

## Coping with Culture-Based Conflict: Implications for Counseling Research and Practice

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*Interpersonal conflict related to sociocultural group membership was examined with a multicultural university sample. The Social Group Conflict Scale (SGCS), collective self-esteem (CSE), and Bradburn affect scale were administered to 248 university students. The current study attempted to replicate and extend the findings on social group-based conflict recently proposed by Dunbar, Sue, and Liu. Results indicated that 51% of the subjects reported encountering interpersonal conflict attributable to their social group memberships, with ethnicity being the most frequently attributed group category. Significant gender and ethnic differences were noted in coping approach employed in responding to the conflict event. The current findings are considered in regard to effectively assessing and responding to intercultural conflict for mental health practice. © 1995 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.*

*• culture-based conflict • ethnic group membership*

Social and culture-based conflict is a very serious and pervasive problem found in contemporary university settings (Carter, 1991). This problem has received a great deal of attention in the study of university life in the 1980s and 1990s (Astin, Trevino, & Wingard, 1991). For researchers and counseling prac-

tioners, this issue poses unique challenges concerning how to assess and effectively respond to the victims of stereotyping, adverse bias, and hate crimes.

Research has suggested that stereotyping and adverse out-group attributions are frequently related to social group categories

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ence of the victim, recognizing the psychological characteristics which facilitate a healthy coping response, and examining how the frequency and severity of the conflict experience vary among social groups. Toward this end, the following research and practice issues were considered:

1. What forms of social group-based conflict are most frequently encountered and are of greatest concern to the target person?
2. Are there notable differences for in-group social identity between persons who report experiencing social group-based conflict and those who do not?
3. How does active coping in response to social group-based conflict vary by ethnic/gender groups?

### *Sample*

Subjects consisted of an ethnically mixed group of 248 university students enrolled in psychology courses at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. The sample consisted of 168 women and 81 men. Classification of the subjects by race/ethnic group category revealed that there were 6 African-Americans, 138 Asian-Pacifics (this included 38 persons of Chinese heritage, 79 persons of Japanese heritage, 17 persons of Filipino heritage, and 4 persons of Vietnamese heritage), 55 Whites of European heritage, and 47 persons of mixed race heritage (including 11 persons primarily of Hawaiian heritage). The median subject age was 22 years (S.D. of 6.6 years) with a range of 16–62. Thirty-four (13.7%) of the subjects reported being non-U.S. born; this group reported a median of 7 years residing in the U.S. (S.D. of 6.5 years).

### *Procedure*

All participants were enrolled in undergraduate psychology courses for which they

received credit for participating in the current study. The materials were administered to classes ranging in size from 20 to 80. Study subjects completed a release to participate in the current study. There were no time limits imposed in the administration.

### *Measures*

#### *Social Group Conflict Scale*

The Social Group Conflict Scale (SGCS) (Dunbar et al., 1994) was administered. This scale consists of items which examine a specific conflict situation which the respondent has experienced with an individual, group, or institution (the conflict domain). The respondent designates which social group categories (race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, and/or religious group membership) served as the conflict attribute—i.e., was a causal factor of the conflict event. The SGCS included 21 items concerning the experience of culture-based conflict (e.g., “I was excluded from a group activity.”). These items were written to reflect conflict experiences related to social exclusion, access to information and resources, and participation in group-based experiences; the items measure social conflict experiences rather than acts of physical aggression or violence. The items used in the current study employed a three-point Likert rating, indicating whether a specific action occurred “a lot,” “somewhat,” or “did not occur.” The five factor dimensions of culture-based conflict identified by Dunbar et al. (1994) were employed in the current study. The five factors included “Personal Provocation,” which was characteristic of the affective provocation of the target person (reliability alpha coefficient was .85). The second conflict factor, concerning the withholding of information for personal achievement, was termed “Gatekeeping.” (The internal coefficient alpha was .76.) The third conflict factor, related to the ignoring and marginalizing of the individual, was termed “Personal Invisi-

enced social conflict (the "conflict" group) and those who had not (the "no-conflict" group). As reported in Table 1, a significant difference was found between the no-conflict and conflict groups for negative well-being ( $t = 2.18$ ;  $p < .05$ ), but not for collective self-esteem.

