are ‘pushing’ your social agenda onto our class just because you are _______ (e.g., Black, gay, a woman, an immigrant).” The class falls silent and students are looking to see what happens next. How would you respond?

The conflict scenarios section of the MCCIS contains six scenarios that were drawn from a review of the literature as well as the personal experiences of five cross-cultural and multicultural instructors with extensive teaching experience; these individuals were solicited to provide examples of difficult multicultural classroom dialogues. Decisions regarding selection of the conflict scenarios used in the MCCIS were accomplished through the use of the talk aloud and card sort protocol described later in this article. To reduce the time it would take for instructors to participate in the research and thereby increase the survey response rate, we created two versions of the survey that divided the original six scenario questions equally among two surveys (i.e., three scenarios representing Types 1, 2, and 3 conflicts in each of two versions of the survey that were determined to be parallel by outside reviewers); all other survey items were the same in each version. Participants read each scenario presented in the MCCIS and were asked to select at least three interventions that when used individually or in combination would most closely reflect their style of managing and dealing with the type of classroom situation presented based on past cross-cultural or multicultural class teaching experience. The scenarios addressed three levels of conflict: Type 1 was focused on cognitive conflict (i.e., ideas or beliefs), Type 2 was focused on conflict between student and student, and Type 3 was focused on conflict directed at the instructor.

We took several steps to minimize measurement error in the use of the MCCIS, including using (a) the talk aloud protocol (Wendt, Kenny, & Marks, 2007) and (b) the card sort protocol (Brown, 1996) to assess construct and content validity of the MCCIS as well as the conflict scenarios used in the instrument. Two professors with extensive teaching experience in the field of multicultural counselor education reviewed the 12 interventions outlined earlier and placed the conflict interventions into the three intervention categories of de-escalation only, supportive confronting, and protective confronting based on the category definitions using the card sort protocol.

The expert reviewers also used the card sort protocol to sort the conflict scenarios used in the MCCIS into the appropriate conflict type. In separate individual sessions with reviewers, the reviewer read aloud each of the conflict scenarios and placed the scenario into one of the three types of conflict categories. During the talk aloud session, the reviewers commented on any aspects of the scenarios that seemed confusing or unclear to them. Scenarios that did not represent a clear delineation of Type 1, 2, and 3 conflicts were discarded. After the first review session, we incorporated suggestions made by the reviewers to edit the remaining scenarios for clarity and to better represent certain conflict types. After these
edits were made, the expert reviewers again used the card sort protocol for final agreement on the validity of the type categorization of the scenarios.

We then conducted a pilot study using three experienced multicultural course instructors as pilot participants. On the basis of an analysis of the pilot study response data, we made small editing changes to the surveys to incorporate the feedback and suggestions for improvement. Appropriate approval from the institutional review board was obtained at each step of the process. Expert reviewers and pilot study participants were removed from the pool of potential participants of the research study to prevent contamination of the sample population.

Results

Participant Characteristics

The sample consisted of 76 female (67%) and 38 male (33%) professors, ranging in age from 29 to 75 years (mean age = 50 years, SD = 11.27). The majority of the respondents identified themselves primarily as White or of European descent (n = 68, 59.6%); 21 (18.4%) identified as African American/Afro Caribbean/African descent, nine (7.9%) as multiracial, seven (6.1%) as Asian/Polynesian or Pacific Islander, five (4.4%) as Hispanic/Latina/Latino, and four (3.5%) as Native American/American Indian or First Nation. When asked about sexual orientation, the majority of respondents identified themselves as heterosexual (n = 96, 84.2%), with 11 (9.6%) identifying as gay or lesbian, five (4.4%) as bisexual, one (.9%) as transgender woman, and one (.9%) as other.

Regarding professional and program characteristics of the sample, the majority of professors’ counselor education programs were located in the Southern region (n = 50, 43.9%) of the United States, followed by 12 (10.5%) in the North Atlantic, 19 (16.7%) in the North Central, 17 (14.9%) in the Rocky Mountain, and 14 (12.3%) in the Western regions of the country. Two respondents (1.8%) did not indicate the CACREP region of their program. Fifty (43.9%) respondents indicated their status as tenured and 64 (56.1%) as nontenured. The majority of the respondents were assistant professors (n = 36, 31.6%); 31 (27.2%) identified as associate professors, 17 (14.9%) as adjunct professors, 16 (14.0%) as full professors, six (5.3%) as retired/emeritus/emerita professors, two (1.8%) as clinical professors, and six (5.3%) as other. The majority of professors reported their overall career frequency of teaching multicultural classes as one class per academic year (n = 49, 43.0%), 31 (27.2%) indicated a frequency of two classes, 18 (15.8%) reported teaching less than one class, and 16 (14.0%) taught more than two classes per academic year.