The relationship of the Conflict Frequency and Conflict Concern ratings was examined with the five Conflict Types. A  $2 \times 5$  multivariate ANOVA (MANOVA) (Conflict Frequency and Conflict Concern by Conflict Type) was computed with the Conflict Frequency and Concern ratings employed as the dependent variables. Results revealed a significant multivariate effect ( $F 5,119 = 5.29$ ;  $p < .001$ ); univariate ANOVAs for Conflict Frequency ( $F 5,119 = 6.84$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and Conflict Concern ( $F 5,119 = 4.30$ ;  $p < .001$ ) were also significant. The Conflict Frequency ratings were significantly related to the Co-Option conflict type ( $t = 4.03$ ;  $p < .001$ ), while the Conflict Concern rating was significantly related to the Personal Invisibility conflict type ( $t = 2.87$ ;  $p < .005$ ). The MANOVA results are reported in Table 2.

Pearson correlation coefficients were in-

dependently computed for the conflict types and subjective well-being for the Asian-Pacific, Mixed Race/Ethnic, and Euro-White groups. Results indicated that for Asian-Pacific subjects, the Opportunity Gatekeeping ( $r = -.40$ ;  $p < .05$ ) and Personal Invisibility ( $r = -.34$ ;  $p < .05$ ) conflict types were negatively related to positive well-being. For Mixed Race/Ethnic subjects, negative well-being was related to the Personal Invisibility ( $r = .43$ ;  $p < .05$ ) and Opportunity Gatekeeping ( $r = .40$ ;  $p = .05$ ) conflict types. For Euro-Whites, negative well-being was related to the Social Isolation ( $r = .31$ ;  $p < .05$ ) conflict type.

Several relationships were observed between the conflict variables and the Active Coping scale. Active Coping was positively correlated with Conflict Concern ( $r = .31$ ;  $p < .01$ ) and Conflict Frequency ( $r = .24$ ;  $p < .01$ ). Results of a  $1 \times 4 \times 2$  (active coping response by race/ethnicity by gender) full factorial MANOVA revealed a significant multivariate effect for gender ( $F 5,122 = 3.90$ ;  $p < .05$ ) but not for race/ethnicity ( $F 5,122 = .52$ ;  $p < .59$ ). As reported in Table 3, significant differences were noted for spe-

TABLE 1 Collective Self-Esteem and Subjective Well-Being Differences by Conflict Status Groups

|                        | <i>Reports Culture<br/>Conflict<br/>Experience<br/>(N = 125)</i> |             | <i>Does Not Report<br/>Culture Conflict<br/>Experience<br/>(N = 123)</i> |             | <i>t-Value</i> | <i>Probability</i> |
|------------------------|--|-------------|--|-------------|----------------|--------------------|
|                        | <i>Mean</i>  | <i>S.D.</i> | <i>Mean</i>  | <i>S.D.</i> |                |                    |
| Collective self-esteem |  |             |  |             |                |                    |
| Public recognition     | 20.47  | 4.76        | 20.89  | 4.27        | .75            | .45                |
| Private identity       | 22.14  | 4.16        | 22.43  | 4.26        | .53            | .59                |
| Ascribed identity      | 18.81  | 5.14        | 18.41  | 4.57        | .64            | .53                |
| Group membership       | 21.66  | 4.38        | 21.44  | 4.13        | .42            | .67                |
| Affect states          |  |             |  |             |                |                    |
| Positive well-being    | 4.13   | 1.07        | 3.93   | 1.29        | 1.28           | .20                |
| Negative well-being*   | 2.95   | 1.63        | 2.48   | 1.65        | 2.18           | .03                |

Note. higher scores on both the collective self-esteem and Bradburn scales reflect greater endorsement of the dimension measured.