Level of Conflict Challenge

To examine if there was a difference between the types of conflict for perceived level of challenge, we completed a repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) using one within-subject factor (i.e., the level of chal-
lelge responses to the three items of the MCCIS: Type 1 conflict, Type 2 conflict, and Type 3 conflict). Mauchly’s test of sphericity indicated that the assumption of sphericity had not been violated, $\chi^2(2) = 0.85$, $p = .65$. Analysis of the data suggested that mean level of challenge differed significantly between the types of multicultural classroom conflict, $R(2, 226) = 7.61$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$.

Post hoc tests using the Bonferroni correction revealed that the level of challenge reported by professors increased slightly from Type 1 to Type 2 conflicts ($2.77 \pm .90$ vs. $2.95 \pm .81$), but the difference was not statistically significant ($p = .10$). However, the level of challenge reported by professors when encountering Type 3 conflicts increased to $3.10 \pm .08$, which was significantly when compared with Type 1 conflicts ($p < .01$) but not Type 2 conflicts ($p = .21$). We can therefore conclude that multicultural classroom conflict elicits a significant increase in the level of challenge reported by professors but only when comparing Type 3 conflicts with Type 1 conflicts.

**Intervention Usage Across Types of Conflict**

We used the Friedman test to determine if there would be differences across the types of classroom conflicts on the conflict management strategies used by professors (i.e., de-escalation only, supportive confronting, and protective confronting). Whereas the level of challenge continuous variable allowed parametric statistics to be used for analysis of the first question of the study, the Friedman test is a nonparametric alternative to the repeated measures ANOVA test and is used to determine whether there are any statistically significant differences between the distributions of three or more related groups. The independent variable was types of conflict (i.e., Types 1, 2, and 3), and the dependent variable was the scores that indicated how many times professors selected each of the different conflict interventions by category (i.e., de-escalation only, supportive confronting, and protective confronting). For the de-escalation only category of interventions, analysis of the data across Types 1, 2, and 3 suggested that usage of this category of interventions was statistically different among the types of conflict, $\chi^2(2) = 10.82$, $p < .01$. However, pairwise comparisons using the Bonferroni correction revealed no statistically significant differences in intervention usage from Type 1 to Type 2, Type 2 to Type 3, or Type 1 to Type 3. For the supportive confronting category of interventions, analysis suggested that usage of this category of interventions was statistically different among the types of conflict, $\chi^2(2) = 17.26$, $p < .01$. Pairwise comparisons using the Bonferroni correction revealed statistically significant differences in intervention usage from Type 1 ($Mdn = 2.0$) to Type 3 ($Mdn = 1.0$, $p = .02$), Type 2 ($Mdn = 2.0$) to Type 3 ($Mdn = 1.0$, $p < .01$), but not Type 1 to Type 2. For the protective confronting category of interventions, analysis of the data suggested that usage of this category of interventions was not statistically different among the types of conflict, $\chi^2(2) = 1.50$, $p = .47$.

On the basis of the previous analyses, there was a significant overall difference across the types of classroom conflict for de-escalation only and
supportive confronting intervention conflict management strategies. The de-escalation only category showed no change between type of intervention, suggesting similar categorical intervention usage no matter what type of conflict arises in classes; supportive confronting intervention data suggested a significant decrease in usage for Type 3 conflicts. Finally, analysis offered no support for overall or between-group differences across the types of classroom conflicts when examining the use of protective confronting conflict management strategies by professors, suggesting that use of this category of intervention was the same no matter what type of conflict arises in classes.

**Individual Intervention Usage**

The aforementioned results are focused on conflict based on the broad intervention categories of de-escalation only, supportive confronting, and protective confronting. Outcomes of the study also pointed to the most prevalent individual use of interventions by multicultural and cross-cultural course instructors when dealing with difficult and conflictual discourse that arose in their classes. Descriptive statistics of individual intervention selections shown in Table 1 give depth and understanding to the intervention usage by instructors as measured by the MCCIS.