\* $p < .05$  (two-tailed test).

cific gender and race/ethnic groups, with Asian-Pacific and Euro-White men reporting greater active coping and women of Mixed Race/Ethnicity reporting significantly less active coping.

### Discussion

This study has attempted to replicate and extend the study of social group-based conflict recently proposed by Dunbar, Sue, and Liu. The current study sought to determine whether culture-based conflict varied significantly for different race and ethnic groups. Additionally we sought to determine whether social in-group identity varied between persons who have and have not reported encountering culture-based conflict.

In the current study it was found that persons who reported having experienced culture-based conflict also reported greater negative well-being; also they were not more identified with their social in-groups than persons who did not report experiencing culture-related conflict. This last point may reflect the realities of the social context of race and ethnic relations in Hawaii (where traditionally there has been more recognition of the salience of race and ethnicity) and may indeed be very different in mainland U.S. environments. As such, the replication of the current findings may not be observed in traditionally less culturally diverse communities. The sociopolitical role of Asian-Pacific persons in Hawaii is distinctly different from that traditionally found elsewhere in the U.S. This is specifically true in regard to Asian-Pacific persons holding positions of economic power and social status in government and business, particularly since the end of the Second World War (Dawes, 1968; Zalburg, 1979). As such, the perceived social support, social group empowerment, and societal acknowledgment of Asian-Pacifics may facilitate more effective coping responses to culture-based conflict than found in most U.S. mainland communities.

An additional issue not adequately explored in the current study is the experience of African-Americans in the state of Hawaii and on-campus at the University of Hawaii. As has been noted by Takara (1991), the cultural heritage of African-Americans is not widely understood nor a part of the social history of Hawaii. African-Americans at the University of Hawaii constitute a very small minority, comprising less than 1% of the student body (Takara, 1992). As such, African-Americans constitute one of several cultural out-groups—and one which is less prominent than that of other race/ethnic groups, such as multiracial “hapa” persons.

Another salient dimension of culture-based conflict concerns the role of gender. The current findings indicated that the employment of an active coping response to culture-based conflict varied significantly between men and women. In the current study, Asian-Pacific and Euro-White men reported a more active coping response when compared to women of mixed racial/ethnic heritage. This gender and race-related difference in coping styles is largely consistent with the prior exploratory work of Dunbar et al. (1994). However, while the current findings suggest that men are more likely to respond actively to the conflict event, it does not imply that they are more effective or satisfied with their solution. It may be that a more active response style in the face of situations which are beyond the individual's personal control may heighten the subjective distress of the target person. Related to this concern is the unexplored question of the affective sequela of culture-based conflict. Specifically, while the experience of bias and prejudice typically does not imply serious physical injury or threat, as is found with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the emotional response to racism and sexism, as suggested in the current study, frequently includes feelings of fear, helplessness, and shock. In this sense, the experience of the target person appears to be closely aligned with the criteria for PTSD and acute stress disorder, as proposed in the DSM-IV (Ameri-

argued, is particularly true when issues of social group identity are a causal factor in the conflict experience.

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such as race, ethnicity, or gender (Miller & Brewer, 1987). The study of social group-based conflict has been linked to contrasting behaviors, affects, and cognitions of members of diverse sociocultural groups (Boardman & Horowitz, 1994). At the same time, it has been argued that there has been greater attention given to the psychological experience of the stereotyping person than to the victim of the stereotype (Steele & Aronson, 1994).

As has been suggested by Dunbar, Sue, and Liu (1994), a signifying characteristic of social group-based conflict is the causal attribution made between one's social group memberships and the conflict experience. In their analysis, Dunbar et al. identified five salient characteristics of the conflict experience. These were: (1) the personal provocation and affective challenge of the target person, (2) the experience of interpersonal invisibility, (3) the exclusion or "gatekeeping" of the individual from learning and work opportunities, (4) the social isolation and exclusion of the target person from group membership, and (5) the controlling or "co-option" of the individual's achievements and intellectual property. These conflict factors were found to be related to subjective well-being and perceived societal support for one's social group memberships.

Of related interest in understanding the phenomena of culture-based conflict is the role of the target person's social identity in the appraisal of the conflict event. The social identity status—i.e., the conscious identification with one's sociocultural groups—may play an important role in the attribution of conflict as being culture- or gender-related (Tzeng & Jackson, 1994). It has been suggested that persons highly identified with their social in-groups may interpret events as being salient to their group memberships more so than persons who are less in-group identified (Smith & Zarate, 1992). Accordingly, strength of identification with one's social group may reflect how the individual

perceives and responds to culture-based conflict.

### *Implications of Culture Based-Conflict for Counseling*

The need for mental health counselors to be responsive and accommodating to sociocultural differences is a well-recognized standard of professional competence (Marsella & Pedersen, 1980; Johnson, 1987). Sue and Sue (1990) have suggested that counselors must recognize their own cultural assumptions, attempt to understand differing worldviews of their clients, and develop culturally appropriate intervention modalities. In addition to these criteria, we advocate the need of practitioners to accurately identify and treat the psychological impact of social group bias (e.g., racism, homophobia, and sexual harassment) on their clients. Specifically, it is proposed that the current diagnostic nomenclature insufficiently recognizes the role of discrimination in the creation of psychological problems for otherwise healthy persons. Social group-based conflict impacts the affective, cognitive, and behavioral competencies of the victim (Wyatt, 1994). Differences in conflict severity and frequency may mitigate against the development of more adaptive coping responses (Asamen & Berry, 1987; Root, 1994). For multicultural institutions, identifying the impact of culture-based conflict holds implications for individual and collective healing and change (Thomas, 1990; Donnellon & Kolb, 1994).

For the target person, effectively managing and coping with the conflict experience is of utmost importance. It is therefore all the more interesting how very little is known about how persons respond to and deal with culture-based conflict. Examining how persons effectively cope with social conflict and bias should be part of the research agenda of researchers concerned with social group relations. Areas of particular concern include understanding the subjective experi-

bility"; the reliability alpha for this factor in the current study was .78. The fourth factor was characteristic of the taking over of the ideas or achievements of the target individual as was termed "Co-Opting of Achievement"; with the current sample the internal coefficient alpha was .60. The fifth factor was related to the isolation of the person from others in work and social contexts and was labeled "Social Isolation" and had a reliability alpha of .73. Ratings of Conflict Frequency and Conflict Concern were scored on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater conflict incidence and expressed concern.

The SGCS included an 8-item scale of the coping mechanisms employed to respond to the conflict situation. The items were based upon the Ways of Coping Questionnaire factor dimensions reported by Folkman and Lazarus (1988). The coping items employed a 5-point rating scale and were aggregated to form a single measure representing an active coping response to the conflict situation. Higher scores on the coping scale reflect greater awareness and engagement with the conflict situation. The internal reliability (alpha) coefficient for the coping scale was .70. The scale mean was 18.50 (S.D. = 3.76).

#### *Collective Self-Esteem*

The Collective Self-Esteem (CSE) scale is a measure of multigroup social identity (Luthanen & Crocker, 1992). The CSE consists of four measures; these are: (1) membership CSE, (2) private CSE, (3) public CSE, and (4) identity CSE. Each measure consists of four items, employing a 7-point Likert-type rating, with higher ratings indicating greater endorsement of the CSE dimensions. With the current sample, the descriptive statistics and internal reliabilities (coefficient alpha) are as follows: for the membership scale the mean was 21.56 (S.D. = 4.25; alpha = .78), for the identity scale 18.23 (S.D. = 4.86; alpha = .74), for private CSE 22.31 (S.D. =

4.21; alpha = .81), and for the public CSE scale 20.69 (S.D. = 5.64; alpha = .83).