**TABLE 1**

Descriptive Statistics of Instructor Intervention Selections for the Three Conflict Types in the Multicultural Class Conflict Intervention Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intervention</th>
<th>Type 1 Conflict</th>
<th>Type 2 Conflict</th>
<th>Type 3 Conflict</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De-Escalation Only Category (N = 413)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Accurate listening and reflection</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Acknowledging the difficulty of being in the course</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Modeling humility</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Using humor</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive Confronting Category (N = 499)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Cognitive challenge</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Linking to the broader issues of counseling</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Reflective assignments</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Gentle reminder of ground rules</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protective Confronting Category (N = 114)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Shutting down the dialogue</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Protecting the lone outlier</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Time-out</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Asking to meet privately with a student</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Type 1 conflict = cognitive conflict; Type 2 conflict = student-to-student conflict; Type 3 conflict = conflict directed at the instructor.
Discussion and Implications

We sought to examine the relationship between perceived severity of multicultural classroom conflict and the proposed use of conflict management interventions and techniques by instructors teaching multicultural counseling courses when difficult and conflictual discourse arises in their classes. The main findings of this study include the significant difference between the types of classroom conflict that occur in multicultural classes based on perceived level of challenge that professors experience. However, post hoc tests indicated that a significant increase between the types could be identified only when comparing Type 1 with Type 3 conflicts. When looking at professors’ use of categorical conflict management strategies from the perspective of intervention usage across conflicts (i.e., Types 1, 2, and 3), we found very little support that encountering any particular type of conflict in a class would point toward a pattern of categorical conflict management strategy different from others (i.e., de-escalation only, supportive confronting, and protective confronting).

Patterns of individual intervention use suggest a preference for certain conflict interventions across all types of classroom conflict on the basis of a review of the descriptive data of participant intervention selections (see Table 1). The most preferred individual intervention across all conflict types chosen in response to the scenarios of the MCCIS was the de-escalation and relationship-building intervention of accurate listening and reflection, represented by an average of 23% of the total intervention selections. This finding was consistent with Meyers, Bender, Hill, and Thomas’s (2006) on the nature and correlates of classroom conflict using a national sample of university faculty (N = 226), which showed that the most effective conflict management techniques were those that address the relationship between faculty and students. Other most preferred interventions averaged across all conflict types were linking to the broader issues of counseling (17%) and cognitive challenge (14%), the importance of which corresponds to research by Perry (1970) that addressed the issue of difficulties related to challenging students’ long-held beliefs in terms of their progression through sequential interpretations of meaning reflected in stages of cognitive and ethical growth. Study data indicating preference for linking to the broader issues of counseling and cognitive challenge also converge with and support Granello’s (2002) emphasis on the importance of counselor educators creating instructional experiences “that are specifically and intentionally designed to push students toward higher levels of cognitive development” (p. 279).

Least preferred across all conflict types were using humor, time-out, and shutting down the dialogue, each represented by an average of 2% of the total intervention selections. Even when skillfully used, humor can be an unreliable mediator because people are not uniform in their ability to recognize it for what it is (Dunning, 2005). Thus, the total selections of humor as a conflict intervention (n = 16) indicated that it was the least preferred among all of the interventions presented. Time-out and shutting down the
dialogue when used as conflict interventions in multicultural classes correspond to the type of instructor behaviors that Sue et al. (2010) described as frustrating to students, who have interpreted the use of these kinds of interventions as “prematurely ending the conversation or discouraging emotional exploration” (p. 211).

Another finding was that certain interventions had an increasing or decreasing pattern of use across the types of classroom conflict. For example, data indicate that cognitive challenge was used with decreasing frequency across the conflict types, with this intervention being used the most frequently for Type 1 \( (n = 70) \) and Type 2 \( (n = 44) \) conflicts and the least frequently for Type 3 conflict \( (n = 33) \). This usage pattern may indicate that greater value is attributed to cognitive challenge as an intervention when it involves conflicts of ideas and beliefs (Type 1) than when dealing with conflicts that are personal and directed at the instructor (Type 3), which corresponds with Pieterse’s (2009) view concerning pedagogy. Likewise, data describing use of reflective assignments also indicate a decreasing pattern of use across the types of conflict for reasons that may be similar to those of the previous intervention. Acknowledging the difficulty of being in the course had an increasing pattern of usage across the continuum from Type 1 to Type 3, possibly suggesting greater usefulness as a mediative strategy when the perceived level of challenge to instructors increases across the types. This strategy is supported by Reynolds’s (2011) view that instructors need to create a safe environment in which students can explore emotions.