#### *Subjective Well-Being*

The Bradburn Affect Balance Scale (Bradburn, 1969) is a 10-item measure of positive and negative affect as related to current life satisfaction. The Bradburn scale is a widely used measure of subjective well-being and has been employed in national quality-of-life studies (Neugarten, Havighurst, & Tobin, 1961) and in the field of health psychology (Schlosser & Sheeley, 1985). The scales reflect independent ratings of positive and negative affect states. In our study, the coefficient of internal reliability for the Positive Affect scale was .67 and .67 for the Negative Affect scale. These internal reliability scores are similar to those reported in the 1969 text by Bradburn.

### **Results**

For the entire sample, 51% (125) of the subjects reported having encountered (that is, been the target of) culture-based conflict. The Conflict Domain was reported as occurring in either interpersonal (57%,  $n = 110$ ) or small group (38%,  $n = 74$ ) contexts. Results indicated that the target person's ethnicity (51.6%) was the most frequently identified Conflict Attribute (i.e., the social group category) related to the conflict experience. Attributions for race (17.2%), gender (16.4%), age (10.7%), religion (2.5%), and sexual orientation (1.6%) were relatively less frequently reported. Results of a univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) for the Conflict Severity Index (the dependent variable) and the Conflict Attribute were significant ( $F_{5,123} = 2.53$ ;  $p < .03$ ); however, none of the Conflict Attributes varied significantly among one another.

The experience of social group-based conflict was examined for differences in social group identity and subjective well-being of persons who had reported having experi-

**TABLE 2** Multivariate Analysis of Variance Results for Conflict Frequency and Conflict Concern with Conflict Type

|                     | <i>F Ratio</i> | <i>Significance</i> | <i>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></i> | <i>Beta</i> | <i>t-Value</i> | <i>Probability</i> |
|---------------------|----------------|---------------------|-------------------------------|-------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Multivariate effect | 5.29           | .001                |                               |             |                |                    |
| Conflict Frequency  | 6.84           | .001                | .19                           |             |                |                    |
| Conflict factors:   |                |                     |                               |             |                |                    |
| Personal            |                |                     | .01                           | .04         | .32            | .74                |
| Provocation         |                |                     |                               |             |                |                    |
| Opportunity         |                |                     | .14                           | .23         | 1.88           | .06                |
| Gatekeeping         |                |                     |                               |             |                |                    |
| Personal            |                |                     | -.13                          | -.22        | 1.57           | .12                |
| Invisibility        |                |                     |                               |             |                |                    |
| Co-Opting of        |                |                     | .45                           | .47         | 4.03           | .00                |
| Achievement         |                |                     |                               |             |                |                    |
| Social              |                |                     | -.04                          | -.05        | .50            | .62                |
| Isolation           |                |                     |                               |             |                |                    |
| Conflict Concern    | 4.30           | .001                | .12                           |             |                |                    |
| Conflict factors:   |                |                     |                               |             |                |                    |
| Personal            |                |                     | .01                           | .01         | .01            | .99                |
| Provocation         |                |                     |                               |             |                |                    |
| Opportunity         |                |                     | .01                           | .05         | .42            | .67                |
| Gatekeeping         |                |                     |                               |             |                |                    |
| Personal            |                |                     | .14                           | .41         | 2.87           | .005               |
| Invisibility        |                |                     |                               |             |                |                    |
| Co-Opting of        |                |                     | -.08                          | -.14        | 1.21           | .23                |
| Achievement         |                |                     |                               |             |                |                    |
| Social              |                |                     | .02                           | .05         | .45            | .65                |
| Isolation           |                |                     |                               |             |                |                    |