Overall, only a narrow band of the most prevalent interventions recommended in the literature were used by participants when presented with hypothetical multicultural classroom conflicts. This finding may indicate a need for research on effective interventions followed by proactive approaches to increase repertoire and fluency in the use of conflict-resolving interventions. As with recommendations provided by Sue, Lin, et al. (2009), counselor education doctoral programs need to develop basic principles to guide and inform students and faculty about how to facilitate difficult multicultural discussions. As suggested by Sue, Torino, et al. (2009), a safe space for multicultural dialogues cannot be created if instructors are not educated about the variety of techniques that are available to use when conflicts occur in the classroom.

Limitations

There are several notable limitations of this study. First, the target sample consisted of only professors of counselor education programs accredited by CACREP. Thus, this criterion eliminated professors of programs that were not affiliated with CACREP. Therefore, generalizability of the study results is limited to professors of CACREP-affiliated institutions who teach or have taught multicultural courses. It is difficult to assess the actual response ratio given that no database exists of professors who teach multicultural counseling classes. Therefore, we cannot evaluate whether those who responded to the survey are representative of those who commonly teach this course. Another
limitation of this study was the self-report measure used to gather the data. Research that asks mental health care educators to report how they would respond in difficult conflictual classroom situations may be analogous to research that has shown that mental health care professionals’ reports of what they would do in difficult client situations may be different from their behaviors when faced with actual ethical dilemmas (Pope, Tabachnick, & Keith-Spiegel, 1987). The nature of the desire and need for professional competency in handling student biases and prejudices and issues of multiculturalism—the lack of which may contribute to the risk of conflict arising in multicultural classes (Sue et al., 2010)—may have resulted in participants giving answers that were socially desirable and therefore not reflective of their actual classroom experiences. Therefore, some respondents may have provided “acceptable” answers to survey questions based on how they felt they “should” respond to classroom conflict rather than describing actual responses to similar classroom experiences from the past. Additionally, the small effect size across the types of conflict (partial $\eta^2 = .06$) found in the results of the first research question analysis may be an indication that the variability in the data does not point to robust differences in the level of challenge instructors experience between the three types of multicultural classroom conflict despite the significant finding of the test results. Finally, although card sort and talk aloud protocols were used to sort conflict scenario prompts used in the MCCIS into the appropriate conflict categories in the parallel versions of the instrument (e.g., Types 1, 2, and 3), the unknown equivalence of the two versions of the instrument is a potential validity concern.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

Why is it important for counselor educators to recognize that there are different types of conflicts that occur in class and that there are a variety of interventions? First, knowing that some conflicts, such as when students are directly confrontational with the professor, may lead professors to more quickly detect the potential risks in the way they respond and be more aware of choosing strategies to defuse possible destructive confrontations. Although there was not a clear delineation of the three levels of conflict, there is some indication that these differences do exist, but more research is needed on this concept. Second, the possibility exists that professors are limited in their repertoire of interventions that can be selected to respond to difficult classroom discussions. Professors may not know other uses of interventions relative to the different types of conflicts that may arise or that it is possible to achieve better outcomes by using other intervention combinations. This possibility is consistent with qualitative research by Sue et al. (2010), which suggests that many instructors who teach multicultural classes lack fluency in strategies for facilitating difficult dialogues. This study presented an array of intervention possibilities that has not been represented previously in a single research study.

For the future, research on actual classroom interventions is needed to ascertain the types of conflicts that occur, identify interventions used, and evaluate the effectiveness of these interventions. One such approach would
be to have students indicate what difficult situations arose during class and then have students identify how the professor responded and the effectiveness of the response. Such research would involve a willingness of professors to encounter the risk of receiving feedback, some of which might be critical, when students are challenged to examine their beliefs about sensitive topics. Besides this weekly instructor feedback, it would also be essential to have students reflect on their perceptions at the end of the semester (or even later) to see how greater awareness may change their views. By increasing their skills in addressing critical multicultural discussions in the classroom, counselor educators can help counseling students to feel safer during these encounters and ultimately obtain greater understanding of themselves in multicultural encounters.

References