**TABLE 3** Multivariate Analysis of Variance Results for Active Coping Response by Race/Ethnicity and Gender

|                             | <i>F Ratio</i> | <i>Significance</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>S.D.</i> |
|-----------------------------|----------------|---------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Race/ethnicity              | .52            | .59                 |             |             |
| Gender                      | 3.90           | .05                 |             |             |
| Race/ethnicity by gender    | .06            | .90                 |             |             |
| Asian-Pacifics: men         |                |                     | 19.14       | 3.43*       |
| Asian-Pacifics: women       |                |                     | 17.96       | 2.85        |
| Mixed race ethnicity: men   |                |                     | 17.82       | 3.04        |
| Mixed race ethnicity: women |                |                     | 16.42       | 3.56*       |
| Whites: men                 |                |                     | 18.80       | 2.78*       |
| Whites: women               |                |                     | 17.63       | 2.62        |

\* $p < .05$  (two-tailed test).



can Psychiatric Association, 1994). Clearly there is a need to define and therapeutically respond to the affective disturbance secondary to social group-based conflict.

In the current study, the relationship between well-being and conflict frequency and concern underscores how different race/ethnic groups appraise and respond to culture-based conflict. Conflict experiences characteristic of the disregard and dismissal of the individual (the "invisibility" of the person) were most consistently related to poorer subjective well-being. This same dimension of culture-based conflict was of greatest expressed concern to the target person. This suggests that experiences of alienation, exclusion, and avoidance by culturally different persons may constitute a particularly problematic form of intercultural conflict, at least for university students.

#### *Implications for Counseling Practice*

An unresolved issue raised by the current study concerns how to therapeutically respond to victims of stereotyping and prejudice. While there has been significant attention given to the need for counselors to be culturally competent, very little has been proposed regarding how to therapeutically respond to the victims of hate crimes, random acts of adverse bias, and social and institutional racism (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1976).

In this regard, this study has examined how actively and assertively the target person responded to the conflict event. This, it could be argued, presupposes that the individual "did the right thing" by engaging with the situation or aggressing party. This basic assumption may well prove to be inaccurate or at least incomplete with respect to what constitutes an effective counselor intervention. Toward this end, it is proposed that three conditions must be addressed with the target person, in determining the efficacy of responding to culture-based conflict. These are: (1) the role of culture in the conflict event must be salient to the target person,

(2) the conflict event must be seen as significant for both the aggressor and the target person (Sherif, 1979), and (3) there must be adequate support available to the target person to alleviate the problem. As has been pointed out by Root (1994), in the absence of adequate social and organizational support for culture conflict remediation, the individual may experience heightened distress in seeking redress of the situation—in essence replicating the feelings of powerlessness and helplessness engendered by the conflict. In the absence of extrapsychic support for intervention, the counselor may find it desirable to explore alternative solutions to the problem situation. These include reducing contact with the perpetrating party, reframing the victim's awareness, and/or seeking consultation from members of the target individual's social milieu.

The counselor is also advised to consider that members of social groups who have historically been politically and economically disenfranchised may employ solutions to culture-based conflict other than what is suggested by traditional assertion training models. Furthermore, provision of psychological services with refugee and immigrant populations may be further complicated by previous trauma experienced in the country of origin as well as the psychosocial stress of cultural immersion (Marsella, Bornemann, & Orley, 1994). When put in this context, client problems of dissociation and behavioral disengagement may not signify avoidance, poor self-esteem, or learned helplessness, but may indicate a survival strategy for interacting with a chronically hostile social environment.

The impact of prejudice and bias upon our cultural institutions is substantial. Accordingly, the need for counseling practitioners to address the needs of persons who are targets of cultural conflict and prejudice is great. It is particularly important for the counselor to consider the relationship of the unique characteristics of the individual and socioculturally proscribed behaviors in responding to interpersonal conflict. This, it is

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